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► **To cite this version:**

Anne Castaing. Vernacularizing Rubaiyat: the Politics of Madhushala in the context of the Indian Nationalism. Asghar Seyed-Gohrab. The Great Umar Khayyam. A Global Reception of the Rubaiyat., Leiden University Press, pp.215-232, 2012, 9789087281571. hal-01990835

HAL Id: hal-01990835

<https://hal.science/hal-01990835>

Submitted on 1 Feb 2019

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Vernacularizing Rubaiyat: the Politics of Madhushala in the context of the Indian Nationalism

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In the early 1930s, when the young Hindi poet Harivansh Rai Bacchan (1907-2003) recited for the first time, and before stupefied assemblies, the quatrains that were soon to be published as the collection *Madhuśālā* (“The house of wine,” 1935), the thundering repercussions of this amazing text were already obvious. Histories of literature have noted that its publication created a mass infatuation¹, favoured by the holding of public recitations (kavi sammelan), which the verses’ musicality encouraged. Legends and anecdotes surround this publication, and the poet himself has recounted his stupefaction at the popular success of the poems, which he could hear on everyone’s lips.² The collection, which narrates the existential itinerary of man portrayed as a drinker, welcomed by a warm house of wine, indeed encourages a hedonist representation of life, glorifying intoxication and the enchantment of beauty, nature, sensuality, art and of course poetry. The romantic aura which surrounds the collection, published in a literary context inherited from both Rabindranath Tagore and John Keats, sets it up as a sanctified idol in a way that could obscure the collection’s historical and political discourse.

Reading a much-commented text such as *Madhuśālā* raises questions about the way literature is rooted, or declared to be rooted or non-rooted, in its context and how it actively or passively, explicitly or implicitly, participates in the great nodes and debates of its immediate historical setting. Given the collection’s obviously extemporal and oneiric character, parallels with the nationalist struggle that characterises India in the 1930s may seem unlikely, but this paper aims at questioning the historicity of literature beyond its explicit discourses and contents, and at illuminating the ideological strategies at work within the poetics themselves.

Madhuśālā ‘s poetical itinerary

Composed of 135 quatrains whose rhyme follows an “aaba” structure, the collection’s originality lies in the fact that every stanza ends with the term *Madhuśālā* (“House of wine”), defining /ālā/ as a unique, omnipresent and persistent rhyme. This rhyme thus elaborates the collection’s poetic universe around a set of elements: *pyālā* (“cup”), *hālā* (“wine”), *madhubālā/saqibālā* (“maid”), *pīnevālā* (“drinker”), *matvālā* (“intoxicated”). The first stanza, for example:

*mRdu bhāvom ke angurom kī
āj banā lāyā hālā
priyatam, apne hī hāthom se
āj pilāūmgā pyālā ;
pahale bhog lagā lūm terā
phir prasād jag pāegā ;
sabse pahale terā svagat
kartī merī Madhuśālā*³.

Distilled from all my hopes and dreams,
This wine is yours, my Dearest Dear;

To you I proffer now the Cup
Unsullied, and the liquor clear;
Before it goes to every nation,
You, Goddess, taste my first libation;
My House of Wine shall honour you
Before the thirsty crowd draws near.⁴

Moreover, in most of the stanzas (76 out of 135), the rhyme is defined by a thematic couple closing the first and the second distich, *hālā* and *pyālā*, focusing on wine and its containers (The House, the Cup):

hāthom mem āne se pahale
nāz dikhāegā pyālā,
adharom par āne se pahale
adā dikhaegī hālā,
bahutere inkār karega
sāqī ane se pahale;
pathik, na ghabrā jānā, pahale
*mān karegī Madhuśālā.*⁵

Reluctantly the Cup will come
Into your hands, and at the brink
All woman-like, the Wine retreats
Before the longing lips may drink
Often before she tilts the vial
The Saki mocks with soft denial;
Be not surprised, O traveller,
When House and Handmaid seem to shrink.
(St. 13)

In other cases, one of the two terms may be present (as in 44 stanzas), or replaced by another element referring to wine and intoxication: *sāqībālā* in 12 stanzas; *pīnevālā* in 9 stanzas; *matvālā* in 13 stanzas; *javālā* (“flame”) in 7 stanzas. Finally, in 7 stanzas, the term *mālā* (“garland”) can certainly not be assimilated to bacchanal symbolism, but underlines the poet’s heuristic agenda regarding the combination of the required elements composing the poetical creation. This “garland” indeed consists of a set of ornaments composed of symbolic as well as prosodic elements, which establish the “flavour” of the poem’s cathartic effect.⁶ This double orientation, which articulates wine with poetic creation, underlines the originality of the collection’s theme and “itinerary”. If the title itself defines the praise of intoxication as a thematic and aesthetical framework, it is accompanied by the fervor of creativity, which the first stanza literally dramatizes. The collection, as the fruit of distilled inspiration/grapes, is offered to the reader/ drinker in its completed form. The first stanzas indeed present the collection’s symbolic “garland” as well as its prosodic basis, while stanzas 6 to 9 emphasize the drinker’s itinerary as he travels toward the ideal House of Wine. Desire combined with thirst is thus stressed in the first pages (“The House of Wine will soon appear”, St. 8), justifying wine’s omnipresence and polymorphic aspects (“*madhu, madirā, mādak hālā*”, “Wine honeyed, potent, sweet and clear”, St. 8), as well as symbolic and sensorial exultation:

