



love

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My heart values his vulgar ways

A HANDMAID'S TALE: SAKHIS, LOVE, DEVOTION,
AND POETRY IN RAJPUT PAINTING

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A leaf from an eighteenth-century Kangra manuscript of Jayadeva's lyric poem *Gita Govinda* (Love song of the dark lord) depicts Radha tentatively approaching her lover Krishna, the cowherd god, often also invoked as Hari or Madhava (fig. 1). Before a dark bower lit by his glowing body, Radha halts, one foot forward, one foot back. A *sakhi*, her friend, gently enfolds Radha, her other hand in the speaking gesture. They are illustrating the last verse of one song from the *Gita Govinda*, while Krishna, at the far right of the painting, corresponds to the beginning of the next song, which is in the *sakhi*'s voice. Here, as in the rest of the poem, the *sakhi* mediates between Radha and Krishna, bridging the two songs as well as the world of the painting and its audience. The *sakhi*, which means "female friend" in Sanskrit and other Indian languages, is a stock character in romance literature; she functions as a go-between and companion to the hero and heroine. Of the three *Gita Govinda* verses inscribed on the back of the painting, the first is in the poet's voice, and he tells us of how the *sakhi* unites Radha with Krishna:

Seeing Hari light the deep thicket
With brilliant jewel necklaces, a pendant,
A golden rope belt, armlets, and wrist bands,
Radha modestly stopped at the entrance,
But her friend urged her on.

Detail, *Krishna with Gopis and Radha with Sakhi*, in Jayadeva's *Gita Govinda*, ca. 1775. See fig. 4.

In the next two verses, the *sakhi* commands:

Revel in the wild luxury on the sweet thicket floor!
Your laughing face begs ardently for his love.
Radha, enter Madhava's intimate world!
Revel in a thick bed of red petals plucked as offerings!
Strings of pearls are quivering on your rounded breasts!
Radha, enter Madhava's intimate world!¹

Till this moment, the poem and paintings spoke of the jealousy, infidelity, and remorse of two lovers in separation.

Radha and Krishna are inhabitants of Brindavan town, and as members of the cowherding caste, go out daily to the pasture with their herd and return in the evening. On one spring (*vasanta*) day, Nanda, Krishna's stepfather, asks the older Radha to accompany young Krishna home through the dark forest, as he is frightened. Once they enter the forest, the situation is inverted, and Krishna seduces a tremulous but willing Radha and makes love to her. After this first encounter, the couple experience a series of misunderstandings and doubts, which a *sakhi*, their good friend, helps to resolve. Toward the conclusion of the *Gita Govinda*, the *sakhi* finally unites the lovers. Having previously seen,

read, and listened to this well-known story, eighteenth-century viewers would have readily identified with the *sakhi*'s final act of diplomacy, which is presented in this painting.

In another painted manuscript of the story (fig. 2), an elegantly dressed woman silently walks to meet her lover. Only partly inside the oval frame is a *sakhi*, head turned but hand

Figure 1. *Radha, Enter Madhava's Intimate World*, from part 11, "Blissful Krishna," of Jayadeva's *Gita Govinda*, India, state of Kangra, ca. 1775. Opaque watercolor and gold on paper, 17.1 x 27.3 cm. Collection of Alvin O. Bellak



Figure 2. *Heroine and Sakhi in Moonlight*, from Bihari's *Satasai*, India, state of Kangra, Punjab Hills, ca. 1780–90. Opaque watercolor and gold on paper, 20.3 x 14.0 cm. Collection of Doris Weiner



Figure 3. *Krishna and Radha's Imagined Rival Make Love*, from part 7, "Cunning Krishna," of Jayadeva's *Gita Govinda*, India, state of Kangra, ca. 1775. Opaque watercolor and gold on paper, 19.8 x 12.0 cm. The Robbins Collection of the Indian Princely States

pointing toward the heroine. The page is from an eighteenth-century Kangra manuscript of the *Satasai* (Seven hundred verses), written in the Braj language by the seventeenth-century North Indian court poet Bihari. A single verse inscribed on the back reads:

The young woman disappeared in the moonlight, she was invisible to the eye.
But hanging on the thread of her fragrance, the beelike sakhi followed her.²

Both painting and verse focus on the beautiful heroine, whom we recognize because she is centrally positioned on the page. But her companion, the beelike *sakhi*, is equally important: for the viewer, her actions identify the particularity of the woman who trysts by moonlight. This heroine hides herself by dressing in white to blend into the silvery moonlight. The *sakhi*'s hand toward her nose signifies the heroine's fragrance and her invisibility, while the other hand's gesture reveals the heroine.

When looking at Rajput love paintings, a viewer may initially puzzle over the identity of the various women. A descriptive title, such as *Radha Pining in Separation from Her Lover*, most often based on scholarly usage rather than a painting inscription, fails to account for the others present in the pictorial space. Equally perplexing is the almost complete absence of corresponding male figures. If a painting has a male, it is either Krishna or occasionally a king. For historians interested in precolonial conceptions of gender and class, particularly women's status, these love paintings are intriguing because they say so much more than art-historical scholarship and popular coffee-table books allow. Indeed, the radical dispersal of individual folios from painted manuscripts, especially those that deal with love, contributes to their problematic status. Many *Gita Govinda* folios, especially the more explicit lovemaking scenes, have been reframed in this century, either by dealers who actually recut them or by publishers who reproduce these paintings with strategic amputations (fig. 3). "Excess" trees, open landscape, figures, and buildings are excised, incidentally mutilating the verse on the back, violating the poem's narrative, and trapping the figures in a telescoped, erotic snapshot. These snapshots are regularly featured in the "art-porn" genre of palm-sized editions, produced to attract impulse purchasing in bookshops throughout the world and as souvenirs at famous temple sites in India.

To understand the ideas that Rajput art communicates about the gendered body, devotion, love, sex, and poetry, we need to reframe these paintings, seeing them as illustrations to a category of texts that were not, in their own day, devalued. The marginal women who populate the pages are a place to begin. Though ubiquitous, *sakhis* have not been understood as being important, either within the dynamics of the narrative or within the composition of the painting. Hence, "A Handmaid's Tale."

Painted Leaves of the *Gita Govinda*

The *Gita Govinda* is a twelfth-century lyric composed by Jayadeva, a court poet from northeastern India.³ The poem of twenty-four songs exults in Radha and Krishna, viewed not just as deities but as two intense, earthly lovers, fully subject to split-second jealousies, excessive pride, and hair-raising passion. Incorporating language and situations from the

established genre of erotic taxonomies describing lovers, love situations, and go-betweens, Jayadeva combined complex metaphors and rhetorical structures with oral poetry and folk songs to create an aesthetic and emotional response (*rasa*) in his audience.

Before Jayadeva, Krishna had appeared in epic and Sanskrit court poetry as a great ruler and friend. Occasionally there were references to his status as a divine lover who indulged in love-sports with his *gopis*, the Braj cowherd girls. Jayadeva transformed the Krishna story by isolating Radha as his primary lover, relegating the other *gopis* to the status of rival or, more important, assigning them the role of *sakhi*. Soon after its composition, the *Gita Govinda* became the foundational text of the Krishna devotion (*bhakti*) movements that were widespread across North India by the sixteenth century. Centered in Braj, the region around the towns of Agra, Mathura, and Brindavan, these movements exalted a personal relationship with Krishna. Court poets, wandering bards, theologians, and saints used the metaphors and emotions Jayadeva coined, writing sometimes in Sanskrit and sometimes in a regional Hindi called Brajbhasa. Highly esoteric aesthetic theories were formulated to encourage an ecstatic and emotional participation in Krishna and Radha's passion, especially through the role of *sakhi*. The *sakhi* was theologically justified as one in a group of devoted friends who performs labors of love. Although it is unlikely that artists, patrons, and viewers of Krishna-Radha paintings were always devotees, the philosophy of *sakhi*-based worship was widespread in North India, and the meaning of a twelfth-century poem was heightened by the prevalent religious climate of their own times.

