

## Five (or More) Ways for a Poet to Imitate Other Poets, *or* Imitation in Sabk-i Hindi

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A poet ought not to pick nature's pocket: let him borrow, and so borrow as to repay in the very act of borrowing.

*Coleridge: Table Talk*<sup>1</sup>

I must confess that the thought of imitating another poet, however venerable, would have been repugnant to the Indo-Persian poet, and I am not being fair to the tradition in using the term Imitation in the context of the fiercely contested arena of *taza go'i* (uttering the new) or *javab go'i* (replying) and many similar terms exemplifying the activity of "making it new" that characterizes the landscape of sabk-i hindi poetry. Paul Losensky has bravely used "imitation" throughout his excellent book, and especially in chapters 3 and 6 (pages 100-133 and 250-313).<sup>2</sup> It is not so much

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<sup>1</sup> Specimens of the Table Talk of Samuel Taylor Coleridge, London, John Murray, 1851, p. 112.

<sup>2</sup> Paul Losensky, *Welcoming Fighani, Imitation and Poetic Individuality in the Safavid-Mughal Ghazal*, Costa Mesa, CA, 1998.

that "Imitation" misses the point as that if it is the Aristotelian *mimesis*, it is a different thing altogether, and more importantly, it issues from entirely different philosophical premises, and if it is common or garden *imitation*, it doesn't even begin to explain the phenomenon under investigation. I use the term "Imitation" under duress, so to speak, because "Plagiarism" would give the false impression that there was large scale "theft" of various kinds going on in the poetry and I wanted to play detective.

So let me begin by saying that plagiarism, as understood in Western poetics, has never been much of an issue in Persian poetry. Doubtless, it begins to be talked about more from the second half of the sixteenth century, that is, from the time of the rise of sabk-i hindi. But the reason for it lies mainly in the discovery that *ma'ni* (meaning) and *mazmun* (theme) can be two different things. It therefore follows that a poem may *say* something (that is, have a *mazmun*), but *mean* something else. This was known in Sanskrit literary theory and was in fact a commonplace since Mammata explained the ideas of Anandvardhan on the subject of the meaning in a poetic or dramatic utterance<sup>3</sup>. Thus if many meanings could arise from one *mazmun*, it was obvious that this could happen only when the same *mazmun* was used in different ways, or was made new by addition, alteration, or shift of emphasis. This development in Persian literary theory, not necessarily conscious or deliberate, led the poets to seek and discover new worlds of bold metaphorising.

Classical Arab literary theorists, and following them, the Iranians did not use the term *ma'ni* to mean the same thing as "meaning", although this is the translation of *ma'ni* that we most often encounter in modern texts. For ancient Arabs and Iranians, *ma'ni* meant the content of the poem, in the literal sense of "that which is intended to be expressed or communicated". By the end of the seventeenth century, the meaning of *ma'ni* had evolved in Indo-Persian to be synonymous with the theme, or the *mazmun*, of the poem. Tek Chand Bahar (d. 1766) who finished his great dictionary *Bahar-e Ajam* around 1752, said no more about *ma'ni* than that it was the synonym of *mazmun*<sup>4</sup>.

This apparently innocent entry signals a great fact: a poem contained two things, one was its *ma'ni*, also called *mazmun*, and the other was what the poem signified, or, what the *mazmun* meant. Though with characteristic pre-modern love of old tools the

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<sup>3</sup> For a good though brief discussion of this in the context of Anandvardhan's term *dhvani* (suggestion), see Tzvetan Todorov, *Symbolism and Interpretation*, trs. Catherine Porter, Ithaca, Cornell University Press, 1982, pp. 12-13, p. 27.

<sup>4</sup> Tek Chand Bahar, *Bahar-e Ajam*, Vol. II, Delhi, Matba'-e Siraji, 1865/66, p. 614.

Indians didn't encourage the emergence of new terms, and no new term was therefore coined or introduced to denote the "meaning" of a poem in our sense of the word, phrases like *ma'ni yab* (finder of [new] meanings or *mazmuns*), *ma'ni afirin* (creator of [new] meanings), *m'ni band* or *mazmun afirin* (composer or creator of [new] *mazmuns*) began commonly to be used while describing or introducing some poets in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries.

