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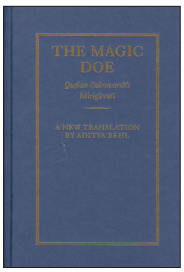

Aditya Behl, trans., and Wendy Doniger, ed. *The Magic Doe: Quṭban Suhravardī's* Mirigāvatī

Oxford; New York: Oxford University Press, 2011. 240 pages. Hardback, US$99.00; paperback, US$24.95; ISBN 978-0-19-984292-6 (hardback); 978-0-19-984294-0 (paperback).

The medieval writer Quṭban Suhrawardi in his *Miriġāvatī* (1505) spins a tale replete with scenes, symbols, and characters recognizable to almost anyone who has been exposed to the folktales, Sufi mystical allegories, or exquisitely detailed miniature paintings of India: the beautiful, elusive magical deer; the prince in yogi's guise desperately seeking his beloved; the misunderstandings and trickery that, along with demons and serpents, separate star-crossed lovers again and again. Variously termed *prema-khyān*s, *masnavī*s, or romances, *Miriġāvatī* and her sister stories in vernacular Hindavī share a frame narrative featuring true lovers who endure suffering, adventure, and transformation before they can experience true union. This union usually presages the end of earthly life and obliteration in the divine. Such is the case in *Miriġāvatī*.

Aditya Behl's new translation unfurls this particular entertainment, which also served as a tribute to kingly patrons and an allegorical guide for Sufi adepts, with considerable action and humor. These qualities balance *Miriġāvatī*'s de rigueur set-pieces and head-to-toe descriptions of the (divine) beloved, which many of us are accustomed to encountering in texts such as *Candāyan* (1379), *Padmāvat* (1540), and *Madhumālatī* (1545). An exciting re-imagining of the cannibal herdsman scene from the *Odyssey*, winningly rhythmic lines of translated verse, and unexpected interjections in contemporary colloquial English are among the delights of this book.

The work gives new depth, texture, and context to the whole genre of *prema-khyān*s (Sufi romances), but in terms of imparting knowledge of verse format and prosody the apparatus leaves some unfortunate gaps. Footnotes give the reader a reasonable idea of the sensitive scholarly process whereby Behl compared, interpreted, and translated manuscripts, but it is slightly challenging to track down specific sources. A few of the citations are incomplete, and the volume lacks a bibliography. While *Miriġāvatī* is an enjoyable addition to scholarship on Sufism, Hindavī language, and romance, one has to consider carefully the degree to which it is useful as a teaching text, or as an introduction to Indian literature for nonspecialist consumers. Can a poem like *Miriġāvatī* work on multiple levels for varying audiences today?

One way to evaluate these matters—admittedly not an entirely fair way—is to compare this text and apparatus with Behl's earlier work on Manjhan's *Madhumālatī* (Behl, Weightman, and Pandey 2001). One of the centerpieces of that romance was a lengthy *sarāpa* (head-to-toe description) of the heroine, on one level a the-

ophany, or a vision of the manifestation (*jalwah*) of God. *Sarāpa*s are ubiquitous in the Sanskrit and vernacular literature of the subcontinent, but in *Madhumālatī*, everything from the blood-soaked part in the heroine's serpent-like locks of coiled hair to her dangerously sharp nipples (!) formed a striking, superficially feminine revelation of God's terrifying beauty (*jalāl o jamāl*). In *Miriġāvatī*, the *sarāpa*s are a bit more conventional, while the hero's battles of wits and brawn and the repartee between prince Rājkunvar and his beloved Mirigavatī, the beloved's rival Rūpminī (to whom the prince is reluctantly wed), his nurse (as ever in the romances, a spiritual guide on the path to union with God), and his foes seem more spirited.

This energy in *Miriġāvatī*'s action sequences is pronounced despite the similarities between this poem and *Madhumālatī* in general progression, format, stanza numbering, and blank verse translation. In the latter (2001), succinct but informative notes on the text explain how collaborators Behl, Weightman, and Pandey made insistent efforts to "represent the poetic form of the original;… each half-line… is translated by a line of English, as are also the longer lines of the *dohā*." The lack of such explication in *Madhumālatī*'s apparatus may well frustrate the reader trying to grasp the parallels between the original Avadhī/Hindavī text and the English version, unless they seek out other reference works on Hindavī prosody. With *Miriġāvatī*'s poetic lines just occasionally less constricted in format and the punctuation more creative than in *Madhumālatī*, couplets can be trickier to delineate. Still, Behl's steady adherence in both translations to the twelve-line (five *caupāī* couplets plus a *dohā*) format of the original text gives the reader a strong sense of the repetition, density, and symmetry in the oral and scriptural lives of symbolic Sufi texts. In *Madhumālatī* the various notes, appendices, and introductions provide instructive technical guidance on format and prosody, in addition to an elegant exegesis of Shaṭṭārī Sufism. They expertly unpack the flexible, versatile *prema-khyān* allegories and how they might function for courtly, mystical, and casual audiences.

