Diversities—Devotional, Artistic And Gendered

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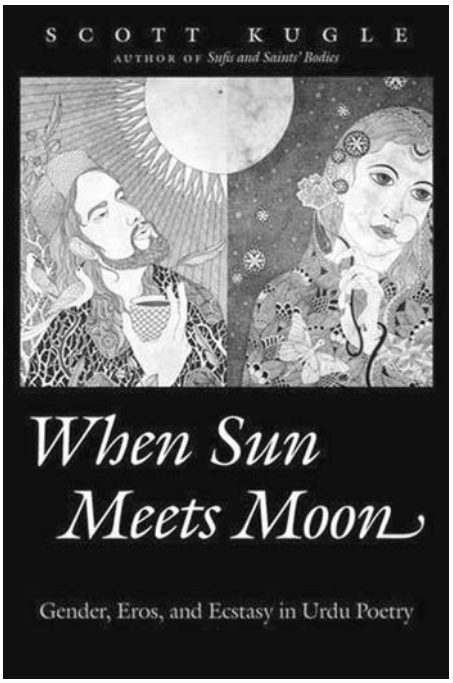
WHEN SUN MEETS MOON: GENDER, EROS, AND ECSTASY IN URDU POETRY
By Scott Kugle
Orient BlackSwan, 2016, pp. 328, ₹1125.00
(Special Indian Price)

Two poets—separated by time and circumstance, not to mention gender—are united in a common purpose: love and its manifestation in the writing of the ghazal. One is Shah Siraj (1715–1763), who lived in the Mughal city of Aurangabad, who after an early homosexual love affair gone sour, decides to lead a celibate life and who, despite being a Sunni Muslim, professes a life-long adoration for Ali and pursues a higher calling in following the saints of the Chishti *silsila*. The other is Chand Bibi, better known as Mah Laqa Bai Chanda (1768–1820) who also lives in the Deccan but in Hyderabad, the city of the nizams. She too remains unmarried but not celibate. A courtesan dancer, she moves from seducing men for money and power to pursuing a mystical devotion to Maula Ali. In placing them together Scott Kugle, Associate Professor of South Asian and Islamic Studies at Emory University, mines the rich lode of creative possibilities that such a comparison offers.

The lives of these two Urdu poets, both from the Deccan region, both Muslim, interact and correspond with each other even though the two never met. 'Siraj', meaning the sun, and 'Mah' meaning the moon, they are indeed like the sun and the moon that complement each other but are never destined to meet. For, as the Holy Quran tells us: 'It is not to be that sun meets moon, and it is not to be that night overtakes day—each glides on a sphere of its own.' [36: 40] They can come together only in the ethereal world of the imagination. Kugle outlines the purpose behind this audacious coupling:

> The basic goal of this book is to retrieve marginalised gendered subjectivities, such as Shah Siraj's and Mah Laqa Bai's, from oblivion in order to challenge heterosexist and androcentric interpretations of the Islamic tradition. Other voices and experiences did exist but are too often ignored. They spoke out through an abundant conception of human spirituality in an Islamic idiom, spirituality that incorporates the messy and mundane worldly dimensions of life, together with the most sublime experiences and transcendent yearnings.



Largely overlooked by critics and literary historians, the lives and poetic ouvre of Siraj and Mah Laqa are important for several reasons. Historically, both lived in the late-Mughal, pre-colonial time, a period that not only witnessed the spectacular flowering of the Urdu language and literature, in particular the ghazal but also a time of greater fluidity before Anglo-Saxon expansion brought in the Victorian values of prudery, utilitarianism and social reform. The poet had not begun to don the mantle of the social reformer and religiosity and sexuality were not contradictory forces in the Islamic culture of the Deccan. What is more, a poet could be chaste but not his poetry and 'a courtesan could be at one and the same time a performer, a sexually available woman, and a spiritual agent.' While critics such as Shamsur Rehman Faruqi caution us against the perils of over-reading the ghazal and of looking for the poet in the poem, there is much in the poetry of both Siraj and Mah Laqa that sheds valuable light on the life and times of these two prolific poets. And Kugle is quick to seize on the biographical details tossed in a seemingly careless manner in the poetry to build his larger argument about gender, sexuality and poetry.

At the age of 16, Siraj was seized by a *wahshat*, a sort of wildness that seeped into his temperament and a spiritual urge that caused him to leave home and family. 'The king of oblivion has bestowed upon me nakedness's royal robe,' he declared as he stopped wearing clothes and renounced worldly life. 'No stitch of discernment's propriety remains/No veil-rending insanity's lewdness.' In the early years, he composed songs only in Persian—reciting them to the hills and birds and bees outside Aurangabad. While his Persian poetry is lost, his entire Urdu *diwan*—composed during a period of four-five years when he was a disciple in the Kalimi Chishti order—has been collected by one Abd-al Rasul Khan, a brother in the Sufi path. And it is this *diwan* that reveals a voluptuous world of erotic forces that the poet suppressed in his personal life but which nevertheless resurfaced in his ghazals. As Kugle notes, 'Siraj hoped that rechanneling his erotic energy—what he calls "sublimation of desire"—would fuel his spiritual life in his quest to love God alone.' However, that was not meant to be. Written with the intention to be recited in *sama* gatherings, the overtly erotic elements of Siraj's eminently lyrical poetry were seen as threatening causing his Sufi master to eventually command him to stop composing poetry and adopt silence. Complying, Siraj wrote:

> It's best to stop speaking, Siraj, for sure
> Now only in silence can one be secure

Mah Laqa Bai, on the other hand, is more successful at juggling the romantic and mystical themes in her poetry. Displaying an extraordinary blend of Shia piety (almost all her poems contain an invocation to Maula Ali) and seductive power, at once elegant, articulate and yet unconventional, hers is among the first *diwans* of Urdu ghazal composed by a woman poet. Here's a sample:

> I'll toss the record of Chanda's deeds into passion's churning waves
> If Ali, the forgiver of my sins, with a wine-cup my way comes

And

> Oh Ali, keep Chanda glowing with a ray of your brilliance
> As the sun is illuminated each day as your radiance pours out.

Being a woman is central to her poetry even though she occasionally adopts the gendered voice of a man pursuing a beloved; even these seemingly masculine poems end with her returning to a female persona in the closing line of the ghazal as 'Ali's servant-girl'. Mah Laqa's poetry seems to constantly challenge the accepted notion of a woman's place in society, that too a society governed by a largely Islamic worldview. She was a woman and a poet, a dancer and singer who also advised the Nizam and his ministers in political matters. She was also a patron of the arts who kept and schooled young women in music and dance and encouraged poets, calligraphers and painters. In no way typical of her time, her city, her religious community or even her profession, she manipulated her femininity and her legendary beauty to achieve her artistic and spiritual goals.

When Sun Meets Moon is an important book for it shows how in the early-modern Deccan it was entirely possible to contain diversities—devotional, artistic and gendered. And despite Scott Kugle's somewhat irritating tendency to over-state and repeat what has been previously stated in clear terms, his work is useful and timely.

Rakhshanda Jalil is a writer, translator and literary historian. Her recent books include *Liking Progress, Loving Change: A History of the Progressive Writers' Movement* and *The Sea Lies Ahead*, a translation of Intizar Hussain's seminal novel.