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CELEBRATING
MUHAMMAD
Images of the Prophet
in Popular Muslim Poetry

by
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in collaboration with
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REMEMBRANCE

Sultaan Ali Asani
1929–1994

O soul at peace return to your Lord.
—Qur'ān Sūra 89:27
Prologue

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. 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 ṣalāt— a formula invoking blessing on the prophet Muḥammad whom they affectionately call habīb Allah (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:

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 (Allah),” 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 islam (belonging to the same verbal root in Arabic as the word salam, 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 Musulma), literally “a submitter.”

Perhaps some of the greatest misconceptions about the Islamic faith concern Muhammad, its prophet. In medieval Europe, for example, a whole range of negative judgments were passed upon this man whom Muslims venerate. Muhammad was variously depicted as an idol worshipper, an arch-schismatic, an epileptic, a kind of anticlimax, heretic, and even as a cardiac 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 Muhammad 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 Muhammad 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), Muhammad 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 Muhammad has been, and still is, one of the greatest obstacles to an appreciation of Islam as understood from within. For Muslims, Muhammad (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. Muhammad 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. Muhammad 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 Muhammad 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 Muhammad, 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 Muhammad 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 Muhammad 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, it illustrates the orthodox Muslim position. The Qur'an emphasizes Muhammad's humanity by calling him "a human being like you to whom the revelation was brought." For the Muslim, the similarities between the Qur'an and Jewish-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'an, 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 Muhammad had to be immaculate in order to receive the divine word, which was to be "inlibrated" in the Qur'an—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'an 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 Muhammad 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 André’s Die Person Muhammad und die Geschichte seiner Gemeinde und 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 Muhammad’s "borrowing," unwittingly or

2. Some Muslims, mindful of the complexities of divine revelation (wahyi), have argued that Muhammad'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 Muhammad, rejects the simplistic notion that God's message was communicated through Muhammad in a mechanical manner. See Frederick Mathewson Denny, "Fazlur Rahman: Muslim Intellectual," Muslim World 79, no. 2 (1989): 98-100.


were short and enigmatic; thus, the hadith developed into a kind of early commentary on the Qur'an. It is understandable that the number of stories about Muhammad 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 hadith 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 Muhammadi—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 hadith literature not so much according to its literal meaning (as in, Muhammad 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 Muhammad and his custom establishes legal, personal, and pietistic norms for the faithful.

The development of theological and mystical doctrines concerning Muhammad’s person contributed other significant dimensions to his role in Islamic religious life. Muhammad never claimed special honors for himself, even though the Qur’an asserts that God and the angels bless him. Consequently, the blessing for the Prophet (salađat) 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, Muhammad felt that he was only a “slave to whom revelation was granted,” and the designation ‘abdulhu (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’anic 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’raj), gave rise to voluminous literature in Islamic mystical circles concerning his true spiritual status. Muhammad’s mi’raj 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 Muhammad” (nūr Muhammad) and the “Muhammad reality” (hadīqa Muhammadīyya). In the course of time, among such mystically minded circles, Muhammad 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: laulaka mā khalaṣtu’l affāka (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 Muhammad’s miracles. Some of these are alluded to in the Qur’an; other stories pertain to events during his life. According to the most popular of these, Muhammad 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 Muhammad as intercessor is truly the most significant leitmotiv of Prophet-oriented piety. The notion that a penitent sinner can be saved by Muhammad’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 Muhammad 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 Muhammad 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 Muhammad or portraying him.

Typically, more conservative Muslims are concerned that excessive
veneration of the Prophet, by compromising strict monotheism, leads to the grassest 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 Muhammad a status similar to that of Jesus in Christianity. For example, in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries the use of candles during the maulid (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’an. 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. Although this festival is not explicitly sanctioned by the Qur’an, more liberal schools of Islamic jurisprudence have permitted it as a praiseworthy innovation (iḥāda). 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 Muhammad’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 Muhammad’s paradigmatic role in the Qur’an by referring to him as ʿusūl ḥusna (a beautiful model) (Ṣūra 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 Khadija, 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.”

