

STUDIES IN  
COMPARATIVE RELIGION

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*Frederick M. Denny, General Editor*

CELEBRATING  
MUHAMMAD  
Images of the Prophet  
in Popular Muslim Poetry

*by*  
*Ali S. Asani*  
*Kamal Abdel-Malek*

*in collaboration with*  
*Annemarie Schimmel*

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## REMEMBRANCE

Sultaan Ali Asani  
1929-1994

*O soul at peace return to your Lord.*  
—Qurʾān Sūra 89:27

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## Prologue

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This is a book about Muḥammad, the Prophet of Islam, who was one of the most influential figures in human history. So powerful and radiant was his personality that almost fourteen hundred years after his death he remains a significant focus of love and devotion for millions of Muslims all over the world. As Constance Padwick has observed, no one can estimate the power of Islam as a religion without first taking into account that at the heart of the tradition is love for the prophet Muḥammad.<sup>1</sup> She describes this love as a warm human emotion which the simplest peasant can share with the most sophisticated intellectual or mystic. This study is a celebration of this love, portraying some of the ways it is manifested in popular Muslim literature from culturally diverse regions of the Islamic world.

There have been few studies that have explored the intensity and depth of veneration that Muslims feel towards their beloved Prophet. Not many books on Islam attempt to explore the significance of millions of Muslims every day reciting the *ṣalawāt*—a formula invoking blessing on the prophet Muḥammad whom they affectionately call *ḥabīb Allāh* (God's beloved). Indeed, the subject of Islamic piety and devotion in general, especially at a popular level, is not well understood and its true nature not well appreciated. Perhaps the fact that the faith of Islam is associated in the popular media with violence, terrorism, political militancy, and other negative images has contributed a great deal to the sad neglect of Islamic devotional life. While this is not the place to discuss the nature and origins of these misconceptions, it is sufficient to say that sometimes even reasonably educated non-Muslims are highly surprised to learn that the central message of Islam, like that of Christianity and Judaism, is monotheism:

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1. *Muslim Devotions* (London: SPCK, 1960), 145.

God is one; "He has not begotten nor is He begotten," as chapter 112 of the Qur'an states. The Islamic profession of faith begins with the sentence "There is no deity save God (Allāh)," a statement that Jews and Christians would readily embrace. Muslims have developed a vast theological literature around this central idea, and the goal of every Muslim interpreter has been to prove by theological, philological, philosophical, or mystical exegesis that there is only one God, whom the Qur'an surrounds with the ninety-nine Most Beautiful Names. There is no sin worse in Islam than associating anything as an equal with God, who is creator, sustainer, and judge on the day of judgment. Indeed, as is well known, the word *islām* (belonging to the same verbal root in Arabic as the word *salām*, or "peace") means "submission to the will of the one God" who knows best what is good for His creation. Hence one who submits to God is called a *Muslim* (feminine *Muslima*), literally "a submitter."

Perhaps some of the greatest misconceptions about the Islamic faith concern Muḥammad, its prophet. In medieval Europe, for example, a whole range of negative judgments were passed upon this man whom Muslims venerate. Muḥammad was variously depicted as an idol worshipper, an arch-schismatic, an epileptic, a kind of antichrist, heretic, and even as a cardinal who, having been thwarted in his ambitions to become pope, founded his own religion. Usually called Mahomet (the Scottish mispronunciation *Mahound* led the Prophet's name to be translated as "devil" or "spirit of darkness"), he was viewed by non-Muslims as a kind of a supreme god that his followers adored like a golden idol. The figure of Muḥammad aroused so much fear and hatred that Dante, in the *Divine Comedy*, saw nothing wrong in condemning this man who has so positively influenced the lives of millions to the deepest abyss of Hell. Frequently in polemic literature Muḥammad was criticised for his involvement in politics and warfare and even more for his "excessive sexuality." After the death (in 619) of his first wife, the faithful Khadija (who unswervingly supported him from the day the divine revelations overcame him), Muḥammad married a number of women, mainly widows or divorced women. For critics this was proof of his questionable and licentious character. The fact that marriage was his *sunna* (his way of life) contradicted the religious ideals of medieval Christian Europe, with its strong emphasis on celibacy and virginity.

From a Muslim point of view, the failure of non-Muslims to understand the role of Muḥammad has been, and still is, one of the greatest obstacles to an appreciation of Islam as understood from within. For Muslims, Muḥammad (born in the Arabian city of Mecca in or about 570) was sent by God as "a bringer of good tidings" and as "a warner."

He is seen as "a shining lamp" for those that err in the darkness of infidelity, and as "mercy for the worlds" to teach the law that God has given humanity so that it might be saved from the horrors of eternal damnation. Muḥammad taught obedience and worship of the one Lord, maintaining that these are the duties of every believer. He also taught that whatever exists was created to praise the Creator in its own silent eloquence. Muḥammad was the one to whom God's will was revealed and who was called to bring to his followers the same divine message as had been given to previous people; for God has never left His creatures without guidance. Islam therefore recognizes and respects the earlier prophets, beginning with Adam. Among them, Moses and Jesus are given pride of place—Jesus, in Muslim tradition, is the prophet preceding Muḥammad and born by the Virgin Mary through the inbreathing of God's spirit. However, he is not believed to be God's son and was not, according to the Qur'an, crucified, but taken into heaven. Besides the twenty-eight prophets mentioned by name in the Qur'an, the Muslim can acknowledge others as well, provided these prophets have appeared before Muḥammad, who is the seal of prophets—that is, the one who brought the final, definitive revelation, the Qur'an (Recitation) in the Arabic language.

The Qur'an, the scripture of Islam, revealed by God to Muḥammad between 610 and 632 and later arranged into 114 chapters (*sūras*), forms the fundamental core of the faith. For a Muslim, listening to the Qur'an means listening to the Divine voice—even though most Muslims, being non-Arabs, do not understand the words and depend on translations and commentaries by religious scholars for their comprehension of its contents. It is a book with an inimitable style, possessing divine beauty and power. The beautiful recitation of the Qur'an is therefore a most edifying and sublime act, and the art of calligraphy, the typical Islamic art form, grew out of the wish to write the word of God as perfectly as possible. Though the sacred book has been translated into many languages (including Latin as early as 1143), for the Muslim, a translation of the Qur'an is strictly impossible. Because the Qur'an is considered to be God's own word, its different levels of understanding can never be offered in a language other than the original Arabic. At best a translation is only an explanation of the book's meaning: one interpretation among others.

Islamic belief concerning the divine origin of the Qur'an has meant that Muslims have never considered Muḥammad to be its author—he was merely its transmitter. As a Swahili Muslim preacher in East Africa explained to his congregation recently, the Prophet's role was somewhat like that of a transistor radio. Although this transistor metaphor

may be too simplistic,<sup>2</sup> it illustrates the orthodox Muslim position. The Qur'ān emphasizes Muḥammad's humanity by calling him "a human being like you to whom the revelation was brought."<sup>3</sup> For the Muslim, the similarities between the Qur'ān and Judaeo-Christian religious texts, including the Old Testament, is not problematic: God's revelation to humanity is basically one, and the different scriptures are simply earthly manifestations from a single source—God's heavenly book. The divine word was poured into the Prophet, who was the pure vessel of divine grace. In the Qur'ān, he is called *ummi*, an Arabic term that originally meant "one sent to the *umma*," the "gentiles," or those who have not yet been blessed by a revelation. However, this word quickly assumed the meaning of illiterate, because Muḥammad had to be immaculate in order to receive the divine word, which was to be "inliterated"<sup>4</sup> in the Qur'ān—just as in Christianity Mary had to be a virgin to give birth to Jesus, the divine word incarnate. This revelation corrects parts of the previous sacred scriptures (Torah, Psalms, and Gospels) which, the Qur'ān claims, have been partly altered by Jews and Christians, according to their sectarian biases.

Ironically, the most important factor contributing to the lack of understanding about Muḥammad and his relationship to his followers may in fact lie in the traditional academic approach to this subject. For the most part (with the exception of Tor Andrae's *Die Person Muhammads in Lehre und Glauben seiner Gemeinde* and Annemarie Schimmel's works *And Muhammad Is His Messenger* and *Und Muhammad ist Sein Prophet*) scholarship on the Prophet has been characterized by an overwhelming emphasis on his historical personality. There have been innumerable biographies focusing on his life (birth, career, death); types of influences on his thought; motives for his sociopolitical activity; the development of his consciousness; and on his accomplishments. Several works have striven to offer the results of painstaking research into the question of Muḥammad's "borrowing," wittingly or

2. Some Muslims, mindful of the complexities of divine revelation (*wahy*), have argued that Muḥammad's heart and mind did play some role in this process. Fazlur Rahman, for example, citing Qur'anic passages that tell that the revelation was brought down on the heart of Muḥammad, rejects the simplistic notion that God's message was communicated through Muḥammad in a mechanical manner. See Frederick Mathewson Denny, "Fazlur Rahman: Muslim Intellectual," *Muslim World* 79, no. 2 (1989): 98–100.

3. *Sūra* 41:6.

4. Henry Austryn Wolfson, *The Philosophy of the Kalam* (Cambridge, London: Harvard University Press, 1976), 246.

unwittingly, stories from the Old Testament and sectarian Christian texts and their incorporation into "his" Qur'ān. No doubt, these biographical studies by European scholars, especially the more recent ones, have been much more objective than the works of earlier generations and do better justice in treating the Prophet's personality. Yet, we would argue that to truly understand the significance of the Prophet to Muslims, it would be more appropriate and more fruitful for us to probe the figure of Muḥammad as the paradigm, or model, for Muslim life. The exemplar, the guide, the intercessor, the kind and loyal friend, the beloved—these are some of the roles that Muslims have seen in their Prophet. In other words, our questions should not center exclusively upon the historical Muḥammad of seventh-century Arabia, but the Muḥammad of faith. A scholarly study of Islam should be concerned then with the role Muḥammad has played in the lives of Muslims through the centuries as the messenger of God. Such an approach, in fact, resembles in many ways that taken by Jaroslav Pelikan in his study of Jesus through the centuries.<sup>5</sup>

Perhaps the best way to appreciate the role of Muḥammad in Islamic piety is to explore the significance of the second part of the Islamic profession of faith: "Muḥammad is God's messenger." At one level, this simple sentence establishes Islam as a distinct religious system. While most monotheists can agree with the statement that there is only one God, belief in Muḥammad as God's messenger and Prophet defines Islamic identity—for it distinguishes Muslims from peoples of other faiths. At another level, the acknowledgement of Muḥammad as God's messenger *par excellence* defines the practical and legal aspects of Islam. Whoever takes this statement seriously is bound to obey the law which was revealed to Muḥammad: he/she has to perform the daily prayers; pay the alms tax; keep the fast during the month of Ramadan; and perform once in his/her life the pilgrimage to Mecca. If he/she does not practice all these duties then he/she has at least to admit that these are duties of the believer.

