



## A Perilous Desire: A Review Essay of SherAli Tareen's *Perilous Intimacies: Debating Hindu-Muslim Friendship After Empire*

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*Perilous Intimacies* is a book about desire because sovereignty, SherAli Tareen teaches us, is bound to desire.<sup>1</sup> Sovereignty is, he writes, “animated by the desire for and attachment to supremacy over the religious other through the maintenance of embodied distinction in everyday life” (11). It is a “desire for dominance through distinction” (11). In this brief essay, I provide an idiosyncratic reading of desire as it appears and disappears within Tareen’s brilliant text.

Desire raises difficult questions. If we follow Jacques Lacan, desire is constituted by a fundamental lack in the subject. Yet this lack is not experienced as such as an object appears as the part that is lost (*objet a*), constituting desire with a promise of consistency.<sup>2</sup> Desire is caused by an impossible object and, thus, always evades satisfaction while also remaining inscribed within the subject (Lacan 2006b).<sup>3</sup> There is a continual pursuit in order to settle the object in its place and produce homeostasis, which only elicits more desire all the while maintaining fantasy – a fantasy that hides the very impossibility of the subject. Fantasy then does not obfuscate reality; rather, as Slavoj Žižek writes, “what precedes fantasy is not reality but a *hole* in reality, its *point of impossibility* filled in with fantasy” (Žižek 2008 [1997], xiv). More simply put, the subject desires *objet a*, which also serves as the support for fantasy, sanctioning a tolerant reality in the giving of an identity to the subject.

Tareen does not employ fantasy in the sense I invoke it here. Still, for Tareen, fantasy is constituted by sovereignty, which he defines as the “fantasy of distinction and supremacy over the other” (11). If we read Lacan and Tareen together, fantasy involves sovereignty – a distinction and supremacy over the other – but an always impossible sovereignty. Desire is tied to sovereignty, but also a sovereignty that was not and cannot be, possessed

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<sup>1</sup>Scholars have started to explore these relationships between desire, fantasy, and sovereignty (Khoja-Moolji 2021; Mian 2023).

<sup>2</sup>Lacan writes, “Desire, a function central to all human experience, is the desire for nothing nameable. And at the same time this desire lies at the origin of every variety of animation. If being were only what it is, there wouldn’t even be room to talk about it. Being comes into existence as an exact function of this lack” (Lacan 1991, 223). Also, the field of reality, Lacan writes, is sustained “only by the extraction of object a, which nevertheless gives [the field of reality] its frame” (Lacan 2006a, 487, fn. 14).

<sup>3</sup>Such an object then is a fantasmatic incarnation of a gap, what Lacan calls the metonymy of desire (Lacan 2006b, 439). As Lacan writes, “And the enigmas that desire ... poses for any sort of ‘natural philosophy’ are based on no other derangement of instinct than the fact that it is caught in the rails of metonymy – eternally extending toward the desire for something else” (Lacan 2006b, 431). Put another way, desire for the lost object, the cause and effect, is verbalized in a chain of signifiers, but can never be expressed or satisfied – because of a gap between signifiers – yet still ordered by language. This is what Lacan calls the symbolic order which gives the subject a mandate.

(Pandolfo 2018; Mian 2019b). To put it pithily, “we have never been sovereign,” although fantasy suggests and promises otherwise (Judge 2024).

Because the lost object was neither lost nor possessed, it is not stable and, therefore, Tareen demonstrates the way Muslims sought to satiate desire is elusive and has shifted.<sup>4</sup> For Tareen, different fantasies developed around sovereignty as new ways to mark distinctions between self and other emerged. How does one manage “hierarchies of difference” to follow Tareen’s theorizations (11)? How were fantasies (re)established to cover the very impossibility of desire? How do we understand an impossible reconciliation with the lost object, that elusive object cause and effect of desire?