sun, kalkal, chalchal madhughat

*se girtī pyālom mem hālā,
sun, runjhun, runjhun cal
vitaran kartñ madhu sāqībālā;
bas ā pahumce, dūr nahñm kuch,
cār qadam ab caltā hai;
cahak rahe, sun, pīnevāle,
mahak rahe, le, Madhuśālā.*

Listen! the gurgling in the Cups
The sounds of drunken merriment!
The Saki moves to music, shakes
Each tinkling golden ornament.
Now we are near the destination
And hear the merry conversation;
Listen! And now we can perceive
The House of Wine, the drifting scent.
(St. 10)

The auditory emphasis, amplified in Hindi by an accumulation of alliteration and onomatopoeia (*runjhun, runjhun; kalkal; chalchal*), dissociates the destination from its sensual and aesthetical manifestations. Music, colours and dance, as well as nature and beauty, thus concern the highly lyrical next stanzas. Equally lyrical is also the representation of the House as a welcoming, secular and egalitarian (St. 57 & 58) homeland, transcending casts and social or communal discrimination:

*musalmān au' hindū haim do,
ek, magar, unkā pyālā,
ek, magar, unkā madirālay,
ek, magar, unkī hālā;
donom rahte ek na jab tak
masjid-mandir mem jāte ;
bair barhāte masjid-mandir,
mel karātñ Madhuśālā!*

O Muslim, Hindu – faith are two
But one the brimming cup you share;
And one the drinking house, and one
The wine which flows so freely there.
By mosque and temple all's divided,
All is either “mine” of “thine”;
But enmities thus forged are all
Forgotten in the House of Wine.⁷
(St. 50)

Stanza 61 marks a brutal transformation, opening a period of doubts, regrets and bitterness. Facing the uncertain condition of man, the tyranny of Time, the progressive loss of ideals, the bitterness that follows intoxication, the second part of the collection is the long lament of a disenchanted man, who fails to find a way out of his frustrations. Death's omnipresence (St. 76 to 87) is both dramatic and parodic, when the description of funeral rituals leads to ridicule of Hindu religious orthodoxies:

*mere adharom par ho antim
vastu na tulsīdal, pyālā,
merī jihvā par ho antim
vastu na gangājal, hālā,
mere śav ke pñche calnevālo,
yād ise rakhnā –
“rām nām hai satya” na kahnā,
kahnā “saccī Madhuśālā.”*

Not Ganga-water on my tongue
But drops of wine shall bring relief;
Lay on my dying lips at last
The Goblet, not the Tulsi leaf;
Let those who bear me to the pyre
And stand beside my funeral fire
Not chant “Our God alone is great! »
But chant “The House of Wine stands chief! »
(St. 82)

Nevertheless, the collection’s last two stanzas offer a possible redemption within the gift that allows poetical creation:

*bare-bare nāzom se maimne
pālī hai sāqībālā;
kalit kalpanā kā hñ isne
sadā uṭhāyā hai pyālā;
mān-dulārom se hñ rakhnā
is merī sukumārī ko;
viśva, tumhāre hāthom mem ab
saump rahā hūm Madhuśālā.*

I taught the little maid myself,
Adored Her, and with jewels hung
Imagination’s fragile harp
Hangs in Her hands, a lute new-strung;
How world, I leave my House behind,
The architecture of my mind;
I leave my loving little Maid:
Be gentle; She is very young.
(St. 135)

A Khayyāmian palimpsest?

One can certainly not read Madhuśālā without referring to the rubaiyat composed by the twelfth century Persian poet ‘Umar Khayyām, which were in fact translated into Hindi by Bacchan himself. *Umar khayām kī Madhuśālā* (“Omar Khayyām’s House of Wine”) was published a few months before Madhuśālā, and in its title, structure, themes and symbols,

is used as a model for Bacchan's own creation. Initiated as a child to both Sanskrit and Persian, and raised in a bi-cultural and bilingual universe, Bacchan says he "spoke Urdu to his father and Avadhi (the local dialect of Hindi) to his mother."⁸ In his context, Persian as a language and rubaiyat as a form are not exogenous. As the critic Harish Trivedi says, "the rubâi has been used by Indian poets for centuries, not only in Persian but also in Urdu and with original local experimentation and innovation in the bahr or metrical length as well; the form was not only known but had been quite domesticated."⁹ Indeed, eminent Urdu poets such as Mir Taqî Mir (1722-1808) and, more recently, Muhammad Iqbal (1877-1938) and Faiz Ahmed Faiz (1911-1984), have resorted to traditional forms borrowed from the Persian poetic tradition, such as the rubaiyat and ghazal, whose musicality is favourable to public recitations.¹⁰ The poet Firaq Gorakhpuri (1896-1982), one of the Indian "masters" of rubâ <ñyât, defines the Persian quatrain's structure:

