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“Risalo” by Shah Abdul Latif

Edited and translated by Christopher Shackle

The Sindhi diaspora, whether in India or around the world, have a warm spot for the name Shah Abdul Latif, an 18th-century Sufi poet from Sindh, Pakistan, and a contemporary of the better known Punjabi Sufi poet Bulle Shah.

Very little is known about Latif, except that he was a *pir*, or a holy man, and his title Shah hints at his possible direct descent from the prophet Muhammad. An ancestor of his, Shah Karim, is considered to be one of the earliest poets writing/composing in Sindhi. Latif is hailed as Shakespeare of Sindhi literature. Christopher Shackle’s edition of *Risalo*—Latif’s collection of his songs; the title means “the message”—forms part of the respected Murty Classical Library of India published by the Harvard University Press and is an easily accessible bilingual edition of the entirety of Latif’s works in Sindhi original and English translation.

It also comes at a special moment: at a time when Sindhi language is fast disappearing from even the isolated pockets of several Indian cities where the Sindhis live, and when the schools teaching in Sindhi are shutting down, the *Risalo* stands as a revived icon of the esteem and the heritage of the community. A word about Sufism and the language would be in order here. Sufism, or *tasawwuf*, is a mystical tradition of Islam often quite different from what might be considered “orthodox” practices. The movement spread to South Asia with the Muslim conquest; its literary express came with the consequent contact with Persian literature.

The Sindhi language’s relation with Islam goes back to at least the 9th century when tradition has it that Quran was first translated in Sindhi. The language has more recently been political: there was a row in the Victorian colonial period about which script to write it in and more recently about its lack of status as an “official” language”. In Sindhi, the Sufi message is seen at its subtlest and most powerful in the words of Latif.

Latif’s *Risalo* speaks of love and the beloved and incorporates metaphors of wine and yogic practices, highlighting traditions that belie Islam’s characterization as a monolithic faith.

The verses or lyrics in the *Risalo* are grouped under thirty *surs*. While a *sur* is understood to be the way a particular *raga* or scale is sung, in the *Risalo*, the *surs* are mostly named after the theme that the majority of the verses deal with. The *surs* do not come with a musical notation but the musicians performing at

the shrine of Latif sing them in specific ways. Some *surs* are dedicated to regional legends like Suhini-Sahar or Sasui-Punhun. Some speak of love in general. Some offer praise to God. But within all subsumes the idea of the beloved as God and God as beloved. In “Sur Yaman Kalyan,” Latif says:

Mother, I do not believe those who shed tears and show people how their eyes water. Those who truly think of the beloved do not weep or say anything.

And a little later:

If you think of being united with the beloved, then learn from the way that thieves behave. They celebrate by keeping awake and taking no rest all night long. When they deliberately do come out, they do not utter a word. When they are chained together and put on the gallows, they say nothing. Although they are cut with knives, they reveal nothing of what has really happened.

The idea of love as a silent phenomenon is not unusual across cultures but the way it is blended here with thievery seems unique and shocking. Also unusual is the way Latif incorporates contradictions in the way he defines Sufi ways of love and devotion:

They are grieved by being given, by not being given they are happy. True Sufis are those who take nonexistence with them.

Latif speaks of love as suffering and pain, even in terms of violent images:

False lovers escape the arrow and never let themselves be struck. Those who make themselves a mark are killed by the first shot.

Or:

On the field of love, do not care about your head. If you mount the gallows of the beloved you will find perfect health.

Sufi thought and practice conceive of love as self-sacrifice. Latif spells it out very clearly when he says that desire and death begin with the same letter. The only way to love is be ready for death, to cease to exist, to trade with one’s head.

These are the pre-requisites to union:

The self is a veil over yourself; listen and mark this well. It is existence that stands in the way of union.

Misery, unbearably cruelty—such are the ways of love and what it demands:

My beloved tied me up and threw me into deep water. He just stood there and told me not to get the hem of my clothes wet.

Latif also uses local romantic stories as analogies for devotion. There is one about Suhini who is married to Dam, but crosses the river Indus or Sindhu every night to meet her lover Sahar. Someone from Dam's family conspires to kill her by replacing the pot she uses to cross the river with an unfired one. Suhini drowns but Latif uses her journey to draw parallels with the quest for the divine beloved. The husband and the society stand for the world that stands between Sunhini and God:

Her route lies in whichever direction the river flows; only insincere girls inspect the riverbank. Those who are filled with desire for Sahar do not ask about entry points or landing places. Those who thirst for love think the river is a mere step.

Loving becomes a journey and the act of pursuing the divine. Latif turns something as illicit as extramarital love into piety. Suhini screams:

Love rages at me every day. Beloved, why do you not come and restrain it?

Besides these ways of refreshing the way trueness to God/beloved is conceived of, there is also an element of transcending religious boundaries in Latif's poetry. Latif says that the practice of seeking God is not in any way exclusive to the pathways dictated by any religious scriptures. That is why he can see what the Hindu yogis who journey towards the Eastern sites of pilgrimages are up to:

For what purpose do the yogis follow this path? Their hearts are not set on hell, nor do they desire paradise. They have nothing to do with unbelievers, and they do not have Islam in their minds. They stand there saying: "Make the beloved your own."

The way the Sufis and the yogis love is the same in this vision. Both are

consumed by a passion for the beloved and both quietly go about their business of seeking him/her:

Ram dwells in their soul, they speak of nothing else. They filled the cup of love and drank deeply from it. After that they closed their lodges and left. With matted braids over their foreheads, the yogis are always lamenting. No one has ever spoken to ask what makes them grieve. They spend their entire life in suffering.

This kind of identification and camaraderie across religious practices is not discernible in South Asian literary traditions except, perhaps, in the work of the Indian Bhakti poet Kabir, or Latif's contemporary Bulle Shah. Christopher Shackle's translation goes a long way in reminding readers across communities that faith moves people and torments them too in the same way irrespective of their religiosity.

The *Risalo* might be held as the *Quran* of Sindhi literature, Shackle suggests. It is perhaps no coincidence that among the works inspirational to Latif himself was the Persian poet Rumi's *Masnavi*, which in turn is idolized as the *Quran* of Persian literature.

Sindhi writing is among the least known regional expressions of South Asian literature. This edition brings to light an important voice from an intersection of a literary tradition and a syncretic practice. The new *Risalo* is invaluable for reintroducing the poet saint's message and creating a context for reading about the ecstasy of divine love and revisiting the ways one can love.