

## Reflections

# The idea of the ma'shuq

WAGISH SHUKLA

Love is too young to know  
What conscience is  
—William Shakespeare

A semi-jocular remark which makes rounds amongst the Indian readers of Persian poetry runs along the following lines: I went through the *Yusuf-Zulaikha* from cover to cover and could not find out which of the two lovers, Yusuf and Zulaikha, was the male. The remark derives meaning from the following interrelated observations: (a) Persian is a (technically speaking) gender-free language, and (b) in Persian love poetry both the partners in love are males.

But before we proceed further, let us note that there is a word, namely *ma'shuqa*, which is generally understood to stand for the feminine of *ma'shuq*. Thus D. C. Phillot writes:

In classical Persian and Arabic, '*ashiq*' is generally used for the male lover, while *ma'shuq* or *mahbub*, 'the beloved', is generally considered to be the feminine of necessity and hence it is not necessary to add an -a- to distinguish it as feminine.

Phillot then cites a verse from Umar Khayyam in which *ma'shuqa* has been used inferring that Khayyam is using the feminine gender here. However, Phillot fails to notice that Khayyam is using the original Quranic expression *hur+e+ain* and maps his *ma'shuqa* with that. Now *hur+e+ain* simply means 'companions with beautiful, big and lustrous eyes', and a derivative, '*hawwariyu*', was applied to the disciples of Jesus. The original idea, therefore, does not force femininity onto the *hur* isomorphed to the *ma'shuqa*, but it does force beauty, purity and plurality. I am convinced, therefore, that Khayyam distinguishes *ma'shuqa* in the sense of plural noun as against the singular noun *ma'shuq* in exactly the same way as one distinguishes the plural *sufia* (= the Sufies) from the singular *sufi* (= the Sufi); the -a- termination

being used not as a gender distinguisher but as a number distinguisher.

This is not to deny the circumstantial possibility of the beloved being female, but I do assert that the physical circumstantialities of an actual *ma'shuq* have nothing to do with the *ma'shuq* in literature. The *ma'shuq* in literature is a creation of language, not of the physical reality. As Mirza Bedil says:

There is not a single sliver of land in this Desert and Court which I can see as a place where the heart can open up. May be, from the Ocean of Poetry, some [such] land will emerge.

Literature forces the *ma'shuq* to be masculine. Let us try to see why.

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There is an easy consensus amongst the modern literary scholars that poetry follows physical realities. This consensus must be broken before a meaningful discussion can start on poetry. In other words, we must not look for Ghalib's *ma'shuq* in the context of the social milieu of the contemporary Muslim aristocracy and the middle class. This is what Prof. Mujib does in his famous introduction to the Ghalib selection published by the Sahitya Akademi, when he says that the accessible female presence in Ghalib's society was limited to the class of courtesans and therefore the courtesan is the model for the *ma'shuq*. This is a game of restructuring comparable to John Benson's publishing of Shakespeare's sonnets in 1640 altering the pronouns of the love poetry to make it address a female lover exactly as Michelangelo's poems published seventeen years before by the sculptor's grandnephew had been altered to meet the same purpose.

The data engineering, so representative of the generation of Prof. Mujib, is actually an attempt to bury an earlier consensus, remarkable only for its naiveté, which looked for the *ma'shuq* in the homosexual practices presumed to be widespread

in the cultures that produced Persian and Urdu poetry. Maulana Shibli, in his *Shi'r-ul-'Ajam*, is an important representative of this consensus when he condemns this presumed homosexuality as 'abhorrent' and 'a blot' on his *quam*, i.e., the particular Islamic society which produced Persian poetry. Mujib belongs to the later generation which asserted that love poetry must come out of heterosexual practice which for reasons unknown is deemed cleaner than the homosexual practice. But to the extent that Shibli and Mujib share the belief that love poetry comes out of sexual practice, whether heterosexual or homosexual, they stand on the same platform, the platform of realism in its gross sense. This platform is totally irrelevant to literature.