The first line should reflect the beauty's perfect brow,
 The second portray the sable locks aglow
 The fourth from the third should thus seem to flow,
 As the greening upper lip from the arched eyebrow¹¹

In addition to the form, the symbols and themes used in Madhusâlâ also explicitly refer to Khayyâm's poetry. Cup, Saqi and Drinker certainly are associated with the praise of intoxication, but they also have a metaphoric value, depending on each stanza's content. Bacchan's House of Wine can be seen as an allegory of poetic creation, homeland, universe, love etc., with wine and intoxication symbolizing the duality of existence, both sweet and bitter. The presentation of this duality is another trait the two poets have in common, as Bacchan re-invents the main themes of Khayyâm's philosophical discourse: the condemnation of orthodoxies, hierarchies and religious idols; the promotion of human existence and bitterness at its ephemeral character; and the promotion of an Epicurean credo. In relation to the poet's opposition to religious orthodoxies, intoxication is seen as a way to overcome the world's illusions, to annihilate categories and hierarchies and condemn religious artifices which obstruct the way to truth. As a matter of fact, Khayyâm writes:

Indeed the idols I have loved so long
 Have done my credit in this world much wrong:
 Have drown'd my Glory in a shallow Cup
 And sold my reputation for a song.
 And this I know; whether the one True Light
 Kindle to Love, or Wrath-consume me quite,
 One Flash of It within the Tavern caught
 Better than in the Temple lost outright.
 (Khayyâm, St. LXXVII¹²)
 And Bacchan follows:

*dharm granth sab jalâ cukî haim
 jiske antar kî jvâlâ,
 mandir, masjid, girje—sabko
 toṛ cukâ jo matvâlâ,
 panšit, momim, pādriom ke
 phandom ko jo kâṭ cukâ,
 kar saktî âj usîkâ*

svāgat merī Madhuśālā.

He who has calcined all the creeds
With fire from his burning breast
Who quits the temple, mosque and church
A drunken heretic, unblest,
Who sees the snares, and now comes running
From Pandit's, Priest's and Mullah's cunning,
He, and he only, shall today
Be in my House a welcome guest.
(*Madhuśālā*, St. 17)

Both poets adopt a nonconformist position, carrying a critical, even blasphemous message. And when Bacchan ridicules the Hindu funeral rituals (St. 82, see above), he draws his inspiration from Khayyām:

Ah, with the grape my fading Life provide,
And wash my body whence the Life has died,
And in a Winding-sheet of Vine-leaf wrapt,
So bury me by some sweet Garden-side.¹³

Bacchan's *Umar khayām kī Madhuśālā* is even more explicit in displaying his inspiration:

Beloved, moisten with wine my lips as they become death-withered
When I die, my dear, bathe my body with wine.
Cover my body with vine-leaves, of which also having made a bed.
Lay me down quietly to sleep by some vinous garden.¹⁴

The rejection of religious schema is accompanied by the promotion of human existence and its constant fluctuation between joy and sadness, hope and despair. Death, suffering, deception, helplessness in the face of the flow of Time, bitterness, are certainly unavoidable as the lot of man: all the more reason to enjoy life's sensuality. Hence this love for wine, whose name is chanted like an idol's:

Go on with endless faith, invoking
[Nectar, liquor, intoxicating Wine]
Believe that in your hand you grasp
The glorious Cup, and do not fear;
Imaginary Wine receiving,
Create the Saki by believing;
Press on, O wayfarer, and then
The House of Wine will soon appear
(Bacchan, St. 8)

And David's lips are lockt; but in divine
High-piping Pehlevi, with "Wine! Wine! Wine!"
"Red Wine" – the Nightingale cries to the Rose
That sallow cheek of hers to incarnadine.
(Khayyām, st. VI)

Hence also his enchantment by beauty, nature and the arts, which are able to root man in an absolute present and thus to overcome the inexorability of Time. Pleasure (O, essence of Delight, writes Khayyām; You drink me up with senses swimming, writes Bacchan) as a way to transcend devastation and loss nurtures both Khayyām’s and Bacchan’s poetry, but regret always underlies the ode of delight, bitterness always underlies the sweet taste of wine:

