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The World Is a Masterpiece

The Symbolism of Painting in the *Citrāvalī* by Usmān (1613 CE)

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Introduction

Usmān of Ghazipur composed his *Citrāvalī* (1613 CE) during the reign of the Mughal emperor Jahāngīr (1605–27). It is a Sufi allegorical love story that falls into the genre of *premakathās* or *premākhyāna*s, mystical tales in the Avadhi language. It is only from Usmān's own literary work that we have a limited amount of information about him. In the prologue to his poem, he describes the members of his family, mentioning his father, Sheikh Husain, and his five brothers. Additionally, he praises Bābā Hāzī as his spiritual guide *(pīr),* as well as the saint Shāh Niẓām Chishtī of Narnaul, which gives us a hint as to his possible affiliation with the Chishti order (*Citrāvalī* vv. 22, 27).

Through the narration of the love story between Prince Sujān and Princess Citrāvalī, Usmān develops original aesthetic and theological elements in his poem that still partakes in the allegorical and literary frame of the Sufi *premākhyāna* genre. *Citrāvalī*'s originality lies in its symbolism built on artistic terminology and semantics. Indeed, the poem revolves around the motif of the picture or painting *(citra),* through which the poet explores complex Sufi ontological concepts.

The *premākhyāna* tradition was probably initiated by Maulānā Dā'ūd, who composed his *Cāndāyan* at the court of Dalmau in the fourteenth century (Behl and Doniger 2016: 59). Dā'ūd's composition laid the foundation for a Sufi regional culture at a time when the Turco-Afghan courts had already established themselves across North India.

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His work inspired generations of Sufi authors who continued to develop mystical themes in their works, thus leading to the creation of innovative narratives like Usmān's *Citrāvalī*, despite the intervening centuries (Digby 2004: 339–43). In his *Citrāvalī*, Usmān implicitly claims a place within the historical chain of authors of the genre, as he demonstrates knowledge and familiarity with their literary works. In the section of the poem about beauty, *rūpa*, Usmān references three well-known Sufi *premākhyānas*: Jāyasī's *Padmāvat* (1540 CE), Mañjhan's *Madhumālatī* (1545 CE), and Quṭban's *Mṛgavatī* (1503 CE). This allows him to situate his poem in a specific narrative tradition, and to demonstrate his ability to create intertextual parallelisms.[1]

The inauguration of the Sufi *premākhyāna*s represents a cultural milestone in the history of the Indian subcontinent, as these narratives not only mark the emergence of a new Indo-Islamic literary genre, but also signify the re-imagining of Islamic traditions on the Indian landscape. By introducing local forms and imagery to the court's cultivated audience, the Sufi poets shaped a new literary and linguistic tradition that was consolidated during the Mughal dynasty (1526–1857 CE). As a result of their choice to convey their mystical message through sophisticated aesthetic compositions in a spoken language of North India, the Sufis facilitated the committing of Avadhi to writing, allowing for the creation of new literate communities. In the course of their circulation and reception, these compositions helped create new understandings and meanings among the composite public of Islamicate India. Their complexity and versatility made them suitable for both formal and informal settings, such as courts *(darbār*s*),* Sufi shrines *(dargāh*s*)* and lodges *(khānqāh*s*),* mosques *(masjīd*s*),* as well as markets *(bazār*s*)* and domestic spaces (Behl and Doniger 2016: 26, 324). These compositions were performed at several locations and were designed to communicate with various audiences simultaneously. The multireferential nature of the works enabled them to appeal to a wide range of interpretive audiences, which resulted in a variety of responses.

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1 *Mṛgāvalī mukha rūpa baserā, Rājakuṁara bhayo prema aherā*
Siṁghala Padumāvati bho rūpā, prema kiyo hai Citaura bhūpā
Madhumālati hoi rūpa dekhāvā, prema Manohara hoi taham̐ āvā.

'*Rūpa* dwelled on the face of Mṛgavatī and [prince] Rājkuṁar* became the prey of her love;
rūpa was in Padmāvatī from Siṁghal who loved the king of Chittaur;
rūpa disclosed in Madhumalatī and Manohar came for her love.
(*Citrāvalī*: v. 30).
*I kept the anusvāra as *ṁ* to reflect its written form in Devanagari. कुंअर

While these poets engaged the early modern public by including heroic, romantic, and fairy-tale elements (Behl and Doniger 2016: 80–2), the Sufi poets also infused their works with mystical content, which required attentive listeners or readers to discern and comprehend the layers of poetic meaning embedded in their works (Behl 2016: 30–1). Also referred to as 'quest narratives', their poems explore the theme of the mystical journey towards God, which the authors depict in the form of a romantic quest (Behl and Doniger 2016: 75, 81). The heroes of these poems are imaginatively portrayed as princes disguised as yogis who give up their royal status to search their beloved thereby representing the Sufi seekers. Hence, the love relationship between the lovers in the *premākhyāna*s may be interpreted as the mystical bond uniting humankind and God. When examined closely, these Sufi compositions reveal an elaborate interplay between aesthetics, metaphysics, and mysticism that converge to express the core Sufi principle of existential unity *(waḥdat al-wujūd)* (Behl and Doniger 2016: 45, 234, 304). By drawing upon Persian and Indian aesthetic and religious imagery, the Sufi poets evoke perceptions of form and beauty *(rūpa),* love and eroticism *(prema* and *śr̥ṅgāra),* and emotion *(rasa),* through which the reader gains the mystical message (Behl and Doniger 2016: 32–3).

