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The Indo-Persian Sublime

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FROM AMIR KHUSRO TO SHAHZIA SIKANDER

In the early 1990s, I began listening to qawwali in a serious way. Qawwali is properly established today as one of the many styles of 'world music', but fifteen years ago it was strange to the ear. In 1994 I happened upon a recording of one of the great performances of the Pakistani maestro, Nusrat Fateh Ali Khan. He must have been addressing an audience outside South Asia, because he began the concert with a sentence in English (of sorts). ‘Now we are singing,’ he announced in his gravelly voice and thick Punjabi accent, ‘a poetry in the Persian.’ Without further preamble, he and his troupe began to sing. For many years now I’ve tried to correct the sentence in my mind. Poetry in the Persian. Poetry in Persian. A poem in the Persian. A poem in Persian. But it never sounds quite right, except in Nusrat’s idiosyncratic grammar: Now we are singing a poetry in the Persian.

Premodern Persian poetry was largely produced in an urban environment, and poets, whether associated with a royal court or of a mystical bent, had a special relationship with the city in which they practiced their craft. In prosperous times the city was the location of patronage networks and a cosmopolitan center of cultural life, as well as being a macrocosm of the narrower spaces that provided the context for the performance of Persianate poetry, i.e., the private mahfil (assembly) or the majlis (session) of courtiers or Sufis. (Sharma 73)

Sunil Sharma, an Indian scholar of Persian literature, begins an article titled ‘The City of Beauties in Indo-Persian Poetic Landscape’ with these lines. When I first met Sunil in 1995, we were both graduate students; he was studying Farsi and I was just beginning to study Sanskrit. We knew there was a close relationship between Persian and Sanskrit, and that the history of philology, as a discipline, had much to do with this relationship between the two classical tongues. What I didn’t understand, then, was that the connection was not merely philological; that Indic and Persianate cultures had been, for centuries, married. Indo-Persian culture was the child of this marriage and, like many progeny of miscegenation, it was a beautiful being.

Qawwali: Redux

In Delhi, the city of the Sufi saint Nizamuddin Auliya, the heat of the summer is excruciating. When the monsoon comes, one can glimpse Paradise. Paradise is only a garden in the rain. Paradise is the crowding of the summer sky with clouds so dark they are almost black. It is trees restless in the wind laden with water, the deep sound of thunder, intimations that relief will pour out of the sky onto the taut, waiting earth. Amir Khusro, the greatest poet of Indo-Persian culture in medieval times, wrote his verses and composed his tunes in Delhi. It was the heat that gave him words, the rain that gave him music. Delhi was the crucible of Khusro’s poetry. In his city, peacocks danced in bejewelled choreography, parrots rose into the air in vortices of green, the Yamuna was swollen in the monsoon. The sky sputtered with unshed rain, like laughter held back. Into this rapture came Khusro’s poems, spirals of song, heaving, lurching, reckless melodies, lightning-flashed like the inundated city and its gardens, poet and river in flood, a love-making of language the like of which has not been heard on the subcontinent in the seven centuries since.

Khusro’s oeuvre is among humanity’s most exquisite artefacts. Qawwali – the style of Sufi music and singing he is said to have invented – takes the tears out of one’s heart, fills up one’s eyes to the brim. Qawwali is the great coming, of rain, of love, of deliverance. It touches one in places only a lover may reach. It opens doors known only to teachers. It rises from the city of Delhi into the heavens; it is a storm and the city its eye. Khusro’s verses hover, flash, growl and pour. He sings for the ages:

My heart is so enamoured of you, love,
I cannot bear to look at your face.
I am smitten, stricken.
You glance at me and armies advance.
Your armies advance.
I shall be routed. (Khusro attrib.)