Whether at Naishapur or Babylon,
Whether the Cup with sweet or bitter run,
The Wine of Life keeps oozing drop by drop,
The Leaves of Life keep falling one by one.
(Khayyām, St. VIII)

Man is a fragile Cup, alas!
Delicate, transient, made of clay,
Full of the fluid bitter-sweet,
The Wine of Life, poured out each day;
With myriad arms, Death, reckoning;
And Time, insatiate Drinker, drinks
The whole created world away.
(Madhusālā, St. 73)

Ah, my beloved fill the Cup that clears
To-day of past Regrets and future Fears:
To-morrow! – Why, To-morrow I may be
Myself with Yesterday’s Sev’n thousand Years.
(Khayyām, St. XXI)

Tomorrow! Those who drink are slow
To trust the concept of Tomorrow!
The hands that lift the Cup today
May soon hang limp in death or sorrow!
We grasp today – today is done –
How shall we trust the not-begun?
Angels of Death may keep this House
Tomorrow, which today you borrow.
(Madhusālā, st. 61)

Indigenizing *Rubāiyāt*: translation, appropriation and cultural “swing”

Beyond a simple parody, H.R. Bacchan undertakes in *Madhusālā* an impressive palimpsest of the architecture of ‘Umar Khayyām’s *Rubāiyāt*, adopting both its form and contents. Written simultaneously with a free “trans-creation” in Hindi of Khayyām’s *Rubāiyāt* in Edward Fitzgerald’s translation (1859), this composition defies all “exogenization” in integrating a cultural context capable of accepting “outsiders”. As Harish Trivedi underlines, if no less than 15 or 19 Hindi translations of Khayyām’s *Rubaiyat* were published between 1930 and 1958, Fitzgerald’s version obviously had an important impact in India. Fitzgerald’s version was quite “romanticized,” matching the extremely positive echo of English Romanticism in India in the 1920s.¹⁵ *Chāyāvād* (“Shadow-ism”), a poetical movement which appeared around the mid 1920’s, is the most convincing example of this resonance. And in some regards,

Madhuśālā is typically Chāyāvād-ian, with its symbolism, highly lyrical descriptions of love, beauty and nature, liberation from traditional form and themes, and domination by an introspective “self” expressing his sensibility and individuality.¹⁶ Despite its originality, *Madhuśālā* appears as a formal and thematic “absorption” of Khayyām’s *Rubāiyāt*.

Furthermore, a close reading of Bacchan’s text throws light on the way the poet derives indigenous cultural references from exogenous cultural references. First, there is the representation of the beloved, which assimilates the thematic and formal bases of the collection (intoxication, wine, quatrains), but also some topoi from Sanskrit classical love poetry, as in stanza 36, where the Saqi is compared to dawn. He uses sophisticated Sanskrit terminology (*uṣā* and *pratah* for “dawn”, *khag* for “birds”, *tārak-mani manṣit* for “star-studded veil”), exclusively metaphorical descriptions, and symbols linked to nature, in a combination which is redolent of the Śringara rasa, the “flavour of Love”. A key concept in Indian classical aesthetics, rasa refers to the cathartic effect of art. Śringara, one of the eight Rasa described by the XIIth Century philosopher Abhinavagupta,¹⁷ refers to the feeling of love as well as eroticism exploited particularly in descriptions of the love games between Lord Krishna and the milkmaid Radha, of which Jayadeva’s Gita Govinda (XIIth Century) is one of the most impressive poetical expressions. Beauty and love, along with passion, expectation and despair, strongly underly a vast and complex symbolic palette composed of natural elements (stars, animals, clouds, water etc.).

Moreover, if symbolic wine refers explicitly to Khayyām’s poetry, the terms used to name it, indigenize it. First, the word *madhu* in the title of the collection can indeed be translated as “wine,” but also as “nectar” and “honey,” which bears a sacred value in the Vedic tradition as representing the nectar of immortality, amrit. This sacred connotation is emphasized by Bacchan himself in the collection’s opening lines, which quote a verse from the Rig Veda, one of the sacred texts of Hindu religion: “Winds are blowing honey for the man faithful to order; rivers are flowing honey. Let the plant be rich in honey for us!¹⁸” *Madhuśālā* is transformed from a den of iniquity to a holy and purifying place. Furthermore, as a bitter element, wine is also designated as *hālāhal* (“Poison”), connoting the *hālāhal* that Lord Shiva drank to save the universe from destruction. Stanza 115 stresses this relationship between wine and the Tantric tradition, when the poet adopts the attributes (begging bowl, poison) of a Shivaite ascetic:

Think not that poison was my choice
Since Wine its ecstasy denies;
I did not take a begging bowl
Lacking a Goblet for a prize;
To roast my heart and heart’s desire
I dwelt beside the funeral pyre;
But look! For there beneath my feet
The House of Wine submissive lies.