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. Kappu, 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 Mevlûd-i sharif by Suleyman Chelebi, a Turkish poet who died in 1419 in Bursa (the first capital of the Ottoman sultans). This mevlûd (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 childlike 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 Muhammad. Stories from both learned and popular tradition, from very early days, describe all the miracles connected with the Prophet’s birth, when his mother, Amina, 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” (Qurʾān Sūra 21:107).

INTRODUCTION

Many years later, I often had the opportunity of listening to the mevlûd in Turkish homes, and I always enjoyed both the words and the simple tune in which they were recited, interrupted by recitations from the Qurʾān 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 rector of religious music in Turkey.

But the part of the mevlûd recital I liked best was the custom of the audience getting up and touching each other’s backs when the singer recited Amina’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 submerged 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 Muhammad 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]), Muhammad alone will march forth and call: ummati ummati (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 qaṣīdas (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 (jannāl) 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 (rahmat) 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 Muhammad’s fragrance. Popular ballads elaborate the miracles which were soon ascribed to him although Muhammad 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” (Sūrat 54:1) was a favorite topic that was particularly dear to Indian authors. This might be attributed to a ruler of Korkan 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 pine 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 (salawat sharifa) 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 salawat sharifa. 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 Muhammad is still alive, for stories and poems often tell how he would extend his hand from his Rasūl (his mausoleum in Medina) to those who came imploring help or vindication from him; that is particularly frequent in the case of the sāqqāids (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 prophethood that permeated Islamic devotional poetry is Muhammad’s luminous nature which manifested itself during his birth (according to legend light had been shining on the forehead of Muhammad’s father before he married Amina). 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 Muhammad who is the sum total of laudable qualities. In the terminology of Ibn al-‘Arabī and his followers, Muhammad is the insān kāmil (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-jāmī (the comprehensive one).

Persian poets like Sanā’ī (d. 1131) have skillfully interpreted the first words of Qur’ānic chapter 93, wa ad-đuhā (“By the morning light”) as
pertaining to the radiant beauty of Muhammad while the first word of chapter 92, “By the night,” was interpreted as referring to Muhammad’s black hair.

It is the concept of this Muhammadan light (nūr muhammadī) that played a central role in later Sūfī speculation. This belief is that God created Muhammad from His own light so that Muhammad’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 Sūfis such as Saḥīḥ 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 Bengali 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 Muhammad 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, Muhammad Iqābāl (d. 1938), whose prophetology contains all the traditional elements that had developed during the past fourteen hundred years. However, Iqābāl 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 gift, to be returned to God. In his ḥaḍīth-nāma (1933) (the Book of Eternity) which, like so many great epic poems in the Muslim world, is modeled according to the story of the Prophet’s heavenly journey, Iqābāl has described Muhammad as “being in time and yet ruling time,” but has especially dwelt upon his rank as ‘abdulu (His, i.e. God’s, slave). The station of ‘abdulu is as early Sūfis 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, Iqābāl 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 veil of divine names and attributes. As the dispenser of God’s wisdom Muhammad beckons to the eternal truth, and is therefore worthy of the believers’ reverence and love. Here Iqābāl 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 Iqābāl, like other Muslim poets, to depict the Prophet as a guide and leader to the truth. Muhammad 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 supernatural community of Muslims can and should be built, overcoming the obstacles created by prejudice and hatred. In the final analysis the prophet Muhammad 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

THE PROPHET MUHAMMAD
IN INDO-MUSLIM POETRY
CHAPTER 1

Background and Introduction

According to a legend prevailing in the Malabar region of India, a local Indian ruler (Shakarwati Fardad) had already converted to Islam within the lifetime of the prophet Muhammad. 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. Qur'an 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. 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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place in 711 when a small military force under the command of a seventeen-year-old Arab general, Muhammad ibn al-Qasim, 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, Muhammad ibn al-Qasim 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-kitab (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 Ghorids) 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 Sufi 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 Muhammad, the Prophet of Islam.

Wilfred Cantwell Smith, commenting on the significance of the prophet Muhammad 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.