Sunil Sharma refers to Amir Khusro as Amir Khusraw Dihlavi, and to his teacher as Nizam al-Din Auliya, with both names followed by the same detail, the year of the demise of their bearers: d. 1325. But in truth both the master and his disciple are alive even today. In the mahfil and the majlis, the gatherings of
Sufis and the assemblies of the patrons of qawwali, the presence of Nizamuddin and of Khusro cannot be denied. Now we are singing poetry in the Persian — the present of this musical form is continuous; its continuity from Khusro’s time is present to us. Khusro’s epithet, in his life and for posterity, is Dihlavi, ‘of Delhi’. Amir Khusro of Delhi, he is tied to his city, and the city to its foremost citizen. Come to the city of Delhi. Come to Paradise. Poetry is perfection.

The Painter Peregrine

Down under Manhattan Bridge Overpass. DUMBO, Brooklyn. Old warehouse buildings, full of workspaces for architects, painters, sculptors, new media practitioners. Massive steel bridges stretched out over the water. Incessant stream of vehicles, flowing on the highways like corpuscles. Dull roar of heavy machinery on gigantic construction sites. Overwhelming Manhattan skyline. On the sidewalk, a film crew at work. Fluorescent orange roadworks to divert cars away from the Manhattan skyline. On the sidewalk, a film crew at work.

It is 2004, ten years after I first began listening to qawwali. Here in this gritty part of Brooklyn is Shahzia Sikander’s studio. It has a high ceiling; it is lit by a very large window whose glass is grimy with age. The room is crowded with canvases, wooden frames, art books, paint, CDs, brushes, boards and the uncontrollable creativity of its occupant. She is a slight figure, dwarfed in her own loft space, but her mastery of the miniature form is quite unprecedented. Far from Delhi, in a city without gardens, once again, the Indo-Persian sublime takes shape. Painting is perfection. ‘My arms are fair/My bangles, green./You took me by the hand/You pulled me close./My bangles broke/Green/Glass’ (Khusro attrib.).

What Khusro did for poetry in the Indo-Persian world, no one else had done until his time. He made it, fashioned it in the languages of the Gangetic plains that until then did not have a poetic register. This was a feat akin to divine intelligence creating the world. We cannot even begin to comprehend the novelty, the effulgence, of making poetry for the first time in a tongue of everyday commerce and conversation. For us language is a worn coin, cheapened by use, saturated with significance and depleted in value. Code floods our world, drowns all meaning. We can scarcely even imagine, let alone remember, such an inaugural minting of poems as Khusro achieved in the thirteenth century. ‘Who says poetry cannot/Be written in Hindi?/That Persian alone/Is worthy?//Persian is fine wine/Hindavi crude liquor/But we know which one/Is more intoxicating!’ (Khusro attrib.).

Something reminiscent of the mystery of making brand new poetry goes on in Shahzia Sikander’s studio. Visions opening in her mind’s eye unfurl on gossamer sheets of paper. Most noticeable, amidst the magical realms and unexpected forms that fill the loft in Brooklyn, are Sikander’s women. Women behind diaphanous veils. Women in flowering gardens. Women crowding around a blue-skinned god. Women breaking out of the framed portraits of princes in profile. Armed women, bearing weapons. Many-armed women, goddesses on earth. I am reminded of Gayatri Spivak, in her celebrated essay, ‘Moving Devil;’ ‘such powerful females, improbably limbed’ (Spivak 1991). The charm of Sikander’s world, with its welters of women, is ineffable; its rigour, breathtaking. As at the singing of a gaul – the ‘word’ of qawwali, its opening call – tears rise, out of their home in one’s heart, into one’s eyes, where they must remain. ‘You looked in my eyes/The unspeakable was uttered.//I drank deep/From your brew of love.//I was intoxicated’ (Khusro attrib.).