The *sakhi's* voice in the *Gita Govinda* is clearly entwined with Jayadeva's; both seek to unite Radha and Krishna. To describe Krishna's condition to Radha, the *sakhi* becomes sympathetic to his misery and conveys his longing to Radha. She also brings Radha to Krishna, using her *sakhi* relationship with Radha to act as go-between for Krishna. The *sakhi* recounts the couple's mutual suffering: her voice oscillates between first-person and third-person narrative to convey the lovers' passion with the observer's distance.⁴

Just as the *sakhi* describes Krishna's pitiful condition to Radha, Jayadeva, too, sings of Krishna's desolation. Throughout the poem, Jayadeva as *sakhi* communicates with both Radha ("Wildflower-garlanded Krishna suffers in your desertion, friend") and the listener-reader-devotee ("When your heart feels his strong desire, Hari will rise to favor you"). As the listener's *sakhi*, he informs us of the affair in progress while also making the love happen. By identifying with Krishna's misery, Jayadeva opens the way for the listener-reader to become Krishna's messenger.

Artists who painted the circa 1775 *Gita Govinda* manuscript from the North Indian Pahari Hills court of Kangra maintained Jayadeva's structure, using a *sakhi* to present love in separation. Although it is impossible to be absolutely certain, as the manuscript is widely dispersed and some pages are missing, it seems likely that each page was matched to an appropriate verse. Sometimes one painting covered an entire song; sometimes it accompanied a single verse. In the process of designing the manuscript, artists interpreted the text, using a *sakhi* to heighten the mood of love in separation. Pages from this 1775 Kangra *Gita Govinda* manuscript (see figs. 1 and 4) reveal how the artists interpreted the text through the *sakhi*, creatively placing her in the pictorial space and giving her gestures that allow her to direct the meanings embedded in the text and so engage the audience.



One folio from the 1775 *Gita Govinda* set illustrates two verses, only one of which is inscribed (fig. 4). Krishna stands to the right surrounded by women, each straining for closer contact. Two *sakhis* stand slightly apart from the others: the one on the outer left joins her hands in prayer, the other stares in wonder. At the extreme left, Radha laments to another *sakhi* about her traitor heart, which longs for Krishna though she knows he is dallying with other women. Standing before Krishna, the praying *sakhi* signals to the viewer that devotion is one appropriate attitude. The wondrous *sakhi* draws the viewer's attention to Krishna even as her hand points ambiguously to both him and Radha. Her equivocating gesture allows the viewer's sympathies to move among Krishna's pleasure, the women he caresses, the *sakhi's* wonder at his beauty, and the plight of Radha's longing.

The painting is a brilliant continuous narrative combining two verses. One is the opening verse of the song, and the other is the end verse. The unscripted opening verse, which inspired the right half of the painting, reads:

While Hari roamed in the forest
 Making love to all the women,
 Radha's hold on him loosened,
 And envy drove her away.
 But anywhere else she tried to retreat
 In her thicket of wild vines,
 Sound of bees buzzing circles overhead depressed her —
 She told her friend the secret.

Figure 4. *Krishna with Gopis and Radha with Sakhi*, from part 2, "Careless Krishna," of Jayadeva's *Gita Govinda*, India, state of Kangra, ca. 1775. Opaque watercolor and gold on paper, 18.3 x 28.2 cm. Collection of Gursharan and Elvira Sidhu

The inscribed end verse, placed on Radha's lips, reads:

My heart values his vulgar ways
 Refuses to admit my rage
 Feels strangely elated,
 And keeps denying his guilt.
 When he steals away without me
 To indulge his craving
 For more young women,
 My perverse heart
 Only wants Krishna back.
 What can I do?⁵

Positioning both Radha and Krishna on the same page, but at opposite ends, the artist interprets her emotions in the context of his infidelity. This synchronicity, implied by the poet Jayadeva, is exploited by the artist to enhance the mood of separation and anger. The viewer follows the *sakhi* who, unlike her friends, has relinquished her own desire for Krishna's graceful touch and crossed the barrier of trees to listen to Radha's sorrow.

In this leaf, the female figures are all alike. While Krishna has a distinctive blue body, Radha is not specially marked by either dress or physiognomy and is identified only by her placement in relation to the other figures. The devotee-viewer, desiring religious rapture, may experience Krishna as Radha, who wants him all to herself, or as one of the unnamed *gopis* who surround him. The viewer could empathize with Radha and

Figure 5. *Krishna Alone on a Hillock*, from part 5, "Lotus-Eyed Krishna Longing for Love," of Jayadeva's *Gita Govinda*, India, state of Kangra, ca. 1775. Opaque watercolor and gold on paper, 17.5 x 27.2 cm. The Robbins Collection of the Indian Princely States



her anguish over Krishna's dalliances. Then again, if the viewer chooses to be a *gopi*, then jealousy (why is Radha so special?) could be another reaction. Alternatively, the viewer may identify with Krishna, who does not appreciate or treat Radha any differently from the others. After all, at this moment in the narrative, Krishna revels in being the object of every woman's ardor. The utility of *sakhi* as a mediator is further established in scenes of Krishna's lovemaking with a single woman, where a *sakhi* rarely mediates between him and Radha (or the other woman). Whenever Krishna and a woman are represented together, the viewer knows to identify her as his sole beloved, whether she is Radha or Radha's fantasy of her rival. The artist allows Krishna's sultry yet penetrating gaze to interact directly with the viewer, offering communion in his mood of ecstasy (see fig. 3).

In figure 5, the painter depicts Krishna alone, and though bees—the messengers of love who signify its relentless demands—hover over his garlanded body and hum for his attention, it is all to no avail. Krishna's pictorial isolation emphasizes his regret. Earlier, he sent a *sakhi* to Radha to inform her of his agony. As we recite the verse inscribed on the back, we become Krishna's *sakhi*:

Bees swarm, buzzing sounds of love,
 Making him cover his ears.