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. For centuries, Muhammad 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

3. For a general discussion of the Prophet’s role in Muslim piety, see Tor Andrae, Die Person Muhammeds in Lehre und Glauben seiner Gemeinde (Stockholm: P. A. Versoedt 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" (ustu hasana) whose example is to be followed by the faithful. Indeed, according to the Muslim scripture, to obey the Prophet means to obey God. The nature of Muhammad’s mission, sent as he was "as a mercy to the world," forms the subject of many books and treatises. And a logical corollary of his mercifulness has been his role as intercessor (sha'bi): a role that is, however, not explicitly articulated in the Qur'an. 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’raj)—has been subject to much speculation. However lofty such speculation may be, it has always been tempered by the necessity to portray Muhammad, ultimately, as God’s servant (‘abd allâh). In this manner, by stressing his humanity, the dangers of totally deifying him were avoided.

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)

5. Sûra 4:80.
8. See Andrae, Die Person Muhammed, 234–44.
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)

These comments only confirm what Sir Muhammad Iqbal (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.

In short, love and devotion for the Prophet are the cornerstones of Islamic practice and are marks of its uniqueness. As Constance Paddick 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 Muhammad, God’s beloved (habib allâh). Muslims have shown their love and devotion to their Prophet in many ways, the most common being the recitation of the salatât (the formula for invoking God’s blessing on him). 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, Muhammad 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.

In her study of poetry in praise of the Prophet, Professor Schimmel observes that the further poets live from Arabia (the Prophet’s home-
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example, a rather dramatic case from medieval Bengal, where the
Prophet became associated with "comparable symbols of the Hindu
tradition." From at least the sixteenth century, if not earlier, Bengal
Muslim authors of the folk tradition forged an ostensible correspon-
dence 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 Muhammad was made
pertinent to the Bengali religious milieu by being presented as the last
and most powerful Kali avatāra of the Hindu deity Vishnu. In their turn,
Hindu deities such as Krishna were conceived as prophets who pre-
ceded Muhammad, the final prophet-avatāra sent down by God to hu-
mankind. 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, Fātimah, with
Brahma's daughter, Sarasvatī.

At great odds with this assimilatist or adaptive strand was a separa-
tistic and law-bound conservative one, which was often represented
by the ashraf (the religious and intellectual elite of Islamic society).
Conscious of the Muslim community's minority status in a predomi-
nantly Hindu milieu, the ashraf 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." To preserve and protect Islam from encroachment by
"idolatrous" Indian customs and beliefs, the separatistic strand culti-
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19. Asim Roy, *The Islamic Syncretistic Tradition in Bengal* (Princeton:
20. Ibid., 98.
panth Islāmis and īmām Shāhīs of Indo-Pakistan," Ph.D. diss., Harvard Uni-
versity, 1972, Ali Asan, "The Khojas of Indo-Pakistan: The Quest for an
31–41.
22. Imtiyaz Ahmad, "The ashraf-ajlāf dichotomy in Muslim social structure in

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.16
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 Muhammad in Medina
I would see there, weeping, weeping.17

We can perhaps broaden this remark by observing that it is in the po-
etry written by Muslims in Islamic lands further away from Arabia that
we encounter images of Muhammad 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 in-
digenous 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 assimila-
tion 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 exis-
tence of two major, often antagonistic, strands in the tradition.18 The
first, associated with these 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

17. Ibid., 191.
18. See Imtiyaz Ahmad, "The Islamic Tradition in India," *Islam and the Mod-
ern Age* 12, no. 1 (1981): 44–62; Annemarie Schimmel, "Reflections on Popular
Muslim Poetry," *Contributions to Asian Studies* 17 (1982): 17–26; Yohanan Fried-
mann, "Islamic Thought in Relation to the Indian Context," *Purusarththa* 9 (1986):
79–91; Richard Eaton, *Sufis of Bijapur 1300–1700* (Princeton: Princeton Univer-
sity Press, 1978); and S. C. Misra, "Indigenisation and Islamisation in Muslim
Society in India," *India and Contemporary Islam*, ed. S. T. Lokhandwalla (Simla:
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character of Islam by evoking the example of Muhammad, the Arabian Prophet, as the only reliable guide. The Prophet’s Arabian background was highlighted—he was Muhammad, the Meccan, the Medinan, the Hashimi, the Qurayshi. 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 tariqa Muhammadiyya (the Muhammadan path).