On issues that the Qur'ān did not regulate or was unclear on, the custom or way (*sunna*) of the Prophet was called upon as the standard or measure of the norms of religious life. From the earliest periods of Islamic history, the Prophet's words and actions were related time and again by his family and those close to him, and these reports (the *hadith*) were often used to explain certain remarks in the Qur'ān which

5. Jaroslav Jan Pelikan, *Jesus Through the Centuries: His Place in the History of Culture* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1985).

were short and enigmatic; thus, the *ḥadīth* developed into a kind of early commentary on the Qur'ān. It is understandable that the number of stories about Muḥammad grew in proportion after the Prophet's death. Everyone knows how easy it is to surround a beloved person or a role model with all kinds of wonderful stories and ascribe words of wisdom to him or her which may reflect the person's intentions but which were never really spoken by the deceased. Small wonder, then, that the sayings and tales about the Prophet increased from decade to decade. In the ninth century several Muslim scholars produced collections of those *ḥadīth* which, according to all rules of criticism, were truthful and correct. Their collections remained a guide for the community through the centuries. The traditional way is to strive for a perfect *imitatio Muḥammadi*—following the Prophet's example in every detail of daily life including even matters of personal hygiene and dress. Recently one observes a tendency to interpret the *ḥadīth* literature not so much according to its literal meaning (as in, Muḥammad used to wind his turban in this or that way) but rather to ponder the way in which Muslims of the first generation might have understood the intended meaning of a certain saying or order. For the legalistically minded Muslims, the Prophet has become the lawgiver *par excellence*. For them, imitation of Muḥammad and his custom establishes legal, personal, and pietistic norms for the faithful.

The development of theological and mystical doctrines concerning Muḥammad's person contributed other significant dimensions to his role in Islamic religious life. Muḥammad never claimed special honors for himself, even though the Qur'ān asserts that God and the angels bless him. Consequently, the blessing for the Prophet (*ṣalawāt*) developed into one of the most important formulas in Muslim life: according to popular belief, to bless the Prophet brings innumerable recompenses in this world and the next. Yet, Muḥammad felt that he was only a "slave to whom revelation was granted," and the designation '*ʿabduhu* (His slave, meaning God's slave) was regarded as his highest epithet. It pointed to the mysterious night journey alluded to at the beginning of the Qur'ānic *Sūra* 17: "Praised be He who traveled at night with His servant" and to the parallel visionary experience related in *Sūra* 53, where again the term "His slave" is used. These allusions to the Prophet's spiritual experiences, especially during his celestial journey (*mi'rāj*), gave rise to voluminous literature in Islamic mystical circles concerning his true spiritual status. Muḥammad's *mi'rāj* formed for the mystics of Islam the prototype of the ascent of their own souls to higher spiritual realms. He became for them not only the beloved of God but, even more, a luminous being who did not cast a shadow.

Some went so far as to say that he was created, as a white pearl or a column of crystal, from the divine light prior to the creation of Adam. Such speculation led to the formulation of concepts such as the preeternal "Light of Muḥammad" (*nūr Muḥammad*) and the "Muḥammad reality" (*ḥaqīqa Muḥammadiyya*). In the course of time, among such mystically minded circles, Muḥammad reached the status of the perfect man (*al-insān al-kāmil*) and was considered the beginning and end of creation. This concept became popular through the extra-Qur'ānic saying attributed to God: *laulāka mā khalaqtu'l aflāka* (If you had not been (i.e., but for your sake) I would not have created the spheres). For many Muslims, some of these ideas bordered on heresy.

Both friends and followers also told stories of Muḥammad's miracles. Some of these are alluded to in the Qur'ān; other stories pertain to events during his life. According to the most popular of these, Muḥammad is said to have split the moon. This miracle is elaborated from a verse in the Qur'ānic *Sūra* 54: "The hour drew near and the moon was split." From such stories developed a rich hagiographic tradition which endows the Prophet with supernatural gifts and almost superhuman powers. The tradition also shows him as extremely gentle and kind, caring for the poor and the needy but also for animals. His kindness culminates in his role as intercessor on doomsday when he will request God not to let anyone among his community remain eternally in Hell. Generations of believers have pinned their hope on this role of the Prophet who will arrive with his green flag of praise to lead the community to paradise. Indeed, the role of Muḥammad as intercessor is truly the most significant leitmotif of Prophet-oriented piety. The notion that a penitent sinner can be saved by Muḥammad's intercession and God's mercy led to all kinds of Muslims (ranging from learned scholars and ecstatic mystics, to popular minstrels and cunning statesmen) uttering countless prayers and verses, imploring the Prophet's intercession.

Muslims see their Prophet through a variety of lenses, and the role he plays in their lives differs according to the perspective they choose to adopt. Portrayals of Muḥammad in popular literature are strongly influenced by diverse interpretations of his status as well as local cultural and literary idioms. A village woman in Bangladesh may well conceive of her relationship to Muḥammad in an entirely different way than a Bedouin nomad in Saudi Arabia, or a peasant farmer in Pakistan. Frequently, Muslims disagree among themselves about the validity or appropriateness of certain ways of relating to Muḥammad or portraying him.

Typically, more conservative Muslims are concerned that excessive

eneration of the Prophet, by compromising strict monotheism, leads to the gravest sin a Muslim could commit, *shirk* (associating or ascribing partners to God). These conservatives have also felt that this emotional and romantic piety contains too many foreign or non-Islamic elements of imagination and mythology to be compatible with basic Islamic conceptions of the divine and the institution of prophethood. They have probably been afraid that such legends and mystical flights of imagination might give the prophet Muḥammad a status similar to that of Jesus in Christianity. For example, in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries the use of candles during the *maulūd* (the Prophet's birthday celebration) aroused fear among religious authorities that Christian, or infidel, influences were distorting the real role of the Prophet as delineated in the Qur'ān.<sup>6</sup> In this regard, we must mention the centuries-old controversy among Muslim theologians over the appropriateness of celebrating the Prophet's birthday, especially after it became a popular holiday in many parts of the Islamic world.<sup>7</sup> Although this festival is not explicitly sanctioned by the Qur'ān, more liberal schools of Islamic jurisprudence have permitted it as a praiseworthy innovation (*bid'a*). In contrast, religious scholars of the strictly conservative Hanbali school have prohibited the event, for they feel that it elevates the Prophet to a divine-like status and makes him the object of inappropriate veneration. Thus, festivities marking Muḥammad's birthday are organized in almost every country of the contemporary Islamic world, with the exception of his birthplace in the Hanbali-influenced kingdom of Saudi Arabia.

Notwithstanding the reservations and objections that divide Muslims on the issue of prophetic veneration, the Prophet has remained the model and guide for all Islam. When God himself endorses Muḥammad's paradigmatic role in the Qur'ān by referring to him as *uswa ḥasana* (a beautiful model) (*Sūra* 33:21), does it not behoove the sincere believer to accept this divine sanction? Beyond this, the Prophet has become someone to whom one can entrust oneself—just as one entrusts oneself to a beloved and venerated member of the family. The constant presence of the Prophet as the kind and beloved, deeply venerated friend in Muslim society is a feeling of which most non-Muslims

are not aware. It is this feeling of a close personal relationship that permeates the Islamic devotional poetry we analyze in this book.

The poetic traditions we examine here originate from several cultural regions that have played significant roles in the history of Islamic civilization. On account of differences inherent in the very nature of these traditions, we have had to employ differing methodologies in our analysis. Consequently, although the perspectives we offer in the book may vary, they are united in their focus on the depiction of the Prophet within local cultural and literary idioms. As noted in the preface, the book comprises three discussions—the introduction and two parts. We have arranged these discussions in a telescopic fashion, beginning in the introduction with a broad overview, or bird's-eye view, of major themes and symbols generally characteristic of devotional poetry in praise of the Prophet in most languages of the Islamic world. Part 1, on the devotional tradition in Islamic South Asia, is bifocal in its perspective for it examines—both in perspective and up close—poetry in praise of the Prophet in two Indic literatures (namely Sindhi and Urdu), highlighting the interactions of significant poetic symbols from different cultures. Part 2, on the Egyptian tradition, “zooms in” to provide a close-up of a single genre of popular literature in colloquial Egyptian Arabic. Through a detailed analysis of the popular account of the Prophet's marriage to Khadīja, the chapters in part 2 demonstrate the synthesis between folk and classical traditions in the ballad.

We hope the chapters that follow, notwithstanding the differences in their scope and outlook, provide a collage of images from which the reader can gain greater insight into the nature of Muslim devotion to the Prophet and learn what Muslim poets in the Arab and non-Arab world feel about him who has been described as “the best of humankind.”

6. Annemarie Schimmel, *And Muhammad Is His Messenger* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1985), 146.

7. For a discussion of the early history and development of the festival and an analysis of some legal opinions concerning its legitimacy, see N. J. G. Kaptein, *Muhammad's Birthday Festival* (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1993).



# Introduction

by Annemarie Schimmel

## The Rain of Grace The Prophet Muḥammad in Islamic Devotional Poetry

Welcome, O friend of the poor and destitute  
 Welcome, O eternal soul, we welcome you.  
 Welcome, O cupbearer of the lovers, we welcome you.  
 Welcome, O darling of the Beloved,  
 Welcome, O much beloved of the Lord,  
 Welcome, O mercy for the worlds,  
 Welcome, O intercessor for the sinners  
 Only for you were Time and Space created.

These are lines from the *Mevlūd-i sharīf* by Suleyman Chelebi, a Turkish poet who died in 1419 in Bursa (the first capital of the Ottoman sultans). This *mevlūd* (or birth-poem) was my introduction to the veneration of the Prophet when my Turkish class read it during the fall of 1940 at the University of Berlin. I was fascinated by the beautiful way in which the poet, using a very simple meter and often an almost childish language, was able to convey to the reader or listener the feelings of a pious medieval Muslim who had long remembered the stories that were woven around the wondrous birth of Muḥammad. Stories from both learned and popular tradition, from very early days, describe all the miracles connected with the Prophet's birth, when his mother, Āmina, became aware of the radiant light that surrounded her. This light could even be observed in the castles of Bostra in Syria. The stories further describe her labor and the assistance of the Pharaoh's wife, as well as Mary, the mother of Jesus. During the night of the birth, all animals in the stables and the fields were telling each other that the luminous, final prophet had appeared as "Mercy for the worlds" (Qur'ān Sūra 21:107).

Many years later, I often had the opportunity of listening to the *mevlūd* in Turkish homes, and I always enjoyed both the words and the simple tune in which they were recited, interrupted by recitations from the Qur'ān and by prayers. It was a lovely experience, especially when artists participated in the musical part, as did Kani Karaca once in my house long before he became famous as the best reciter of religious music in Turkey.

But the part of the *mevlūd* recital I liked best was the custom of the audience getting up and touching each other's backs when the singer recited Āmina's tale of her experience: she is offered some heavenly sherbet, and:

Drinking it I was immersed in light  
 And could not discern myself from light.  
 Then a white swan came with soft grey wings  
 And he touched my back with gentle strength,  
 And the King of Faith was born this night,  
 Earth and Heaven were submersed in light.