Historically speaking, fantasies emerged, Tareen argues, from both an imperial Muslim political theology, but also the loss of Muslim sovereign power. As Tareen notes, “... often it is precisely in the absence of political sovereignty that the desire of an imperial political theology is most urgent and immediate” (21). Because there is no “real” object, because sovereignty is absent, the chapters oscillate between different objects that constituted desires and the fantasies that ensued from these “lost” objects as well as what we can say are symptoms, which are, Alenka Zupančič writes, “subjective solution[s] to some contradiction or impasse,” a solution for when the fantasy can only be maintained (Zupančič 2017, 66).

One example: “the everyday performance of Muslim identity in the public sphere emerged as a synecdoche for sovereignty,” writes Tareen (24). So, the desire for sovereignty became tied to policing the behaviors and ritual as well as marking “the force[s] disrupting stable social identity.” If it were not for *them*, then society would be harmonious and, thus, sovereign as distinctions and hierarchies would be clear and settled.

Let us take a more precise example. The focus of Tareen’s second chapter is the Shahjahanpur polemic between Mohammad Qasim Nanautvi, Dayanada Saraswati, and Father Knowles in 1876, which, as Tareen describes, “brought together leading Hindu, Muslim, and Christian missionary scholars in India to debate and contest the authenticity of their respective religious traditions and doctrinal systems” (27). In the polemic, Tareen contends we can see how the object that oriented the desire for sovereignty was “the product of a modern colonial episteme that equated religious authenticity with divine sovereignty” (85, 109). And this object was “religion” (114). The desire in the polemic was to authenticate this object, to discover it, and corral it, which required new forms of knowledge and evidentiary criteria, including the protocols of a newly emergent discipline, History. Historicist procedures became paramount in the debates, Tareen demonstrates, as claims and rebuttals privileged a unilinear, progressive, and teleological time. Thus, to obtain this object “religion”, one had to become a transcendental subject aligned with a transcendental law, which was, eventually, bound to History in a resolution promised by “transcendental poesis” as Denise Ferreira da Silva has it (da Silva 2007, 70).<sup>5</sup> Most of all, one had to eliminate desire, reconciliation beckoning once again and vulnerability removed.<sup>6</sup>

<sup>4</sup>This is the case both diachronically but also synchronically in the re-orientations toward desire such as in mystical experiences as Ali Altaf Mian has insightfully examined (Mian 2019a, 132).

<sup>5</sup>For transcendental subject, I refer here to Immanuel Kant, who produces, Denise Ferreira da Silva writes, “a universal ruler that operates in the mind” in which “the universal foundation of truth now resides fully in interiority” (da Silva 2007, 62).

<sup>6</sup>But, of course, this is an impossible project, and the will takes center stage to battle itself as Lorraine Daston and Peter Galison detail in the rise of objectivity as an epistemic virtue – a virtue which must be situated in relation to race (Daston and Galison 2007). For vulnerability, consider, to give one example, Charles Lock (2021).

Tareen traces this key rupture by examining one central question asked during the polemic: “Whose miracle is most miraculous (113)?” Such a question only garners legibility in a conceptual space in which there are assumptions “that miracles represent objects readily available for verification, evaluation, comparison, and rationalization” (113).

The shift Tareen traces has to do with a change in how causality and intention were understood in which miracles played a central theoretical role. It is a longer shift in the history of epistemology and the development of a philosophical form of life that scholars have examined in detail.<sup>7</sup> To put it simply, “nature’s habits had become laws, and deviations were no longer permitted” (Daston 1988, 51). Causality becomes naturalized (Daston 1988, 51; Daston and Stolles 2008; Daston 2022). This was a long and drawn-out change, if we want to call it that, tied to Christian theology. For example, as Lorraine Daston and Katharine Park explain, whereas for Augustine all nature reflected divine commands, for Thomas of Cantimpré, nature came to possess “an independent internal order located in the chains of causes that produced particular phenomena” (Daston and Park 2001, 48–49). We see the emergence of a split between the supernatural and natural as cause and effect become autonomous sequences in nature, although the natural could be disrupted by God, the supernatural.<sup>8</sup> Eventually, with René Descartes, we see “laws of nature” emerge (Descartes 1985).<sup>9</sup> “Thus, God imparted various motions to the parts of matter when he first created them, and he now preserves all this matter in the same way, and by the same process by which he originally created it,” writes Descartes (Descartes 1985, 240).<sup>10</sup> We see then, as Daston explains, that “nature was nothing more than matter in motion, an elaborate engine crafted by God,” even though God’s relation to this engine remained a matter of debate (Daston 2022, 226–7).<sup>11</sup> But a problem arises, a particular one: how to reconcile the wonder aroused by miracles with the knowledge guaranteed by causality?

