

Manjhan, Madhumilati: An Indian Sufi romance

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Manjhan, *Madhumīlatī: An Indian Sufi Romance*, translated by Simon Weightman and Aditya Behl, with S.M. Pandey. Oxford, Oxford World's Classics, 2000. lviii + 258 pages.

Faithful readers of this journal (and students of Sufism more generally) are probably at least vaguely aware of the considerable influence of ideas and teachings of Ibn 'Arabī in the course of the gradual spread of Islam and Perso-Islamic culture throughout India in the centuries following his death, through the related studies – to mention only a few familiar names – of W. Chittick, C. Ernst, A. Schimmel, A. Rizvi and many others.

4. As the authors point out, that conclusion was often circulated as a separate Arabic work, recently edited by H. Taher in *Alif* (Cairo, A.U.C.), 1985, pp. 7–38.

Unfortunately, however, the most familiar images and stereotypes concerning that influence continue to reflect the ongoing modern polemics, rooted more in contemporary politics than in past religious or cultural history, surrounding the controversial views of Sirhindi.

This new, very readable and accessible translation from the courtly Hindavī poem (composed in 1545) by S. Weightman and A. Behl, suggests richer, more creative and lasting strands of Akbarian influence. At the same time, it is also a delightful, unforgettable “romance” epic of spiritual transformation in its own right. On first encounter, if one were to begin with the translation itself and pass over the remarkably rich and accessible introduction and explanatory notes provided by the translators, those without a serious knowledge of Sufi traditions would probably feel they were reading a highly symbolic Hindu or Sanskrit romance broadly reminiscent, in its combination of rich human drama and complex metaphysical symbolism, of either the *Divine Comedy* or Goethe’s *Faust*. However, the highly condensed historical Introduction and Simon Weightman’s remarkable Appendix clearly explain the complex roots of this narrative in the Shattārī Sufi lineage and training of the author, who was himself a respected shaykh of that order as well as an influential and accomplished literary artist.

Readers interested in Ibn ‘Arabī and the deeper Sufi dimensions of this text should turn first to Simon Weightman’s masterful Appendix (“The Symmetry of *Madhumīlatī*”), which carefully summarises both the practical yogic–Sufi and aesthetic dimensions of the story and especially its elaborate transposition of Qur’anic cosmology and eschatology as understood by Ibn ‘Arabī and his later philosophic and Sufi interpreters. Prof. Weightman’s thorough analysis of these multiple structural symmetries – whose parallel complexities are certainly familiar to any student of Dante’s masterwork, and which he and his students are now fruitfully exploring in the complex narrative structures of Rumi’s *Masnavī* – should suggest the almost unimaginably enormous gaps which still exist in our critical understanding and appreciation of so many of the classics of later Islamic literature (Persian, Ottoman, Urdu, etc.), a phenomenon

which is surely not unconnected to today's so commonly impoverished intellectual appreciation of the essential metaphysical dimensions of Qur'anic teaching. In particular, Manjhan's detailed focus, founded on Ibn 'Arabī and his interpreters, on the allegorical depiction of the cosmological, "emanative" dimensions of Qur'anic (and classical Hindu) teaching and its subsequent reflection in the ascending planes of realisation, is an essential aspect of this mystical "romance" that goes beyond the overt emphasis on the more practical dimensions of spiritual ascent in both Dante and *Faust*.

Much of the translators' Introduction and Notes focuses on the central dimension of "taste" – at once a shared set of cultural-aesthetic assumptions, and corresponding spiritual realities – unifying and underlying the complex symbolism and inherited rhetorical forms of this extraordinary poem. Those powerful aesthetic dimensions of this text, still quite palpable in this fluent and eminently readable translation, are a convincing reminder that Ibn 'Arabī's classical Muslim interpreters in this and other newly "islamising" cultures were engaged in something far deeper than a merely random "syncretism" (understood as a sort of sterile "name-game" reminiscent of today's empty ideological enterprises of "islamisation") or the strictly philosophical elaboration of a personal theory of the "transcendent unity of religions". Instead, what the attentive reader can immediately experience here, even today, is clearly a challenging, powerfully effective *creative* synthesis dictated by the living interaction of actually operative cultural norms, languages, symbols and artistic and spiritual possibilities.

This combination of the careful study of Ibn 'Arabī's teachings (or of Islamic scriptures understood in their light), philosophical acumen, and immensely creative, lastingly influential literary and social invention – the deepest possible realisation of that *ihsān* ("making good and beautiful") which the famous "hadith of Gabriel" identifies as the ultimate aim of real Religion (*dīn*) – is a constant sign of the genuine assimilation of Ibn 'Arabī's teaching, whether in such earlier key literary figures as 'Irāqī, Ibn al-Fārid, and the great poet-philosopher Jāmī, or with Manjhan here in early Mughal India. Through seminal works like

this study, we are only beginning to appreciate how profoundly the inspirations of Ibn ‘Arabī continued to inspire similarly creative figures throughout the post-Mongol eastward expansion of Islam into southeast Asia and China, both in literature and in more anonymous, but no less influential, social domains.

Finally, Manjhan’s own historical situation is another helpful reminder that the great classics of Islamic civilisation, in every field, were typically forged in rapidly changing, tumultuous and unavoidably multi-cultural situations precisely like our own. Against that backdrop, his creative accomplishment should suggest remarkable parallels to – and potential lessons for – our own time. Ibn ‘Arabī’s unswerving focus on returning to the actual *realities* underlying all human experience and the superficially warring interpretations of revelation takes us far beyond the sterile gambits (and Protogorean journalistic assumptions) of inter-religious and inter-civilisational “dialogue”. The central theme of *Madhumālātī*, at every level, is that of ever-renewed “marriage” (echoing the role of *azwāj* throughout the Qur’an): that is, of the necessity of creative, challenging re-union of initially conflicting and apparently disparate principles in the deeper cosmic processes of renewal and spiritual perfection. For us, it is another helpful reminder, in remarkably similar historical circumstances, that the attractions of Ibn ‘Arabī’s thought, like the beauty of each Beloved, are only the very beginning of the story, drawing us into the adventurous necessity of forging new, authentic and effective forms of community and vehicles of realisation.

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