A cursory examination of two of the most representative and popular tazkiras of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries<sup>5</sup> yields many such terms, or words, used about the "new" poets. I give a sampling here below:

*Sahib-e talash* (seeker[and finder of new *mazmuns*])

*Sukhan az 'alam-e khiyal* (poetry based on, or derived from [abstract] thought

*Mazamin-e taza* (new *mazmuns* or *mazmuns* having the quality of freshness)

*Ma'ni ha'i ghariba* (rare and unfamiliar *mazmuns*)

*Mazamin afirini* (creation of [new] *mazmuns*)

*Ma'ni afirini* (creation of [new] meanings)

*Khiyal bandi* (composing [poems based on abstract] thought

*Ma'ni yab* (finder of [new] meanings or *mazmuns*)

*Mazamin-e taza wa ma'ni-e jadid* (new themes and new meanings)

The fact that these terms were not used indiscriminately, but were used for only a certain type of poet shows that they weren't just buzz words, devoid of real content, but had some force of theory.

Although the agonistic environment encouraged by the orality or semi-orality of the poetry must be one of the causes, it is obvious that positions in the field of poem-making in the seventeenth and eighteenth century were sites of contestation: the search for new *mazmuns* and the effort to endow the poetic utterance with new meanings encouraged disputations, claims and counter claims, "corrections" or emendations offered by a listener, any listener, or rival, and complaints by poets that others stole their *mazmuns*:

*My peers took my verses*

*A hundred thanks to God,  
they didn't take my name*<sup>6</sup>.

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<sup>5</sup> Muhammad Afzal Sarkhush (1640-1714), *Kalimatush Shu'ara* (finished 1682, with minor additions made up to 1703), ed. Sadiq Ali Dilavari, Lahore, Shaikh Mubarak Ali, n.d., [circa 1942]; Kishan Chand Ikhlās (d. 1748/54), *Hamesha Bahar* (1719), ed. Waheed Quraishi, Karachi, Anjuman Taraqqi-e Urdu, 1973.

<sup>6</sup> Ghani, Mulla Muhammad Tahir Kashmiri, *Divan-e Ghani*, Eds., Ali Javad Zaidi and Muhammad Amin Darab Kashmiri, Srinagar, Jammu & Kashmir Academy of Arts, Culture, and Languages, 1964, p. 165.

Thus Ghani Kashmiri (d. 1666), a poet who commanded respect and admiration from Indian and Iranian alike, and about whom Ikhlas says, "To this day, there hasn't been a *mazmun* composing (*ma'ni band*) poet like him from that heart-pleasing territory [Kashmir], and in fact none like him has come out of the whole of India"<sup>7</sup>. Kalim Kashani (d. 1651), perhaps greatest of *mazmun afirin* poets, whom Siddiq Hasan Khan describes as being known by the title *khallaq-ul ma'ani* (God-like creator of *mazmuns*)<sup>8</sup> must also have at some time felt the pinch of the accuser's finger, for he said:

*How can I take the themes of another  
When in my creed  
Redepicting my own themes is thievery*<sup>9</sup>?

The earliest and perhaps the most authoritative pronouncement about *saraqa* (plagiarism) in Persian literary theory is by Shams-i Qais-i Razi in his *Al-Mu'jam fi Ma'air-i Ash'ar-il 'Ajam* (1220/1221). Razi devotes a longish chapter to the subject, saying, "It must be understood that plagiarisms in poetry are of four types: *intihal* (falsely attributing to oneself the words of another), and *salkh* (to skin or flay an animal; to take off someone's clothes), and *ilmam* (approaching or becoming close to something), and *naql* (transferring or transporting)"<sup>10</sup>.