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 nā’t (poetry praising the Prophet) two themes, in particular, stand out. The first is the virahini (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 virahini 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 before a deity who is male.27 The most renowned use of the virahini in Indian literature occurs in poetry dedicated to the Hindu god Krishna. In this poetry the gopis (cowmaids), and in particular Rādhā, express their longings for union with their elusive beloved. Jain, Sant, and Sikh religious poetry also have their virahinis. Within an Islamic context, the virahini appears in many genres of vernacular Sufi poetry ranging from the romantic epics of Awadh to the folk songs of Punjab and Bengal.28 Interestingly, such poetry equates the concept of viraha with the Sufi concept of ʿishq (the burning, consuming longing of the soul for union with God).29 The woman-soul is also conspicuous in the devotional literature of the subcontinent’s Ismaili community, where she yearns for the Shīʿī Imām.30 The use of the virahini, then, in poetry devoted to Muhammad (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.31 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,32 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.”33 Consequently, Islamic literature is re-


complete 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. One of the foremost poets of the Urdu language, Mirzâ Ghalib (d. 1869), in his poem honoring the Prophet, refers to him as a “jewel-bearing cloud” (abr-i gaharâtâr), while the most famous poet in Sindhi, Shâh ʿAbd ul-Lâṭîf (d. 1752), addresses him as the “cloud of mercy.” 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. Thus, in literary genres such as the bârahmâsâ (songs of the twelve months), as well as the cau- mâsâ (songs of the four months of rain), the rainy season is invariably connected with the viraha. The pangs and agonies of being left alone become particularly intense for her during this time of the year. Not infrequently, the viraha’s beloved is, directly or indirectly, associated with dark rain clouds.

Both literary motifs—the viraha 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 viraha 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.

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34. Muhammad Bukhari Libis, Qasidahs in honor of the Prophet (Bangi, Malaysia: Penerbit Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia, 1983), 42.
35. Schimmel, And Muhammad is His Messenger, 81–82.
38. Ibid., 28.

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Chapter 2

The Bridegroom Prophet

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

Beloved! put out the fire of biraha (viraha) with your own hands.

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, ʿAbd ur-Raʿūf Bhatti (d. 1752) or ʿāṣâ (the sinner), as he calls himself, ranks among the first poets to write maulūds in his native language Sindhi. 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 waʿāt and kāfī. Maulūds always contain a beginning verse that is repeated as a refrain (thul). 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.” To this day, the numerous poems composed by ʿAbd ur-Raʿūf Bhatti are recited throughout the villages and towns of Sind, not

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1. The number in parentheses refers to the poem number in the ʿAbd ur-Raʿūf Bhatti section in Nabibakhsh Baloch, ed., Maulūd (Hyderabad: Sindhi Adabi Board, 1961), 5–33.
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.

'Abd ur-Ra'ūf Bhatti wrote under the influence of the North Indian virahini 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, Mustafā (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 Bhatti'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. However, the woman-soul—especially in the form of the virahini—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.

Bhatti expresses the virahini'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. Muhammad 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.

THE BRIDEGROOM PROPHET

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 wend 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 virahini 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:  
Muhammad has met thousands of pilgrims.  
The joys of proximity as I draw near;  
The trembling of emotions [as I think of] Ahmad [Muhammad] 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. 7 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," 8 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 virahini like a sickness for which Muhammad 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.

Muhammad 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.
Care me with the medicines and potions of mercy
You are the physician and the healer;
Place your hand on this weak one.

Yet the most dramatic aspect of the virahini symbol in Bhatti's work recalls the image of the young bride-to-be and her impending marriage to Muhammad, 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's devotion to the Prophet in a form that awakens immediate associations and emotions among his listeners.

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

(menthi) 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, a 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!

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 Muhammad with flowers and rose petals (15) as well as precious gems (8). The hirs (the paradisiacal virgins) rejoice noisily (10) while making garlands (16), bearing wedding gifts (14), and showing 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.

By representing the Prophet as a bridegroom, the poet Bhatti utilizes a symbol that has become a distinctive feature of many Sindhi panegyrics. Bhatti 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. 9 In keeping with this tradition, Bhatti too, makes allusions to

7. Tor Andrae, Die Person Muhammeds in Lehre und Glaube seiner Gemeinde (Stockholm: P. A. Forstedt og soner, 1918), 256.
Sindhi romances in his works. He does not narrate these romances for he assumes his listeners are well aware of their details. He only judicially refers to those tales that feature a virahini. In this way he continues to preserve a consistency in his symbolism.