Stranded in the Present

I can be in Delhi, but not in the city that was when Khusro lived and wrote and sang and composed and invented and imagined and made, from his mind, meaning and music. Fragments of Khusro’s Delhi surround me and yet its totality is irretrievable. One senses monsoon winds bearing their burdens, but they are remembered more clearly than they are seen. One glimpses parrots among the rain-harassed trees in the Lodhi Gardens, but they are gliding to their extinction. One smells the Yamuna, two notional banks for a vanished city, filthy trace of a river that was murdered. One hears old qawwals at Nizamuddin’s shrine, their voices broken with thirst, pollution, poverty. I can, however, go into the crucible that is New York city and visit Sikander’s space where she brings alive, on a far continent, in another age, the Indo-Persian sublime.

She gives me directions over our cell-phones. I take the subway across the water from Manhattan. She meets me at the first station on the other side. We walk in the sunlight across a park, under a bridge, down streets shaded by tall buildings. She shows me a new animation CD she is making on her iBook, recently dropped and partially broken, its hold on data somewhat precarious. She tells me that it takes her two years, sometimes more, to make work for a show. Making work. Every era has its flavour, its own sweetness on one’s tongue. Roar of storm clouds in Sultanate Delhi; roar of traffic in new millennium New York. Qawwali pounding in my ears; miniature painting piercing my eyes.

The novelist Orhan Pamuk has written of sharp needles, of dark workshops, of the blindness and the betrayal, the heresy and the epiphany, that constituted the lives of miniaturists in Safavid Iran, in Ottoman Turkey, in Mughal India. In My Name is Red Pamuk writes of Istanbul long ago. Sikander exhibited in the Istanbul Biennale in 2003. Her paintings were displayed in a bank, as befits works that are precious. On the walls of a vault, a charming tale she had painstakingly animated folded and unfolded, her monsters and men came together and fell apart in exquisite detail, with her trademark intricacy, her signature humour; a two-dimensional puppet show on Istiklal Avenue. I have been there too, in Istanbul of the Blue Mosque, I have seen its minarets and bridges, its cobbled streets and covered markets. Two years later Pamuk would come out with another book about his beloved city, Istanbul. Khusro lived in Delhi long ago. Sikander lives in New York now. Beauty is precisely that which comes across oceans, ages and media, with grace, perfectly.
In *qawwali* a major theme is the Battle of Karbala, site of the martyrdom of Imam Hussein, grandson of the Prophet Mohammed. The heart-rending scenes surrounding Hussein’s death and the slaughter of his family are sung ever and anon in distant India, my country in which the pain and ecstasy of every religion on earth fills the air with cries. As I meet Sikander in New York, America is at war with Iraq. Karbala is once again drenched in blood. History leaves us ever uncivilised. In my Delhi, where Khusro and his beloved Sufi master Nizamuddin lie buried close together, married beyond their mortal coils, beggars mill at the traffic signal. Their bodies are so mutilated by poverty they do not even have arms to stretch out in beggary, hands with which to tap the closed windows of air-conditioned cars, or legs to carry them from one waiting vehicle to the next. Lights turn red-orange-green-red-orange-green. I look for the Yamuna but do not see it. I look for peacocks, I look for rain; the sky is empty, the air burns. I see the orange-green. I look for the Yamuna but do not see it. I look for waiting vehicle to the next. Lights turn red-orange-green-red-orange-green.

For our meeting, love,
I made up my face, so carefully.

One look at your face
And I forgot my own.

You looked in my eyes
My composure was lost.

You looked in my eyes
And took from me my modesty.

One look
And you made a bride of me. (Khusro attrib.)

Sikander explains how she is fusing two important but entirely disparate elements of the miniature painting — one, an indoor setting, depicting a royal court, a sort of pavilion in which a royal personage might sit surrounded by his courtiers; and two, the dance of the blue god Krishna with his playmates, the cow-herding *gopis* in a forest or garden by the banks of the Yamuna. Both are standard tropes in the Indian miniature — only, for obvious reasons, you would never see them together in the same painting. The computer works fitfully; the work itself is incomplete; and animation is something Sikander is still learning. But even the fragments I see are complex, beautiful, surprising — the royal palace becomes the site for a dance that ought to be taking place in a pristine forest; the formality of the interior space is disrupted by the movements of innumerable dancers who resemble a flock of black birds more than a circle of pastoral women. Later I would learn that this work is titled ‘Spin’, and that its various versions have been extensively shown and reviewed.