It should seem that in spite of the plethora of examples that Razi provides, his distinctions of various types of plagiarism don't really enlighten the inquirer for they are either too subtle (like his four technical names) or too plain. However, when he wraps up his discussion he delivers opinions or judgements that are seminal. Listen to his first opinion:

And those who are the true masters of the reality [of the art of rhetoric] have said that if a poet finds a theme [*ma'ni* or *mazmun*] but clothes it in the raiment of disagreeable language and expresses it in shallow and flimsy words, and then another poet picks up that very theme and puts it out in pleasing and desirable language, he shows himself superior by that act and that particular theme becomes his property and for the one who went before is the credit for being the first.<sup>11</sup>

So finding a good *mazmun* doesn't do for the poet unless he also finds language appropriate to it. This grants the poet the right to

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<sup>7</sup> Ikhlas, p. 177.

<sup>8</sup> Navab Siddiq Hasan Khan, *Sham'-e Anjuman*, Bhopal, Ra'is-ul Matabe', 1876, p. 402.

<sup>9</sup> Kalim Kashani, in Shams Langrudi's selections from Kalim appended to *Gird Bad-i Shor-i Junun*, Tehran, Nashr Markaz, 1372 (=1993), p. 180.

<sup>10</sup> Shams-i Qais-i Razi, *Al-Mu'jam fi Ma'air-i Ash'ar-il 'Ajam*, ed. Muhammad bin 'Abd-ul Wahhab Qazvini, with corrections to the mss by Mudarris Rizvi, Tehran, Kitab Faroshi-e Zavvar, 3<sup>rd</sup> printing, 1360(=1981), p. 464.

<sup>11</sup> *Al-Mu'jam*, p. 475.

make use of what he himself may not have found by his own diligence. This also seems to put *mazmun afirini* at a bit of a discount, though the poet who first discovered the *mazmun* still gets some credit. But a more important principle is being established here: it's possible to find new *mazmuns*. Razi elaborates:

And if the second poet [who lifts the *mazmun* of the first] does not provide an addition or a supplement to the *mazmun* of the first one in such a way as to enhance its elegance, and does not clothe it in the dress of a language more expressive and sweeter, then he is a thief of *mazmuns*.<sup>12</sup>

It must be noted here that Razi doesn't make this principle dependent upon the bad quality of the *mazmun*. Any *mazmun* can be improved upon, or added to, or enhanced. This at least seems to have been the belief of the sabk-i hindi poets. And it is clear that Razi's formulation provides the theoretical underpinning to the seventeenth and eighteenth century practice of *javab* (reply) common among sabk-i hindi poets. To be sure, this *javab*-writing is different from the *javab go'i* (composing a reply) or *istiqlal* (going forward, welcoming) so ably explored by Paul Losensky. The *javab* here was in the context of a single she'r.

The term *tavarud* (occurring at the same time, or coincidentally) had been coined by Arab theorists who did not see much wrong in a poet using another's *mazmun* so long as it could not be shown that that the borrowing poet had striven hard but was unable to go beyond his model. They said that poets working in the same literary tradition were bound to stumble upon same, or similar themes. Shams-i Qais-i Razi took a different position and did not consider *tavarud* as a possible category. As we have seen, he was inclined toward a juridically stern view of such literary transactions as suggested borrowing or copying. Later theorists, however, concerned themselves with the question of coincidence, and the best statement on *tavarud* was perhaps made by the sabk-i hindi poet and scholar Ghulam Ali Azad Bilgrami (1705-1785) in his *Sarv-i Azad*. Quoting a number of instances from important sabk-i hindi poets of possible *saraqah* or plain *tavarud*, Bilgrami said:

Were one to look with the eye of diligence, there won't be found a poet who could be said to be free of *tavarud*. For the store of all information is particular to God's knowledge [of things], great are His tasks. The theme-depicter's pen shoots an arrow in the dark. What does the pen know if the prey [that its arrow shot] was already bound in wing and feather, or if it was flying free?<sup>13</sup>

Let's look at an example or two from Azad before going on to

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<sup>12</sup> *Al-Mu'jam*, p. 476.