By expanding upon the motif of the picture in his poem, it is not unlikely that Usmān was influenced by the Mughal tradition of painting and portraiture alongside the various aesthetic theories and literary compositions on the subject that had originated in the Indo-Islamic world. His possible exposure to the art culture of the Mughals is even more likely if we put his composition in the context of Jahāngīr's reign (r. 1605–1627). Although Usmān praises Jahāngīr for his justice and majesty, the Mughal emperor was particularly known for his patronage of the arts and his particular interest in naturalistic paintings and individual portraits, which he used to collect in the courtly atelier *(kitābkhāna)* inherited from his father, Akbar (r. 1556–1605) (Okada 1992: 11–12). The emperor also commissioned paintings to accompany his autobiographical essay, the *Jahāngīrnāma*, where he affirms his predilection for painting and ability to recognize artists behind their art (Thackston 1999: 281). Further, Usmān follows convention by eulogizing Jahāngīr through a description of his court, and by adding elements that enhance his royal image. Interestingly, the poet portrays Jahāngīr's court during the Nawrūz *(Navaroza),* a popular Persian festivity that marks the onset of spring and the new year. On this occasion, Usmān depicts the interior of the royal tent *(dalabādala)* as a recreation of the sky with frescoes of the sun, moon, constellations, as well as the twelve signs of the zodiac *(bāraha rāsi)* and the planetary conjunctions (*Citrāvalī* v. 18). While

there is no direct evidence of Usmān's association with the court of Jahāngīr, still his courtly imagination reflects motifs that became prominent in Mughal aesthetics. Indeed, in Mughal art and architecture, the use of cosmological elements, especially solar motifs, reinforced the idea of the emperor's divine right to rule.[2] To the poet, the court is a 'treasury of delights' *(rahasa-nidhāna),* where Jahāngīr enthroned looks more powerful *(balavandu)* than the god Indra (*Citrāvalī* v. 18).

The theme of painting and, more specifically, portraiture has been discretely treated both in Persian and old Indian classical literature. Saunders, for instance, points out that the portrait element occurs often in Sanskrit plays, where it serves as a multifunctional literary device, serving different aims in the dramatic context (Saunders 1919). Just to mention a few literary examples: the portrait becomes a means for uniting lovers in the *Abhijñānaśākuntala* ('The Recognition of Śakuntalā') by Kālidāsa (fourth–fifth centuries) or even an alternative way to get them married in their absence in Bhāsa's *Svapnavāsavadatta* ('The Dream of Vāsavadattā'), while in the *Viddhaśālabhañjikā* ('The Carved Statue of a Woman') by Rājaśekhara (tenth century) it represents one among other means of encountering the lover, ultimately symbolizing the different levels of access to reality (Granoff 2001: 65, 68 n.10).

In the Indo-Persian world too, portraits were a symbol of imperial power and political self-representation, especially during the Mughal dynasty influenced by European models (Natif 2018: 2016; Koch 2011). The portrait acquired a metaphorical significance within the aesthetic and narrative dimensions of Persian mystical literature. In one of the most popular allegorical stories of the *Khamsa* ('Quintet') by Niẓāmī-ye Ganjavī (1140–1209 CE), *Shīrīn-va-Khusro*, the Armenian princess falls in love with the portrait of Khusro, which the artist Shapur had painted to catch her attention. Pellò (2017) analyses the role of painting and portraits *(naqsh)* and the corresponding terminology in Indo-Persian literature, in particular in the works by Nāṣir 'Alī Sirhindī (1638–1696) and Mīrzā Bīdil (1644–1729), demonstrating how the theme of painting is embedded within complex aesthetic and religious considerations. In both ancient Indian and Persian literary cultures, then, narrators used portraits to depict living people, replace them in important ceremonies, and to foster imagination and knowledge.

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2 For an analysis of solar symbolism in Mughal thrones and its connection with imperial ideology, see Malecka (1999). With specific reference to Jahāngīr, he is famous for issuing coins *(sikkah)* featuring Zodiac signs. In his memoirs, he claims credit for introducing astrological themes in coin production (Thackston 1999: 260).

Vernacular Indian narratives, however, are understudied in this regard. The subject of painting and portraiture in the Indo-Islamic literature of the early modern period is not comprehensively addressed, particularly the Sufi literary tradition of the Avadhi *premākhyānas* has been neglected. The authors of these literary compositions integrated and adapted poetic motifs and idioms from both the Indian and Persian literatures in order to appeal to the tastes of local audiences. This chapter is the first exploration of the poetic and allegorical nature of the portrait within the context of this regional Sufi literary culture. It investigates how Usmān recreated in his vernacular narrative mystical aesthetic terminologies related to portraiture and, in general, art in order to convey complex Sufi concepts and ideas to the socio-literary communities of seventeeth-century North India. For my analysis of the text, I rely on the 1912 edition of Jaganmohan Varmā compiled at the request of the Nāgarī Pracāriṇī Sabhā; it represents the *editio princeps* of the *Citrāvalī*.[3] Apart from Varmā's edition, throughout the twentieth century Indian scholars have made other attempts to edit the text; however, their efforts have resulted in partial editions that frequently rely on the *editio princeps*. Moreover, none of these editions presents a systematic study accomplished by comparing other surviving manuscripts of the *Citrāvalī*. This chapter consists of two main sections: the first is devoted to an explanation of the symbolism of the Divine Painter in the *Citrāvalī*, and the second treats the development of love and desire of union through viewing the lover's portrait.