Figure 6. *Krishna Lies Alone in the Forest Pining for Radha*, from part 5, "Lotus-Eyed Krishna Longing for Love," of Jayadeva's *Gita Govinda*, India, state of Kangra, Punjab Hills, principality of Lambagraon, India, ca. 1825. Opaque watercolor and gold on paper, 24.5 x 31.7 cm. Collection of Jagdish Bhagwati and Padma Desai

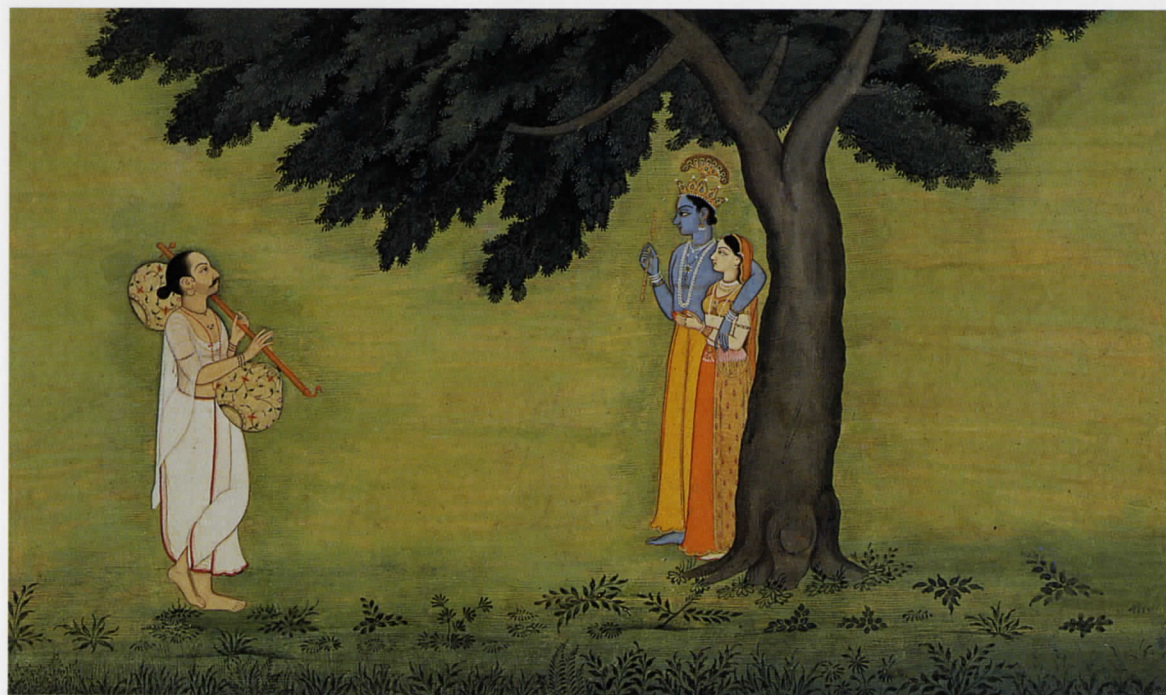
Your neglect affects his heart,
 Inflicting pain night after night.
 Wildflower-garlanded Krishna
 Suffers in your desertion, friend.⁶

An 1825 painting of the same song employs another tactic, and the viewer's relationship to Krishna's pain is subtly altered (fig. 6). Instead of choosing to represent a single verse or combination of verses, the artist has produced a single painting for the entire song. Beside the Yamuna, which flows at the bottom, lies Krishna pining on his bed of leaves. Leaving his isolated bower, the *sakhi* steps toward Radha's grove and is shown again at the extreme left, conversing with Radha, who listens with reluctance. At the top center are two figures, a male and another female, with the label *varadi ragini* above them. Jayadeva wrote this song in *varadi*, a feminine musical mode (*ragini*) that evokes the mood of amorous desire in separation; ideally, the song must be performed in *varadi*. The female *ragini* is always portrayed as a woman who holds off her lover. Here the lover is not a rustic Braj cowherd; rather, his fine dress speaks of his status, and his gestures indicate his refinement as a *rasika* (aesthete and connoisseur). The *ragini* and the nobleman physically occupy a different section of the page, interacting with each other and not with the figures below. But the artist has kept faith with Jayadeva. The female singer, too, is a *sakhi* helping

us have access to Krishna's desolation.

This page offers remarkable testimony of how the contemporaneous audience of Kangra aristocrats related to the mythical time of the *Gita Govinda*. When the poem was sung and the painting viewed, Krishna's world became localized in the Kangra court. Paradoxically, the personified *ragini* and her

Figure 7. Jayadeva's Vision of Radha and Krishna, from part 12, "Ecstatic Krishna," of Jayadeva's *Gita Govinda*, India, state of Kangra, ca. 1775. Opaque watercolor and gold on paper, 16.5 x 26.7 cm. The Kronos Collections



aristocratic Rajput lover suggest the inevitable passage of time as the musical narrative progresses away from Jayadeva's eternal Braj. The knowledge of separate worlds must have been poignantly evocative for those already familiar with the sung verse. The first verse inscribed on the reverse, in Krishna's words (here he is referred to as Madhu's foe), reads:

"I'll stay here, you go to Radha!
 Appease her with my words and bring her to me!"
 Commanded by Madhu's foe, her friend
 Went to repeat his words to Radha.

The last inscribed verse reads:

Poet Jayadeva sings
 To describe Krishna's desolation.
 When your heart feels his strong desire,
 Hari will rise to favor you.
 Wildflower-garlanded Krishna
 Suffers in your desertion, friend.⁷

The temporal implications of the two verses have been established in the painting. The artist reminds us that Jayadeva wrote his words to be heard, not just read, that his words enrich the listener, and that the listener has to cultivate the appropriate mood in order to experience a vision of Krishna's springtime passion. The apparently secondary women in this page, the *sakhi* and the singer, are singularly important to achieve all the devotee-connoisseur's goals.

In the final and twelfth part of the *Gita Govinda*, Jayadeva (and the painter) pulls away from the lovers in union and becomes self-referential (fig. 7). He exalts the soteriological or salvational benefits of listening and singing his poem:

His musical skill, his meditation on Vishnu,
 His vision of reality in the erotic mood,
 His graceful play in these poems
 All show that the master-poet Jayadeva's soul
 Is in perfect tune with Krishna —
 Let blissful men of wisdom purify the world
 By singing his *Gita Govinda*.⁸

In the painting, Jayadeva occupies the same space as a *gopi-sakhi*, but deferentially stands on one leg, savoring his vision of Krishna and Radha. The painter, too, becomes integrated with the poet: they have both helped the viewer achieve Jayadeva's "vision of reality in the erotic mood." Each has performed the task of the *sakhi*.

Bhakti and Riti

A circa 1765 page from Kangra or Guler illustrates the first verse of the poet Bihari's *Satasai*, a compilation of individual verses, each of which encodes a discrete narrative (fig. 8):