<sup>13</sup> Ghulam Ali Azad Bilgrami, *Sarv-i Azad, being the second fascicle of Ma'asir'ul Kiram* [1752], Hyderabad, Kutub Khana-e Asifiya, 1913, p. 69.

other matters. He quotes Muhammad Quli Salim(d. 1657), a great finder of new and himself reputed to make free of others' *mazmuns*. In this she'r, he protests against Sa'ib Tabrizi (1601-1669):

*Whose divan, oh Salim!  
Is free of my utterances?It's not only  
at Sa'ib's hands that I suffered  
such cruel treatment.*

Azad comments:

Salim has openly specified Mirza Sa'ib's name. Yet those of mature vision are aware that Mirza Sa'ib possesses great command [over *mazmuns*] and has a sufficiency of capability. Far be it from him that he should practice taking and pulling and make another's property his source or stock in trade.

Azad now gives examples from Salim and Sa'ib, and also Ghani, and the examples are so telling that one can't decide who took from whom:

*The maid who performs your toilette  
Is turned insane by your beauty:  
She imagines that the mirror is not a mirror  
But a house for peris.*

(Salim)

*Your fiery eye  
turns the heart insane;  
Your face  
turns the mirror into a house of the peris.*

(Sa'ib)

*Whoever looked you in the face  
became insane; the mirror, reflecting your face  
became a house of peris.*

(Ghani)<sup>14</sup>

Azad goes on to quote Kalim Kashani whom we saw above as having been accused of *saraqa*, to say that *tavarud* is impossible to avoid. Kalim says:

*Since my hand reaches up  
to God's generous table, I do not cast my eye  
on what the beggar has  
in his begging bowl. But  
I do not know what to do about tavarud,  
Except that I shouldn't let my tongue  
ever know an act of poetic utterance<sup>15</sup>.*

It seems obvious that in citing these she'rs Azad Bilgrami is stretching the definition of *tavarud* to mean what a Western critic would now describe as an echo from another work. Also, within the sabk-i hindi tradition, the examples quoted by Bilgrami would very

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<sup>14</sup> *Sarv-i Azad*, pp. 67-68.

<sup>15</sup> *Sarv-i Azad*, pp. 69-70.

well fit into the category of *javab* (reply), of which more later. Bilgrami, however, firmly believes in the long arm of coincidence and goes on to quote verses from Persian which have an exact parallel in Arabic. He then observes in some exasperation:

Granted that a poet could have put together all the divans of poetry in his own language. But what could he do about the divans in other languages? And it's extremely rare for someone to join several different languages in himself.<sup>16</sup>

Independently of Azad Bilgrami, Kishan Chand Ikhlas makes the same point with some degree of heat. He said that nowadays everybody composes the *mazmuns* of the older poets but has claims to *mazmun afirini* (creation of new mazmuns), yet:

They don't know that a person is rarely born who doesn't accept anything [from others]. So it's clear that so many fresh *mazmuns* and new themes can't really come to hand.<sup>17</sup>

My feeling is that the incidence of *tavarud* was not so frequent as Bilgrami and Ikhlas make it out to be. Bilgrami, in *Sarv-i Azad* gives but a few scores of sh'ers where *tavarud* seems to have occurred. Considering the amount of poetry that was written in the three centuries of sabk-i hindi's flowering, this is but but a few grains of sand from a wide sea shore. For instance, no one has yet made an accurate estimate of the quantity of Sa'ib's huge output. Bedil also produced as much as Sa'ib's known work. Sarkhush gives a piquant case of *tavarud* involving himself. He says that once he recited the following sh'er of his to Mirza Bedil (1644-1720). Bedil, as we know, was perhaps the greatest poet of sabk-i hindi and a man of prodigious learning:

*Muhammad is one with 'Ali, his closest, and his successor,  
Just as one person may be named "Muhammad Ali".*

Bedil said, "I heard this verse attributed to Mir Hashmati." Sarkhush retorted that Hashmati wasn't the poet to have been such a seeker and finder (*sahib-e talash*). "However, in view of what you say, I hereby withdraw my claim to it. God will reward both of us."<sup>18</sup>

By the time Azad Bilgrami wrote his *Sarv-i Azad*, the categories established by Shams-i Qais-i Razi were all but buried in text books. The new reclassifications of *saraqqa* that were more or less established by Azad's time reflected the creative urge of sabk-i hindi better than the tenuous if subtle distinctions made by Razi. Plagiarism (*saraqqa*) was of course the most heinous of sins, but what followed gave more latitude to the poet's creativity. Coincidence (*tavarud*) was next to *saraqqa*, then came *tarjama* (translation) and excerpt (*iqtibas*). Azad Bilgrami uses the more familiar term *tazmin*

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<sup>16</sup> *Sarv-i Azad*, p. 75.