Behl's scholarly supplements to *Miriġāvatī* also underline the text's polyvocality, its ability to project multiple messages to various consumers, and its location within the Suhrawardī Sufi sect. To confirm the poem's verse form, though, the reader has to chance upon a footnote wherein the translator comments on the inscrutability of one of the couplets (217). Behl's analysis of the staples of the *prema-khyān* genre—the soul's search for God, the mysteries of "form" (*rūpa*), the longing on the parts of hero, heroine, and reader to savor *rasa*, the sensuous, even orgasmic "juice" of mystical/artistic arousal—and on the stock characters who people the narratives is helpful and accessible. This is especially noteworthy since *Miriġāvatī*'s editor, Wendy Doniger, had to assemble this apparatus from outlines, drafts for the book, and lecture notes Behl left behind when he died at the untimely age of 42.

Miriġāvatī and *Madhumālatī* are precious contributions to the corpus of vernacular Indian literature available in English. The other *prema-khyān* stories of *Candāyan* and *Padmāvat* are so ubiquitous that they pop up in tourist guides' spiels about Rajasthani forts, Amar Chitra Kathā comic books, and the folklore of India's tribal regions. Jayāsī's *Padmāvat* has been reiterated as a Sufi Muslim allegory, a folk drama, and an almost anti-Muslim Indian nationalist parable (for

example, see SREENIVASAN 2005). Nearly all of these intriguing tales, written in the fourteenth through sixteenth centuries and most of them still in play in some form today, dramatize the valor of Kshatriya princes and the virtue of female chastity against a backdrop of highly sensual esthetics. By means of a definitively Indic system of emotional and artistic interplay between writer/performer and audience, an Islam "internally and externally transformed," as Behl puts it, emerges from the tightly woven garb of Hindu rituals, names, and invocations to the gods "into an Indian religious and literary world" (BEHL, WEIGHTMAN, and PANDEY 2001).

Behl's writings flesh out, with unprecedented erudition, the medieval Indic/Sufi romance with all of its complex Persian, Sanskrit, and Avadhī linguistic heritage. The sophisticated authors he ventriloquizes in his works include Quṭban, disciple of Shaikh Buddhan Suhravardī, Mīr Sayyid Manjhan Rājgirī, and Malik Muhammad Jayāsī (in a partial, unpublished translation of *Padmāvat*). Given that Jayāsī is sometimes the only romance author credited in college survey courses with laying a cornerstone of "Hindi" literature, it is especially satisfying to find Behl mapping out the broader picture of these romances. Their creators, the medieval *pīr*s whom Behl poignantly sensed "with" him, seeing him through "many difficult passages in life and work" (6), have been lucky in securing him as a mediator.

Aditya Behl's deep immersion in the genre and its social and religious history, as well as his superb deftness with language, make his *Miriġāvatī* more contemporary and user-friendly than earlier scholarly treatments (for example, PLUKKER 1981), although it might be helpful to use this along with some of these in the context of teaching literature. All told, Doniger has done a really commendable job in arranging and polishing the manuscript Behl left, even if the reader is occasionally left hanging by somewhat vague assertions in the footnotes (in 212, for example, Behl grumpily alludes to "the three gods of the Hindu pantheon, who are sometimes, wrongly, said to control the creation, preservation, and destruction of the universe"). And perhaps his relatively light touch with *Miriġāvatī* offers a productive complement to the formality and the enlightening, formidable scholarship so evident in *Madhumālatī*.

I myself have seen Aditya's scholarly offerings elicit thoughtful discussion about the nature of passion, temptation, and the transience of existence among students who had no special knowledge of South Asian literature. He even credited some of these students with insights that became a crucial part of his vision of the *premakhyāns*. Aditya's expertise, then, does indeed potentially permit generalists as well as specialists to imbibe a little sip of the *rasa* of medieval India's delightfully, complexly mixed spiritual culture. At the same time, a nameless Amazon reviewer's caustic conclusion that *Madhumālatī* "is full of overused, unimaginative sayings that someone decided to use as a vehicle for destroying trees," confirms that, for the uninitiated, foregoing the introduction and apparatus just does not work. Nearly all of us need the guidance of the linguist or the translator, the scholar, the assiduous "nurse" or the Sufi masters who peered over Behl's shoulder to bring these works to life. And with Aditya gone from our midst all too soon, we can only try to wait patiently for his fond and dedicated colleagues to bring us more of his revelations about romances.

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