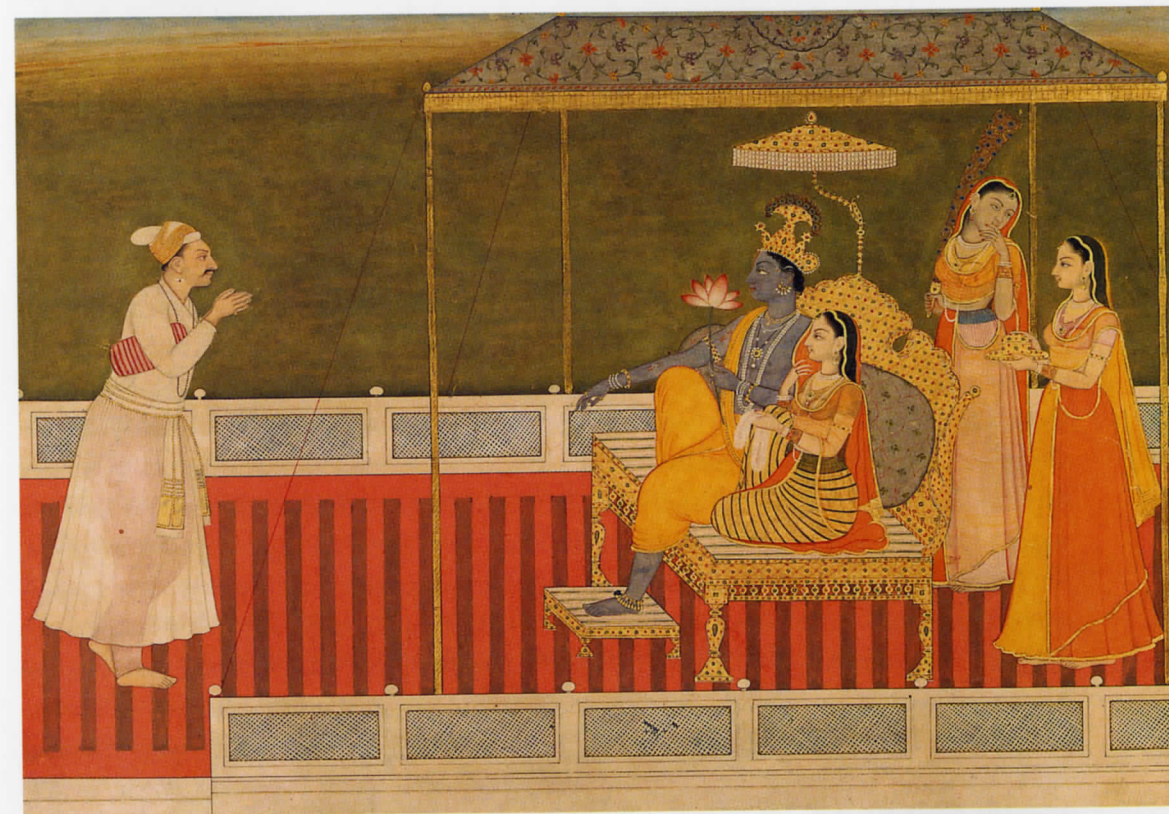
Remove my pain of existence Radha, you skillful woman,
You whose golden complexion turns Krishna green.⁹

The poet and artist begin their endeavor by seeking divine grace. Bihari addresses Radha as a goddess, asking her to take away his earthly existence. He praises her divine and sensuous power over Krishna, and her golden complexion that turns Krishna's blue body green. The word for "green" in Braj (*harit*) is both the color and the state of happiness. The verse enunciates differing attitudes toward sensuality, an ambiguity present throughout the text. Bihari offers homage to Krishna: he stands on one leg as Jayadeva does in figure 7. Yet the setting in which Bihari's devotion is offered is quite different. Although both the *Gita Govinda* and the *Satasai* sets were produced for aristocratic patrons in the same Pahari region, the former is treated as a pastoral in which verdant forests, lush springtime flowers, and flowing waters dominate the landscape, and buildings are irrelevant. The mood of the *Satasai* is different. If Jayadeva praises himself as "the wandering king of bards," Bihari's fame begins in the court.

Under a canopied pavilion, Krishna and Radha sit on a sumptuous jeweled throne, with a parasol highlighting their divinity. Krishna admires a lotus and enjoys its scent as he gazes at Bihari, while his beloved Radha is at his side. Bihari graciously make eye contact only with Krishna, while Radha demurely veils her face. For all their sanctity, they have also become a Rajput king and queen, with a goddess giving *darsan* (ritual gazing) through her *pardah* (veil). The *sakhis* who in the *Gita Govinda* surround Krishna and Radha in their forest love-play work in this painting as attendants, waving a fly whisk and offering betel leaves. Their equal status as friends of Krishna and Radha has been converted to servility. All signs in the painting indicate a life at court rather than the rustic world of Braj.

The *Satasai* belongs to a genre known as *riti* (style), which emerged in the sixteenth century. *Riti* poets, like many in the Krishna devotional movement, chose to write in the local language of Braj. Modeling their work on earlier Sanskrit texts, they were highly conscious of their aristocratic patronage. Unlike *bhakti* writers who emphasized their sectarian affiliations, *riti* poets consciously styled themselves into literary lineages. Their works encompassed taxonomies of poetic theory, aesthetic sentiments (*rasa*), types of heroes and heroines, as well as inventories of terms arranged by topic on all aspects of culture. Some texts like Keshavadasa's *Rasikapriya* (Connoisseur's delights) begin each section with a definition of the category, followed by illustrative examples. Others, like Bihari's *Satasai*, group short, pithy verses to evoke a mood, describe a hero or heroine, or exemplify a literary category. By and large, *riti* poets favored a combination in which aesthetic, rhetorical, and semantic categories intertwined with love or devotional situations and sentiments.

Scholars of literature have generally separated Braj poetry into two discrete schools, *bhakti* and *riti*, the first sacred and devotional, and the latter courtly, aestheticized, and erotic. The division mirrors the great scholarly embarrassment over *riti* poetry that is part



of India's colonial and nationalist heritage. Many critics have scorned *riti*'s emphasis on beauty and eroticism, contrasting it with *bhakti*'s spirituality. Yet, the separation of *riti* and *bhakti* along the line of eroticism versus spirituality simplistically reduces a much more complex dynamic. Formally both genres use Radha, Krishna, and a *sakhi* as chief protagonists. Both can potentially address a cultivated audience, both use stock phrases and metaphors that can be traced to folk songs and Sanskrit poetry, and both rely on the rhetoric of eroticism to convey emotion. More important, both were reproduced in manuscript form for the same patrons. Perhaps the biggest problem with this division is trying to understand the response of members of the text's initial audience and how they felt about love, Krishna and Radha, the *sakhi*, poetry, and devotion. The stark dismissal of *riti* poetry as indecent is facilitated by simply reading the verses, as against hearing them or viewing them in performance.

Krishna and Radha were treated differently by *riti* and *bhakti* poets. However, it is not the inherent eroticism of one and the supposed lack of eroticism in the other that marks the differential treatment; in the *Gita Govinda* paintings, the artists and audience clearly engage with the poem's explicit sexuality. There are several ways to understand these differences without devaluing *riti*. Court poets who belonged to the *riti* school practiced what I would like to call "*Gita Govindafication*." Whereas erotic and aesthetic texts like the fifth-century *Kamasutra* (The art of love) posited the cultivated urbanite as their protagonist and audience, *riti* poets entered the space fashioned by Jayadeva to create an extremely fluid body of writing that moves between devotion and urbane eroticism. Writing in Rajput courts, where many patrons and artists were devotees of Krishna, poets

Figure 8. *Remove the Pain of My Existence*, from Bihari's *Satasai*, Guler, India, 1760–65. Opaque watercolor and gold on paper, 24.8 x 32.7 cm. Collection of Alvin O. Bellak

gained access to a vast encyclopedia of culturally valuable symbols by not aligning their work fully with any single mode.

I suggest that *bhakti* and *riti*, when not explicitly equated with devotion versus eroticism, remain useful categories for understanding the audience and the context in which the poetry was performed and painted. A temple viewing of a painting of Krishna and Radha's union would be significantly different from a viewing of the same theme by a king, seated in a court pavilion, for his solitary pleasure. Paintings of *riti* poems like the *Satasai* are valuable interpretations of the texts. They indicate the class structure of the poetry's audience: their size and portability suggest restricted viewings by cultivated kings and by male and female nobility. Each page and its accompanying verses compress conflicting definitions, resulting in two or three possible meanings. Double entendres, alliteration within each verse, and repeated vocabulary allow contradictory sentiments to occupy the same language. A verse can imply explicit eroticism, exalt or mock Radha and Krishna, suggest class conflict, or arouse devotion. Because there is no intrinsic narrative to follow, the *Satasai* has been compiled differently over the years, with only the first verse's placement consistently maintained. The work has an inherent capacity to be shuffled, and its imagery and construction demand a viewer response that differs from the response demanded by the *Gita Govinda*. Yet neither Bihari nor his artist interpreters saw its fluidity as a problem. Artists seem to choose from the verse's various implied meanings and then paint a picture reflecting their chosen interpretation. A *sakhi* becomes critical to this process of making and selecting meaning.