Narrating the Art of Creation: Usmān's Metaphor of the Divine Painter

In the various sections of the prologue to his poem, Usmān praises God, the Prophet Muḥammad, and the first four caliphs (*Citrāvalī* vv. 1–12). Although the sections of praise *(stutikhaṇḍas)* introducing the text are

3 For his edition, Varmā refers to a handwritten and illustrated manuscript copy in Kaithī script dating back to 1745 CE, which seems to be the earliest and only manuscript to date. According to the editor, it is preserved in the private library of the Mahārājā of Benares, at the Ramnagar Fort, although it has never surfaced. In the preface, Varmā affirms that the copy of the manuscript was commissioned to Fakīr Cand Śrīvāstava, a member of the scribe community *(kāyasth)* of Kara-Manikpur, by Hazārī Ajab Singh of the Baheliyā family of the Chunar Fort, during the reign of Muhammad Shāh. The manuscript was unknown until 1904, when Bābū Amīr Singh discovered it in the private library of the Mahārāja of Benares (Varmā 1912: 9–10).

conventional to the genre, in his *Citrāvalī* Usmān imagines God as the Supreme Painter *(citerā),* invoking the Quranic designation *al-Muṣawwir*, the Artisan or the Painter, as in Islam God is considered to be the only one capable of producing images and giving forms (Quran 59:24). By using the metaphor of a painting to illustrate Sufi metaphysical concepts, the *Citrāvalī* sets itself apart from other works of its kind. The passage below shows how painting functions as an allegory to illustrate the story of Creation in the Sufi narrative:

1 *ādi bakhānauṁ soī citerā, yaha jaga citra kīnha jehi kerā*
2 *kīnhesi citra puruṣa au nārī, ko jala para asa sakai saṁvārī*
3 *kīnhesi joti sūra sasi tārā, ko asa joti sakai jaga pārā*
4 *kīnhesi bacana beda jehi sīkhā, ko asa citra pavana para līkhā*
5 *asa vicitra likhi jānai soī vohi binu meṭa sakai nahi koī*
6 *kīnhesi raṅga syāma au setā, rātā pīta aura jaga jetā*
7 *kīnhesi rūpa barana jahaṁ tāīṁ āpu abarana arūpa gusāīṁ*
8 *agini pavana raja pāni ke bhāṁti bhāmti byohāra*
9 *āpu rahā saba māṁhi mili, ko nigarāvai pāra*

1 First, I will describe the Painter who crafted the picture of this world.
2 He made pictures of the man and the woman, who [else] could fashion [them] in such a manner on the water?
3 He created the sun, the moon, and the stars out of light. Who else could bring such light to the world?[4]
4 From the word He created the Vedas, from which one learns. Who [else] could paint such a picture in the wind?
5 Except for the one who can paint such wonderful [paintings], no one can erase them.
6 He created colours, such as black, white, red and yellow and as many as there are in the world.
7 Although He created colours and forms, the Supreme Himself is formless and colourless.
8 He made the air, the fire, the dust, and the water, all exist in different ways.

4 There are two possible interpretations of this verse. The word *jaga pārā* means 'liberation from rebirth', and, accordingly, the verse could be translated as 'who else could [grant] liberation with such light?'. Alternatively, the term *pārā* can be understood as the past participle of the verb *pārnā* ('to throw', 'to pour') (Śyāmsundardās1965–75, s.v. *pārnā*). I prefer the second possible interpretation for this passage, in which God is portrayed as 'having thrown light into the world' after creating the luminous celestial bodies.

9 In all of them, He can be found, so who can separate Him
from Creation?
(*Citrāvalī* v. 1)

In these first lines of his *Citrāvalī*, Usmān delineates philosophical notions connected with the visual semantic field, providing us with aesthetic descriptions charged with mystical meanings. Drawing from Chishti philosophy, the author describes the ontological structure of the universe, introducing the belief of the divine manifesting in every aspect of the multiform cosmos while reaffirming the idea of God's ultimate oneness *(tawḥīd).* This concept evokes the Sufi tenet of 'unity of existence' *(waḥdat al-wujūd)* as it was formulated in the monistic ideology of Ibn 'Arabī (1165–1240 CE), influencing the doctrine of other Sufi orders making their way into the subcontinent (Chittick 1989: 79–80). Thus, Usmān enhances the paradoxical principle of the simultaneous existence of multiple colours and forms emerging from the absolute God, who is without colour and form. In this way, through the symbolism of artistic vocabulary, Usmān attempts a verbal representation of the allegory of Creation and the complex dynamics of reality traversing both the material and transcendental realms.

Aside from *citra* (picture), the poet also employs other terms to describe the complex relationship of God with the world. For instance, further in the prologue, Usmān praises God for having created the 'form of the world' *(jaga rūpa)* and its constituent figures *(mūrti),* and yet, 'He is invisible and figureless' *(alakha amūrata)* (*Citrāvalī* v. 1). The term *mūrti* can refer to 'body' or form' as well as 'embodiment' or 'manifestation'. *Rūpa* as well may designate any 'form' or 'image'. Historically, both the terms have been employed differently in South Asian traditions for their philosophical implications.[5] In his analysis of Quṭban's *Mṛgāvatī*, a main text of the genre, Aditya Behl, a pioneer in the study of the narrative tradition of the Sufi *premākhyāna*s, comments on the asethetic and theological significance of the term *rūpa* employed in the context of the Sufi *premākhyāna*s 'as a calque for the Arabic *jamāl*, beauty or grace', that represents 'one of the attributes of Allāh' (Behl 2012: 34, 204). Therefore, the Sufi poet elaborates the opening passage of his poem of mystical love by emphasizing the dialectics of the outward *(ẓāhir)* and inward *(bāṭin)* aspects of reality, as he affirms that the divine resides in both the manifest *(pargaṭa)* and hidden *(gupta)* aspects of the universe (*Citrāvalī* v. 1). Within a context

5 For a comprehensive explanation of this terminology in a philosophical context, see Colas 2019.

of dialogue and negotiation, the Sufi authors convey through their Avadhi poems notions of Sufi metaphysics in a language and vocabulary of paradoxes that resonate with the Advaita Vedānta (non-dualism) school that excludes individual differences from the level of absolute reality *(brahman)* (Bartley 2018). Therefore, Usmān poetically describes Creation as divine artwork, drawing attention to the interconnectedness and complexity of reality throughout his poem, as evidenced by the metaphor of art.