The tender movement of touching the backs of friends in imitation of the blessing and caressing movement of the heavenly bird showed clearly that for my Turkish friends the Prophet was not at all someone far and remote in time and space, but a living force who seemed very close to his followers. All the legends that had been woven around his personality notwithstanding, the Prophet appeared as a human being, only distinguished as the bearer of God's final revelation. Through the veils of centuries of hagiography, the faithful Muslim could perceive that Muḥammad was the living model for all humans and that his *sunna* (his way of speaking and behaving) was followed in the same way as one might follow the example of a highly venerated elder of the family. One could speak to him and pour out one's heart before him because one knew that it was he who would appear on the day of judgment to intercede for his followers. During that dreaded hour when everyone else, including the innocent Jesus, will call out: *nafsī nafsī* (I myself [hope for salvation]), Muḥammad alone will march forth and call: *ummatī ummatī* (my community, my community [should be saved]) and will intercede even for the greatest sinners of the Muslim community. Is that not reason enough for a Muslim to sing of Muḥammad's kindness and to tell him of one's sorrows and needs?

To be sure, the absolute source of power and mercy is the one God, but when one looks at Muslim poetical expressions of the faith, in the form of long *qasīdas* (hymns addressed to the Creator and Judge in



Arabic, Persian, Turkish, and Indo-Muslim languages) one has the impression that poets are often confused as how to praise God, the all-powerful, adequately. They may find a way to give homage to Him by enumerating His contradictory attributes, the names under which He revealed Himself in the Qur'ān—the first and the last, the inner and the outward, the one who bestows life and He who bestows death, He who raises and He who lowers and does whatever He deems necessary and useful. Poems describing His unfathomable depth by hinting at the mysterious manner in which His beauty (*jamāl*) and His majesty (*jālāl*) together form the fabric of life of the world are abundant in the Muslim world.

But it is in the poems written in honor of the Prophet that the poets have opened their hearts, have expressed their hope in his intercession, and have praised the one who appears like the great rain cloud that stretches over the world to quicken the dried-up, lifeless hearts. And like rain—often called mercy (*raḥmat*) by villagers in Muslim areas—he is sent as “mercy for the worlds.” Poets describe him as the one from whom the rose was grown during a night journey when a mysterious winged creature (*Burāq*) carried him through different spheres into God's presence; the drops of perspiration that fell from his face onto the ground grew into roses which still carry in them Muḥammad's fragrance. Popular ballads elaborate the miracles which were soon ascribed to him although Muḥammad himself refused the idea that he had performed any miracles other than conveying the words of the Qur'ān. But many miracles ascribed to him grew out of expressions used in the Qur'ān, like the description of the night journey, derived from the short remark in the Qur'ān (*Sūra* 17:1), which was often combined with the visionary account of the beginning of *Sūra* 53—“The Star.” The “splitting of the moon” (*Sūra* 54:1) was a favorite topic that was particularly dear to Indian authors. This might be attributed to a ruler of Konkan who was converted to Islam when he observed that the moon was split during the night. This miracle laid, as it were, the foundations of the Muslim community in Southern India. But more frequent are stories outside Qur'ānic statements. Poets from both the great traditions of the big cities (the royal seats of Iran or Egypt) and those of the villages of Anatolia or Sind vied with each other in embellishing the miracle of the weeping palm trunk. It is said that a piece of wood upon which the Prophet used to put his hand—until a proper *minbar* (pulpit) was erected—then began to sigh because it missed the touch of the master's hand. “Should not humans feel the same longing for the Prophet?” the poets asked. Other poets, espe-

cially in the rural areas, would tell, in ever new variants, how the Prophet once helped a gazelle that had been trapped, and now pined to feed her kids, by entering the snare and freeing her. All of the poets knew according to centuries-old tales that the trees bowed before him and that the wolf and lizard attested to his rank as God's messenger as much as doors and walls greeted him and the pebbles in his hand sang his praise. Some of the folk poets in Turkey or in Sind say that one is able to hear, in the humming of the bees, the words of blessing for the Prophet and his family (*ṣalawāt sharīfa*) since this ensures that the honey will be sweet. And like the honey, the human heart will become sweetened by the constant recitation of the *ṣalawāt sharīfa*. Such loving descriptions fill the pages of numberless books, and allusions to these stories percolated into wedding songs and lullabies so that the Muslim child grows up with the idea of the Prophet as a loving friend of humanity. It is also believed that pious people might see him in their dreams, and such dreams are always true because Satan cannot assume the Prophet's form. One feels that Muḥammad is still alive, for stories and poems often tell how he would extend his hand from his *Rauza* (his mausoleum in Medina) to those who came imploring help or vindication from him; that is particularly frequent in the case of the *sayyids* (his descendants). However, verses expressing the poets' deep longing for Medina became increasingly popular in the later Middle Ages. This relationship, despite the Prophet's spiritual greatness, is often a very personal one that can be understood from popular poems in different parts of the world which describe events like his marriage to Khadija, the mother of the faithful.

Another aspect of Muslim mystical prophetology that permeated Islamic devotional poetry is Muḥammad's luminous nature which manifested itself during his birth (according to legend light had been shining on the forehead of Muḥammad's father before he married Āmina). Popular tradition also claims that the Prophet did not cast a shadow, and that he was beauty personified—for it was his light that shone through Joseph (Yūsuf), the paragon of beauty. All previous prophets show only aspects of Muḥammad who is the sum total of laudable qualities. In the terminology of Ibn al-ʿArabī and his followers, Muḥammad is the *insān kāmīl* (perfect man) in whom the divine names in their fullness are reflected while everyone else is the locus of manifestation for only one, or at best, a few, of these names. He alone is *al-jāmiʿ* (the comprehensive one).

Persian poets like Sanāʿī (d. 1131) have skillfully interpreted the first words of Qur'ānic chapter 93, *wa aḍ-ḍuḥā* (“By the morning light”) as

pertaining to the radiant beauty of Muḥammad while the first word of chapter 92, "By the night," was interpreted as referring to Muḥammad's black hair.

It is the concept of this Muḥammadan light (*nūr muḥammadī*) that played a central role in later Ṣūfī speculation. This belief is that God created Muḥammad from His own light so that Muḥammad's spiritual essence, like a column of light, stood in front of the Lord performing the ritual prayer long before God created everything else from it. These ideas were developed by Ṣūfis such as Sahl at-Tustarī as early as the late ninth century and were then expanded and embellished by theologians and poets. They must have been widely known in the Muslim lands, for the myth that this primordial light—something like a radiant white pearl—began to perspire and that the different parts of the animated world were created from this perspiration is found in both medieval Bengal and sixteenth-century Turkey. Not surprisingly, even the Islamic literatures of sub-Saharan Africa are permeated by allusions to the prophetic light. The eighteenth-century West African poetess Asma bint Shehu acclaims in the Hausa language that the light of Muḥammad outshines in its brilliance any other light.

As we have already seen in the prologue, many theologians objected to this emotional and romantic piety that seemed to contain too many elements of non-Islamic imagination and myths. One can well understand their position that these were incompatible with the strict monotheistic tenets of Islam. Despite these theological objections, however, the veneration of the Prophet seems to have had something that fulfilled a deep need among large segments of the Muslim population; otherwise, the existence of an enormous corpus of poetry, legends, grand hymns, and simple folk songs about the Prophet cannot be explained.

Perhaps the most succinct expression of the deep love for, and faith in, the Prophet can be found in the works of one of his greatest admirers in our century, Muḥammad Iqbāl (d. 1938), whose prophetology contains all the traditional elements that had developed during the past fourteen hundred years. However, Iqbāl also highlights the practical aspects of the Prophet, who has to act in accordance with God's will by implementing the Divine order to ameliorate the world which he has been given as a fief, to be returned to God. In his *Jāvidnāme* (1932) (the Book of Eternity) which, like so many great epical poems in the Muslim world, is modeled according to the story of the Prophet's heavenly journey, Iqbāl has described Muḥammad as "being in time and yet ruling time," but has especially dwelt upon his rank as 'abduhu (His, i.e. God's, slave). The station of 'abduhu is, as early Ṣūfis have

claimed, the highest rank a human being can reach. The true slave of God is, at the same time, the truly free person.

"You can deny God, but you cannot deny the Prophet." With these words, Iqbāl intends that it is through the Prophet that Islam becomes articulated as a religious system, and it is through him that Divine wisdom is revealed to humankind while God remains forever hidden in His essence behind the veils of divine names and attributes. As the dispenser of God's wisdom Muḥammad beckons to the eternal truth, and is therefore worthy of the believers' reverence and love. Here Iqbāl alludes to a role played by the Prophet for which generations of Muslims have always remained grateful, namely, the Prophet's role in conveying the message of Islam to the world and teaching humankind the way to approach God. Hence it was only natural for Iqbāl, like other Muslim poets, to depict the Prophet as a guide and leader to the truth. Muḥammad is the caravan leader who guides the community of believers to the Ka'ba in Mecca. Even more importantly, the Prophet provides an example of the way in which a supranational community of Muslims can and should be built, overcoming the obstacles created by prejudice and hatred. In the final analysis the prophet Muḥammad remains, even centuries after his death, a powerful force fostering unity within a culturally diverse Muslim community. All this has been expressed, in all the languages of the Muslim world, in poetry—the true reflection of the feelings of millions of believers.

PART 1

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THE PROPHET MUHAMMAD  
IN INDO-MUSLIM POETRY

## CHAPTER 1

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### Background and Introduction

According to a legend prevailing in the Malabar region of India, a local Indian ruler (Shakarwatī Farmād) had already converted to Islam within the lifetime of the prophet Muḥammad. The king, the legend tells us, became a Muslim after he witnessed the miracle of the splitting of the moon which Muslim folk piety associates with the Prophet (cf. Qurʾān *Sūra* 54:1). While this account may have no historical basis, it is, nevertheless, as Yohanan Friedmann has shown, only one of several anecdotes that reflect the widespread tendency among South Asian Muslims to demonstrate both the antiquity and respectability of their association with the Islamic tradition.<sup>1</sup> Indeed, Islam has flourished so well in the Indian subcontinent, that today the region is home to the single largest body of Muslims in the world—there are more Muslims in India, Pakistan, and Bangladesh than in all the Arab countries put together. Furthermore, Muslims from this region have been responsible for spreading their religion to other areas of the world—notably to Southeast Asia and East Africa, and more recently to the Western world, especially the United Kingdom, Canada, and the United States.