On Sikander’s pin-board, two columns of colour photocopied of her recent works, all in pink, peach, mud, terracotta, flesh-tones. I paint from memory, she says. Has she been there, I ask her, to Central Asia, to the Middle East, to North India, to Mongolia, to the vast Asiatic home of Persianate miniature painting? No, she smiles. I meant, my memory of works by medieval painters that I’ve seen in art books. That’s all one remembers, those images in books, they are all one can remember. She pulls out a book from her laden shelves, randomly flips through the pages and points to paintings. One knows of the Indo-Persian tradition, not from having been *there*, in Khusro’s universe, but from having been *here*, in front of the artefacts that have survived. But there’s no time to be lost. In the garden of Venus, enchantment. In the arms of Kali, terror. In the paintings of Shazia Sikander, rapture. Khusro in a thousand-year concert. The *qawwals* sing. Delhi is its eighth self. Where there are so many residues there must also be unendurable loss. New York was stabbed in the heart, but it watered its ground with blood and sprouted new life, continuing to throb like an indestructible Leviathan. Making work. Make the poem, the painting, the song, the city. The Indo-Persian sublime, it is one of the things of beauty to be salvaged from the great destruction that surrounds us, every street, Baghdad. Make work. Through the tumult of time, by some miracle, *qawwali* lives, miniature painting lives. Make work, not war.

**Mahfil: The Gathering of Connoisseurs**

In early 2005 I am to return to Delhi. I am afraid that the city will vanish, like a mirage upon approach. I grew up in it, and yet I’ve travelled very long, very far, to be coming to Delhi again. Could it be that Khusro awaits me in Delhi, hanging about in his city and mine as he has done for the last 700 or 800 years? Will I meet him, at last, on some street corner, gossiping, chewing paan, reciting verses to an appreciative audience of stragglers and passers-by, making up the words as he goes along?

The path to the river
Twists and turns

The path to the river
Is strewn with stones

How shall I walk this treacherous path
Bearing a pot heavy with water? (Khusro attrib.)

In the spring of 2005 the city’s many music and poetry lovers gather at a festival named *Jahaan-e-Khusrau*, ‘The World of Khusro’. Over three days Sufis from all over India, as well as from Iran, Turkey, North Africa and Pakistan, pour into Delhi to recite, sing, play their instruments and to remember Khusro, with whom it all began. Thousands turn out to listen and sit in the chilly outdoors swaying and clapping until the climax of the concert, a performance by the Pakistani woman *qawwal*, Abida Parveen. She sings and there is thunder and lightning, and then the rain comes down. I always suspected that *qawwali* could bring rain. I am drenched with the crowd, and we are all believers. ’I went to the river/
Filled my pot/With water./But you/ Broke it/Drenched me/In the flurry/In the hurry/Of your love’ (Khusro attrib.).

Flitting about unnoticed in the midst of an ecstatic audience, Khusro is pleased at the salutary effects of new musical and media technologies on his simple songs of love and longing. As Abida’s powerful voice carries his rustic medieval verses all the way from the open ground in Arab ki Sarai to Nizamuddin’s shrine a good mile or two away, Khusro turns in his seat next to me on the soaking mattress covered with a dripping white sheet and asks, his palms turned up in wonderment, ‘Who knew?’