In association with notions of beauty, colour, and form, Usmān privileges Avadhi expressions that acquire specific meanings within his poem's mystical framework. Therefore, in the opening schema derived from the prologue *(ḥamd)* of the Persian *maṯnavī*, he conventionally uses the verbal formula *kinhesi* or *kīnha* to list all the things and beings that God has created in the world (Behl 2012: 42). To further enhance the theme of divine artistry, Usmān adds the verbal expression *likhā*, to refer to the act of drawing or painting the universe.[6] In this way, the poet like his predecessors adapts the typical praise sections of the Persian romance to the poetic context of the *premākhyāna* in order to promote concepts of Sufi theology in the North Indian multireligious context. Likewise, he refers to God not as Allāh, but rather by appellations common to indigenous traditions. Therefore, apart from the more original *citerā* (Painter), he identifies God as *kartā* (Maker), *vidhātā* or *vidhi* (Creator), as well as *sirajanahāra* (from the Sanskrit root √*sṛj*, 'the One who spreads life' [Monier-Williams 1899]) and *antarajāmī* (Omniscient).[7]

Although Usmān introduces other appellations for God and visual elements into his story, it is clear that he places the painting at the heart of the philosophical and mystical discourse of his poem. In the following stanza, the poet describes the role of the picture from an ontological perspective, aligning it with the metaphor of the ocean:

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6 The verb *likhnā* in Hindi-Urdu encompasses both writing and drawing, and in association with colors, extends to the act of painting (Śyāmsundardās, 1965–75: s.v. *likhnā).* Within the mystical and poetic context of Usmān's poem, it metaphorically describes the process of divine creation, portraying God as the ultimate painter who 'paints' His attributes onto the canvas of existence.

7 In this regard, Varmā adds an interesting gloss in Farsī (unfortunately without informing us about its source) as a commentary to the term *antarajāmī.* It says 'reaching to the heart is better than [going on] the ḥajj [pilgrimage], a heart is better than thousand ka'abas' *(del be-dast ke ḥajj akbar ast, āz hazārān ka'abe yekdel behtar ast)* assuming that God knows the real intentions of the heart which is worth more than a ritual act (Varmā 1912: 67).

citrahi mahaṁ so āhi citerā, nirmala diṣṭi pāu so herā
jaiseṁ būṁd māṁha dadhi hoī, guru lakhāva tau jānai koī
ja kahaṁ guru na pantha dekhāvā, so andhā cārihuṁ disi dhāvā
mūrakha so jo citra mana lāvai, Semara suā jaise pachatāvai

Only by acquiring pure sight you can see the Painter in the picture.
It is similar to the ocean contained in a drop; one gets to know it when the guru illustrates it.
As long as the guru does not show the path, one is like a blind man who is running in all directions [without seeing where he is going].
The one who takes in his heart the picture [alone] is a fool, like a parrot
that repents [having indulged in] the Semar's flowers.[8]
(*Citrāvalī* v. 167)

The expression *nirmala diṣṭi* reflects the role mystical vision plays in obtaining divine knowledge. This is in line with the concept of spiritual insight *(ma'rifat),* a form of spiritual understanding that is more intuitive and direct (Chittick 1989: 1489). In the passage above, Usmān informs us about the importance of the guru's guidance to acquire *nirmala diṣṭi* and being able to see the path with clarity, emphasizing the role of the Sufi teacher in the seeker's spiritual journey. Throughout the poem, the poet often refers to vision or gaze, suggesting a connection between vision and mystical insight, especially in the prologue, where he already uses the metaphor of the ocean. In the poet's words, only by seeing the ocean with the 'eyes of wisdom' *(jñāna naina)* can one realize that waves do not exist without it (*Citrāvalī* v. 2). In the same way that a wave merges with the ocean, the Sufi gnostic understands that the individual self is not separate from the divine self.

The motifs of the painting and the ocean perfectly illustrate the ontological principle of the unity-of-being *(waḥdat al-wujūd),* which stress the concepts of divine immanence and oneness. While a drop shares some of the ocean's characteristics, it is still different from the entire ocean, and the painting is still not the same as the artist. By exploring the subtle meanings of these metaphors, the poem offers a unique

8 Usmān refers to the cotton-silk *(semar)* tree drawing from Indian imagery. In this verse, he describes the parrot attracted to the semar flowers because of their radiant colour, mistaking them for fruits, symbolizing the human soul's confusion over the external world.

perspective of Sufi thought. Usmān's text illustrates the relationship between the world and God through continuous metaphorical parallelisms, as when the association between a picture and its painter is equated with that between a drop and the ocean. The Persian mystical tradition includes imagery of the ocean, which in Sufi romantic poetics is conceived as 'the ocean of divine love' in which the devotee dissolves himself and merges with God (Schimmel 1975: 284–5).[9]

The sufis sought to overcome local differences and oppositions by embracing a non-dichotomous view of the universe which helped them negotiate with the complex socio-religious climate of early modern North India. Thus, the authors of the *premākhyāna*s articulated their mystical message through literary expressions of divine truth and love that could be understood and appreciated by local society, and thereby secured patronage and audiences. Muzaffar Alam argues that the Sufis' contact with local modes of religious and cultural expression was part of their attempt to root Sufi monotheism in the country. Sufi monotheistic beliefs could be adapted to Indian non-dual philosophy, to which different religious groups of India have contributed in different ways, but all adhering to the pursuit of ontological truth *(ḥaqā'iq)* (Alam 1989: 40). By establishing contact with competing religious traditions, the Sufis were able to use indigenous symbols, mythologies, religious practices, as well as deities in order to express their own sense of devotion to Allāh in a competitive atmosphere. With their verses, these poets attempted to convey a sense of their message of Sufi monotheism that was understandable to the Indian audiences amidst the polytheistic cultural landscape of early modern India (Behl and Doniger 2016: 146, 176).