If *Madhuśālā* is replaced by the funeral pyre where Shivaite ascetics dwell, fire is crucial in both the Tantric and Vedic traditions, where it purifies as well as redeems.¹⁹ The stanzas embody a sacred ritual, in which fire is sacred and the word, as a prayer, performs. Indeed, in Vedic tradition, as Charles Malamoud underlines, “the sacrificial rituals performed by the gods – and following their example, by humans – can only be fully realized when they are accompanied by the recitation of Vedic mantras.”²⁰

But the mantra, the ‘magical formula’ whose repetition brought about the creation of the universe as described in the Hindu cosmogony, is not the hallowed syllable “Om”, but ālā, this incessant rhyme which permeates the collection as a condensed Madhuśālā. It thus holds a double performative value: *Madhuśālā* is both signifié giving rise to an oneiric world stemming from the poet’s imagination (“Distilled from my hopes and dream”, St. 1), and signifiant, whose acoustic substance, through repetition, impells the creation of a sacred universe.

Consequently, in its lexicon, in its aesthetic codes as well as in its cultural references, Bacchan’s rubaiyat refer in the first place to a Hindu indigenous universe. Despite the mainly thematic similarities between Bacchan and Khayyām’s poetry, the transcreation that Madhuśālā represents proceeds to a referential swing, performed in the various layers of the collection. This “swing” can certainly be justified by the accumulation of translations separating the original from this Hindi version, as well as by the geographical, temporal and linguistic distance between the two collections. Critics may acknowledge Bacchan’s influences, but they should also be sensitive to this swing’s import, in an historical and political context where it can certainly not be insignificant.

Yet, beyond the import of this referential displacement, the collection asserts an explicit ideological position. Could not the few “committed” stanzas, that have been described as “weak” or “didactical,”²¹ be seen as nullifying a reading in terms of *chāyāvād* romanticism alone? In other words, could not this re-appropriation be nurtured by a real political discourse, whose substance stands precisely beyond didacticism?

The idea of a Nation

These “committed” stanzas are indeed reminders of Bacchan’s sympathies with Gandhian action and ideology. In the late 1920’s, in response to Gandhi’s call, Bacchan joined the Nationalist Struggle. After Gandhi’s death, he also published two collections of poems (*Khādī ke phūl* and *Sūt kī mālā*, 1948) as a tribute. Both the “nationalist” and “egalitarian” aspects of Gandhian discourse are conveyed in these stanzas:

There is a precious rich red Wine
Made for a terrible carouse
From those heroic Indian hearts
Victims by patriotic vows;
Now generous the Motherland
Pours out such Wine with either hand;
Freedom is thirsty Kali, and
The altar is a hallowed House.
(St. 45)

None of the drunkards in this House
Stand upon caste or social form;
None says, « My wine is touched! » « My cup
With a polluting touch is warm! »
Here tipsy in the drinking hall
Sit drinking freely great and small;
Here wealth and rank sink drowned in Wine;
My House achieves a great reform.
(St. 57)

Madhusālā was published in a context of cultural and political fervour. The 1930s constituted what historians²² have called the “critical decade” in the Indian nationalist movement, suggesting a huge mobilization of the population in the struggle for independence. In addition to the constant pressure on British rule exerted by political forces (notably the Congress Party which, at the end of the 1920s, called for complete independence for India), the Indian population became massively involved in the non-cooperation movement stimulated by Gandhi. Gandhi had returned to India in 1915, and promoted a mode of struggle initiated in South Africa, called Satyagraha (“the Force of Truth”). Massively followed by the Indian rural population in 1917 and then 1919, this Satyagraha was characterized by “passive resistance” through non-violent actions: violation of “unfair” rules, voluntary arrests, and spectacular marches. Thus, Gandhi became a catalyst in nationalist dynamics. In 1930-1931 and again in 1932-1933, he

played a main role in the movement of civil disobedience: protest marches, boycotts of imported goods, strikes etc. In 1942, Gandhi worked with Jawaharlal Nehru, leader of the Congress Party, to initiate the Quit India Resolution, calling for India’s complete autonomy. However, the years leading up to the country’s independence exacerbated their disagreements concerning the modalities of the country’s governance on the one hand, and the Muslim question on the other. Gandhi presented himself as the defender of a “mixed” nation, refusing the idea of separate electorates for the different religious communities and quotas for minorities. But above all, he was firmly opposed to the creation of Pakistan, a separate state built on a religious basis. He criticized the “solution” proposed by Nehru and the Congress Party, which advocated a severed India with a strong central power rather than the village confederation Gandhi dreamt of by Gandhi.