The tasks assigned to *sakhis* by *riti* poets are based on the *Kamasutra* rather than on Krishna *bhakti* models. Unlike the *gopi-sakhi* of the *Gita Govinda* whose life beyond the bucolic landscape of the poem is never presented, the *riti* go-between's social and professional roles help Krishna and Radha fulfill their desire to be together. Keshavadasa, in his sixteenth-century *Rasikapriya*, a major *riti* text, classifies messengers as

Nurse, maid, barber woman, an available female neighbor,
Female gardener, a woman selling betel leaves or bangles, female artist,
Goldsmith's wife, mixed caste woman, female ascetic, or a silk embroiderer's
daughter,
Keshavadasa says for lovers, the *sakhi* makes their destiny.¹⁰

Here, the *sakhi* is not a *gopi* who gains spiritual and narrative validation by assisting the divine pair but just another inhabitant of the town. Keshavadasa's messengers are all women who, in order to be *sakhis*, must remain within their economic and social position. *Riti* texts portray a world where romance and male-female interactions are closely monitored; ideal messengers must have legitimate reasons to move from space to space. Doing their work (bangle selling, beautifying, embroidering) becomes vital to the progress of the love affair. The women's subordinate social status positions them as ideal functionaries of elite lovers, allowing them to move between men's and women's spaces without restriction. As Bihari writes, the *sakhi* is not a privileged position from which to worship but a "sub-structure" on which love affairs are built:

Without the messenger-scaffolding, love is joined by no other means.
Love beams are cemented, messenger-scaffolding is removed, things proceed.¹¹

Yet many *riti* authors also question the *sakhi*'s contradictory status as both woman (and thus available and desiring) and neutral go-between. In the world of *riti* poetry, any woman who is openly available to the male gaze is potentially sexualized. In a number of verses, the heroine suspects duplicity in her messenger: did the *sakhi* herself enjoy the hero?

A Painted *Satasai*

A folio from a late-eighteenth-century painted Kangra *Satasai* illustrates this unscripted verse, a *sakhi*'s description of a peasant guarding her fields (fig. 9):

A garland adorns her chest, flax flowers her brow,
Standing up, the girl with upright breasts guards the field.¹²

The artist appreciates Bihari's equation: the riches of the ripening grain fields match the bounty of the girl's body. Her stance is upright and guarded, her breasts blindly gaze back. Because the beauty's head is turned, watching for birds that might steal her grain, the artist can allow the viewer to relish a secret look at her body. Her lushness, youth, and strength contrast with the aged go-between who sits in the balcony with Krishna. Though Bihari never specifies the type of go-between, the artist, aware of *riti* conventions, juxtaposes contrasting female bodies to create a piquant eroticism.

But this painting is not just a comparison of the beauty and her go-between. Krishna with his golden crown and fine jewels is also contrasted with the village girl's simple attire. Although Bihari dismisses peasant life in general, he does incorporate the historical tradition of celebrating Krishna's life in rustic Braj. A medieval commentary on the *Kamasutra*, for example, states that "for a gentleman, relations with peasants are degrading, they are merely substitutes for love. Such forms of sexual release, like neutral sex are only possible if one disguises oneself. Of village girls, the only attractive ones are the cowgirls of Vraja [Braj] country."¹³

The artist skillfully presents the tensions of cross-class, cross-regional love through an erotic fantasy. Interpreting the listening male hero as Krishna allows the cultural symbols associated with his worship to inhabit the same frame as the world of the aristocrat. A contemporaneous viewer could easily see the village beauty as a Braj girl, uninhibited by town mannerisms and available for delectation. The aristocrat as Krishna, or Krishna as aristocrat, is physically separated from her. He is able only to imagine what we know already in the go-between's speech-portrait embodied before us. The improbable relationship between the town building and the field, as well as the choice of go-between, suggests that values other than strict devotion are central to the response sought from the audience. One is humor; Bihari's language is keenly playful. The other is an erotics of power: he knows about her, but does she know of him? He may want her, and given his status how

could she respond with anything but agreement? On the other hand, perhaps the go-between is an emissary for the young girl. On the reverse are several inscribed verses that suggest this reading as well. In one, the beauty says:

Though they drink till sated, they remain thirsty.
The thirst of my eyes for the saltlike body of the handsome one is unquenched.¹⁴

Through his painting, the artist insinuates that a woman's desire can be an equally powerful visual aphrodisiac.

In *Satasai* paintings without Krishna, the *sakhi's* capacity for desire becomes a powerful tool in the creation of the erotic mood. The beelike *sakhi* of figure 2 cannot see the heroine moving in the moonlight, but she is able to follow her scent. Only a male bee goes after scents, so in this verse and painting the female *sakhi* can also stand in for the desiring male. Simultaneously, the beelike *sakhi* follows the heroine as the heroine follows her own desire. For the viewer, the *sakhi* becomes the point of entry into the narrative. The scene is assembled from her perspective, and, to partake of the pleasure she offers, the viewer must see (inhale) the heroine from the *sakhi's* angle. Perhaps a desiring beelike *sakhi* also increases the sensuous experience of the male viewer; he is the singular male in the context of the picture and its viewing. In any case, in a single page, the viewer gets two beautiful, questing women.

Some paintings depict the *sakhi* interacting with a second friend who is neither Krishna or Radha. Figure 10 illustrates a series of verses about a love-struck heroine's agitated behavior. On the left, the physically and emotionally agitated heroine (*nayika*) climbs up and down seeking a glimpse of Krishna. Her yo-yo like state is indicated by her piecemeal body, revealed in varying degrees through the openings of the house. In the top window, she is shown bent at the waist, gazing at Krishna below, while in the middle window, she is shown waist down, her face hidden behind the small screened opening. At the very bottom, she is framed in the doorway. Radha, if imagined as a status-conscious Rajput woman from a respectable family, would have led a sequestered life, voluntarily wearing a veil when interacting with most men, including her own family members. Her romantic relationships, if any, would have been conducted discreetly. To display her desire so publicly, as Radha does in this painting, would have been a matter of shame and family dishonor. The three verses relate the travails of a heroine caught in her love:

Frenzied, ascending, and descending the balcony, her body is not the least bit tired,
Caught in the clever one's love, she is like an acrobat's yo-yo.