<sup>17</sup> Ikhlas, p. 128.

<sup>18</sup> Sarkhush, p. 19 n.

(including one thing in another) for excerpt, though in some cases the term *tazmin* wouldn't very well fit the case. Last came *javab* which meant one poet's reply to, or improvement upon another's she'r.

It should be obvious that the practice of replying to a she'r at once implied that the reply-giver, however obscure a poet he might be, was equal, if not superior to the poet whose she'r he was replying to. The practice of *javab* also protected a poet from the charge of plagiarism. Another thing implied by both excerpting or replying to a she'r was that the audience would at once know which she'r, and whose, was being quoted from or being replied to. In excerpting, poets would also sometimes mention the name of the poet being excerpted, but it wasn't universal and it wasn't also common for poets to say whose she'r and which she'r they were making a reply to. The audience or the reader was expected to know, and in most cases, *javab* occurred in poets' assemblies or friendly meetings where the atmosphere wasn't too formal.

In his entry on Imamuddin Riazi who was a mathematician and occasional poet, Ikhlas writes about a famous opening verse (*matla'*) of Talib Amuli's which had defied all poets' efforts to construct its *javab*:

*By her body she makes the flowers  
painted on the bed sheet give out fragrance;  
By her footstep she awakens  
The sleeping figures woven in the carpet.*

Ikhlas says that when this was reported to Riazi, he promptly composed the following:

*Every thread in the sheet  
was turned into veins of flower-petals  
by that rose-faced one.  
This thought turned into scars  
The flowers on the carpet's breast.<sup>19</sup>*

Another favourite way of giving *javab* was to correct somebody else's she'r or to change a word or two in it and appropriate it as one's own. This was called *tasarruf* (appropriating, or taking possession). Here again, the poet doing the correction or effecting *tasarruf* need not have been a more respected master than the poet whose verse was the target of correction or appropriation. Sarkhush reports on a she'r of Nasir Ali Sarhindi (d. 1696/97):

*The thought of my solitude and friendlessness  
Made her think of loyalty.  
Instead of a candle she brought her heart  
at my grave and burnt it.*

Sarkhush says "To bring the heart and then burn it was a trifle odd and vexatious." Muhammad Sa'id I'jaz, a comparatively obscure poet, made the following appropriation:

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<sup>19</sup> Ikhlas, pp.90-91.



*Instead of a candle, my beloved's heart  
Burnt at my grave.<sup>20</sup>*

Sarkhush notes many interesting examples of correction (*islah*). For instance, he reports that Sa'ib recited before Mir Mu'izzi the following she'r in praise of a building:

*Just as the floret riding  
the shoulder of the rose finds  
its dress too tight, the painted silk  
of the sky finds itself short and tight  
before the grandeur of this building.*

Mir Mu'izzi said to Sarkhush that he pointed out to Sa'ib a serious flaw in the first line (*misra'*), and Sa'ib agreed with Mu'izzi after a lot of thought and hesitation. Sarkhush removed the flaw extemporaneously and recited:

*Just as the unopened bud finds its dress too tight,  
So the painted silk  
of the sky finds itself short and tight  
before the grandeur of this building.*

According to Sarkhush, the correction made by him found approval from Mu'izzi.<sup>21</sup>

Perhaps the most remarkable instance of appropriation, or reply, involves the first she'r of the great Nizami's (1140-1207) masnavi *Makhzan-ul Asrar* (1174). The verse is also a miracle of *tazmin* or excerpting (*iqtibas*):

*In the name of Allah, Most Gracious, Most Merciful.<sup>22</sup>  
This verse is the key  
To the Door of the treasure of the Most Wise.<sup>23</sup>*