Islam in South Asia had rather humble beginnings. As early as the mid-seventh century, a few Arab merchants settled on the southern and western coasts of India to earn a living through trade. Over the next couple of centuries, this small Arab Muslim trading presence grew at a steady rate in the towns of Southern India, proving to be culturally and historically more significant than any Arab military presence. In fact, the Arabs did not seem very interested in conquering large areas in this region. The sole Arab military campaign of any significance took

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1. Yohanan Friedmann, "Qissat Shakarwatī Farmād: A tradition concerning the introduction of Islam to Malabar," *Israel Oriental Studies* 5 (1975): 233–58.

place in 711 when a small military force under the command of a seventeen-year-old Arab general, Muḥammad ibn al-Qāsim, set out from Iraq to avenge the capture of some Muslim women by local pirates. Though this small Arab force conquered the region of Sind up to the city of Multan, and established a state along the Indus Valley, the Arab presence in this state was so small that they could not impose their religion on a country with a very different culture. On the contrary, Muḥammad ibn al-Qāsim acknowledged the rights of the native Hindu and Buddhist populations to practice their faith as long as they paid their taxes. He thus equated their position under Muslim rule with that of the *ahl al-kitāb* (the people of the Book)—that is, the Jews, Christians, and Sabians, in the Near East. This early Arab presence in Western and Southern India considerably predated the military invasion of Northern India by Turko-Persian Muslim armies in the tenth century. Initially, these Turkish military expeditions into the subcontinent from Central Asia and Afghanistan were quick loot-and-plunder raids that only gradually led to the establishment of permanent Muslim rule in the eleventh century. By the twelfth century, a Turko-Persian dynasty (the Ghoriids) had acquired substantial control over the Northern Indian plain conquering cities such as Delhi, Ajmer, and Gwalior. Areas of Bengal were conquered in the beginning of the thirteenth century as were some parts of Assam and Orissa. Towards the end of the thirteenth and the beginning of the fourteenth century, Turko-Persian rulers had expanded Muslim rule not only in western provinces, such as Gujarat, but also down south into the heart of the Deccan. The late fourteenth and early fifteenth centuries witnessed the emergence of several independent Muslim states in Southern and Northern India. Those areas in the south gave rise, in the sixteenth century, to the kingdoms of Bijapur and Golkonda, while those areas in the north consolidated into a single powerful empire under the rule of the Mughals—the most renowned dynasty of Muslim India. Mighty as the Mughal Empire was in its heyday, by the eighteenth century it began to disintegrate rapidly, making it easy for the British to take control of India.

During its twelve-hundred-year presence in the subcontinent, the Islamic tradition has had a profound impact on all aspects of South Asian culture and life. Though it entered the region in a cultural mold that was predominantly Turko-Persian, the tradition also interacted with the indigenous cultures to create a highly sophisticated civilization that we may describe as Indo-Muslim. The more visible and concrete achievements of this civilization are renowned all over the world. The Taj Mahal, the monumental mosques, palaces, forts, and pleasure

gardens that dot the subcontinent's landscape, as well as exquisite miniature paintings, are among just a few of the attainments of Indo-Muslim culture in the field of art and architecture. On the one hand this culture is rooted in and intimately connected to the Turko-Persian and Arabic worlds but, on the other, it has developed—because of its Indic cultural base—its own distinct identity. The society it nurtured was splintered into a complex pattern of cleavages along political, social, economic, ethnic, and even religious lines. These fissures are reflected in the countless individuals who represented Indo-Muslim society, whether powerful emperors or humble subjects, landowning aristocrats or exploited tenant farmers, sophisticated urban literati or illiterate peasants, learned religious scholars or popular Sūfī saints. Indeed, the heterogeneous Muslim community of South Asia is so fragmented that there seem to be few bonds that hold it together. Perhaps the most powerful of these bonds is allegiance and loyalty to Muḥammad, the Prophet of Islam.

Wilfred Cantwell Smith, commenting on the significance of the prophet Muḥammad for the Muslim community of early twentieth-century India, writes:

The emphasis is on Muhammad as a person, a human being of commanding excellence. . . . He becomes the object of a devotion, virtually an adoration, that can hardly be exaggerated. . . . Muslims will allow attacks on Allah: there are atheists and atheistic publications, and rationalistic societies; but to disparage Muhammad will provoke from even the most "liberal" sections of the community a fanaticism of blazing vehemence.<sup>2</sup>

Made almost half a century ago, these remarks seem—in light of the Salman Rushdie affair—particularly pertinent to our times. On the one hand, they underscore the centrality of the Prophet in Muslim religious life.<sup>3</sup> For centuries, Muḥammad has provided Muslims all over the world with the paradigm for establishing legal, personal, and social norms for their societies. In the words of the Qur'ān: he is "a beautiful

2. W. C. Smith, *Modern Islam in India*, 2d. ed. rev. (Lahore: Muhammad Ashraf, repr. 1969), 72.

3. For a general discussion of the Prophet's role in Muslim piety, see Tor Andrae, *Die Person Muhammads in Lehre und Glauben seiner Gemeinde* (Stockholm: P. A. Vorstedt og soner, 1918); Constance Padwick, *Muslim Devotions* (London: SPCK, 1960); and Annemarie Schimmel, *And Muhammad Is His Messenger* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1985) and various articles on the subject by the same author.

model" (*uswa ḥasana*)<sup>4</sup> whose example is to be followed by the faithful. Indeed, according to the Muslim scripture, to obey the Prophet means to obey God.<sup>5</sup> The nature of Muḥammad's mission, sent as he was "as a mercy to the world,"<sup>6</sup> forms the subject of many books and treatises.<sup>7</sup> And a logical corollary of his mercifulness has been his role as intercessor (*shafī*): a role that is, however, not explicitly articulated in the Qur'ān.<sup>8</sup> For Muslims with mystical inclinations, the Prophet's spiritual and mystical status—particularly on account of his mysterious night journey to the highest heaven (*mi'rāj*)—has been subject to much speculation.<sup>9</sup> However lofty such speculation may be, it has always been tempered by the necessity to portray Muḥammad, ultimately, as God's servant (*'abd allāh*). In this manner, by stressing his humanity, the dangers of totally deifying him were avoided.<sup>10</sup>

Professor Smith's observations also, on the other hand, allude to the deep devotion that the Prophet evokes among his followers. As the following reactions to *The Satanic Verses* from Britain's Muslim community (mostly South Asian) poignantly demonstrate, any attack on the Prophet is perceived by many Muslims in intensely personal terms:

What Rushdie has written is far worse to Muslims than if he has raped one's own daughter. *It's an assault on every Muslim's inner being. . . . Muslims seek Muhammad as the ideal on which to fashion our lives and conduct, and the Prophet is internalized into every Muslim's heart. It's like a knife being dug into you—* or being raped yourself. (a leader of Britain's Muslim community)

I started reading [*Satanic Verses*] but when I came to the bits about the Prophet, I put it down. *I love the Prophet. I found it hurt me.* It was very degrading, disgraceful. (a sixteen-year-old high school student)

4. *Sūra* 33:21.

5. *Sūra* 4:80.

6. *Sūra* 21:107.

7. See, for example, Alhaj Qasim Ali Jairazbhoy, *Muhammad: A Mercy to all the Nations* (London: Luzac, 1937) and Syed Ameer Ali, *The Life and Teachings of Muhammad or The Spirit of Islam* (London: n.p., 1897).

8. See Andrae, *Die Person Muhammeds*, 234–44.

9. See A. A. Affifi, "The Story of the Prophet's Ascent (*mi'rāj*) in Sufi Thought and Literature," *Islamic Quarterly* 2 (1955): 23–29; John C. Archer, *Mystical Elements in Mohammed*, repr. ed. (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1980); Earle H. Waugh, "Following the Beloved: Muhammad as Model in the Sufi Tradition," *The Biographical Process*, ed. Frank E. Reynolds and Donald Capps (The Hague and Paris: Mouton, 1976), 63–85; and Schimmel, *And Muhammad Is His Messenger*, 157–75.

10. Schimmel, *And Muhammad Is His Messenger*, 142–43.

*He has killed our Prophet. He has killed us all. We just can't explain how much he has hurt Muslims. I would die rather than hear these things and so would our children. (a Muslim crane-driver)*<sup>11</sup>

These comments only confirm what Sir Muḥammad Iqbāl (d. 1938), the Muslim poet-philosopher of Indo-Pakistan, declared in a Persian verse many years ago:

The Prophet's home is in the heart of the Muslim  
The very name of the Prophet is our glory.<sup>12</sup>

In short, love and devotion for the Prophet are the cornerstones of Islamic practice and are marks of its uniqueness. As Constance Padwick points out, a true understanding of Islam as a religion is impossible without an appreciation of the immense love at the heart of the tradition for Muḥammad, God's beloved (*ḥabīb allāh*).<sup>13</sup> Muslims have shown their love and devotion to their Prophet in many ways, the most common being the recitation of the *ṣalawāt* (the formula for invoking God's blessing on him).<sup>14</sup> They have also expressed it through innumerable poems written in almost every language of the Islamic world. Whether these are the sophisticated compositions of the literati or the folk songs sung by villagers, the poems are equally filled with warm human emotions towards the Prophet. Frequently in these verses, Muḥammad is addressed as if he were alive and affectionately listening to his followers as they seek his help in solving every type of problem, no matter how seemingly mundane.<sup>15</sup>

In her study of poetry in praise of the Prophet, Professor Schimmel observes that the further poets live from Arabia (the Prophet's home-

11. Emphasis mine. These comments, taken from interviews appearing in the British press during 1989, were brought to my attention by Zoe Herzov, recently of Cambridge, Mass., and now of London.

12. *Asrār-i khūdī* (Lahore: n.p., 1915), lines 357–58.

13. Padwick, *Muslim Devotions*, 145.

14. In this they follow the Qur'ānic command in *Sūra* 33:56 which says "Surely Allah and His angels bless the Prophet; O you who believe! call for blessings on him and salute him with a salutation."

15. The tendency to turn to the Prophet in times of difficulty has become so widespread and common in Indo-Muslim folk piety that even popular Indian films dealing with "Islamic" themes portray it. For example, in the movie *Mughal-i A'zam*, the unjustly imprisoned heroine, Anarkali, who is later condemned to be buried alive in a wall, sings to the Prophet of her tragic plight: *be kas pe karam kijie, shāh-i madīna* (O King of Medina, be kind to this destitute one).

land), the more eloquent they become in expressing their yearning for the Prophet and their desire to visit his tomb in the city of Medina.<sup>16</sup> She cites, for example, Yunus Emre (ca. 1300), the early Turkish poet, who cries:

If my Lord would kindly grant it,  
I would go there, weeping, weeping,  
And Muḥammad in Medina  
I would see there, weeping, weeping.<sup>17</sup>

We can perhaps broaden this remark by observing that it is in the poetry written by Muslims in Islamic lands further away from Arabia that we encounter images of Muḥammad that are more romantic and more exotic. Many non-Arab Muslims tend to clothe their devotion to the Prophet in metaphors and symbols taken quite naturally from their indigenous cultures. Consequently, they often surround him with ideas and themes that may have little or no resonance with the prophetology espoused in the official Islam of the religious scholars. Such assimilation of the Prophet to a local environment is most pronounced in the Indian subcontinent—home to the world's largest concentration of Muslims.