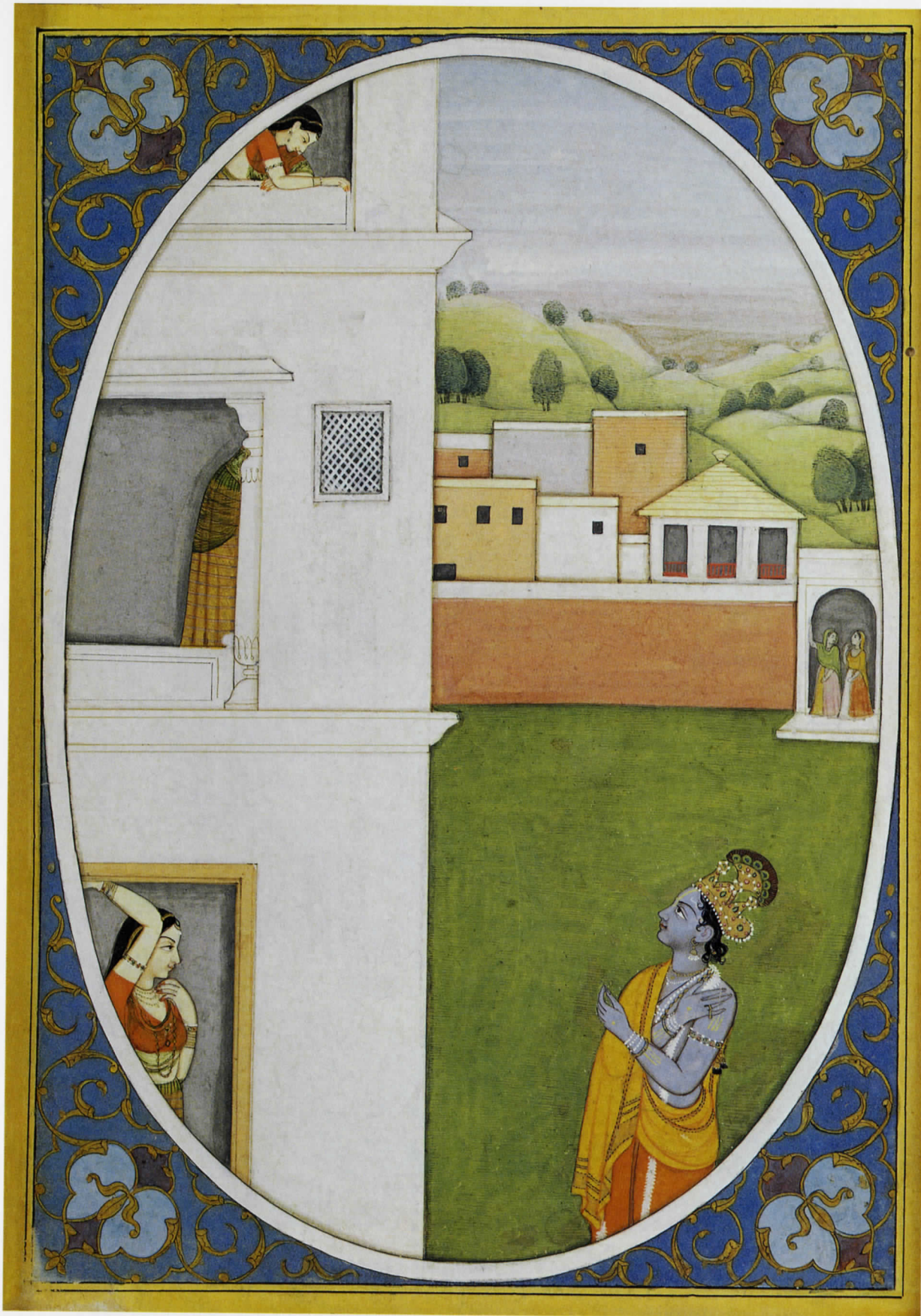
Restless and distressed, between her new love and her family's shame,
Pulled both ways, turning and returning, she passes her day like a yo-yo.

From here to there, from there to here, she does not rest for a second.
Without resting, like a yo-yo, she comes, and she goes.¹⁵

The building serves as the physical barrier, isolating Radha from her lover. The claims that the frames make on her body mirror the claims of her desires and duties. The two



Figure 9. *Village Beauty*, from Bihari's *Satasai*, India, state of Kangra, Punjab Hills, ca. 1780–90. Opaque watercolor and gold on paper, 20.7 x 14.9 cm. The Kronos Collection



sakhis stand in the distance; one points upward, drawing her companion's attention to the events in the foreground. For the viewer positioned closer to Radha and Krishna, their clandestine exchange of glances is clearly visible. The *sakhis* deep in the pictorial space emphasize the interiority of Radha's fear of family dishonor, a fear that they voice. Yet the love affair is public; eavesdropping on the conversing women, the viewer can become a voyeur of Radha.

If the *sakhis* in this painting humorously bare the conflicts endured by Radha, in another painting they celebrate the breach of social norms. Figure 11, inscribed with five verses, clearly plays on the erotic potential of a forbidden love openly displayed in public. One verse is a conversation between two *sakhis*:

Speaking, refusing, delighting, angering, meeting, blooming, blushing,
In a crowded hall, the eyes do all the talking.¹⁶

Two pairs of *sakhis* here point to the lovers' transgression and offer it for the viewer's delectation. One *sakhi* in the pair at bottom right points at Radha, while the other holds a hand to her mouth in a gossipy gesture of knowing incredulity. Another *sakhi* in the pair to the left repeats the same gesture. Radha stops at center, her feet moving away from Krishna, her face turned toward him.

Lovers' transgressions and the reactions they produce are grist for the *riti* poet's mill. His *sakhi* is a device to arouse the reader and provide a moralizing presence that throws the social violation into stark relief. Public spaces such as this pavilion offer suitable locations for observers to report on the lovers' deeds. The *sakhi* is the poet's voice, and the scene comes into existence through her. How would viewers know that something happened unless she made it happen?

The *sakhis* in this painting also demonstrate the ambiguous status of Krishna as object of both erotic and religious devotion. This ambiguity is manifest in the awkward isolation of Radha at the center, in the *sakhis*' lack of interaction with Krishna, and in the treatment and placement of Krishna's body, which, as if bounded within the frame of a portrait painting, hangs on the wall. In another verse on the back, two *sakhis* say to each other:

Facing everyone for a moment, her glance shifts, turning away from all,
Like a mystic's magic bowl divines the guilty thief, it rests on that side.¹⁷

The *sakhis* seem to know that Krishna's figure exists in their space, as the verse establishes ("rests on that side"). The painting plays on a standard *riti* description of the heroine who openly displays love upon seeing her lover's portrait. Because Krishna seems alive only for Radha, the painting implies that, for lovers, the act of representation is double edged. It reminds the lover of the beloved's absence even as it makes the beloved more tangible.

Krishna's beauty is so enchanting that his *gopis* and his worshipers call him *citcor*, "thief of consciousness." Radha's presence of mind has been stolen. She is unaware of her

Figure 10. *Restlessness of Love*, from Bihari's *Satasai*, India, state of Kangra, Punjab Hills, ca. 1780–90. Opaque watercolor and gold on paper, 19.7 x 14.0 cm. Collection of Cynthia Hazen Polsky

surroundings. Her shifting glance gives her away, just as the divination bowl reveals her thieving lover. But Braj words have complex etymologies and double meanings; the word *kavilanvi*, “magic bowl” or “divination bowl,” can also mean a Muslim’s compass that the orients the believer toward Mecca at the time of prayer. Thus the same two lines can be translated as:

Facing everyone for a moment, her glance shifts, turning away from all,
It rests on that side, like the faithful’s compass finds Mecca.

The double meaning of a single word—*kavilanvi*—places Krishna in the space of the religious.