Majlis: The Gathering of Renegades

A few days later I am back in New York, this time for the opening of Shahzia Sikander’s show, ‘51 Ways of Looking’, at the Brent Sikkema Gallery. It is almost Easter, but in the city winter still lingers. On a cold evening I get out at the wrong station and walk several blocks in Chelsea before I reach the gallery. In it are four bodies of recent and new material by Sikander: several twelve-by-nine inch black, white and grey drawings; a handful of enormous works in her trademark style, all in flesh tones, titled ‘Pink Pavilion’; a row of small vari-coloured jewel-like paintings; and a digital animation titled ‘Pursuit Curve’, tucked away in a projection room in the back of the exhibition.

Both the quantity and the quality of the work are hard to believe. Their maker is calm amidst the storm of her own creations, slinking and shimmering in the gregarious crowd. ‘Shahzia is not fully of this world,’ says Matin Maulawizada, her long-time friend, a few evenings later in Nolita, at a private party where DJs Rekha and Umang spin Bollywood songs from the 1970s and 1980s. Matin, in his early forties, is a research scientist turned make-up artist, Afghan-born but settled in America since the Soviet occupation of his country when his father, a doctor, smuggled him out to go to college at Berkeley. He is tall, hip and warm. His respect...
for Sikander’s work is tempered by personal affection. ‘She is connected to another world. That is why she paints the way she does. You cannot make these things unless you see them.’

Matin and I, introduced by Sikander almost an hour ago, have been talking about visions. On a screen behind us, Hema Malini and Parveen Babi, Zeenat Aman and Sarika, all in their prime, heart-stoppingly curvaceous and absurdly clad, do their voluptuous dances in clips from Hindi movies we have all watched as children. Matin has watched them too, in Kabul, in California, in Delhi, in Lahore. Occasionally we glance at these seductresses and laugh, but we are talking of more serious beauty. Nazia Hassan sings, uncannily, in her far-away voice from when we were all very little and still living on the subcontinent. The volume is loud and Rekha spins expertly, as the queen of New York’s Indian/Pakistani underground club scene, but the melodies seem to come from a great distance, from that remote continent which is always childhood.

Matin tells me of another dance he once saw with his own eyes. Long ago, he says, at the end of the 1980s, he spent many months in the city of Delhi. At some point he had sciatica. He was told to go see a blind pir in Old Delhi, who reputedly healed by touch. Matin went to the place where the pir sat, receiving the sick from morning to night. It was supposed to be a garden, but it was scarcely a shabby walled compound, with a sad gnarled tree under which the pir dispensed his healing touch, unable to see those whom he helped. Matin approached the healer but, as he was walking towards him, he suddenly realised that he was not in the decrepit compound, he was in a beautiful garden, with drop-shaped ornamental trees as in central Asian miniatures, and cooling fountains and greenery everywhere. How could there be such trees in Delhi? Matin wondered. Where had the fountains come from? He must be in Herat, in Isfahan, in Shiraz. But his wonderment only increased when, in place of the seated pir, he saw an entranced dervish whirling slowly in the centre of the garden, turning and turning to the strains of music that Matin could not hear. The Sufi was no
1523, Safavid period, Opaque watercolour, ink, gold and silver on paper, H: 30.1cm, W: 18.9cm, Herat, Afghanistan. Reproduced by kind permission of Freer Gallery of Art, Smithsonian Institution, Washington, DC, USA.
Indian; his dress was foreign, his sobriety was foreign. Such trees grow only in high mountains, such plants wither in the Indian sun. The entire scene was electric with colour. The air was moist; the dervish whirled in a perfect circle. Matin blinked. Everything before him vanished. He waited his turn and then went to the pir, who cured his back.

Later on Matin asked his teacher what it was that he had seen, where it was that he had been. Sometimes Sufis will hide their visions, he was told, and accidentally one may find them. If you stumble upon a hidden vision, you will see it. In another age, perhaps in another land, a garden was as Matin saw it momentarily, and a Sufi danced in it in solitary splendour. Someone had concealed that sight on the premises, to be found by a traveller centuries later, as he looked at a blind healer. Whose gaze was it, whose eyes, whose vision, whose sight? In what mind did memory arise, in what touch was there knowledge, in what city, in what time, in what walls was there a dance, a cry, a call to God that was answered? The pain disappeared from Matin’s back.

