

Sajjad Rizvi

The Flowing Sands of Being in Mughal Poetry

The history of the concept of *waḥdat al-wujūd* finds its ‘point of rising’ (*maṭlaʿ*) with the ideas of Ibn ‘Arabī (d. 1240) on the singularity of *al-ḥaqq* and the ways in which that unique and absolute being is manifest in its many theophanies. Its limits (*hudūd*) and extension (*inbisāṭ*), however, go far beyond and reach into the very aesthetics of literature traditions across Islamicate and Persianate languages and cultures. A generation ago William Chittick indicated the significance of the reception of Ibn ‘Arabī (d. 1240) in this context, and the sheer number of commentaries, marginalia, paratexts, and independent treatises that engages the metaphysics and devotional tradition of the Andalusian master testifies to a major commitment. The earliest presence of Ibn ‘Arabī was in the poetry of Fakhr al-dīn al-‘Irāqī (d. 1289), a devotee in the presence of the Suhrawardī Sufi Bahā’ al-Dīn Zakarīyā (d. 1262) in Multan, followed by Chishtī and Kubravī masters already in the pre-Mughal period. We still have much to do to consider the literary heritage of early modern pre-colonial and colonial South Asia in terms of the broad long tradition of *ḥikma*, *taṣawwuf*, *kalām*, and *‘erfān*. One of the decisive elements in this tradition is the way in which Persian and vernacular literary traditions negotiated the influence of Ibn ‘Arabī and read his ideas in ways that conformed to their own aesthetics of presence and metaphysics of beauty. I will consider four case studies that modify and read Ibn ‘Arabī in their own ways: the Mughal prince Dārā Shukoh (d. 1659), Bēdil (d. 1720) perhaps the greatest Indo-Persian poet, Mīr Dard (d. 1785) one of the pillars of Urdu poetry and the pivotal thinker of the new ‘Muḥammadan way’ of Sufism, and the great Punjabi poet of the 18th century Bullheh Shah. None of these figures was a simple imitator or transmitter – literary traditions like philosophical ones acquire a dynamic that arises from creative misreadings and liminal interpretations as well as exciting new aesthetic formulations. In this way, we can consider how the metaphysics of the unity of existence and often its ethical and aesthetic implications were naturalised and transformed in the soil of Hindustān.



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