Let me just point out the direction in which such things work. The generation of Shibli could not stomach love poetry which was to come out of heterosexual practice since it was obviously a debasement of all that Persian and Urdu poetry stood for, namely, a permanent possibility of dual semantics: one arrow towards the so-called 'worldly love' (= *ishq + e + majazi*), the other arrow towards the so-called 'godly love' (= *ishq + e + haqiqi*). Love poetry out of heterosexual practice did not permit this dual semantics because God was Positively-Not-a-Female in the gendered religiosity which was the ambiance in which this poetry was manufactured. Therefore, Shibli's generation preferred to write no love poetry generally speaking, and concentrated on metical sermons on social problems or Urdu remakes of poetry from the west. The animosity towards the Ghazal that this generation displayed and its promotion of the so-called *nazm*, a genre unheard of in the thousand-year old history of the Persian poetic enterprise, are direct consequences of this evasion. This generation worked against its gut feelings and groundings. Mujib's generation had no gut feelings and groundings, and you have poets like Faiz and Sahir writing love poetry inspired by the girl in the neighbourhood. This would have been dismissed by Mir as *chumachati*, the kiss-and-tell poetry of Jur'at and his class. The *ma'shuq* has been replaced in the 20th century poetry as well as criticism by the girl you could marry if circumstances were favourable.

Ghalib is the last poet in Indo-Persian as well as Urdu poetry who had a *ma'shuq*. As he says:

After me, the flame of love  
(went into mourning and) dressed  
in black.

But perhaps a clarification is required. I do not deny that there were homosexual practices. In fact, references to such practices abound. What I assert is something different: I am saying that the *ma'shuq* in Persian and Urdu poetry is better understood by taking this verse from Abru seriously:

He is just a teacher, not an '*ashiq*,  
the one who fails to love a boy and  
takes a courtesan as his lover.

Let us note that the girl you could marry, if the circumstances were favourable, is not even worthy of entering the hierarchy. So Faiz and Sahir are way below the lecher, the *bul hawas*, and I cannot imagine how outraged Abru would be if he saw the poems of Josh Malihabadi who actually wrote a poem on his wife!

Let us forget about Mujib's sociology of literature which demotes Ghalib from '*ashiq*' to *bul hawas*, and examine Shibli's sociology of literature which traces the *ma'shuq* in the homosexual abuse of the slaves from the regions conquered by the warriors of Islam. Shibli's history is poor but this will not affect his argument which is based on his reading of literature. This reading is the moral face of the empty exercise known as the Nechariya movement (from the English word 'nature') which inexorably degenerated into the progressive movement in the later generations.

Actually, to the extent that socio-historical reading of literature is relevant at all, Persian poetry is a nostalgic entry into extra-Islamic religiosity. To quote Baba Fighani:

In actual terms, the '*Ashiq*' and the '*Ma'shuq*' have the same genealogy. Only prattlers construct an idol (= *ma'shuq*) and a Barhaman (= '*ashiq*') as separate entities.

The line which I quoted from Ghalib above is also an instantiation of this because 'dressed in black' refers to the *ka'ba* and it is a popular theme with Persian and Urdu poets that the *ka'ba* is dressed in black in mourning for the dead past when it was an idol-temple and idol-worshippers visited it. Iqbal recognized this nostalgic entry and is therefore adversarial to Hafiz, Bedil and Ghalib. Constraints of space do not permit me to enter into a debate with Shibli here and I will only assert, in unequivocal terms, that no practice in real life generates poetry and in particular

no sexual practice generates love poetry.

Ghalib, let me repeat, is the last poet in Indo-Persian and Urdu poetry who was an *'ashiq*. His words were prophetic:

After me, the call is back on the lips of *saqi*:  
'Who will familiarize with this man-hurling drink of love?'

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What are the characteristics of the *ma'shuq*?