When the Eyes Meet the Beloved's Portrait: The Dynamics of the *citra-darśana*

The religious aesthetics of the *Citrāvalī*, which is based on painting symbolism, are what forms the basis of the conceptual interpretation of the whole narrative. Indeed, Usmān names his poem after the female protagonist of the story, Citrāvalī, whom he chooses to represent as an artist or a paintress *(citriṇī)*, drawing upon the Indian traditional classification of women into four categories.[10] His choice

9 The imagery of drop and ocean can be found with similar mystical tones in Kabīr's *sākhī*s. See, for instance, Hess and Singh 2002: 96.

10 The differentiation of women *(nāyikā-bheda)* into categories, according to their occupation, physical characteristics, and emotional states, is a conventional

of an artist woman as the heroine model *(nāyikā)* for his story adds innovative aesthetic, social, and theological aspects to the *premākhyāna* genre. He prefers the *citriṇī* heroine over the *padminī*, who occupies the highest position in the classification provided by the Indian classical aesthetic treatises. Moreover, his selection of the *citriṇī* woman is strategic to the storyline of his Sufi tale. In the Sufi romances, the heroines are conventionally considered to reflect divine beauty and light (Behl and Doniger 2016: 29, 64, 164). As in the specific context of Usmān's romance, there is a focus on the *citriṇī*'s talent in painting, it is worthwhile to observe how the poet is able to create a clear and symbolic link between the artist heroine's aspect of divinity and the concept of the artist God. In Usmān's text, we get a sketch of the general category of *citriṇī nāyikā*, enhancing her physical and intellectual features. For instance, he describes her as an attractive woman *(kamini)* with a leaf-like body and a soft *(mṛdula)* waist, with tresses like black-bees and a voice similar to the sound produced by the anklets *(sabada maṁjora).* Among her talents *(caturāī),* she can paint *(citra likhai)* and play the *vīṇā (bajāvai bīnā)* (*Citrāvalī* v. 553). In particular, Princess Citrāvalī owns a space dedicated to painting inside her royal palace, a picture gallery *(citrasāri),* where she stores her tools and exhibits her paintings:

1 *tehi mahaṁ Citrāvali guna gyānī, āpuna citra likhai asa jānī*
2 *jau lauṁ sakhī darasa nahiṁ pāvahiṁ, bhorahiṁ āi sīsa tehi nāvahiṁ*
3 *aura jo citra ahahiṁ tehi māhīṁ, so Citrāvali kī parchāṁhīṁ*
4 *asa vicitra kehi lāvoṁ jorī, astuti joga jībha nahiṁ morī*
5 *vahī raṅga apne raṅga māhīṁ, ohi ke raṅga aura kou nāhīṁ*
6 *sauṁha na jāi citra mukha herā, dhana so citra au dhana so citerā*

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topic of Sanskrit treatises on poetics that is also found in vernacular literature. In the *Kāmasūtra* by Vātsyāyana we find a standard four-category classification: the *padminī* (lotus-woman) at the top, followed by *citriṇī* (artist woman), the *śaṅkhinī* (shell-woman), and the *hastinī* (elephant-woman) (KS 2.1.1–2; 2.1.3–71). Apart from Vātsyāyana's treatise, which is the oldest text to mention this type of classification, other works of the Kāmaśāstra literature mention the *citriṇī* among the various *nāyikā*s, such as Kokkoka's *Ratirahasya* ('Love's secrets', twelfth–thirteenth centuries) (Koka 1.1–10, 11–16) and Kalyāṇamalla's *Anaṅgaraṅga* ('The Perfumed Garden', fifteenth-century) (1.6–13). An example of vernacular text providing a similar aesthetic categorization (including *citriṇī*) is the *Rasikapriyā* by Keśavadās (1591 CE), written in Braj Bhasha (3. 1–13).

7 *mānuṣa kahā so dekhai pāvaiṁ, devatā jāhiṁ johāre āveṁ*
8 *koṭi citra citasārī mahaṁ, dekhata ekau nāhiṁ*
9 *jauṁ dinkara uddota hī, naṣata sabai chipi jāhiṁ*

1 In that [pavilion lives] Citrāvalī, having gained knowledge of virtues, she has painted her self-portrait as she knows it.
2 Her friend who could not see her came early in the morning and lowered the mirror.
3 All the pictures in the pavilion are shadows of Citrāvalī.
4 How shall I describe her amazing [pictures]? My tongue is unworthy of even praising her.
5 The colour of her beauty belongs to her only. No one else owns that colour.
6 No one can see her face in front of the picture. The painting is venerable, and so is the Painter.
7 How could the men see what the deities greeted with reverence?
8 In the pavilion there are thousands of pictures, but [that] one, [Citrāvalī herself], cannot be seen.
9 It seems like the constellations start to hide as soon as the sun rises in the sky.
(*Citrāvalī* v. 161)

Usmān brings into his story a magical form of encounter of lovers that is the sighting of the beloved's portrait *(citra-darśana),* which is described in the corpus of Indian treatises classifying love meetings according to their modalities and locations *(milana-sthāna).*[11] Indeed, the first meeting between Sujān and Citrāvalī occurs in the princess' picture gallery, where the prince is immediately captivated by her picture matchless in beauty *(apurba)* (*Citrāvalī* vv. 82–3). His overwhelming desire to meet the princess leads him to paint his own picture next to hers. Usmān, thus, emphasizes the vivid colours the prince uses to portray his picture with the princess' painting tools:

11 Other types of meeting are the in-person meeting *(sākṣāt-darśana),* the meeting in a dream *(svapna-darśana),* and the meeting through hearing the beloved's voice or the description of her beauty *(śrāvaṇa-darśana).* Keśavdās' *Rasikapriyā* references the divine couple, Kṛṣṇa and Rādhā, using their story as an example of how to meet one's beloved, including the meeting through the portrait *(citra-darśana)* (4.1–16).

