

GEETA PATEL

## Myth and Memory: Musings from “Incomplete Self-Portrait”

I WAS SITTING a little distance from Ḥuẓūr’s *jāli* in beautiful Medina, lost in meditation, asking blessings for my friends as they came to mind, one by one, until no name was left unremembered. I was suffused with a strange happiness. My feelings were melting and strings of tears poured from my eyes when suddenly Mīrājī stood in front of me and said, “You’ve forgotten me—you didn’t pray for me!” Right away I prayed for him; he continued to stand before me. When I finished praying and looked up, he was gone and so was everyone else; no one else was around, neither Mīrājī nor anyone else. I was alone, by myself. There was just me with Ḥuẓūr’s *jāli*. I was amazed ... astonished ... perplexed. What sort of adventure was this?<sup>1</sup>

Yūsuf Ẓafar’s mythopoetic tale offered to Shāhid Aḥmad Dehlavī brings a spectral Mīrājī back to life. Mīrājī, a ghostly literary icon, is remembered in a litany of tales passed around by many individuals. Mīrājī’s short, full life—he died at 37 in 1949—was replete with contradictions. A pre-eminent Urdu poet, a voracious reader of literature from all over the world, a prolific writer and translator, Mīrājī published three books of poetry, two

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<sup>1</sup>Shāhid Aḥmad Dehlavī, *She’r-o-Hikmat*, vol. 1, ed. Mughanī Tabassum (Delhi: Educational Publishing House, 1987), p. 28. This story, originally written by Shāhid Aḥmad Dehlavī for the periodical *Nayā Daur*, begins: “When I visited Pindi [Rawalpindi] some time ago, Mīrājī’s close friend Yūsuf Ẓafar Ṣāhib narrated a strange incident to me. He’d gone that year on the *ḥajj*. He said ...” It also appears in Mīrājī, *Shakhsīyat aur Fann*, ed. Kumār Pāshī (New Delhi: Modern Publishing House, 1981), pp. 45–50.

of essays, as well as numerous poems and short prose commentaries on literature in journals all over the Subcontinent. He started his career as the poetry editor of the Lahore magazine of arts and letters *Adabī Dunyā* (Literary World), and soon became the hub of a vital literary scene. But Mīrājī's career and memory are marred by stories of his drinking and supposedly seamy sexual habits. The complex registers of his large poetic oeuvre were almost overshadowed by readings that focused entirely on prurient sexuality. By the time he died on 2 November, while being given electroshock therapy in Bombay Hospital, Mīrājī had largely been ostracized by his compatriots; no one but his pall bearers attended his funeral. Mīrājī's grave in the Marine Lines Graveyard, unmarked by a gravestone, embodied the loss of memory that haunted even close friends of his like Yūsuf Zafar, who, as he recalled the names of other friends at Medina, had forgotten Mīrājī. Recent collections of Mīrājī's works like the one in which Zafar's memorial was printed, have begun the task of recuperating the poet, recreating his work and life in all its colorful, sometimes contradictory, detail.

### Stories from a Childhood

Zainab Bēgam traveled a long distance from where her husband was stationed in Kathiawar, Gujarat, to give birth in his family home in Lahore. At five A.M. on 25 May 1912, Ṣanā'ullāh Ḍār—Mīrājī—was born, the eldest child of his father Munshī Mehtābud-dīn Ḍār's second wife, Zainab Bēgam, whom the Munshī had married in 1910, shortly after the death of his first wife, Ḥusain Bēgam. Mīrājī had two older half-brothers, Muḥammad 'Aṭā'ullāh and Muḥammad 'Ināyat'ullāh; and while growing up he was closer to them than to his six younger siblings, two of whom died at an early age.

Zainab Bēgam remained in the large multi-family home with her new son for fifteen months before rejoining her husband in Godhra, Kathiawar, where he had been relocated during her absence. Mīrājī's father was an assistant engineer with the British Indian Railway System; he moved his growing family with him when he was transferred to new posts, which included stations in Bindhiyachal and Halol in Kathiawar, Kohistan in Baluchistan, and Sukkur and Karachi in Sindh. Although very little information is available on this period of Mīrājī's childhood,

one piece that does provide details is his autobiographical article, “Nā-Mukammal Self-Pōrṭarēṭ” (Incomplete Self-Portrait),<sup>2</sup> which focuses primarily on Halol, where the family moved when he was six and had just started school. Halol was the site of all Mīrājī’s early memories of a “normal” childhood, playing the kinds of games that children of British and Indian civil servants who lived in remote rural areas often played: “aping” the activities of their parents and friends.