It may be helpful to look at the complete list of the *ma'shuqs*. Their total number is seven including the *'ma'shuq'* of the poet. They, together with their *'ashiqs*, have been listed by a poet whom I know only as Hasrat, and the following table provides the complete roll:

<i>Ma'shuq</i>	<i>'Ashiq</i>
1. Laila	Majnun
2. Azra	Wamiq
3. Ayaz	Mahmud
4. Shirin	Farhad
5. Daman	Nal
6. Yusuf	Zulaikha
7. <i>ma'shuq</i>	<i>'ashiq</i>

Out of the six models in this table that appear in the column for *ma'shuq*, four are females, two are males, and the only homo-sexual pair is the Ayaz-Mahmud pair. All the six are past adolescence. One, namely Daman, the Damayanti of the Indian mythology, is actually married to her *'ashiq*, Nal. All the six are deeply in love with their *'ashiqs*. However, the *ma'shuq*, the seventh in the list, violates all these significations. The *ma'shuq* is a male syntax with female semantics, is very young, very cruel, unattainable, and, most important of all, not in love with the *'ashiq*. It is as if the *ma'shuq* is an *anqa*, the mythical bird with a name—six names if you like—but no existence. The basic strategy of providing a name is to trap the existence into a manageable box which you can hold in your hands, touch, pass on, analyze, and store for retrieval. The *ma'shuq* defies this information management strategy. The six names in the list are labels on information boxes whose contents evaporate the moment you open them to take an inventory. But this lack of clues is of course the clue. As Mirza Bedil said:

There was so much talk about cluelessness that cluelessness became the clue. The disappearance brought out *anqa* from the disappearance.

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What kind of Laila do we have in poetry?

Mirza Bedil wrote an elegy on the death of his only son who was less than four years old at the time he died. In this elegy, Bedil uses the word 'Laila' for his son. This proves several things. Some of them are:

(a) The *ma'shuq* can be a very young child.

(b) The *ma'shuq* can be male.

(c) The *ma'shuq* can be the object of love which is not directly rooted into sexual desire.

(d) The *ma'shuq* does not exist in the same universe which the *'ashiq* inhabits.

These derivatives are variously supported in a very strong way by the general corpus. Thus *difl* (= very young child) is a well known word for *ma'shuq*. That the *ma'shuq* is invariably a male is well attested and some of its aspects have been discussed above. That the love for the *ma'shuq* need not be directly rooted into sexual desire is also well known because apart from the fact that the *ma'shuq* is usually the abstract version of God himself, the *mamduh* (= the object of praise) in *aqasida* is the same as the *ma'shuq*. And the *ma'shuq* is, of course, not in the same universe which the *'ashiq* inhabits because the *'ashiq* has to roam into *sahra* (= the uninhabited space), an extra-geographic spatiality distinguished solely by not being a home.

All these are, of course, indeterminants, not determinants, of the *ma'shuq*.

The age of the *ma'shuq* is the most underdetermined (or overdetermined, if you like) parameter of all these. Hafiz talks of a fourteen year old *ma'shuq*; Nazir Akbarabadi mentions a ten year old *ma'shuq*; and we have already seen Bedil speaking about a Laila who was not even four. But the numerical indicators do not indicate anything; the only point is that the *'ashiq* is old (= *pir*), and the *ma'shuq* is young (= *jawan*). How young? As young as you please; the upper limit is the pubescence period when the down starts delineating itself on the cheek. We can safely dismiss the third-rate Urdu poet who speaks of a *ma'shuq* actually going in for a shave.

So let us recapitulate: (a) The age-limits for the *ma'shuq* must accommodate the infant as well as the sexually usable boy on the threshold of adolescence. (b) The love for the *ma'shuq* should be capable of being interpreted in three ways: (i) love for the child not directly rooted into

sexual desire; (ii) love for the pubescent boy directly rooted into sexual desire which can be feasibly satisfied by a carnal union; and (iii) love for an abstract entity which you may call God for want of a better description.