‘I see you,’ said Matin to me that night, against a backdrop of outlandish dreams projected from a computer, ‘and it is clear to me again, after all these years. I will come back to Delhi one day. Perhaps we can go together to Nizamuddin.’ Yes, Nizamuddin, I concur, the shrine of Amir Khusraw Dihlavi and Nizam al’Din Awliya. My hair stands on end from Matin’s story. He is walking me to Astor Place subway station, a few blocks north from Houston. Matin has long been a thorough Manhattan resident, but we get lost. It is cold. We go round and round, in New York/Delhi, up and down deserted streets of unending night that is fragrant as though in a summer by the Yamuna. By the banks of missing river on the sidewalk along Broadway we dance in the light of a moon that cannot be seen among the skyscrapers. Back in Rekha’s sensorium, Parveen and Zeenat sang of the night still ahead, of the unfinished conversation:

O let it be
Whatever will be

O look at me,
Look at me

With love, my love,
O look! O look!

Whatever will be,
Let it be.

Look at me
With love in your eyes! (Bhosle and Lahri ‘Raat baaki’ [‘The night remains’]; my trans.)

Thus in loops on Rekha’s machine they trilled — sweet-voiced, round-breasted, silken-haired, gorgeous, chimerical — once, twice, infinitely. Parveen and Zeenat, one of them is dead and the other will die, and they are undying in our childhood that never stops being childhood and they never lived except in the fluid, flickering world of cinema halls. Theirs was the dance of desire, but the dervish whirled in perfect poise. They sought nothing. But he yearned for an unattainable Beloved. Between their dance and his, there is no difference, for what turns our mortal feet is love. ‘You really figured us out,’ I said to Rekha before leaving the party, pointing to the small crowd of Sikander’s guests, all between twenty-five and forty-five, ‘you played just right for us.’ ‘That wasn’t hard,’ she laughed, shaking my hand, ‘we belong to the same generation.’

‘My forefathers were great teachers,’ says Matin, explaining to me his patronymic, maulawi-zada. ‘Perhaps that is why I found a hidden vision.’ Matin has seen Parveen and Zeenat only from a distance, as have I, but he has dusted Gwyneth Paltrow’s cheekbones, painted Angelina Jolie’s lips. Visions come to him. No subway station at the corner. Prince? Bleecker! Where’d they go? Weird cartography. Nizamuddin? Or the Walled City? O why are we lost? Who else was there, in Matin’s garden? Was it the blind pir who danced with his eyes closed? Could the dervish’s face be seen? How high were the fountains? Were there flowers? Where in Old Delhi? Will I miss the train? Russians in Kabul. Americans in Kabul. Thirty years of war. All his sisters smuggled to safety. Country of conquerors in shambles, boot and gun of white man swarming it, swamping it,
leaving no refuge, swallowing the past into an abyss without visions that could save or salve. The wars of the West upon the East have brought doom to our part of the world.