During that time, Munshī Mehtābud-dīn directed two plays he had written in response to a severe famine in Gujarat, staging them to raise money for famine relief. Writing about “formative” events in his brother’s life, Muḥammad ‘Aṭā’ullāh said that this was their family’s first excursion into the world of the arts.

### Scenes from an “Incomplete Self-Portrait”

The autobiographical “Incomplete Self-Portrait” evokes Mīrājī’s earliest childhood memories, which he used to explore and explain the timbre of his adult excursions into sexuality, in both his life and his poetry. Sexuality was for him an important component of the life of every person, and was not to be confused with a moralizing message. He was aware that his work was thought of by many as primarily sexual, but he felt strongly that sexuality could not be isolated from other aspects of a person’s life, that indeed it was part of the complicated pattern of life and could be neither ignored nor excessively highlighted.<sup>3</sup> The critical pieces he wrote exploring poetry, facets of his life, and diverse literary traditions weave sexuality with other threads: community behaviors, social expectations, histories of literary production, and discussions of aesthetics.

“Self-Portrait” locates his early encounters with sexual pleasure in the games he played during his period in Halol; it provides an unusual look into his own primal scenes of sexuality. For instance, young Ṣanā’ullāh’s moralizing response to sexual and scatological scenes (they were “bad”) presages some of Mīrājī’s later discussions on the moral ambivalence with which sexuality and physical pleasure were treated by his contemporaries. Mīrājī felt that his desire for women, including the desire recorded in his poetry and in the gesture he made of adopting a woman’s name, could be

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<sup>2</sup>For which, see his *Shakhsīyat aur Fann*, pp. 45–50.

<sup>3</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 45.

explored in his childhood fascinations with nature and with women's clothing.<sup>4</sup> His desire for women, according to him, was always thwarted, never realized. Mirājī's lament echoes that of the poet-lover of classical Urdu poetry—insistently spurned, forever yearning, never satisfied. In “Nā-Mukammal Self-Pōrṭarēt,” rather than establishing continuities between his poetic imagery and earlier poetic traditions (*b<sup>h</sup>akti*, Urdu *ghazal*, Sanskrit love poetry), he returns to the stories of his childhood to find precursors of his later imagery.

In his early work (poetry and prose), looking (*nazar*) was the mode through which Mirājī explored sexuality. Held by his own accounts from physical consummation of his desire, Mirājī moved towards several valences of looking, rather than literal touching, to articulate sexuality. Looking, when employed conventionally by him, expressed a desire for someone—desire that could be potentially realized or repulsed. In its less conventional sense, looking was used in lieu of physical union. Looking in this case replaced touching. When desire was consummated looking was marked by pleasure, and when repulsed, inflected with pain. But Mirājī also wrote about the ways in which his expressions of desire (for an object or for its own consummation), rather than attaching to a woman's body, were routed through obsessive descriptions of scenery, weather and clothing. Thus, when looking was the form that “touch”—contact or consummation—effectively took, desire could be seen as twice removed from body-to-body contact: first, by touching through looking, and second, by transmuted bodies into natural and sartorial images.

Scenes from Mirājī's childhood gave him the language through which his sexuality as an adult found its expression. Halol was the site from which metaphors for the luxuriant “thick, dense” seductive pleasure of looking emanate, while Sindh, with its hot, barren topography, provided him with the language to describe the desiccation and dryness of the pain produced when desire is thwarted.

The translated pieces excerpted here from “Incomplete Self-Portrait” are important precisely because they carry into standard prose form fragments of images from Mirājī's prose poetry. These scenes provide a rarely seen frame for reading Mirājī's sexual poetry. In their delicacy they allow for an understanding of the sexual undertones of some of his lyrics markedly different from the more overt “pathological” connections some critics have drawn between Mirājī's sexual “habits” as an adult and his

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<sup>4</sup>*Ibid.*, pp. 45, 47.

synaesthetic, sensuous, diffuse writing.