The carnal union in (b)(ii) above must be only a feasibility, never to be actualized. A spatio-temporality which the *ma'shuq* and the *'ashiq* can actually share must perforce annihilate one of them: when the *'ashiq* is annihilated, this spatio-temporality is *wisal* (= union); when the *ma'shuq* is annihilated, it is *firaq* (= separation). As Bedil says:

He is, when I am not  
And I am, when he is not.

To write poetry, you must have a spatio-temporality in which both the *ma'shuq* and the *'ashiq* exist.

Therefore, whenever the required charts and atlases which will frame into such a spatio-temporality are assembled, the spatio-temporality will have to be perforce 'out of joint', to use the famous words of the prince of Denmark. As Ghalib says:

In the night of Union, the pillow is my friend.

The pillow is in fact the author of the life and the body.

The pillow, which is the divider between the two bed-partners, is a friend because if it were not there to intervene, the union would take place and there would be annihilation of the life and the body of the *'ashiq*. The pillow is the physics of existence, demarcating the *'ashiq* out of the *ma'shuq* by authoring a life and a body for the *'ashiq*, the barrier which has to be crossed. Therefore the *wisal* never takes place because the *firaq* is never absent from it.

Just where do you find such a *ma'shuq*?

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Elsewhere, in an article on eroticism, I have discussed the evolution of the *gopi*-concept from the Vedic literature. I refer to it here only to record the antiquity of the idea and, in this presentation, will deal with only the more explicit database which starts building up sometime around the first century of the Christian era.

I submit now that the *ma'shuq* which answers to the required degree of the goodness of fit to the parameters discussed above is none other than Krishna during his Gokul-Vrindavan days, and the *'ashiq* is modelled after the *gopis* at the point of time when Krishna has

left for Mathura.

Consider now the basic data. The *gopis* are all senior to Krishna in age and sexual maturity. They are all in wedlock to ensure social illegitimacy of their love for Krishna. This includes Radha who is regarded eight years senior to Krishna and is married to a *gopa* named Abhimanyu. Krishna is not a faithful lover and every *gopi* has a rival, i.e., a *raqib* who is also a confidante. The homo-erotic component is injected along the theoretical axis by the assertion that Krishna is merely the male version of Lalita who is laterally introduced as a confidante-rival of Radha; it is injected along the practical axis by the frequent devices of Krishna masquerading as a *gopi* and the *gopis* masquerading as Krishna. Since the Indian cosmology is not gendered, the impact is not the same as made by Rosalind, played by a boy actor, disguising herself as a boy named Ganymede flirting with Orlando pretending to be Rosalind. But the gendered cosmology in which Persian poetry published itself would inevitably orient it towards the articulation of male homo-sexuality. And Krishna is cruel, deserting everybody who loves him; but even when he does not desert, even in a meeting, cruelty and not kindness is expected from him. To quote Sri Chaitanya Mahaprabhu:

Whether that rogue picks me up from  
his feet and crushes me to my death  
in his embrace, or chooses to hurt me by disappearing altogether, he and he alone, is the Master of my life  
regardless of how he behaves.

The *ma'shuq* has hardly any differentials: Krishna disappears and the *gopis* look for him in the jungle, exactly where the *'ashiq* would go in search of the *ma'shuq*.

Apart from the behavioral isomorphisms, the physiognomies also match. Let us recall that the *ma'shuq* is a young boy with just a hint of the down on his cheek. This is the age at which Krishna leaves Gokul-Vrindavana for Mathura. When he reaches there, he is still observed to be only an adolescent and the arranged fight with the wrestlers of Kansa is described as uneven by the observers on this count. Yet, Kubja, whose sexuality is unmistakably mature, seeks Krishna as a bed-partner. This is the last sexual encounter which Krishna had out of wedlock, and the first with a woman who is not married although

not a sexual novice. After this, he is the marrying kind and never enters into an extra-marital affair. After this, no woman who is senior to him in age and sexual experience seeks him as a bed-partner. After this, no women fall in love with him; only maidens do and they all become his wives before they meet him sexually. In other words, his status as a *ma'shuq* disappears after the Kubja episode. The Gokul-Vrindavan period comes to an end.