Scholarship on Islam in this part of the world has discerned the existence of two major, often antagonistic, strands in the tradition.<sup>18</sup> The first, associated with those Muslims who interpreted their faith more esoterically or mystically, saw nothing wrong in adapting Islam to the local Indian environment, languages, mores, and traditions. Indeed, it is precisely the indigenization of the faith that was instrumental in spreading, so successfully, the fundamental Islamic precepts among the local populations. As part of this process, even the figure of the Prophet was "Indianized" and presented in terms that would be familiar and palatable to Indian audiences. We can cite here, by way of

16. Schimmel, *And Muhammad Is His Messenger*, 190.

17. *Ibid.*, 191.

18. See Imtiaz Ahmad, "The Islamic Tradition in India," *Islam and the Modern Age* 12, no. 1 (1981): 44–62; Annemarie Schimmel, "Reflections on Popular Muslim Poetry," *Contributions to Asian Studies* 17 (1982): 17–26; Yohanan Friedmann, "Islamic Thought in Relation to the Indian Context," *Purusartha* 9 (1986): 79–91; Richard Eaton, *Sufis of Bijapur 1300–1700* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1978); and S. C. Misra, "Indigenisation and Islamisation in Muslim Society in India," *India and Contemporary Islam*, ed. S. T. Lokhandwalla (Simla: Indian Institute for Advanced Study, 1971).

example, a rather dramatic case from medieval Bengal, where the Prophet became associated with "comparable symbols of the Hindu tradition."<sup>19</sup> From at least the sixteenth century, if not earlier, Bengali Muslim authors of the folk tradition forged an ostensible correspondence between the Islamic concept of prophethood, on the one hand, and the Hindu concept of the *avatāra* (literally "descent," or divine incarnation), on the other. The personality of Muḥammad was made pertinent to the Bengali religious milieu by being presented as the last and most powerful *Kali avatāra* of the Hindu deity Vishnu.<sup>20</sup> In their turn, Hindu deities such as Krishna were conceived as prophets who preceded Muḥammad, the final prophet-*avatāra* sent down by God to humankind. Similarly, at the other end of the subcontinent, in Gujarat and Sind, medieval preacher-saints identified the Prophet with the Hindu god Brahma, and the Prophet's daughter, Fāṭima, with Brahma's daughter, Saraswati.<sup>21</sup>

At great odds with this assimilativist or adaptive strand was a separatistic and law-bound conservative one, which was often represented by the *ashrāf* (the religious and intellectual elite of Islamic society).<sup>22</sup> Conscious of the Muslim community's minority status in a predominantly Hindu milieu, the *ashrāf* were always anxious to prevent Islam from being absorbed and overwhelmed by "an environment which could only be described as an anathema to their cherished ideal of monotheism."<sup>23</sup> To preserve and protect Islam from encroachment by "idolatrous" Indian customs and beliefs, the separatistic strand cultivated an outlook that has been appropriately termed "prophetic-separatistic" or "Mecca-oriented."<sup>24</sup> It looked to Arabia, the heartland of Islam, for determining the cultural and religious norms for the subcontinent's Muslim community. More significantly, it stressed the Arabian

19. Asim Roy, *The Islamic Syncretistic Tradition in Bengal* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1983), 95.

20. *Ibid.*, 98.

21. See Azim Nanji, *The Nizari Ismā'ili Tradition in the Indo-Pakistan Subcontinent* (Delmar: Caravan Books, 1978); G. Khakee, "The Dasa Avatāra of the Satpanth Ismailis and Imam Shahis of Indo-Pakistan," Ph.D. diss., Harvard University, 1972; Ali Asani, "The Khojas of Indo-Pakistan: The Quest for an Islamic Identity," *Journal of the Institute of Muslim Minority Affairs* 8, no. 1 (1987): 31–41.

22. Imtiaz Ahmad, "The *ashrāf-ajlāf* dichotomy in Muslim social structure in India," *Indian Economic and Social History Review* 3 (1966): 268–78.

23. Friedmann, "Islamic Thought," 79.

24. Schimmel, "Reflections on Popular Muslim Poetry," 19.



character of Islam by evoking the example of Muḥammad, the Arabian Prophet, as the only reliable guide. The Prophet's Arabian background was highlighted—he was Muḥammad, the Meccan, the Medinan, the Hāshimī, the Qurayshī.<sup>25</sup> Indeed, on account of this Arabian emphasis, the epithet "Arab" in reference to the Prophet occurs more frequently in Islamic literature from South Asia than in any other part of the world. Adherence to the way of the Arabian Prophet to the exclusion of non-Islamic Indian elements became so strong in this conservative strand that some of the powerful reformers associated with it identified themselves as following the *ṭarīqa Muḥammadiyya* (the Muhammadan path).<sup>26</sup>

The history of Islam in the Indian subcontinent can quite easily be interpreted within the framework of the dynamic interplay of these two antagonistic strands. However, as much as their philosophies and outlooks differed, it is significant that the Prophet occupied a prominent position in both ideologies. That is because whether he is perceived through an Arabia-tinted or India-tinted glass, loyalty to him—as expressed in the *shahāda* (the Muslim testimony of faith)—is a hallmark of Muslim identity. We must, however, not forget that over the centuries, the majority of the Prophet's followers have chosen to declare their love and devotion to him in poems and songs in their native languages (such as Tamil, Sindhi, Hindi, Bengali, or Urdu), incorporating themes and ideas typically characteristic of Indian poetry in general.

Among the several literary motifs used by composers of *na't* (poetry praising the Prophet) two themes, in particular, stand out. The first is the *virahinī* (a loving and yearning young woman, usually a young bride or bride-to-be), who is tormented by the absence of her husband or lord. This motif most likely originated in plaintive songs sung by the village women in periods of separation from their husbands. This symbol and the associated concept of *viraha* (longing in separation) was enthusiastically adopted in almost all the vernacular literatures of India. The *virahinī* enjoyed great popularity in a wide variety of religious contexts where she was often identified as a symbol for the human soul. Such usage is in keeping with Indian literary conventions according to which the human soul is always to be represented as female

25. Annemarie Schimmel, *As Through A Veil: Mystical Poetry in Islam* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1982), 199–200.

26. Schimmel, *And Muhammad Is His Messenger*, 216–38 and "The Golden Chain of 'Sincere Muhammadans,'" *The Rose and The Rock*, ed. B. Lawrence (Durham: Duke University Press, 1979), 104–34.

before a deity who is male.<sup>27</sup> The most renowned use of the *virahinī* in Indian literature occurs in poetry dedicated to the Hindu god Krishna. In this poetry the *gopīs* (cowmaids), and in particular Rādhā, express their longings for union with their elusive beloved. Jain, Sant, and Sikh religious poetry also have their *virahinīs*. Within an Islamic context, the *virahinī* appears in many genres of vernacular Ṣūfī poetry ranging from the romantic epics of Awadh to the folk songs of Punjab and Bengal.<sup>28</sup> Interestingly, such poetry equates the concept of *viraha* with the Ṣūfī concept of *ishq* (the burning, consuming longing of the soul for union with God).<sup>29</sup> The woman-soul is also conspicuous in the devotional literature of the subcontinent's Ismaili community, where she yearns for the Shī'ī *Imām*.<sup>30</sup> The use of the *virahinī*, then, in poetry devoted to Muḥammad (the longed-for beloved) is hardly a surprising development.

The second motif commonly associated with the figure of the Prophet is that of rain and/or a rain cloud. This association may seem rather surprising at first glance, but in many cultures rain and its life-sustaining powers have signified the descent of divine or heavenly influences upon earth.<sup>31</sup> In fact, the use of rain, particularly as a symbol of the Prophet's mercy, is a well-attested traditional Islamic literary convention. Since the Qur'ān itself, in two separate verses,<sup>32</sup> refers to both rain and the Prophet as being signs of God's mercy, "it was but natural to compare him [the Prophet] and his power to the life-giving cloud, the quickening rain."<sup>33</sup> Consequently, Islamic literature is re-

27. See John Hawley, "Images of Gender in the Poetry of Krishna," *Gender and Religion: On the Complexity of Symbols*, ed. Caroline W. Bynum, Steven Harrell, and Paula Richman (Boston: Beacon Press, 1986), 231–56.

28. See Schimmel, *As Through A Veil*, 152–54 and Ali S. Asani, "Sufi Poetry in the Folk Tradition of Indo-Pakistan," *Religion and Literature* 20, no. 1 (1988): 81–94.

29. Charlotte Vaudeville, "La conception de l'amour divin dans la Padmāvat de Muhammad Jāyasī, *virah* et *ishq*," *Journal Asiatique* 250 (1962): 351–67.

30. See Ali S. Asani, "Bridal Symbolism in Ismā'īlī Mystical Literature of Indo-Pakistan," *Mystics of the Book*, ed. R. A. Herrera (New York: Peter Lang, 1993), 389–404.

31. See article on "Rain," *Encyclopedia of Religion*, vol. 12 (New York: Free Press, 1986), 201–5.

32. *Sūras* 7:57 and 21:107.

33. Annemarie Schimmel, "The Veneration of the Prophet Muhammad, as Reflected in Sindhi Poetry," *The Saviour God: Comparative Studies in the Concept of Salvation*, ed. S. G. F. Brandon (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1963), 135.

plete with examples of the Prophet as rain or a beneficent rain cloud. For example, in the *Burda* (the famous Arabic ode to the Prophet) the rain is a metaphor for the Prophet's mercy to those who are without any helper.<sup>34</sup> One of the foremost poets of the Urdu language, Mirzā Ghālib (d. 1869), in his poem honoring the Prophet, refers to him as a "jewel-bearing cloud" (*abr-i gauharbār*), while the most famous poet in Sindhi, Shāh 'Abd ul-Laṭīf (d. 1752), addresses him as the "cloud of mercy."<sup>35</sup> In Indian culture, however, rain takes on a special significance. Rain is constantly associated with *viraha*—an association that leads W. G. Archer to comment that Indian folk poetry almost always connects sexual frustration with the rains.<sup>36</sup> Thus, in literary genres such as the *bārahmāsā* (songs of the twelve months), as well as the *cau-māsā* (songs of the four months of rain), the rainy season is invariably connected with the *virahinī*.<sup>37</sup> The pangs and agonies of being left alone become particularly intense for her during this time of the year. Not infrequently, the *virahinī*'s beloved is, directly or indirectly, associated with dark rain clouds.<sup>38</sup>

Both literary motifs—the *virahinī* and the rain cloud—have a rich literary heritage behind them, which brings with it the potential for interesting poetic minglings. Their immense appeal as metaphors and symbols, no doubt, explains their pervasiveness in Indian literature. The Prophet's panegyrists took advantage of this popularity by exploring different directions in which these motifs could be extended. With this in mind, we turn now to two poets, both equally renowned for their literary skills as well as their piety. One writes in Sindhi, the language of Sind, and chooses the *virahinī* as a vehicle to express his devotion; the other writes in Urdu, the premier literary language for the subcontinent's Muslim community, and focuses on the rain cloud motif.

## Chapter 2

### The Bridegroom Prophet

Beloved, send for this beggar, your little country girl  
For God's sake, O Muṣṭafā, my hero, give me courage!