A particularly favorite tale of his is the Sassui-Punhun romance. The story has a simple plot: Sassui, the adopted daughter of a washerman, was the boast and beauty of the town of Bhambore, and a considerable sensation in society. Punhun, 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, Punhun's brothers, through force and stratagem, manage to kidnap a very drunk Punhun 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.10

For Bhatti, the heroine Sassui is the virahini, separated from her beloved Punhun. She represents the soul who longs to meet the beloved Prophet (in this case Punhun), ready to undergo all trials and affliction in the process. Addressing the Prophet as Punhal (an affectionate form of Punhun) Bhatti’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.

Bhatti also alludes to Sassui’s arduous journeys in quest of her beloved:

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

In another poem, Bhatti tries to capture Sassui’s agony and pain as she awakens from her sleep to find Punhun has disappeared. She is beside herself with grief and there is no reason for her to stay in her town, Bhambore, 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 Punhun of folklore was ethnically a Balochi, Bhatti’s Punhun, of course, represents the Prophet. Hence he is addressed as Hashimi (coming from the Banu Hashim, the Arabian clan of the Prophet).

O girlfriend! How can I bear this? I, who am walking towards the beloved Punhun
While awake, I weep; while sleeping, I have no peace;
Thoughts of the Hashimite friend overcome me!
Sisters, staying in this Bhambore 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‘uf says, “Treat me kindly;
I am going to the Prince of Medina and I will return.”

To relieve the despondency and gloom of the Sassui tale, Bhatti also refers to another romance, this one with a more happy ending. It is the tale of Prince Jam Tamachi, who falls in love with the charming, but lowly, fishermaid Nuri. 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.11 We have here a situation that fulfills the virahini’s most ardent desire—a state of

10. This summary of the Sassui-Punhun 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.

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 Samu [Jām Tamāchī] was born, peace prevailed; wealth descended on nations. Happy in the marital bliss (suhāg) of the Prince’s affections, oh, the fisherwomen smile. On the shores of the Kinjhar lake, they talk about love!

Chapter 3

The Rain Cloud and the Prophet

Among all the Urdu/Hindi poems extolling the Prophet, none has been more renowned for its use of the rain cloud imagery than Muḥsin Kākorawī’s Madīḥ khāra al-mursalin (Eulogy for the best of messengers). Beginning with the dramatic line, simi: Kāshī se čalā jáānb-i Mathrā bādāl (from the direction of Benares went a cloud to Mathura), this poem has inspired many imitations. Its composer, Muḥsin Kākorawī (d. 1905), was a member of an ʿalawī sayyid family whose ancestors were guardians of the Prophet’s tomb in Medina. Though professionally a lawyer, Kākorawī ranks as the first major Urdu poet to dedicate himself to composing solely nāʿīs (poems praising the Prophet). As he put it:

When blessings were distributed in pre-eternity, The art of [writing] nāʿī was assigned to my tongue.  

Composing his very first panegyric at the tender age of nine, after the Prophet appeared to him in a dream, Muḥsin Kākorawī 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 nāʿī.

(121)

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 Ḳākūrāwī’s verse since Muhammad, himself, found it to be “very good and pleasing.”

From the literary point of view, the poem Madīh khair al-mursalin 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 Ḳākūrāwī 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, Ḳākūrāwī was popularly known as Ḥassān-i waqī (the Hassān 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—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 ra-mal mithamman? with a monorhyme ending in a consonant, short “a” vowel, and the consonant “l” as in bīdāl, jāl, gokāl. Like a traditional qaṣīda, it is divided into three parts. The first is the tashbih (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 tashbih is followed by the madīh (the central portion of the qaṣīda) in which the poet displays his/her skills in praising his/her patron, in Ḳākūrāwī’s case the Prophet. Finally, the qaṣīda ends with the ḍū‘a (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 tashbih, that is most interesting and the most controversial. In its meter and rhyme it is perfectly conventional.

However, its imagery as well as its vocabulary may appear peculiar, especially for a qaṣīda on an Islamic theme. The very first verse (buṭī) 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. 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 Kaʿba, which in pre-Islamic times served as a temple of the infidel pagans. The poet warns:

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:

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THE PROPHET MUHAMMAD IN INDO-MUSLIM POETRY

Perhaps Lāt and Hubal may yet again lay siege on the Ka'ba.