Indeed, the national ideal defended by the Nationalist Movement was based on unity, despite the composite character of India from a religious, ethnic, cultural and linguistic point of view. The vision of an independent nation as formulated by Nehru was pan-Indian, articulated around a common cause, ideal and culture. The creation of the Muslim League in 1905 and then its call for a separate state sounded the death-knell for such an ideal. It is therefore important to emphasize the ambivalence of the “invention” of the Nation in India. As underlined by the Historian Gyanendra Pandey,²³ India had begun to think itself as a Nation, and the individual as a “citizen,” since the 1920s. In the 19th century, the nationalist answer to colonisation had been formulated by mobilizing an image of the country drawn from Hindu cultural resources, with the ideal of restoring the Golden Age of Great India. The vision and identity of this Hindustan, this magnified India, were exclusively Hindu, excluding Muslims.

In Northern India, this fervour was supported by a common language, Hindi, a purified and standardized version of Khari boli, the lingua franca of North India. In accordance with the formula summing up the construction of Indian identity, “Hindi, Hindu, Hindustan,” all “Persianisms” or “Arabisms” were excluded from the Hindi lexicon, to be replaced by a Sanskrit vocabulary, and the Devanagari script was adopted while Urdu, its Muslim equivalent, adopted the Arabic alphabet. Hindi was standardized through the creation of grammars, journals, newspapers and fictions, which aimed at conveying the new language of the Hindu nation. However it was not yet a language of literature. As a paradox, the constitution of a Panindian identity found its roots in an affirmation of the communalism that the political mobilizations sought to erase.

Many studies on Hindi literature in the late 19th century and the early 20th century have revealed the transformations occurring within its internal stakes and ideals.²⁴ At that time, North India saw an attempt to formulate and communicate a definition of a national language and culture, as seen for example in the very popular collection *Bhārat Bhāratī* (1912) written by Maithili Sharan Gupta. While confirming the poetical value of the Hindi language, the collection glorifies ancient India and presents a reformist ideal for modern India, which was to be extricated from the dark colonial era. During these first decades, the agenda of a “committed literature” was to denounce colonial abuses. The novelist Premchand, considered as one of the main figures of Hindi fiction, prepared the ground for an anti-British literature, a vehicle for Gandhian ideals, which denounced colonial, social and caste abuses and glorified humane qualities opposed to greed and corruption, in the context of oppressed peasants. Gandhism, Marxism and Nationalism played a key role in Hindi literature in the 1920s and 1930s.

Nevertheless, it is essential to situate literary commitments beyond the superficial layers, beyond patriotic or egalitarian themes. In *Madhuśālā*, the few committed stanzas do not in themselves explain the collection’s political substance and, above all, its impact. This impact results rather from the referential displacement, from the paradoxes and strangeness it contains.

First, the collection’s lexicon aims at erasing communal distinctions, when the gulf between Hindi and Urdu was exacerbating them.²⁵ While the collection contains a strong Sanskrit element (as in St. 36), it also uses a significant number of Arabic and Persian terms. In addition to the often repeated *sāqī*, some terms such as *momim* or *masjid* (St. 17) are highly connoted. This cohabitation is not incongruous, it is natural in Hindi in both speech and in literature.²⁶ This is what the synonyms in the collection show: a Sanskrit term meets its Persian or Arabic equivalent, belonging either to a literary or a colloquial level: “intoxication” can be either *mādaktā* (Sanskrit) or *mastī* (Persian); “world” may be either *viśva* (Sk) or *duniyā* (Arabic); “fate” is either *bhāgya* (Sk) or *qismat* (P); “desire” is either *abhilāṣā* (Sk) or *armān* (P); “mad” is either *madmātā* (Sk) or *dīvanā* (P). A stanza may contain a double lexicon: both *himmat* (P) and *sāhas* (Sk) designate “courage” in st. 7, and *bhāgya* and *qismat* are “fate” in st. 98.

Similarly, the Hindu traditions evoked in the collection counterbalance the Arabo-Persian tradition that is also present. Stanza 13, cited above, (p XX) which draws on the stereotypes of Persian classical love poetry, seems to be answered by Stanza 36. The wandering yogi ascetic, represented by symbols referring to Tantrism (*khappar*, fire and the funeral pyre) is also present as a Qalandar, the mad and drunk vagrant Sufi ascetic progressing towards Union with the divine spirit, abundantly described by Persian Sufi poetry.²⁷ While the drinker is “intoxicated” (*mastī*), and looking for his sheikh, he is also making progress through the repetition of a sacred phrase, his personal Zikr formula. The poet thus emphasizes the similarities between the two traditions, in which the repetition of a sacred word is a means of achieving transcendence.