Mountains heroinkalashnikovs blue veilseyes like blades the shores of distant California. Matin now puts his earnings as a make-up artist to supermodels and Hollywood stars back into artisanal trade in Afghanistan. Beneath the radar of the new Karzai government, he supports rural Afghan women who practice traditional crafts, bringing their wares to the West. ‘My city is in ruins,’ he says, and I answer, but only in my head: ‘Mine too.’ Yet in India there persists the Indo-Persian sublime, as though 1,000 years had passed in the blink of Matin’s eye, and the great wheel in the sky was as unblinking as the eye of God. So it is in Sikander’s ‘Pursuit Curve’. An army advances. Bodies fall, heads are felled, what remains, a heap of turbans. A flight of birds. Substance becomes shadow. A bevy of women. Topknots fly away on wings of black. The turbans sink far far below the surface of the earth, become a heap of stones. Water seeps into stones. Trees sprout up above the ground, line the hemispheric horizon. Flowers open in the sky. Like bombs. Like bombs above Baghdad, Gulf War on CNN, America bombing Iraq then, now, again, always. The sky above the city becomes the stage for their choreography of spark and ash, burning bits ceaselessly bombarding the city below. Towers crumble. Once tiered, once towered, once tall, city gives like the insubstantial chimera that it is under the relentless aerial attack. Turbaned warriors of medieval armies give way to hi-tech war in the twenty-first century. Rivers of blood flood the ground, make of the earth a grave, and in the earth there is stillness and an end to strife. Eventually, everything vanishes. Everything morphs into something else. Swords and scimitars, spears and lances, bows and arrows, shields and knives; medieval warfare is rendered picturesque, modern warfare becomes abstract. Weapons and mass destruction — but also water and renewal — follow one another in a loop.

Life and death pulsate into one another ceaselessly in the carnival of Sikander’s animation. Wit permeates the entire construct, raising her critique of the world around us from the merely political to the ontological. It is not just the American Empire of which she makes fun; it is also the Empire of Death, of which we are all, equally, American or Asian, subjects. In the perspective of eternity, all things are possible, and all things pass. Women take wing. Blue and black alternate, like the sky in the monsoon, like the skin of a flute-playing god. Army, harem, court. Landscape. Light. Shade. Colour itself. Return to the drawing board of the world, take an empty canvas, begin at the very beginning, go as far as death will allow. Take the elements of Persianate painting out of stock scenes of love and valour, royalty and enmity, strip them down and reinsert them into virtual space, without plot, without narrative, without anything but their peculiar shapes. Subtract the relations that obtain between things, and the matrix dissolves into clusters and
Outside the Dargah of Nizamuddin Aulia. 35mm slide.
strings, piles and pieces, detritus afloat in ether. Sikander has
seized the Indo-Persian miniature, detonated it and sequenced
the shards anew, until another order emerges.
Composer David Abir’s ambient music plays, providing a
haunting backdrop to the phantasmagorically morphing
forms, the strict details and ornaments that have exploded out
of their frames into a medium that no medieval painter could
have imagined. Abir, a Kashmiri-American, himself deconstructs
classical music, rebuilds it from its compositional blocks,
moves it out of its Western context into unlikely settings like
Sikander’s work. At a remove from where we expect to find
them, disembedded from the times, spaces, stories and styles
that were their original homes, both the painting and the
music achieve a paradoxical purity. In the evenly lit firmament
of cyber-space, what they really are, as formal objects but also
as cultural artefacts, comes into much sharper relief. *Ars
electronica*. Without a mastery of the old, it is not possible to
make something new.

**Crossings**

Waqas Wajahat deals in twentieth-century American art in
New York. I meet him at the post-opening reception that the
Brent Sikkema gallery hosts for Sikander’s friends and
colleagues in a trendy lounge in Greenwich Village. He is in his
early thirties, Pakistani. Soon he plans to have his own gallery
in Chelsea, named after himself. Wajahat studied at the
University of Pennsylvania and has made a niche for himself in
the New York art market; his own country is a distant memory
to him. But it is a memory that talking to me brings alive.
Engaging me clearly causes him some difficulty; he speaks
under a continual pressure to translate and to come to grips
with the translation that he perceives to be embodied in me.
‘Look,’ he confesses to me a few days later, in SoHo, over
coffee, ‘I’ve never been part of the South Asian scene in
New York. Shahzia’s the only one I have any connection with,
and that’s because I know her as a person, and I know her
work to be what it is, not because she’s Pakistani.
Professionally I deal in very different genres of art — mostly
American – Pollock, Rothko, that kind of thing.’ I remember
something Sikander told me the last time I was in her studio in
Brooklyn. She loves to drive in America, cruising American
highways by herself or with friends, taking in American
landscapes that are so different from anything in Pakistan or
India. On the road she takes pictures, hundreds and hundreds
of photographs of desert and mountain, sea and sky, forest
and river. The veil of ideology prevents most South Asians from
seeing it, but America is spectacularly beautiful.
‘This is my reality,’ she said to me, ‘this country, its
landscapes, its rocks and trees. Not Iran and Mongolia, not
Turkey and Arabia, not India and China. I live here, in America.’
She gestures to our immediate surround. The referent of her
deixis, however, is not all that self-evident. America is out
there, wide open and magnificent. It begins just over the
horizon of steel bridges and jagged skyscrapers and the
missing Twin Towers. But we’re sitting in an industrial loft in