The popularity of this she'r in Indo-Muslim culture can be judged by the fact that I learnt it as a nine or ten year-old and never forgot it. Its metre is not of the easiest, and certainly not common in Urdu, my mother tongue. However, for a hundred years it remained just a remarkable she'r, and of course extremely suited as the opening for a long poem dealing with philosophical themes. It was only when the Indian poets came on the scene that the she'r was perceived as a prize to be emulated. Hamid Hasan Qadiri quotes Amir Khusrau (1253-1325) as the first one to make a reply, but Khusrau couldn't go the whole way because he inverted the sequence of the *misra's*:

*It's the speech of pure sanctity  
In the Land of Eternity:  
In the name of Allah, Most Gracious, Most Merciful.<sup>24</sup>*

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<sup>20</sup> Sarkhush, p. 6.

<sup>21</sup> Sarkhush, p. 98.

<sup>22</sup> This is, in Abdullah Yusuf Ali's translation, the first and arguably the most famous and most recited verse of the Qur'an: *bismillah al-rahman al-rahim*.

<sup>23</sup> Nizami Ganjavi, *Kulliyat*, ed. Dr. Mu'in Far, Tehran, Intisharat-e Zarrin, p.1 (of text).

Many others followed suit, Qadiri says that he has collected sixty examples from thirty-three poets.<sup>25</sup> He has a high opinion of Jamaluddin Urfi Shirazi (1554-1590/92?) who composed his own masnavi *Majma'-ul Abkar* in the metre of *Makhzan-ul Asrar* and at the head of the section containing his masnavis, threw an open challenge to the past master and the present reader:

*Urfi gives the call for fine speech,  
What are you doing, sleeping  
at Nizami's grave?  
Nizami conjoined with the bride of poetry  
But it was I who provided his bride-dower.*<sup>26</sup>

Urfi then commenced his *Majma'-ul Abkar* with the following verse:

*In the name of Allah, Most Gracious, Most Merciful:  
This verse is  
The first wave from the Ocean of Eternity.*<sup>27</sup>

It's not a very good reply, for eternity has no beginning and no end, so there can't be a "first wave" in the ocean called "eternity". Azad Bilgrami has a different objection to it. He says that *madd* (high tide) instead of *mauj* (wave) would have been more suitable. He then says that I too have composed a misra' to go with *bismillah* but Shaikh Nizami claims the reed of excellence in all such misra's.<sup>28</sup>

Before I discuss Bilgrami's contribution, I must notice some others quoted by Qadiri, and also Ali Akbar Dekhoda who has fifteen such in his *Lughat Name*<sup>29</sup>. All of Dekhoda's examples seem from Indian poets and are drawn from *Tazkira-e Haft Asman* compiled by Maulavi Zulfiqar Ali who has identified the authors of only three misra's, but all of them are obscure writers and most of the misra's don't have much to recommend them. While some are common between Qadiri and Dekhoda, the former's christomathy consists generally of better examples. He admires the efforts of both Urfi and Faizi (1547-1595) though Faizi seems to replying more to Urfi than Nizami:

*It's the eternal mystic that encloses  
The Treasure of Eternity-without-beginning:  
In the name of Allah, Most Gracious, Most Merciful.*<sup>30</sup>

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<sup>24</sup> Hamid Hasan Qadiri, *Navadir-e Muntakhaba*, published by Afzalur Rahman, New Delhi, 2006, p. 151.

<sup>25</sup> Qadiri, p. 150.

<sup>26</sup> Urfi Shirazi, *Kulliyat, Vol. II*, ed. Wali-ul Haq Ansari, Tehran, Tehran University Press, 1378 (1999), p. 100.

<sup>27</sup> Urfi Shirazi, *Kulliyat, Vol. II*, p. 158.

<sup>28</sup> Ghulam Ali Azad Bilgrami, *Khizana-e 'Amira*, [1757-8], Kanpur, Nawal Kishor Press, 1871, p. 319.

<sup>29</sup> CDROM published by Tehran University, entry *Bismillah al-rahman al-rahim*.

<sup>30</sup> Qadiri, p. 151.