2 *dekhā āhi likhai kara sājū, jāte hoi citra kara kājū*
(...)
8 *sāṁvara aruna pīta au harā, jo raṅga cāhiya so saba dharā* (...)
9 *sāji so mūrati āpanī, lai saba raṅga vahi kera*

2 'As soon as he saw the painting tools, he started painting his picture.
(...)
8 He decorated it with red, yellow, and green, using all the colours he wanted.
9 He drew his figure, taking all her colours.'
(*Citrāvalī* v. 86)

In the *Citrāvalī* the colours are given a new dimension, infused with spiritual aesthetics.

The prologue in praise of the Divine Painter *(citerā)* also features colours that God incorporates in Creation, although Usmān points out that the Creator transcends colour and form. In both instances, the poet seems to refer to the sphere of primary colours as listed in Indian classical treatises on painting *(citrasūtras),* amounting to five: white *(sita),* black *(syāma),* red *(rakta),* green *(harita),* and yellow *(pīta),* indicating that these colours hold significance both in divine artwork and the painting of the self-portraits in the picture gallery.[12] In stanza 161, the poet implies Citrāvalī's identification with unique colours, which is closely linked to the aesthetics of divine beauty and light, further enhancing the divine attributes inherent in the heroine's character.

The picture gallery plays a crucial role in the allegorical context of the Sufi tales, as it evokes the 'world of images' or the 'world of analogies' and, by extension, of imagination *('alam al-mithāl),* forming an integral part of the Sufi hierarchical cosmology (Behl and Weightman 2000: 266). Affirming the 'world of images' as an ontologically real dimension that exists on a separate level of existence from the material world, Ibn 'Arabī refers to it as *barzakh* ('in-between realm'), an intermediary realm that connects the physical and the spiritual worlds. In the following section, Usmān gives a detailed description of the picture gallery:

1 *o puni jahaṁ māṁjha phulvārī, tahaṁ Citrāvalī kī citrasārī*
2 *candana meda kapūra milāvā, inha tihuṁ mili kai kīnha gilāvā*
3 *hīrā īṁṭa lagāi uncāī, dekhata banai barani nahiṁ jāī*

12 For a critical analysis of the *Citrasūtra*s, see Nardi 2006.

4 *cunī cūri kai kīnho khohā, motī cūri gaśa jaga mohā*
5 *ati nirmala jasa darpana kīnhā, tahāṁ jāi puni āpu na cīnhā*
6 *mandira eka tahaṁ cāri duārī, nagina jarī puni lāgu kevārī*
7 *kanaka khamba tahaṁ cāri banāe, hīrā ratana padārtha lāe*

1 The picture pavilion of Citrāvalī is built in the middle of the flower garden.
2 Clay was mixed with sandalwood, musk, and perfumed oils to construct it.
3 You cannot help but watch it, yet you won't be able to describe it. It was built high with diamond stones.
4 A gallery was built by crushing selected [pearls]: the world is enchanted by the pearl mixture.
5 A polished mirror was built there. You will not recognize yourself if you stand in front of it.
6 There is a temple with four doors adorned with precious gems.
7 Four golden pillars were built there with joint diamonds and gems.
(*Citrāvalī* v. 160)

Within the allegorical setting of Citrāvalī's picture gallery, represented as the fulcrum of the palace, the prince's recognition of the divine qualities in the woman's self-portrait and his painting of his own picture using her colours can, thus, be considered an early stage of the seeker's mystical experience. According to Ibn 'Arabī, the 'world of images' can only be accessed through a higher level of perception identified with the active imagination *(khayāl)* (Chittick 1989: 30, 134, 181; Dobie 2010: 47). Concerned with the ontological status of imagination, for Ibn 'Arabī the '*alam al-mithāl* represents the intersection between the visible and the invisible, the tangible and the intangible, the sensible and the intelligible, insofar as imagination perceives the formless through form (Chittick 1998: 331–2). The picture gallery, then, represents a magical realm that the prince temporarily accesses when he is transported asleep by the forest deities. Here he recognizes the transcendental beauty of the princess in the portrait, assuming that she is a celestial nymph of Indra (*Citrāvalī* v. 83). Therefore, the first encounter, which occurs through the medium of painting, suggests a visionary experience of the divine beauty that can only take place on the plane of the '*alam al-mithāl*. As the prince awakens in the forest temple the following morning after being carried back by the deities, he initially believes that the picture gallery moment was part of a dream. His clothes, however, have colour spots that confirm his

memories, making him even more eager to meet the princess of the portrait (*Citrāvalī* v. 89).

As a consequence of finding the prince's portrait in her gallery, the princess is overcome with the pain of separation *(viraha)* and longs to unite with him. Sufi poets have transformed the notion of *viraha* (or *hijr* in Persian poetics) into a positive image, since they see it as fueling the spiritual desire of the devotee who strives to achieve the mystical union (de Bruijn 2012: 104). In Behl's interpretation, the nostalgic condition of *viraha* is 'the other side of *prema* or *'ishq'* (love) which builds the thematic frame of Sufi literature, as it vividly expresses the human soul's yearning for God that is central to Chishti soteriology (Behl and Doniger 2016: 105). The experience of *viraha*, often associated with fire, is ultimately a process of necessary purification that the Sufi mystic undergoes in preparation for union with God. By taking up images from the Nāth alchemical tradition and integrating them into Sufi mystical asethetics, Usmān associates *viraha* with the process of the refinement and purification of gold. In particular, the eyes of Citrāvalī are compared to the touchstone *(kasauṭī)* that tests gold *(kañcana),* whereas she embodies pure gold itself *(kundana).* Thus, the burning fire of separation from the beloved involves a journey of transformation that makes the lover acquire a pure body (*Citrāvalī* v. 279).