However frequent the cultural references can be, they are never explicit or repeated enough to refer to a precise and defined tradition. The juxtapositions of the two traditions might appear too trivial to ground a reading upon. But in the South Asian cultural context, the proximity of traditions is imposed by an historical fact: the Muslim ruling during more than two centuries, which induced an indigenization of exogenous characteristics and the composition of hybrid traditions.²⁸ Through the diversity of his references and through these parallelisms, the poet

points to the inter-penetrations of traditions, refusing to marginalize Muslim culture, but rather acknowledging it as deeply “indigenous”, as deeply Indian. Bacchan’s poetry is the fruit of an imagination which is both indigenous and multi-cultural, thus defending the idea of a composite and fraternal nation. This fraternalism though goes beyond the simple religious segmentations: all segmentations and hierarchies are rejected, as shown in stanza 17 which presents the reforming drinker as a “heretic.” Khayyām’s humanist discourse, which denounces orthodoxies and religious artifices, finds an echo in Gandhian discourse which rejects the distinction between popular and high culture. The “dramatization” of *Madhuśālā*’s publication, and its promotion through recitations before large popular audiences “intoxicated” by poetry, proudly described by the poet in his autobiography and in the collection’s preface,²⁹ indicate that Bacchan’s agenda was to popularize what was traditionally considered an elitist culture, that is Persian poetry.

Similarly, the multiple references to Vedism are not promoting a sacred and reserved Hindu tradition. Deconstructing the myth of “pure” cultures, Bacchan does not reverse hierarchies. Scholarly and highly “sacred” traditions, governed by an explicit purity (Vedism), are freely crossed with popular practices and traditions (Tantrism, Sufism), mainly governed by transgression, granting them a grandeur and sacredness. The heterodox character of the House and the marginal, mad and heretical Drinker, echoes the heterodox and composite character of the coming new nation (*rāṣṭra*) envisioned by Gandhi as patchwork of traditions, cultures, languages and communities, all inspired by an egalitarian and fraternal ideal. If unity was one of the key concepts in the 1920s and 1930s, this collection reminds the reader of the risk of subsuming diversity under a national ideal that, especially in its early development, was itself marked by communalism.

The national heritage praised by the defenders of the Nation is composed of a common culture (*jāti*) made up of diversity and interactions, and not of homogeneous or hermetic groups. Beyond a praise of intoxication, beyond the narrative of life or art’s tribulations, this “House where it is pleasant to dwell awhile” is also an allegory of the Nation as a welcoming land, built on equality, fraternity and diversity, all contributing to the Indian identity. In the context of the threat of balkanisation of the country on religious lines, *Madhuśālā* aims to define and communicate the Gandhian idea of the Nation.

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Notes

- 1 See notably R.A. Dwivedi, *A critical survey of Hindi literature*, Delhi: Motilal Banarasi Das, 1966; M. Bandopadhyay, *Lives and works of great Hindi poets*, Delhi: BR Publishing House, 1994. F. Orsini, *The Hindi public sphere, 1920-1940: language and literature in the age of Nationalism*, New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2002.
- 2 H.R. Bacchan, *In the afternoon of time, An autobiography*, R. Snell, ed., New Delhi: Viking, 1998, chap. 10.
- 3 The underlining is mine.
- 4 Except otherwise mentioned, all translations are M. Boulton and R. S. Vyas', *The House of Wine*, New Delhi: Penguins, 1989.
- 5 The underlining is mine.
- 6 In accordance with the rules of classical Sanskrit poetry, in which the "garland" (mālā) of "ornaments" (alankār) serves to determine the work's "mood" and "flavour" (rasa): See M. Hulin, *Le principe de l'ego dans la pensée indienne classique*, Paris: Boccard - Collège de France, Institut de Civilisation Indienne, 1978, pp. 348-50, and E. Gerow, "Indian Poetics", in J. Gonda, ed., *A History of Indian Literature*, Vol. V Fasc. 3, Wiesbaden: Otto Harrassowitz, 1977.
- 7 Translation by Rupert Snell, in H.R. Bacchan, *In the afternoon of time, An autobiography*, pp. 163-4.