Many North Indian devotional movements enlivened paintings for worship. The final act of inserting the eyes was believed to transform a painted image into a live deity. Once enlivened, the image was regarded by worshipers not just as a representation of Krishna but as Krishna himself. Devotees sought *darshan*, the ritual exchanging of the gaze between devotee and god through this enlivened image. Krishna’s *darshan* transmitted his divine grace to his devotee. In turn, the devotee performed for him a series of daily rituals known as *puja* or *seva* (service). These rituals included the morning awakening, bathing, lunchtime feast offering, and live musical entertainment. At night, Krishna paintings and images were covered with curtains so he could sleep. Through such a cycle of rituals, a personal relationship with Krishna was developed and the devotee’s life became oriented around him. This ritual process also altered Krishna’s status: he ceased to inhabit just the heavens but instead became a welcome and exalted resident of human households.

In this page, Krishna’s seating and framing imply his royal and divine status. Like Rajput and Mughal royal portraits, he is presented in partial profile. He is placed in a *jharokha*, or throne-window, where Rajput and Mughal kings sat to give audience. But the *jharokha* also calls to mind the *mihrab* or niche in a mosque wall that indicates the direction of Mecca, and the rolled-up curtain suggests a painting in a home altar or a temple wall. Though none of the verses on the back refer to Krishna as an active participant in the scene, the artist animates him. His head has turned toward Radha; her presence draws his gaze toward her. The hierarchical arrangement, in which Krishna is ensconced in his throne-window and all others are in the pavilion, is subverted as he bends his head in reciprocal desire.

Other verses on the back of the painting indicate Radha’s longing for Krishna. In a conversation between her and the *sakhi*, Radha confesses her uncontrollable desire to gaze at Krishna:

Looking at Krishna’s dark body, they have no regard for honor or dishonor,
What can I do? These flirtatious, desirous eyes go toward him.

In another verse, she tells the *sakhi*:

I stand filled with his head-to-toe form. Still these eyes ask for a smile,
They will not abandon their covetous nature.¹⁸

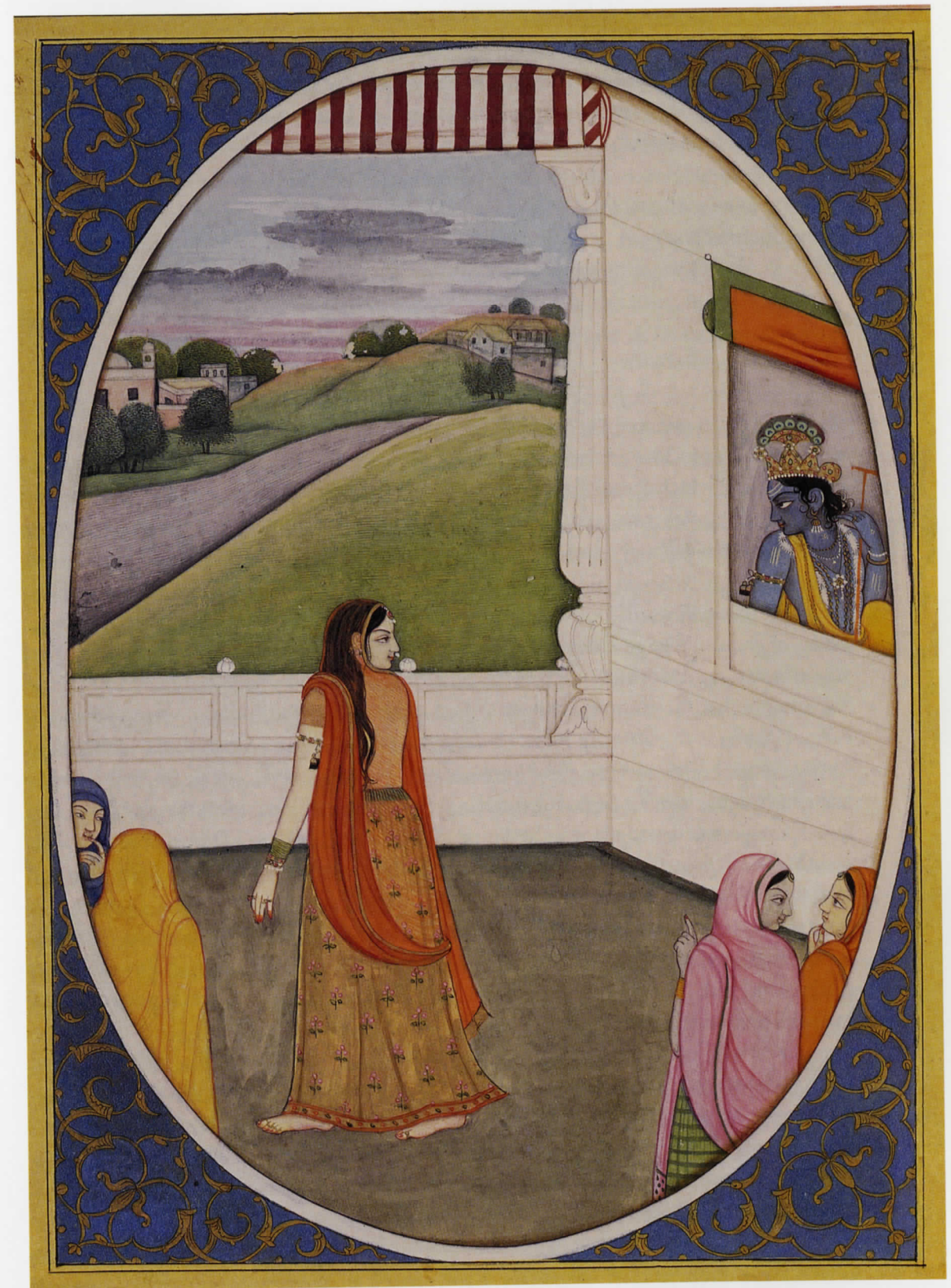


Figure 11. *Meeting of the Eyes*, from Bihari’s *Satasai*, India, state of Kangra, Punjab Hills, ca. 1780–90. Opaque watercolor and gold on paper, 21.3 x 15.2 cm. Collection of Gursharan and Elvira Sidhu

Radha's overpowering yearning undermines one of the standard subjects of *riti* poetry—a woman's physical beauty described from head to toe (*nakh-sikh*) to paint a word-picture for the reader. Here Krishna's body is the object of Radha's ardor. Viewing and interpreting this *Satasai* page as a conversation between the *sakhi* and Radha allows the viewer "unmediated" access to her feelings. She is not only the object of physical admiration but also subject to her own desire. Viewers can identify with the emotions of several figures: Radha's longing for Krishna, Krishna's enjoyment of Radha, or the *sakhis'* general sense of astonishment.

The *Sakhi* as Mediator

This brief exploration of the figure of the *sakhi* in two painted texts suggests avenues for rethinking Rajput love imagery that take into account contemporaneous religious and court cultures which found ways to integrate eroticism, mysticism, aesthetic pleasure, and devotion. The *sakhi* was a crucial intermediary figure in bringing about reconciliations between what today may seem like disparate or irreconcilable positions to occupy in face of the divine.