DUMBO, encircled by her paintings of an Indo-Persian mythos.
As we navigate this welter of worlds, she and I often slip
into our shared native language, Hindustani/Urdu. In our many
lives, we have both forgotten how to speak Farsi, the language
of the ancient Persians and the modern Iranians.

Friend, listen!
My Beloved has come home.

My courtyard is blest,
My Beloved has come home.

I waited
I waited, all dressed-up
Henna in my hands
Kohl in my eyes
Flowers in my hair
I waited
If there be a Monsoon
When my Beloved isn’t home
Let it burn up,
Damn Monsoon!

Hazrath Nizāmuddin Auliya with Amir Khusrau (From a
miniature in the possession of the Victoria Memorial Hall,
Kolkata)
Let the clouds catch fire,  
And burn down my house!

My courtyard is blest,  
My Beloved has come home. (Khusro attrib.)

Partly it is Sikander’s fault, this chaos and collision of realities, this beautiful excess, this mind-boggling vertiginous space that other critics of her art have described as ‘cosmopolitan’. The row of smaller coloured paintings in Sikander’s show seemed to gather some of the threads of her engagement with the American landscape, bring us all back to the present and the here, which is not the there of the Indo-Persian sublime, suspended forever outside of time. Wajahat reminds me of the cowboy boots dotting some of Sikander’s work in an earlier phase, when she lived and painted in Texas. The languages of Paradise need no interpreters but, sometimes, human tongues fail to speak to one another.

In this hiatus between cultures that Sikander works, ceaselessly stitching together what is separate, taking apart what is fused, debunking our assumptions, undermining our prejudices, surprising us. Wajahat has a dinner appointment with clients in Tribeca. I walk with him to Canal Street, then turn around and walk back to Lodi Road. It is April in Delhi. Summer is upon us.

I would like to thank Basharat Peer, Mahmood Farooqui, Hirsh Sawhney, Yousuf Saeed, Negar Motaheddeh and Waqas Wajahat.

Notes
1 All translations of verses and songs attributed to Amir Khusro, as well as of unattributed but popular qawwali lyrics, are my own. I have translated most of these from hearing them sung. Almost all of them are popularly and conventionally attributed to Khusro, but in the scholarly literature there is no hard evidence that he did in fact write the lyrics.
2 For an explication of the genre of performance in Iran, associated with the remembrance of the Battle of Karbala and the martyrdom of Imam Hussein, see Negar Mottahedeh (forthcoming), ‘Scheduled for Judgment Day’. This genre of commemoration in song and drama, a ‘sacred theatre’ for Shias, is called ta’ziyeh in Iran and taziya in South Asia. After Iran, Pakistan and India have the largest Shia populations in the world — twenty million in India, out of 175 million Indian Muslims. Mottahedeh’s short history of the ta’ziyeh, that she names ‘an indigenous Persian performance tradition’, from the early nineteenth century, through the Islamic Revolution in Iran in the latter part of the twentieth century, to post-Revolutionary Iranian cinema of the present day, is lucid and evocative. The taziya too, like the other forms of culture under discussion in this article, exemplifies the marriage of Indic and Persianate traditions of worship as well as of ritual practice, literary production, artistic expression and everyday life.

Works Cited