This loss of the *ma'shuq*-status is signalled in by the appearance of the down. Let us carefully note that the age of Krishna during the *rasa-lila* time is called *pauganda*, literally the 'clean-cheek age' which starts at five and ends at ten. The 'adolescence' or *kaishor*, literally 'the age at which one is slightly violent', is mentioned only in Mathura, at the time of the Kubja episode.

Kubja is the down, the boundary-line of the *ma'shuq*-status. A *ma'shuq* at this threshold is a remembrance of his tenure as a *ma'shuq*, a reminder of the surreal *rasa-lila* days which are irretrievably banked into memory. A *ma'shuq* at this threshold is at the peak of the desirability graph, but he is in Mathura where there are no *gopis*, a market-place without customers. It is this situation which Ghalib captures in his famous but never explained verse:

The sensex of the *ma'shuq* crashed at the appearance of the down perhaps.

The down at the cheek is simply the smoke from the candle which has been extinguished.

But let me emphasize that the market crashes because the customers are absent, not because the *ma'shuq* is no longer beautiful. This is a common misunderstanding. I repeat: when the down appears, the *ma'shuq* is at the peak of the desirability graph. The down is an increment to the *ma'shuq* beauty, if 'increment' is the right word in the context of a beauty which is always already perfect and without blemish. This is the reason why the first-rate poets are ecstatic about the down. In particular, the above quoted verse by Ghalib does not speak of the nondesirability of the *ma'shuq* which is an incongruity and bothers all his readers. The incongruity is only apparent and stems from an infirmity in appreciating the verse.

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The *ma'shuq* is, to use the words of the Elizabethan poet Richard Barnfield, the 'Cherry-lipped Adonis'

who is 'slow to love and quick to hate', and I submit that the young Krishna is the only one who meets the criterion. He is also the only one who can be loved as a child is loved, and there is enough support to assert that the *gopis* who loved him as a child are not different from those who loved him when he was pubescent. The '*ashiq*' is the same; it is the *ma'shuq* who changes his appearance in the three-fold manifestation as a child, as a pubescent boy, and as a god. The description has to remain the same: thus Khaqani describes the down of his son in an elegy on his death at the age of ten lunar, hence nine solar years, the down of his patron king in a panegyric, and the down of *ka'ba* in a religious ode with the same ritualistic compulsion.

There remains the job of the completion of this mapping of Krishna onto the *ma'shuq* and of tracing the actual path of transition of the Krishna love poetry into the morphology of Persian poetry. This is not a difficult job, but I must postpone compilation of the evidential knowledge-base to a sequel. Suffice it to say here that there was enough of a semantic corpus to validate a lexicography which could machine-translate the Krishna love poetry in Hindi into the *sufi* love poetry in Persian. The *Haqayyaq-e-Hindi*, compiled by Mir Abdul Wahid Bilgraimi in 1566, is a dictionary emerging out of such a lexicography. In it, the Prophet is isomorphed to Uddhav, the messenger to the *gopis* sent by Krishna from Mathura.

Mirza Ghalib was the last poet who knew his *ma'shuq* well. When Mohsin Kakorawi wrote his famous *qasida*, there were objections and Amir Minar quoted a *qasida* from Ghalib in defence of Mohsin's piece. When you read this defence, the *qasida* by Mohsin, and Mohsin's own defending piece in verse together with the *qasida* by Ghalib which is cited in support, you become convinced that although Mohsin's *qasida* mentions *gopi* and Krishna and Gokul explicitly, something that Ghalib never does anywhere in his work, it is Ghalib who is in touch with the lexicology and not Mohsin or his defender. With the exit of Ghalib, the *ma'shuq* also exited the Urdu poetry.

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