Like his fellow *riti* poets, Rupa Gosvamin, a sixteenth-century theologian and a leader of the Gaudiya sect devoted to Krishna worship, wrote a commentary on the *Gita Govinda* that represented Krishna as the classic hero and Radha as the archetypal heroine. Rupa wrote that the amorous attitude is best cultivated by the young women of Braj; for them, Krishna is the ultimate lover. He identified these *gopis* as a group of friends led by Radha. Among these *sakhis*, some have greater love for Krishna, some for Radha, while some have equal love for both. Rupa advocated as the devotional ideal the *sakhi's* unceasing and selfless desire to witness the union of Radha and Krishna. The concept of a *sakhi* assisting the divine couple during their love-play is particularly entrenched in the Gaudiya sect. Its male leaders often envisioned themselves as *sakhis*, performing female gender roles in rituals. Only as *sakhis* did they see themselves gaining access to the amorous path, the apex of religious experience. As David Haberman points out, it is through these paradigmatic *sakhis* that "the entire emotional world of Krishna-lila [love-play] is portrayed and made accessible" to Krishna's human devotees.¹⁹

Reworking established *rasa* (mood) theories of aesthetics for his *bhakti* theology, Rupa wrote that the erotic mood was essential in achieving the attitude of *shringara*, or "love in devotion." After attaining this mood, worshipers faced two possibilities. They could either imagine direct sexual pleasure with Krishna or vicariously enjoy the emotional experience of any *gopi*, especially of Radha.²⁰ Rupa privileged the second possibility. Instead of solely seeking self-gratification, the ideal devotee participated in Radha's love affair as a supportive spectator. By refashioning the *sakhi's* role, Rupa reconciled vicarious, selfless enjoyment with the self-centered pleasure of religious voyeurism. The devotee as friend could altruistically participate in Krishna and Radha's love-play while experiencing a visceral, erotic bliss (*ananda*). Voyeurism in this devotional context is inextricably linked to *darshan*, the act of ritual gazing that communicates the worshiper's love to the god and

bestows the god's grace on the devotee, as well as to *puja*, a form of worship enacted with enlivened images of the deity. Rupa believed that the *sakhis'* attainment of bliss would inspire others to follow their path of worship.

Rupa's *sakhis* flaunt and operate outside the strictures of ordinary society. They are willing to do anything for the union of the divine couple. Through their assistance, Radha and Krishna overcome shyness, personal quarrels, and social barriers, encountering each other beyond the boundaries of social norms. Rupa's elaborate theology joins selfless devotion to the achievement of *ananda* or bliss. In the process, the devotee's soul is salvaged. Rupa's Gaudiya sect rejected many conventions of religious worship even as it subscribed to others. For Rupa, friendship signified equality, selflessness, and self-gratification. Yet in his theology, viewing Krishna and Radha's illicit love in forest bowers hidden from a disapproving society also bears fruit for their *sakhis*.

By contrast, *riti* poetry is not concerned primarily with creating alternative or emancipatory modes of worship. The poems and paintings locate their emotional and aesthetic power in the social status quo. Public settings are needed for the poems' narrative goals. Though romantic love ostensibly happens between and inside two people, *riti* as a genre is most interested in how it can be brought to the surface and exhibited in society. Although the lovers struggle for privacy and unmediated contact, *riti* poets rarely allow them this insularity. Love remains an aesthetic and social event always in progress; the lovers never ride off into a happily-ever-after sunset. Though she is only a "substructure," the *sakhi* remains in the picture, mediating between the lovers and the reader as a messenger and as an observer. The *sakhi* who comes from the margins of society (barber woman, bangle seller) gains a limited subjectivity by trafficking and policing the love affair. The *sakhi's* work is the lovers' and reader-viewer's pleasure.

Both *bhakti* and court poets have long mined the love story of Krishna and Radha for literary and pictorial effect. In both religious and courtly settings, there is frank glorification of their beauty and sexuality. Yet my readings of the painted poetry highlight a powerful discourse of eroticism that revolves on the secret display of feelings, on the lovers' covert actions, and on their exposure by *sakhis*. The range of love sentiments expressed and validated seems both distant from and interior to the Rajput courts in which these paintings were made. The solitary male and the ubiquitous female presence suggest that throughout these texts, sentiments of love and romance are best expressed in the company of women. This suggestion is substantiated by another genre of Rajput love painting, one I have not addressed, that depicts male rulers being entertained and gratified in women's quarters. Many such paintings bear inscriptions that identify historical persons; many others remain anonymous. Indian art-historical scholarship is just beginning to address such works in a critical manner.²¹

The historic viewers and the viewing situations of erotic paintings are relatively undocumented. The question of who is allowed to feel what, where, and how is unexplored. The love of gods presented in a devotional setting, the love of gods reproduced for contemplation in the court, and the sexuality of a ruler represented in explicit detail are all different and need to be analyzed as such. Rajputs participated in religious *bhakti* movements like those of Rupa Gosvamin and patronized *riti* poets like Bihari. They also commissioned many other kinds of painting. Images of love and eroticism are one strand in

the fabric of Rajput subjectivity, just as paintings are only one context for the performance of longing and desire.

The artist's and viewer's point of view are primarily located in the *sakhi's* female body. Simultaneously, the viewer's desire may masculinize a beelike messenger. The fluid embodiment of the artist and the viewer in the paintings throws into question Rajput conceptions of gender. Is there a third sex, a third gender, a third way of looking? Ways of seeing must be historicized by studying gender as a powerful ideology that permeates art, in this case Rajput images of love. Only then can we understand the values and ideologies signified by these paintings of love, sex, and devotion. ∞

Notes

1. Jayadeva, *The Love Song of the Dark Lord: Jayadeva's Gitagovinda*, ed. and trans. Barbara Stoler Miller (New York: Columbia University Press, 1977), p. 118.
2. Bihari, *Satasai*, ed. Sri Jagannath Das "Ratnakar" (Varanasi: Granthkar, 1965), verse 7. All translations of Bihari are mine.
3. The two *Gita Govinda* manuscripts on which I have focused are from the Pahari Hills, produced within seventy-five years of each other and sharing a close textual and artistic relationship. The artists who made these manuscripts have been stylistically and genealogically linked by art historian B. N. Goswamy; many of the pages reproduced here are not only from the same text but are part of the same workshop tradition.
4. Lee Siegel, *Sacred and Profane Dimensions of Love in Indian Traditions as Exemplified in the Gita Govinda of Jayadeva* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1978), p. 135; Jayadeva, *Love Song of the Dark Lord*, trans. Miller, p. 78.
5. Jayadeva, *Love Song of the Dark Lord*, trans. Miller, p. 80.
6. *Ibid.*, p. 90.
7. *Ibid.*, pp. 90, 91.
8. *Ibid.*, p. 125.
9. Bihari, *Satasai*, verse 1.
10. Keshavadasa, *Rasikapriya* (New Delhi: National Museum, 1962), p. 41. The translation is mine.
11. Bihari, *Satasai*, verse 399.
12. *Ibid.*, verse 248.
13. *The Complete Kama Sutra*, ed. and trans. Alain Danielou (Rochester, Vt.: Park Street Press, 1994), p. 205.
14. Bihari, *Satasai*, verse 417.
15. *Ibid.*, verses 44, 50, 51.
16. *Ibid.*, verse 32.
17. *Ibid.*, verse 30.
18. *Ibid.*, verses 157, 158.
19. David L. Haberman, *Acting as a Way of Salvation* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1988), p. 56.
20. In the Gaudiya understanding of Krishna and Radha's love-play, a special *sakhi*, the *manjari*, serves Krishna and Radha's needs during their lovemaking. For the role of the *manjari*, see *ibid.*, p. 108.
21. See Molly Emma Aitken, "Spectatorship and Femininity in Kangra Miniature Painting," in *Representing the Body: Gender Issues in Indian Art*, ed. Vidya Dehejia (New Delhi: Kali for Women, 1997), pp. 82–101.