— . . . . .  
Beloved! put out the fire of *biraha* (*viraha*) with your own hands.<sup>1</sup>

(27)

This verse, addressed to Muḥammad was written by a male poet from Sind—the region of the subcontinent that came under Muslim rule as early as 711. The composer, 'Abd ur-Ra'ūf Bhaṭṭī (d. 1752) or 'aṣī (the sinner), as he calls himself, ranks among the first poets to write *maulūds* in his native language Sindhi.<sup>2</sup> Technically intended to be poems describing the Prophet's birth, the Sindhi *maulūds* consist of five to ten verses, patterned after traditional Sindhi poetic forms called the *wā'ī* and *kāfī*. *Maulūds* always contain a beginning verse that is repeated as a refrain (*thal*).<sup>3</sup> As with most Indian poetry, the last verse contains the name of the poet who usually takes the opportunity to offer a supplication to the Prophet. According to one Sindhi religious manual *maulūds* are meant to be recited in "a sweet and harmonious voice," either by an individual or a chorus, so that the listener's heart is "correctly guided."<sup>4</sup> To this day, the numerous poems composed by 'Abd ur-Ra'ūf Bhaṭṭī are recited throughout the villages and towns of Sind, not

34. Muhammad Bukhari Lubis, *Qaṣīdahs in honor of the Prophet* (Bangi, Malaysia: Penerbit Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia, 1983), 42.

35. Schimmel, *And Muhammad is His Messenger*, 81–82.

36. W. G. Archer, "Seasonal Songs of the Patna District," *Man in India*, 22 (1942), 232.

37. Charlotte Vaudeville, *Bārahmāsā in Indian Literatures* (Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass, 1986), 27–33.

38. *Ibid.*, 28.

1. The number in parentheses refers to the poem number in the 'Abd ur-Ra'ūf Bhaṭṭī section in Nabibakhsh Baloch, ed., *Maulūd* (Hyderabad, Sind: Sindhi Adabi Board, 1961), 5–33.

2. Meman 'Abd al-Majid Sindhi, *Sindhi men na'tiya shā'irī* (Larkana: Sindhi Adabi Academy, 1980), 121.

3. *Ibid.*, 133.

4. *Ibid.*, 134–35.

only at religious assemblies and gatherings but during weddings, general occasions of rejoicing, and at times of mourning.<sup>5</sup>

'Abd ur-Ra'ūf Bhaṭṭī wrote under the influence of the North Indian *virahinī* tradition. As illustrated, he beseeches the Prophet in the voice of a humble and unsophisticated woman, "a little country girl," who can no longer bear the painful agony of being separated from her beloved, in this case the Prophet. It is not surprising then, that the language and vocabulary he employs are typical of the idiom of Sindhi women, utilizing linguistic forms such as the diminutive for tender and affectionate address. Only the Prophet, *Muṣṭafā* (the chosen one), can put out the fire of longing that consumes this young lady. The yearning, pining woman is a leitmotif that runs through almost all of Bhaṭṭī's poems addressed to the Prophet. Indeed, she is a standard character in much Sindhi mystical poetry, where she is always interpreted as symbolizing the human soul in its long quest for God. There too, the woman-soul endures much pain and suffering as she burns in divine love, and frequently dies from intense longing. The representation of the soul as a woman in Sindhi poetry is definitely unusual by the standards of Islamic religious poetry from the Arabic- and Persian-speaking Islamic world. In the Arabo-Persian literary tradition, the woman is generally used as a symbol for something that is negative, such as the seductions of the material world.<sup>6</sup> However, the woman-soul—especially in the form of the *virahinī*—is a symbol adopted by many of the subcontinent's Muslim writers as they indigenized their poetry to the literary tastes of their local Indian audiences.

Bhaṭṭī expresses the *virahinī*'s relationship with the Prophet in several different ways. This relationship is one of mutual love—love and mercy being the essence of the Prophet. Muḥammad is described as "love-intoxicated" (48), "compassionate" (47), "filled with mercy" (3), and a "sweet comforting beloved" (65) for whom thousands have sacrificed themselves in yearning like moths (48). Still, this "sweetest of relationships" (1) is painful and soul-consuming for it burns lovers in the fire of *biraha*, a fire which slowly kills:

Dying from love, those wounded by the prince, weep in yearning  
(73)

5. Baloch, *Maulūd*, 5.

6. Annemarie Schimmel, *Mystical Dimensions of Islam* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1975), appendix 2, 426–35.

All this longing kills me!  
O intercessor, yearning for you is killing me!  
(61)

Deep passion for the beloved entered my heart, immediately there  
followed pain;  
O compassionate one, save me now; remove the burdens of *biraha*.  
(65)

Out of intense desire to be in his presence, the Prophet's faithful lover is so anxious to visit his mausoleum that the very "love for Medina" is difficult to bear (45).

Remembering, my eyes yearn; every day lovers come into your presence.  
The pilgrims, who travel to Arab country, are in love  
There, every day, the travellers recite blessings on the master;  
The Prophet's lovers weep on the roads;  
Journeying on foot, they come with boundless joy.  
(69)

The journey itself is gruesome and involves traversing difficult, desolate distances, leading the woman-soul to exclaim:

Would that I would give up my life crawling along the road to Medina!  
(52)

But as the *virahinī* approaches her destination, she sees the minarets of the Prophet's mausoleum—a sight that acts as a soothing balm for her tired and burning eyes:

When I saw the minarets of the true master  
The fire in my eyes was soothed.  
With longing came the thoughts of the intercessor:  
Muḥammad has met thousands of pilgrims.  
The joys of proximity as I draw near;  
The trembling of emotions [as I think of] Aḥmad [Muḥammad] as  
my companion.  
(47)

According to folk belief, a visit to the Prophet's tomb guarantees his intercession; an idea which Tor Andrae points out "moves in an area

which is essentially alien to orthodox Islam."<sup>7</sup> Nevertheless, as any contemporary description of a visit to Medina will prove, the Prophet's *Rauza* (garden) in Medina to this day signifies an ecstatic moment for many Muslims. Being in the presence of the Prophet, experiencing what Constance Padwick terms the "awe of the Prophet,"<sup>8</sup> is the fulfillment of a life-long dream. It is a highly emotional moment to which South Asian Muslims, in particular, have devoted entire collections of poetry. In these poems, the Prophet's lovers rejoice at being physically present in his city, Medina. On the other hand they also express the painful yearnings they will feel once they depart and are separated from him again.

This love for the Prophet afflicts the *virahinī* like a sickness for which Muḥammad is the only cure:

I am love-sick: beloved, you be my health!  
The beloved need only come to my house and  
All pains and afflictions will be cured.

(49)

Muḥammad is not only the "medicine of the afflicted" (69) but he is also the physician who can, through his mercy, save a soul dying from love-sickness:

Revive me so that I may live; otherwise I shall surely die.  
Cure me with the medicines and potions of mercy  
You are the physician and the healer;  
Place your hand on this weak one.

(30)

Yet the most dramatic aspect of the *virahinī* symbol in Bhaṭṭī's work recalls the image of the young bride-to-be and her impending marriage to Muḥammad, the bridegroom of Medina. The poet makes condensed references to a host of terms and images pertaining to weddings in Sindhi society. He uses these to allude to the true nature of the woman-soul's devotion to the Prophet in a form that arouses immediate associations and emotions among his listeners.

Like all Indian weddings, this wedding too, is preceded by a henna

7. Tor Andrae, *Die Person Muhammeds in Lehre und Glaube seiner Gemeinde* (Stockholm: P. A. Vorstedt og soner, 1918), 256.

8. Constance Padwick, *Muslim Devotions* (London: SPCK, 1960), 142.

(*menhdi*) night (when the bride's hands and feet are stained with henna) and at this henna party innumerable angels are present (16). As the hour of the wedding approaches, the ladies of the household have climbed on the upper storeys of the house to catch a glimpse of the bridegroom as he arrives (6). Meanwhile the bride anxiously awaits her bridegroom Prophet. In typical Sindhi fashion, he comes wearing a turban of honor, the turban of faith, tied on him by God Himself (16). He arrives riding a horse—a well-harnessed horse (14) with a golden saddlecloth (10)—or on a camel (6). The waiting bride-soul exclaims:

O girlfriends! The handsome, beloved bridegroom has come!

(8)

The procession accompanying the Prophet is comprised of heavenly beings. There are ten million attending angels (9) who distribute musk and perfume to the populace (12). At the same time, they shower Muḥammad with flowers and rose petals (15) as well as precious gems (8). The *hūrs* (the paradisiacal virgins) rejoice noisily (10) while making garlands (16), bearing wedding gifts (14), and showering the bridegroom with millions of rubies (11). A fragrant wedding bed, on which the angels have scattered pearls (14), has been prepared for the bridegroom. Finally, the groom sits on the bed (13) and leans against the cushions on which are scattered roses (10). Now the bride-soul knows that her desire to meet the Prophet-bridegroom will be fulfilled:

The lord sat on the bed, on which lie scattered pearls  
Thanks be to God! the wedding will take place.

(13)

By representing the Prophet as a bridegroom, the poet Bhaṭṭī utilizes a symbol that has become a distinctive feature of many Sindhi panegyrics. Bhaṭṭī employs another literary device, equally fashionable in Sindhi poetry—the use of folk tales and romances as allegories. The culture of Sind is so permeated with folk tales and romances that a scholar of Sindhi literary history considers them to be a pivot around which the bulk of Sindhi literature revolves, regardless of form or theme.<sup>9</sup> In keeping with this tradition, Bhaṭṭī too, makes allusions to

9. L. H. Ajwani, *History of Sindhi Literature* (Karachi: Allied Book Co., 1984), 40.

Sindhi romances in his works. He does not narrate these romances for he assumes his listeners are well aware of their details. He only judiciously refers to those tales that feature a *virahinī*. In this way he continues to preserve a consistency in his symbolism.

A particularly favorite tale of his is the Sassui-Punhuñ romance. The story has a simple plot: Sassui, the adopted daughter of a washerman, was the boast and beauty of the town of Bhambhore, and a considerable sensation in society. Punhuñ, a handsome Balochi prince, much to the distress of his noble father and brothers not only falls in love with Sassui but stays with her family as a lowly washerman until he finally gets to marry her. Outraged by his behavior, Punhuñ's brothers, through force and stratagem, manage to kidnap a very drunk Punhuñ from Sassui as she lays peacefully asleep. On awakening, the deserted bride is heartbroken and desolate. She sets out, alone, in pursuit of her beloved on a fatal two-hundred-mile march across a dreadful desert and still more dreadful hills.<sup>10</sup>

For Bhaṭṭī, the heroine Sassui is the *virahinī*, separated from her beloved Punhuñ. She represents the soul who longs to meet the beloved Prophet (in this case Punhuñ), ready to undergo all trials and affliction in the process. Addressing the Prophet as Punhal (an affectionate form of Punhuñ) Bhaṭṭī's Sassui cries:

Dear sweetheart, I will not forget my beloved, the Prophet  
For you, I spread my hair as a mat, O Punhal, my prince!  
Beloved, more fragrant than musk and ambergris is your sweat;  
On account of your beauty, the moon sacrifices itself.