Although doubting the real existence of the subject in the picture, both Sujān and Citrāvalī wish to meet directly after gazing at their respective portraits. The character of the paintress able to paint portraits of people in perfect likeness is, for instance, already found in Sanskrit works such as the *Kathāsaritsāgara* by Somadeva (eleventh century), and Rājaśekhara's *Viddhaśālabhañjikā*, where, interestingly, the figure of the woman painter is particularly noted for painting her lifelike self-portraits (Mukherji 2016: 75–6).[13]

As Usmān proceeds through his narrative with the theme of the beloved's quest, the nature of the portrait is questioned since it seems to no longer be accurate in revealing the divine woman's essence:

citrahiṁ kahaṁ joti chabi ātī vaha sajīva yaha binu jiu jotī
citra abola hoi janu gūṁgā vohi ka bola jasa mānika mūṁgā

13 These Sanskrit stories specifically refer to female painters as *śilpinī*s. Sivaramamurti (1970) explains that these women were specialized in drawing portraits of young men and women that were exchanged during marriage proposals (p. 15).

citra kaṭāccha bhāva binu nainā vohi ka naina saba mohana sainā
citra aḍola na ḍola ḍolāvā vohi gaunata janu haṁsa sohāvā

Where is the radiance of the light in the picture? She is animate, while [the picture] has a lifeless light.
The picture utters no word as if it was dumb, while her words are like rubies and corals.
The picture's eyes are an emotionless gaze, while her eyes enchant everyone with their movements.
The picture is motionless and cannot be moved, while she has the graceful gait of a lovely swan.
(*Citrāvalī* v. 168)

In the story of Sujān's spiritual–romantic journey to Citrāvalī, in addition to the portrait, the poet introduces other visual items that refer to different levels of reality and stages of mystical experience, exploring the tension between materiality and immateriality, immanence and transcendence, and visibility and invisibility. Significantly, Usmān brings the mirror *(darpaṇa)* into his Sufi story, a key motif of Sufi metaphysics which finds extensive articulation in Persian mystical poetry, as well as Sant literature.[14] For instance, the mirror already appears in the description of the picture gallery, serving as more than just an ornamental element. If we consider the picture gallery as a symbolic representation of the *'alam al-mithāl*, then why would Usmān decide to place a mirror there? The answer can be found in a later episode of the story, in which the mirror plays a crucial role in Sujān's advancing quest for uniting with Citrāvalī. In the narrative storyline of the *Citrāvalī*, at a certain point, the princess sends the prince a mirror via her messenger with precise instructions, requesting that the prince meet her in the temple by means of the mirror:

au puni āpana darpana dīnhā kahesi dihehu lai yaha mora cīnhā
kahehu rākhu lai hiradai lāī, māṁjata rahaba parai nahiṁ koī

Then, she gave him her mirror saying, 'Give it to him as my sign.

14 For instance, in one of his *sākhī*s, Kabīr says: 'Make the guru your burnisher. Polish, polish your mind. Scour, scour with the word. Make consciousness a mirror' (Hess and Singh 2002: 107–8).

Tell him to guard it in his heart and to keep polishing it [so]
nothing falls on it.'
(*Citrāvalī* v. 159)

In stanza 168, Usmān makes clear that the picture has its limitations. Because the picture lacks transparency, it cannot reflect like a mirror. However, the mirror can both reveal and deceive, depending on whether it is clean or dirty. If the mirror is dirty, it will distort and blur the reflection, causing a misunderstanding or misinterpretation of reality. A key concept of mystical literature is the idea that the human heart is a mirror that must be continually polished to reflect divine light. Thus, the verse hints at the spiritual practice of a Sufi devotee to purify his heart so that he can reflect divine light as a perfected human *(insān-i kāmil)* (Chittick 1992: 114). This metaphor builds on the theory of divine self-manifestation *(tajallī)* elaborated by 'Ibn Arabī, through which he tried to solve the dilemma of the absolute God amidst the plurality of the universe. In Arabī's view, the world is a theophany, a mirror in which the divine reflects itself and contemplates its own beauty (Chittick 1989: 196, 216). Being both the instrument and the effect of divine revelation, humankind is witness to divine beauty and glory (Behl and Doniger 2016: 230). The author of the *Citrāvalī*, alongside the picture *(citra),* deals symbolically with the notions of mirror and its related terms, such as light *(jotī),* shadow *(chāyā),* and reflection *(parchāyā).* All these terms interact with each other in the poem, that becomes a narrative infused with Sufi metaphysics, addressing different aspects of existence and stages of divine encounter. To illustrate this further, at one stage of the prince's journey towards meeting the princess, she asks him to keep his eyes fixed on the mirror so he can see her reflected beauty, because her 'image is like light equal to the twelve rays of the sun', too intense for him to see directly. The princess herself compares the experience of seeing her in person to Moses witnessing God's presence through an angel in the form of a burning thorn bush on Mount Horeb (Tūra).[15] Light imagery is central to Sufi metaphysics, which finds expression in vernacular Sufi aesthetics, particularly through the idea of divine light manifested in the heroine's beauty. The moment the prince grasps the divine light reflected by the