Qadiri has entered the lists with an example of his own making. (So have I, for that matter.) He seems to have missed out on Mulla Shaida (d. betw. 1637-1647), Indian wit, poet and courtier who said:

*In the name of Allah, Most Gracious, Most Merciful:  
This verse has come to us  
As the source of God's munificence  
That extends to all.*<sup>31</sup>

Correction is also a kind of appropriation, and appropriation is a way of reply: you couldn't handle your *mazmun* the way it deserves. So I have done *tasarruf* (appropriation) where needed and made your she'r my own. Sometimes poets accepted the correction with good grace. Sometimes some other poet replied on their behalf. It's doubtful if the arrogant Urfi would have accepted Azad's correction, but he certainly wouldn't approve Azad's own contribution:

*In the name of Allah, Most Gracious, Most Merciful:  
It is the  
Black-tempered sword of the benevolent Prophet.*<sup>32</sup>

No doubt *Bismillah* can be imagined as a sword, for the Qur'anic verse, calligraphed in black ink can be made to look like a sword. And the sword can be imagined being wielded by the Prophet to eradicate the worship of multiple gods against the One True God. Still the *mazmun* takes us nowhere near Nizami, and in any case the image of the benevolent Prophet doesn't go happily with a sword, however metaphorical.

Ikhlas has an anecdote about Mirza Shah Husain Munasib, a poet of some distinction. Munasib once recited before his friends the following:

*The rose opens herself to the bulbul, by stages;  
The new bride comes out of her veil, slowly.*

A Hindu clerk of Munasib's who had had no training at all in the art of poetry, made the objection that since the rose, in order to be a rose is already in blossom, so the rose opening itself by stages is improper: it was better to have said *ghuncha* (bud) instead of *gul* (rose). Everyone present liked the idea and the misra' was changed, as follows:

*The bud opens herself to the bulbul, by stages*<sup>33</sup>

Ikhlas doesn't say who exactly made the correction. It was not just a matter of changing *gul* for *ghuncha*. The two words do not have the same metrical value, so a simple substitution would not do. Rewriting half the line was necessary. Perhaps it was the unnamed

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<sup>31</sup> Ikhlas, p. 122.

<sup>32</sup> Azad, *Khizana-e 'Amira*, p. 319.

<sup>33</sup> Ikhlas, p. 236.

clerk, or perhaps it was one or more of those present, for in such situations poem making could be a collective exercise.

Correction didn't always have such happy results. It is Ikhlas again who reports: an old man, and an old friend of Nasir Ali Sarhindi, who (Ikhlas says) must remain unnamed, made appropriation in the opening verse of a masnavi by Nasir Ali. The original she'r was:

*Drop, oh God, a particle-worth  
of pain in my soul; infuse  
A spark in the cotton-field  
of my bones.*

Nasir Ali's friend objected that while the bone is hard, cotton is soft, so bones could not be compared to cotton. The friend apparently did not know that *pamba kardan* (to turn into cotton) means "to soften". Anyway, word reached Sarkhush of the *tasarruf* which was as follows:

*Drop, oh God, a particle-worth  
of pain in my soul; insert  
A spark in the cotton-field of my hair.*

Sarkhush wrote a scorching reply of which here are three she'rs:

*When I heard him say these words,  
I laughed in his face like the rose and said,  
Friend, why should you pray to God to fulfil  
your need? Even I can do this little thing  
that I should light up a handful of hay  
and burn away your head of hair and your beard.<sup>34</sup>*

Those must have been exciting times for a poet to be in: Nasir Ali Sarhindi being sniped at by a nobody and the sniper being castigated by Muhammad Afzal Sarkhush. Poetry counted for a lot in those days.

Shamsur Rahman Faruqi  
Allahabad, 11 May 2008

#### **Author's Note**

All translations from Persian have been made by me.  
I thank Professor Asif Naim Siddiqi for letting me have access to some key texts cited in this paper.

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<sup>34</sup> Ikhlas, pp. 164-165.

Five (or More) Ways for a Poet to Imitate Other Poets, *or* , Imitation in Sabk-i Hindi  
by Shamsur Rahman Faruqi