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Scene One  
**Early Encounters**  
 Halol Games

Whenever the English engineer visited [Halol] on his rounds [of railway stations], a hunt was arranged for his entertainment. Children, because they are the tiny descendants of monkeys, ape their parents. So, our childhood games also included hunting. The Railway Dāk Bungalow was a short distance from our house. This is a description of a particular incident that occurred when the engineer was visiting [us] on his rounds. His son and daughter strolled with my sister, me, and the two sons of our household servants over to the rambling garden [of the Dāk Bungalow] to play. Our other companions, the son and daughter of the Bungalow's watchman, were assembled there. The Bḥīl tribe lives in that area [Halol]. Having graduated from an agricultural livelihood, they are now skilled at pillaging and stealing, as well as driving or beating for game. In that kind of hunting, people sit high up on a raised platform (*mačān*) and a line of Bḥīls flushes animals out [of the forest] with many different noises, surrounds them, and drives them towards the platform. We, too, played at driving game in the Dāk Bungalow [garden]. We had designated a tree our "raised platform." The engineer's son and I, pretending to be the Bḥīls, had wandered away [to find game]. Just then, the servant's daughter ran towards us, and yelled out that Jamunā was a very bad girl—she was sitting in a tree and peeing. I, well versed in the set of rules that ordered my family's behavior, also thought of the act as "bad." However the sensual specialness of that event has since stamped itself on my consciousness. I have just begun to understand the tangled effects of that sensual experience. But at the time, the experience had not only an exotic, provocative seductiveness, but a sense of harmony with nature (as well as carrying a profound moral ambivalence).<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>5</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 46.

Scene Two  
**Luxuriant Metaphors**  
 The Mountain Outside My Window in Halol

We lived near the famous ancient site of Champaner. The mountain of Pavgadhad was four or five miles away. There was a Kālī temple at its summit. We could see the mountain from our courtyard. I've written a line: "Who is responsible for the blue mystery of the mountain?" Though the mountain looked as if it was close by, it held a deep indigo mysteriousness for me—the kind of secret whose allure leaves a profound impression on one's mind.

The monsoons lasted for quite a few months in those areas, and for a large portion of the year the sight of the mountain veiled in the smokiness of the rain held a special enchantment.<sup>6</sup> In my imagination the rivers, draped randomly over the mountain's smoothness, turned into chalk streaks. Their sensual and sexual significance has recently become clear to me. The special characteristic of that region was the profusion of snakes [that appeared] during the monsoons. For a child, the dangerousness of snakes was not as significant as their seductiveness which, like the story of Adam and Eve, snared men's imaginations. These were the important images [for me]—the mountain's smokiness, flowing streams, and colorful snakes.<sup>7</sup>

Scene Three  
**First Flickers of Desire**

This is a story from the time in my life when I had first begun to feel flickers of physical desire. We had just been transferred to new place near Multan. Our neighbor, the stationmaster's daughter, brought over a welcoming gift for us. A plate was balanced in her right hand and, holding open the reed mat blinds that covered the door with her left hand, she walked into the room. I was by the door, sitting in a comfortable armchair, reading a book. As she stepped over the threshold and looked around, she realized that I was the only person in the room. When she asked me, I gestured towards the inner room, letting her know that the

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<sup>6</sup>I am indebted to Kath Weston for helping me translate this line.

<sup>7</sup>Mirājī, *op. cit.*, p. 46.

rest of the inhabitants were inside. She left. But for a moment, as she stood hesitating, my eyes lingered on her with a half-woken dream of desire. She was wearing a thin white shift; she must have been ten or eleven years old. Perhaps because she was on an errand inside the house, she hadn't worn a slip under her clothes. The sun suddenly glimmered through the veil of her clothing and outlined the delicate body inside. This stolen vision, dissolved from deep inside the earth, has come to inhabit my life and poetry in many forms—as clothing.<sup>8</sup>

#### Scene Four Desiccation

Our travels with our father took us to Kohistan in Baluchistan. But this place did not have the thick, dense scenery of the hot, moist terrain of Hindustan. The changing circumstances of our lives took me to Sindh too, desiccated and barren, inhabited by forbidden beings. Here, the only place worth speaking about was by the sea of Sindh, a spot thirty-seven miles from Karachi—Dabeji's mausoleum. I sat there many times, by the sea. After a while the ocean's being would appear before me as a demon, prone and still, a creature both repulsive and seductive. The land around Dabeji's tomb, stretched out [in front of me] stripped of all its tall green grass, spotted with dry, spiny brambles and shriveled, stunted trees. I saw before me, about four or five miles away, the smoky outline of the seashore. At the shore, I'd heard there was a garden, home of Sassī, the beloved of one of Hindustan's most famous lovers—Pannū. I don't know whether the garden really existed or whether it was just a story from local folk legends. However, that place was bathed by hot, fierce winds from the sea.<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>8</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 48.

<sup>9</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 49.