15 *Naina lāi rahu darpana māṁhīṁ pahile dekhu rūpa parichāhīṁ*
ekahi bāra jo sanamukha dekhā, hoi Tūra para Mūsaka lekhā.
[Tell him] to keep his eyes fixed on the mirror and to look first at the reflected image.
He who sees me in person once is like Moses on Mount Horeb. (*Citrāvalī* v. 160)

princess in the mirror, he temporarily falls unconscious to the ground, as he has beheld the manifestation of divine beauty. In this regard, the prince admits that he is not capable of bearing the fire of her vision *(sahi na sakā darśana kī āṁcā)* (*Citrāvalī* v. 279). Usmān compares the prince to a cotton thread that gets burned by the princess' divine light. The poet draws on a traditional textile image from Sufi poetry, alluding to the popular belief that cotton or linen wears out under the moonlight that is reflected in the beloved's face (Schimmel 1992: 225, 294).[16] Likewise, the heroine of the Sufi *premākhyāna*s is often compared to the moon for her divine beauty and radiance (de Bruijn 2012: 251–2) For instance, Usmān describes Citrāvalī as the moon incarnated *(sasi otari)* or the woman with a moon-like face *(canda-badana)* (*Citrāvalī* v. 168), while also contrasting her flawless face with the spotted surface of the moon (*Citrāvalī* v. 169). After seeing the heroine's light through the mirror and regaining consciousness, Citrāvalī's messenger informs the prince that he shouldn't avoid the direct vision of her face *(sanamukahu),* a reference to the climax of the divine encounter (*Citrāvalī* v. 279). Therefore, Prince Sujān symbolizes the perfected human capable of truly recognizing divine reality through attaining 'pure sight', the mystical vision that comes with realizing the truth of divine unity. By pursuing divine love, the Sufi hero has rendered his heart a mirror that reflects the manifestation of the divine presence in the world.

In light of this, how should we interpret the portrait or, more generally, the picture in the *Citrāvalī*? It is essential that we consider the significance of the divine woman's self-portrait in the hero's contemplation. In Usmān's composition, the picture serves to induce a desire *(shauq)* for mystical union in the hero as a vehicle to contemplate the divine woman's beauty. The hero becomes aware of what is being represented in the portrait, as the *citriṇī* makes herself known through her self-portrait, in the same way as the Sufi disciples are encouraged to acknowledge God in the creation.

As we place the *Citrāvalī* in its Sufi cultural and religious context, it is important to remember the role visualization plays in eliciting a particular mystical aesthetic experience. The tradition of illustrated

16 *Darpana māṁha kuṁara dekhi chāyā gayau murachi sudhi rahī na kāyā sūra joti darpana mahaṁ ūī yahi duhuṁ bīca kuṁara bhā rūī.*

[When] the prince saw her shadow in the mirror, he fainted, no consciousness was left in his body.
The divine light arose into the mirror, and between these two, the prince became like [a mound of] cotton. (*Citrāvalī* v. 277)

manuscripts on the wonders of creation *('ajā'ib al-makhlūqāt)* largely produced in Arabic and Persian between the thirteenth and nineteenth centuries across the Islamic world sets a perfect example of the crucial function of image and painting in the viewer's perception of the beauty of divine creation.[17] In these manuscripts, the painted images are meant to inspire wonder at God's creation, helping the viewer contemplate the things God has created (Berlekamp 2011: 15). A wondrous image captures the viewer's imagination and elicits spiritual sensibility, having an emotional and psychological impact.

Usmān has been able to adapt motifs and images from the classical Indian and Persian traditions to the mystical aesthetics of the *premākhyāna*. By blending literary traditions, his work demonstrates remarkable levels of intercultural understanding, creating a truly unique narrative. While absorbing much from the 'high' traditions, these narratives represent autonomous literary spaces where the Sufis combine their poetic sensibilities with the 'taste for the spiritual' *(zauq)* (Behl and Doniger 2016: 6). As a result of the original use of the symbol of the painting *(citra)* to express the idea of the universe being God's canvas on which he paints his art, the poem represents a unique interpretation of artistic imagery among Indo-Islamic texts. By employing the picture and the mirror as prominent symbols in his poem, Usmān highlights the importance of visual representation and reflection in understanding and experiencing the divine. The narrative shows the spiritual dynamics at work in the Sufi love story as they progress from portrait to mirror, representing the levels of intimacy and proximity with the divine beloved. The transition from portrait to mirror represents the evolution of human knowledge of God on the soteriological path. The portrait reproduces the heroine's physical attributes in a static and two-dimensional manner, whereas a mirror allows for a deeper revelation of her divine qualities. Besides reinforcing the need for introspection, the metaphor of the mirror also suggests that as the Sufi seeker delves deeper into the mystical journey, his understanding and perception of divine reality also evolve, allowing him to witness the divine in a higher form.

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17 Zakarīyā Ibn-Muḥammad al-Qazwīnī's (d. 682/1283) *'Ajā'ib al-makhlūqāt wa-gharā'ib al-mawjūd* ('The Wonders of Creation and Oddities of Existence') is a source of inspiration for the premodern Islamic genre of manuscripts of wonders-of-creation. It is an encyclopedic resource on Islamic cosmology, covering everything from stones and minerals up to the heavens, describing angels, fantastic creatures, and bizarre beasts.

Through the analysis of the metaphorical language of art used in the *Citrāvalī*, this chapter has attempted to provide a glimpse into the complex relationship between religious and aesthetic expressions in vernacular Sufi literature. The author has illustrated his model of creation and mystical relationship with God in an unparalleled way in his devotional fiction, making critical points of the Sufi doctrine accessible to a diverse religious and cultural communities sharing permeable geographies and aesthetic affinities. By weaving in elements of Hinduism, as well as other spiritual traditions, Usmān is able to create a narrative that is both relatable and understandable across diverse literary and religious cultures. He has contributed to shaping the cosmopolitan contours of an Indo-Islamic narrative tradition in the vernacular, displaying his cross-cultural competencies. Like other *premākhyāna*s, the *Citrāvalī* witnesses past forms of Indo-Muslim literacy that travelled across religious and cultural networks of South Asia. Usmān has shown extraordinary creativity and skill in combining Perso-Arabic and Sanskrit sources, resulting in an original literary work that revolutionizes our understanding of how linguistic and literary practices evolved in early modern India through cultural diversity.

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