(5)

Bhaṭṭī also alludes to Sassui's arduous journeys in quest of her beloved:

Remembering, my little heart longs for the beloved [Punhuñ]  
Difficult, desolate distances, dear Punhuñ makes me travel!  
O Generous One, show me the tomb of the Prophet.

(45)

10. This summary of the Sassui-Punhuñ romance is closely based on Sir Richard Burton's rather colorful account in *Sind Revisited: With notices of the Anglo-Indian army; railroads; past, present and future*, vol. 1 (London: R. Bentley and Son, 1877), 129–32.

I pluck roses along the roadside so that I may welcome Punhuñ when he comes.

How many tasks shall I undertake for the sake of Punhal?

The journeys are dangerous and difficult, escort me across safely!

May the Generous One show me the mausoleum of the Prophet.

(58)

In another poem, Bhaṭṭī tries to capture Sassui's agony and pain as she awakens from her sleep to find Punhuñ has disappeared. She is beside herself with grief and there is no reason for her to stay in her town, Bhambhore, any longer. She is determined to set out in pursuit of him, even if it means being ground by the "fist of death" (71). Though the Punhuñ of folklore was ethnically a Balochi, Bhaṭṭī's Punhuñ, of course, represents the Prophet. Hence he is addressed as Hāshimī (coming from the Banu Hāshim, the Arabian clan of the Prophet).

O girlfriends! How can I bear this? I, who am walking towards the beloved Punhuñ

While awake, I weep; while sleeping, I have no peace;

Thoughts of the Hashimite friend overcome me!

Sisters, staying in this Bhambhore is poison to me!

The fist of death grinds me along the road;

Seizing me by the roots, love has carried me away!

The grasped hem no longer remains [in my hands]; I live but my life is gone!

The "sinner" 'Abd ar-Ra'ūf says, "Treat me kindly:

I am going to the Prince of Medina and I will return."

(71)

To relieve the despondency and gloom of the Sassui tale, Bhaṭṭī also refers to another romance, this one with a more happy ending. It is the tale of Prince Jām Tamāchī, who falls in love with the charming, but lowly, fishermaid Nūrī. The heroine in this tale is interpreted as nothing less than the symbol of the perfect and obedient soul who pleases her lord (the Prophet). Her mighty but loving lord in return covers her, and all who belong to her, with loving kindness.<sup>11</sup> We have here a situation that fulfills the *virahinī*'s most ardent desire—a state of

11. Annemarie Schimmel, *Pain and Grace: A Study of Two Mystical Writers of Eighteenth Century Muslim India* (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1976), 175.

marital bliss (*suhāg*) in which the lover and beloved, Nūrī and Tamāchī, the yearning soul and the loving Prophet, are happily united.

O you, medicine for the little sinners and aggrieved ones,  
Muhammad, the bridegroom of Medina.  
When Samo [Jām Tamāchī]<sup>12</sup> was born, peace prevailed; wealth descended  
on nations.  
Happy in the marital bliss (*suhāg*) of the Prince's affections, oh, the fish-  
erwomen smile:  
On the shores of the Kīnjhar lake,<sup>13</sup> they talk about love!

(4)

## Chapter 3

### The Rain Cloud and the Prophet

Among all the Urdu/Hindi poems exalting the Prophet, none has been more renowned for its use of the rain cloud imagery than Muḥsin Kākōrawī's *Madīḥ khair al-mursalīn* (Eulogy for the best of messengers). Beginning with the dramatic line, *simt-i Kāshī se ḥalā jānib-i Mathrā bādāl* (from the direction of Benares went a cloud toward Mathura), this poem has inspired many imitations. Its composer, Muḥsin Kākōrawī (d. 1905), was a member of an 'alawī *sayyid*<sup>1</sup> family whose ancestors were guardians of the Prophet's tomb in Medina. Though professionally a lawyer, Kākōrawī ranks as the first major Urdu poet to dedicate himself to composing solely *na'ats* (poems praising the Prophet). As he put it:

When blessings were distributed in pre-eternity,  
The art of [writing] *na't* was assigned to my tongue.<sup>2</sup>

Composing his very first panegyric at the tender age of nine, after the Prophet appeared to him in a dream,<sup>3</sup> Muḥsin Kākōrawī remained faithful to a declaration he once made to the Prophet:

It is my desire that none of my poetry  
should be devoid of your *na't*.<sup>4</sup>

(121)

1. Descendants of the Prophet through his son-in-law, 'Alī, and daughter, Fāṭima.

2. Muhammad Nūr al-Ḥasan, *Kulliyāt-i na't-i Muḥsin Kākōrawī* (Lucknow: Uttar Pradesh Urdu Academy, 1982), 2.

3. Ibid., 8–9.

4. The number in parentheses indicates the page number on which the verse occurs in Nūr al-Ḥasan, *Kulliyāt-i na't-i Muḥsin Kākōrawī*.

12. Meaning here the prophet Muhammad.

13. A pond near Thatta in Sind, which abounds in fish.

His poetry achieved widespread fame and popularity, so much so that one religious scholar even had a dream in which the Prophet endorsed the recitation of Muḥsin Kākorawī's verse since Muḥammad, himself, found it to be "very good and pleasing."<sup>5</sup>

From the literary point of view, the poem *Madīh khair al-mursalīn* is particularly unusual for its charming combination of verse styles, imagery, and vocabulary drawn extensively from the Indian as well as the Perso-Arabic traditions. It exhibits a rather exceptional blending of the indigenous with the foreign, and the popular with the classical. In this, it represents a bold experiment by its composer to depart from the conventions and norms of classical Urdu poetry. Not too surprisingly, Muḥsin Kākorawī was severely criticized for the daring and unconventional nature of this poem. This criticism, however, did little to detract from his universally acknowledged status as the Prophet's foremost panegyrist in Urdu. For his lifelong veneration of the Prophet, Kākorawī was popularly known as *Ḥassān-i waqt* (the Ḥassān of his time). This title is an allusion to Ḥassān ibn Thābit, the Prophet's Arab eulogist in the seventh century.

Structurally, "Eulogy for the best of messengers" is a long *qaṣīda*<sup>6</sup>—the verse form conventionally employed to write panegyrics in Arabic, Persian, and related languages (such as Turkish and Urdu). The whole composition can be scanned mercilessly in the Perso-Arabic meter *ramal muthamman*<sup>7</sup> with a monorhyme ending in a consonant, short "a" vowel, and the consonant "l" as in *bādal*, *jal*, *gokal*. Like a traditional *qaṣīda*, it is divided into three parts. The first is the *tashbīb* (the exordium or introduction), the main function of which is to permit the poet to capture the attention of listeners. This is usually accomplished by introducing erotic or amatory subjects—though descriptions of nature and geographical regions are also found. The *tashbīb* is followed by the *madh* (the central portion of the *qaṣīda*) in which the poet displays his/her skills in praising his/her patron, in Kākorawī's case the Prophet. Finally, the *qaṣīda* ends with the *du'ā* (the petition or prayer) in which the poet presents his/her humble requests to his/her patron.

It is the poem's first part, the *tashbīb*, that is most interesting and the most controversial. In its meter and rhyme it is perfectly conventional.

5. Ibid., 31.

6. This also includes a couple of small *ghazals* within the framework of the *qaṣīda*.

7. The arrangement of syllables in this meter is as follows:

---|---|---|---|---

However, its imagery as well as its vocabulary may appear peculiar, especially for a *qaṣīda* on an Islamic theme. The very first verse (*bayt*) can have a startling effect on listeners because of the clear Hindu nuances:

From the direction of Benares went a cloud toward Mathura  
The breeze brings Ganges water on the shoulders of lightning.

(95)

Both Benares and Mathura are important pilgrimage sites in the Hindu tradition—Benares is the most sacred of all cities for Hindus, while Mathura is held in great honor as the birthplace and early residence of Krishna. The significance of the water (in the form of rain) from the Ganges—the most sacred river of the Hindus—becomes apparent in subsequent verses. The rain cloud showers the residents of Gokal—a tract of the river Jumna which served as the residence of Krishna during his youth—with this holy water, and makes them pure. The poet then declares:

News has just reached the great forest that  
The wind-borne clouds are coming to the pilgrimage sites.

(95)

These are no ordinary clouds. According to the poem many such dense, black rain clouds have filled the sky. They are the clouds of infidelity—the color black being associated with Hindus and infidelity in the Persian-influenced Urdu literary tradition.<sup>8</sup> It seems:

The idols hold sway not only in Hind [India] but indeed the whole world.

(95)

The clouds slowly move eastwards in the direction of the Ka'ba, which in pre-Islamic times served as a temple of the infidel pagans. The poet warns:

8. For a detailed discussion of this symbolism, and especially association of the color black with the Hindu, see Annemarie Schimmel, "Turk and Hindu: A Poetical Image and Its Application to Historical Fact," *Islam and Cultural Change in the Middle Ages*, ed. Speros Vryonis, Jr. (Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz, 1975), 107–26.



Perhaps Lāt and Hubal<sup>9</sup> may yet again lay siege on the Ka'ba.

(96)

Such is the opening scene described in the first seven verses of this panegyric to the prophet Muḥammad. The Indian and Hindu themes continue as the poem takes on the character of an Indian rain song describing the onset of the rainy season. The rains of Bhādoṇ (the month of rains in the Hindu calendar) are heavy and continuous, spreading the flood waters of the Ganges River everywhere. The gusts of wind overturn the boats which come out filled with Ganges water (*gangā jal*). The complex of images associated with the rainy season in Indian literature also always involves the theme of *viraha* and the yearnings of a lonely wife (the *virahinī*). So quite appropriately the *gopīs* (the cowmaids), who lovingly pine for their lord Krishna, make their appearance. And as in many popular Hindu devotional poems, the *gopīs*, with their hearts beating restlessly in their constricted bosoms, wonder:

How will we be blessed with the *darshan* (vision) of Lord Krishna?

(97)

Indian rain songs always describe the days of the rainy season as dark and dreary.<sup>10</sup> In keeping with this convention, this poem, too, turns to darkness. The darkness is so overwhelming that neither the moon can be seen at night nor the sun during the day (99). In the blinding darkness, the clouds themselves cannot move, and, amazingly, the moth seeking to immolate itself has to search for the candle flame with the help of a torch (99)! The poet, to further develop the equation of darkness with infidelity, introduces Layla, the symbol of divine beauty in Arabic and Persian mystical poetry. Since her name is connected with the Arabic word for night (*layl*), the poet, in a multiple pun, declares that if Layla were to reveal her face by lifting her veil, the lover would witness only infidelity (darkness) on account of it being too dark for him to see (98). As he puts it, the infidel has applied lampblack (the color symbolizing infidelity) in the eye of infidelity (98). This means that darkness has been compounded by further darkness; that is, infidelity permeates everything and everywhere.