Such is the opening scene described in the first seven verses of this panegyric to the prophet Muhammad. 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 Bhadon (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 (ganga 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 virahini). So quite appropriately the gopis (the cowmaids), who lovingly pine for their lord Krishna, make their appearance. And as in many popular Hindu devotional poems, the gopis, with their hearts beating restlessly in their constricted bosoms, wonder:

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

Indian rain songs always describe the days of the rainy season as dark and dreary. 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. 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! 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 multipie 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. As he puts it, the infidel has applied lampblack (the color symbolizing infidelity) in the eye of infidelity. This means that darkness has been compounded by further darkness; that is, infidelity permeates everything and everywhere.

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

As in a typically well-written qasida, the tashbih 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 Muhsin Kākorawi's contemporaries. These critics were obviously disturbed by his attempt to "indianize" and popularize a classical qasida on such a significant Islamic topic. Was it appropriate for a poet of Muhsin Kākorawi'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? Was it fitting that a qasida in praise of the Prophet of Islam should contain references to a Hindu deity (Krishna) and mention Hindu sacred places (such as Mathura, Gokul)?

Amir Minai, a friend and contemporary of the composer, argues in Muhsin Kākorawi's defense that no one has laid down any literary rules governing the topics that may or may not be addressed in the tashbih (exordium). Though certain subjects have traditionally been associated with this section of the qasida—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 Binti Sa'id, the most popular Arabic qasida written in praise of the Prophet, composed by Kāb ibn Zuhayr, a former antagonist of the Prophet. When this Arabic panegyric, which also had an unconventional tashbih, was recited in front of Muhammad, he had nothing but praise for its beauty.

Muhsin Kākorawi, 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

9. The names of pre-Islamic Arab deities.
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 Muhammad, himself, expressed his pleasure with the Bānūt Šu‘ād (which describes him as the light that illuminates). 13

As both Muḥsin Kākārāwī and Amir Minār suggest, in the madh (praise) section, there is a dramatic change in the mood and style of the qasīda. 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 Qur’ān and the hadith, to praise the Prophet. It is amusing to note that at one point, Muḥsin Kākārāwī 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 madh clearly shows the influence of the sabk-i hindi (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 madh 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 (mīrāj). The cloud, having witnessed divine light, is praised with the honorary 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 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 qasīda with a ghazal (love-lyric) using the rhyme-word bīdal (cloud). Muḥsin Kākārāwī, a faithful adherent of the sabk-i hindi 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 Ka‘ba, the qibla;
The cloud prostrates towards Yathrib [Medina] and Baithā [a valley near Medina].
Having abandoned the tavern of India and the idol house of Brāj,
Today the cloud has spread its prayer rug in the Ka‘ba.

(112)

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 Muhammad is unique (119); like the Prophet, the cloud came before the exalted throne on the night of the mīrāj, 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 Kākārāwī plays with the cloud symbol, one point is clear: in the madh, 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 tashīb.

It is fitting that the cloud symbol appears one final time at the beginning of the du‘ā (petition) as it comes around to gather supplications like a prophet. The du‘ā contains some very beautiful and touching verses declaring the poet’s total dependence 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. 14
Whose every branch has flowers, and whose every flower contains a fruit.

(121)

13. ibid., 94.

14. This is an allusion to the Qur’ānic story of Mary, who was supported by the trunk of the palm tree and its fruit as she gave birth to Jesus. Sīra 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 bidā mīm (without m), the secret of the Prophet’s spiritual status (122).

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 qasīda 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 Bhattī, 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 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 Bhattī portrays is all too human—like a kind and loving bridegroom for a bride. Bhattī 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 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 Madīth khāir 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 Muhammad Ḩabīl, the poet-philosopher of Indo-Pakistan, says in his poem Rumāz-i bekhudi: it runs like blood in the veins of the Muslim community.16

15. This is an allusion to the hadīth qudsī (divine saying), extremely popular in eastern Islamic lands, according to which God declared: And Ahmad hidā mīm, “I am Ahmad [that is, Muhammad] without the [letter] m [which means al-ḥad, “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.