- 8 H. Trivedi, *Colonial Transactions. English Literature and India*, Calcutta: Papyrus, 1993, p. 52.
- 9 *Ibid.*, chap. 2-VI.
- 10 After a first volume titled *Masterpieces of Urdu Ghazals* (New Delhi: Sterling Paperback, 1990), the critic K.C. Kanda edited an anthology of Indian Rubaiyats: *Masterpieces of Urdu Rubaiyats* (New Delhi: Sterling Paperback, 1994), which presents the work of 25 famous poets over more than four centuries.
- 11 Quoted by Kanda, *Masterpieces of Urdu Rubaiyats*, p. 3.
- 12 All translations are Edward Fitzgerald's, in E. Heron-Allen, ed., *The Ruba'iyat of Omar Khayyām*, London: Bernard Quaritch, 1899.
- 13 Translation by Edward Fitzgerald and quoted by Trivedi, *Colonial transactions. English literature in India*, p. 67.
- 14 Translated and quoted by Trivedi, *Colonial Transactions. English Literature and India*, p. 63.
- 15 "Such chronological clustering of so many translators within so few years may seem uncanny. But it is at the same time a part of the over-all pattern of the literary history not only in Hindi but broadly speaking of all Indian languages. Over the last one hundred years or so, Indian languages have received four hundred years of English Literature from Shakespeare down to say Ted Hughes, and in this highly telescoped and elliptical timewrap, the moment when most Indian languages discovered English romantic poetry in a big way came some time in the 1920s and persisted for a decade or so afterwards. Edward Fitzgerald, who belonged to a late and almost decadent phase of English romanticism, was appropriately received in Hindi towards the fag-end of the reception of the English romantic movement": Trivedi, *Colonial transactions. English Literature and India*, p. 49.
- 16 And so classified by the histories of Literature: See notably P. Gaeffke, *Hindi Literature in the Twentieth Century*, in J. Gonda, ed., *A History of Indian Literature*, Vol. VIII Fasc. 2. Wiesbaden: Otto Harrassowitz, 1978, p. 34.
- 17 Michel Hulin defines *rasa* as "the object of aesthetical experience", and quotes Abhinavagupta who evokes the "mental and intuitive perception, which annihilates the distinctions of Time" and which "penetrates the heart directly": Hulin, *Le principe de l'ego dans la pensée indienne classique*, pp. 348-50.
- 18 *Madhu vātā Rtāyate madhu kśaranti sindhava... mādhvīrna... santvoḥadhī...*, *Rig Veda* 1-4-90.
- 19 In *Cooking the World*, Charles Malamoud explicates the value of Fire in Vedic Rituals: the Sanskrit word *pac* means both "to cook" and "to ripen", "to mature". He thus associates sacrifice, which aims at redemption, with cooking which aims at creating, originating what composes the living body: milk, blood etc.: *Cooking the World. Ritual and Thought in Ancient India*, Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1989/1996, p. 48.
- 20 Malamoud, *Cooking the World. Ritual and Thought in Ancient India*, p. 143.
- 21 Notably the prefacer of the English translation: "In stanza 45 the poet has employed the imagery of the tavern and of sacrificial wine to sound a patriotic note, but this is not in Bachchan's best style and its introduction lacks spontaneity. There are few stanzas which have a topical interest only and are definitely didactic; for example, the question of Hindu-Muslim unity is hinted at in stanza 53, the problem of untouchability in 57 and 58 and socialism in 59. Such passages, however, I consider the weakest in the book. They have found a place only because the poet's canvas is wide enough to include the whole of life." G.P. Johari, "Introduction to the First English Edition, 1950", *Madhushala, The House of Wine*, p. xiii.
- 22 J. Brown, *Modern India, The origins of an Asian democracy*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1985, chap. V.
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- 23 *The construction of communalism in colonial North India*, New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2006.
- 24 See notably Orsini, *The Hindi public sphere, 1920-1940: language and literature in the age of Nationalism*, and V. Dalmia, *The Nationalisation of Hindu Traditions*, New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1997.
- 25 See C. R. King, *One language, two scripts. The Hindi movement in Nineteenth Century North India*, New Delhi: OUP, 1994.
- 26 "One of the distinctive factors in the evolution of New-Indo-Aryan is the integration of

some Turkish and many Arabic and Persian words, resulting from the invasions of the Turko-Afghan conquerors toward the very end of the 10th c. (...) The classical division of the lexicon between tatsam (Sanskrit like in their form), tatbhav (such as they have become as a result of historical evolution), deśī (local: with no clear etymology) and alien does not really correspond to practical use. Some Persian words are perceived as native (...), and, moreover, many newly introduced words from Sanskrit are perceived as loans”:
A. Montaut, *A grammar of Hindi*, Munich: Lincom, 2004, p. 6.

27 Commenting the Persian poet Baba Tahir, J.T.P. de Bruijn writes: Occasionally, terms are used which belong to the vocabulary of the qalandars, a phenomenon which appeared only more than a century later in the history of Sufism. It did play a great part in the development of Sufi poetry, but this also was a development which had not yet begun in the lifetime of Baba Tahir.” He then quotes the poet’s quatrain :

28 “I am that drunk whom they call a “qalandar”;

29 I have no home, no family, no shelter.

30 My days I spend circling your place;

31 At night I put my head upon the tiles.”

32 J.T.P. de Bruijn, *Persian Sufi Poetry. An introduction to the mystical use of classical poems*, Richmond: Curzon, 1997, p. 15.

33 See notably D.S. Khan, *Crossing the Threshold, Understanding Religious Identities in South Asia*, London: I.B. Tauris, 2004.

34 H.R. Bacchan, *In the afternoon of time, An autobiography*, pp. 144-61; “Bhūmikā” (Preface to the eleventh edition), in *Baccan racnāvālī Vol. 1*, A. Kumar, ed., New Delhi: Rajkamal, 1983, pp. 35-7.