As the *tashbīb* continues, the identity of this dark cloud becomes clear:

9. The names of pre-Islamic Arab deities.

10. Charlotte Vaudeville, *Bārahmāsā in Indian Literatures* (Delhi: Motilal Barnardasidass, 1986), 36.

Today in Braj the Lord Krishna is the black cloud  
The cloud that casts a good [protective] shadow over Gokal and Mathura.  
Today the cloud is immersed in the color of Kanhaiya [Krishna].

(104)

As in a typically well-written *qaṣīda*, the *tashbīb* contains several other beautifully concocted images, many of them very cleverly manipulated to demonstrate the composer's command over the language. But it is the Indian and Hindu themes, and their predominance in this portion of the panegyric, that aroused criticism among Muḥsin Kākorawī's contemporaries. These critics were obviously disturbed by his attempt to "Indianize" and popularize a classical *qaṣīda* on such a significant Islamic topic. Was it appropriate for a poet of Muḥsin Kākorawī's heritage and stature to employ expressions and idioms from Hindi: a language which, on account of its Sanskrit-based vocabulary, they identified as belonging to the Hindus?<sup>11</sup> Was it fitting that a *qaṣīda* in praise of the Prophet of Islam should contain references to a Hindu deity (Krishna) and mention Hindu sacred places (such as Mathura, Gokal)?

Amīr Mināī, a friend and contemporary of the composer, argues in Muḥsin Kākorawī's defense that no one has laid down any literary rules governing the topics that may or may not be addressed in the *tashbīb* (exordium). Though certain subjects have traditionally been associated with this section of the *qaṣīda*—days of youth, erotic and amatory subjects—poets have by no means been restricted to them. Significantly, he strengthens his argument by evoking the example of the *Bānat Su'ād*, the most popular Arabic *qaṣīda* written in praise of the Prophet, composed by Ka'b ibn Zuhayr, a former antagonist of the Prophet. When this Arabic panegyric, which also had an unconventional *tashbīb*, was recited in front of Muḥammad, he had nothing but praise for its beauty.<sup>12</sup>

Muḥsin Kākorawī, himself, upset at the criticism, wrote a poetic defense in which he claimed that to truly appreciate the poem, it should be considered in its entirety "with the eye of justice." Then, it would be quite obvious that the infidelity portrayed in the first section comes to a happy end in the affirmation of faith—that is, in Islam and the

11. For a discussion on the reluctance of Indo-Muslim literati to write on Islamic subjects in Indic vernacular languages (which they considered "vulgar" and "substandard"), see Ali S. Asani, "Amir Khusraw and Poetry in Indic Languages," *Islamic Culture*, 62, 2-3 (1988): 50-62.

12. Nūr al-Ḥasan, *Kulliyāt-i na't*, 93.

Prophet. Moreover, he claims, it is customary for the poets of Islam to compare infidelity with darkness, and faith with light—which is precisely what he does in this composition. Significantly, he also turns to prophetic example for endorsement of his case when he points out that Muḥammad, himself, expressed his pleasure with the *Bānat Suʿād* (which describes him as the light that illuminates).<sup>13</sup>

As both Muḥsin Kākorawī and Amīr Mināī suggest, in the *madḥ* (praise) section, there is a dramatic change in the mood and style of the *qaṣīda*. Linguistically, the vocabulary switches from Hindi and Sanskrit based terms to a heavy use of Arabic and Persian terminology and constructions. This linguistic change is accompanied by a change in subject as the Prophet is praised and terms and concepts associated with Islamic belief prevail. Changes can also be discerned in the style, which becomes pompous and grandiose. For example, while extolling the Prophet, the poet declares:

Your metaphor[ical] being is a matter of astonishment for reality  
Your supplication is the place of coquetry for self-sufficiency.

(117)

The poet shows off his poetic skills by drawing on the full range of rhetorical devices, including allusions to the Qurʾān and the *ḥadīth*, to praise the Prophet. It is amusing to note that at one point, Muḥsin Kākorawī modestly declares that he would write many more befitting verses for the Prophet but his pen would become ecstatic and fly off from his hand (114)!

In regards to imagery, the *madḥ* clearly shows the influence of the *sabk-i hindī* (the Indian style of Persian poetry), the impact of which was also felt on classical Urdu literature. This style is characterized by the compression of a world of meaning into a single image; the employment in unexpected ways of familiar and conventional symbols, so that they never retain a fixed meaning; and the use of artificially created and abstruse diction, often so strange that even an educated native speaker would find the poetry difficult to follow.

The *madḥ* proper begins with the reintroduction of the cloud, now a symbol of the Prophet, as it journeys to the highest heaven—a reference to the Prophet's own heavenly ascension (*miʿrāj*). The cloud, having witnessed divine light, is praised with the honorific title "one who is consumed by the sudden lightning of [divine] manifestation" (111). As the poet begins to describe various heavenly sites and, then, turns to high-flown and glowing praise of the Prophet's various attributes

13. Ibid., 94.

and uniqueness, the symbol of the cloud falls into the background. However, he returns to the cloud symbol several verses later when he breaks the *qaṣīda* with a *ghazal* (love-lyric) using the rhyme-word *bādal* (cloud). Muḥsin Kākorawī, a faithful adherent of the *sabk-i hindī* style, delights in playing with the cloud symbol, ever attaching new meanings to it. It is a faithful cloud, having left behind India, the land of infidelity:

How [beautifully] the cloud prostrates towards the Kaʿba, the *qibla*;  
The cloud prostrates towards Yathrib [Medina] and Baṭṭā [a valley  
near Medina].  
Having abandoned the tavern of India and the idol house of Braj,  
Today the cloud has spread its prayer rug in the Kaʿba.

(118)

At the same time, the cloud continues to function as a prophetic symbol: it is a special mercy of the Lord Almighty (118); on account of its blackness the cloud becomes the black hair of the Prophet (119); Jesus declares it to be unique just as Muḥammad is unique (119); like the Prophet, the cloud came before the exalted throne on the night of the *miʿrāj*, in the verdant meadow of the world above (119); and finally, the cloud represents the Prophet's generosity—it is the hand in the rose garden of generosity (120). In other contexts, the cloud = prophet symbolism becomes obscure with the cloud appearing to be a helper or assistant of the Prophet. For example, the cloud brings the Prophet "the grey horse of the heavens" (118) or it spreads the news of his prophethood (120). But, however much Muḥsin Kākorawī plays with the cloud symbol, one point is clear: in the *madḥ*, the cloud becomes a positive symbol of the true faith of Islam, just as much as it was a negative symbol of infidelity in the *tashbīb*.

It is fitting that the cloud symbol appears one final time at the beginning of the *duʿā* (petition) as it comes around to gather supplications like a prophet. The *duʿā* contains some very beautiful and touching verses declaring the poet's total dependance and reliance on the Prophet's kindness and generosity:

Only on you do I depend, on your strength, on your power.  
May [you be] my fibre of hope and palm tree, fresh and green.<sup>14</sup>  
Whose every branch has flowers, and whose every flower contains a fruit.

(121)

14. This is an allusion to the Qurʾānic story of Mary, who was supported by the trunk of the palm tree and its fruit as she gave birth to Jesus. *Sūra* 19: 23–26.

The poet desires the name of the Prophet be on his lips as he dies, so that the Prophet may intercede for him. He wants concealed in his heart the secret of *bilā mīm* (without m), the secret of the Prophet's spiritual status (122).<sup>15</sup>

So strong is the poet's confidence and trust in the Prophet's intercession that he portrays his last moments quite cheerfully and nonchalantly. The angel of death lovingly asks the poet whether he wants to come along to Medina, the Prophet's city. He is reassuringly told:

Don't worry about the day of resurrection, we'll take care of it tomorrow.  
(122)

And Munkar and Nakīr, the two scribe angels whose job it is to record a person's deeds, welcome him with the words:

Feel at home [here]; don't be distressed, don't be anxious!  
(122)

But Muḥsin's love for the Prophet extends, in his conception, even to the after-life. He hopes that he will continue to praise the Prophet there. Perhaps the angel Gabriel, on the day of resurrection, will command Muḥsin to recite this very *qaṣīda* by telling him:

Yes, begin in the name of God,  
"From the direction of Benares went a cloud towards Mathura."  
(123)

In this skillful manner, Muḥsin Kākorawī ends his poem with exactly the same hemistich with which he began.

The two poets we have looked at in this chapter represent two very different dimensions of Islamic South Asia. 'Abd ar-Ra'ūf Bhaṭṭī, the Sindhi, is heavily influenced by the culture and traditions of rural Sind. He belongs to a poetic tradition that is deeply rooted in folk poetry (especially the popular tradition of women's songs). He employs the structure of regional folk poetry and local imagery to create poems that

15. This is an allusion to the *ḥadīth qudsī* (divine saying), extremely popular in eastern Islamic lands, according to which God declared: *Anā Aḥmad bilā mīm*, "I am Aḥmad [that is, Muḥammad] without the [letter] m [which means *aḥad*, "One," a reference to God's unity]." The letter "m," symbolizing the Prophet, is in Islamic numerology equivalent to 40, the number of stages, according to some mystics, separating humanity from the Divine.

may not be literary masterpieces. Nevertheless, they are effective in transmitting his message within a regional context in a regional idiom. His symbols for the Prophet are also local, simple to understand, and are not burdened with too many theoretical speculations. The Prophet Bhaṭṭī portrays is all too human—like a kind and loving bridegroom for a bride. Bhaṭṭī is a poet whose poetry comes from the heart and appeals to the emotions of a wide audience, both rural and urban.

Muḥsin Kākorawī, on the other hand, is a product of the sophisticated urban Islamic culture of Northern India. The culture is Indian but at the same time heavily influenced in its tastes by centuries of contact with the Turko-Persian Islamic culture of Central Asia and Iran. It was a civilization associated with a Muslim ruling elite (of foreign ancestry) with lifestyles very different from rural Sind. In its literary tastes, this elite preferred the embellishments and intricacies of Persian-influenced poetic style. Much of Muḥsin Kākorawī's poetry clearly caters to the literary tastes of this aristocratic culture—for only a person thoroughly versed in it could fully appreciate the niceties of his poetic style. It is perhaps because of his style and cultural background that his portrayal of the Prophet tends to be metaphysical and transcendental. At the same time, however, Muḥsin Kākorawī tried to break through the literary conventions of this culture by trying to indigenize (as far as he could) the language and symbolism of his poetry to an Indian milieu. In the process, he, too, drew on the language and the imagery of the Indian tradition so that his poetry, by marrying the popular with the classical, could appeal to a wider audience. That his *Madiḥ khair al-mursalin* (Eulogy for the best of messengers) remains a favorite to this day is a testimony to the success of his experiment.

Whatever differences exist in the backgrounds of these two poets and their audiences, we can discern in their attitudes to the Prophet, manifest in different idioms, the same enthusiastic love and devotion. Love of the Prophet is a powerful reconciler of differences and a force for communal unity. As Sir Muḥammad Iqbāl, the poet-philosopher of Indo-Pakistan, says in his poem *Rumūz-i bekhudī*: it runs like blood in the veins of the Muslim community.<sup>16</sup>

16. *Rumūz-i bekhudī* (Lahore: n.p., 1917), 190.