Perhaps, following this all-too brief gloss, we can say that the questions Nanautvi struggled with were Christian ones. His thought, we learn from Tareen, was “arrested in the irresolvable contradiction of seeking to demonstrate the indemonstrable, historicize the incredible, and rationalize the uncanny” (113). He tried to reconcile wonder with a naturalized causality. It was an irresolvable contradiction he thought he could solve by historicizing. He desired resolution to the impossible in a Christian manner: the promise of transcendental poesis to reconcile the internal with external.

<sup>7</sup>I borrow philosophical form of life from Steven Shapin and Simon Schaffer (1985). The changes, however, can be read as too stark and I am here arguing there is a Christian question that we must ask (Gillespie 2009; Anidjar 2014).

<sup>8</sup>There is also the preternatural, which Daston covers in length elsewhere (Daston 1991).

<sup>9</sup>Descartes writes, “From God’s immutability we can also know certain rules or laws of nature, which are the secondary and particular causes of the various motions we see in particular bodies” (Descartes 1985, 240). God was the general cause to Descartes.

<sup>10</sup>This follows from Descartes’s reasoning in relation to causality: “God is the primary cause of motion; and he always preserves the same quantity of motion in the universe” (Descartes 1985, 240).

<sup>11</sup>The question stretches to the shift toward a nominalism, but one can also consider the debates between Isaac Newton and Gottfried Leibniz. The problem was that leading scientists had, as Peter Harrison writes, “a dual commitment on the one hand to a science premised upon a mechanical universe governed by immutable laws of nature and on the other to an omnipotent God who intervened in the natural order from time to time, breaching these ‘laws’ of nature” (Harrison 1995, 531). One might also consider Kant, who further locates laws within the subject. He writes: “the being of the world is not as it is simply because God wishes to have it so, but because it was not possible in any other way” (Terada 2009, 86).

The Christian conditions of possibility that Tareen highlights demonstrate the results of an impulse toward naturalization. In these shifting coordinates, intentionality becomes more and more suspicious, losing evidentiary status, especially as anxiety about diabolical and human imposture spread (Daston 1991, 118).<sup>12</sup> New ailments appear: the passions and wonder especially superstition and enthusiasm (Daston 1988, 162; Daston and Park 2001, 329–363; Hirschman 1997 [1977]). These passions are tied to the subject and the subject's desire, which now becomes a problem too since decision-making should be tied rational self-interest in the use of probabilistic reason.<sup>13</sup> It becomes critical to eliminate desire as a transcendental subject comes to the fore, one who possesses what, we can call, an epistemological autonomy or, at the very least, prudent decision-making (Daston and Park 2001, 237; Daston 1988, 67).

Although the passions become a problem and self-interest takes root, there remain, of course, Christian desires that conjure objects across the world. As Tareen writes, the polemic in Shahjahanpur was constituted by desire and, he writes, “the underlying normative desires and anxieties that compelled them to advance their arguments ... were not of their choosing” (85). Consider this example. Tareen locates the public display of truth as essential to making the polemic possible. He argues that “the spectatorship of a public readily available to be preached to, doctrinally persuaded, and reformed” was now essential to the new terrain (110). There was a desire to garner assent of a public through rational deliberation. This mirrors the shift in Christian theology I have gestured toward. Whereas miracles were, Daston explains, “associated with the private experience of grace,” rather than public evidence, they became sites for public verification as “Protestant theologians intent on discrediting sacramental miracles insisted on “a public and visible demonstrations” of the miracles (Daston 1991, 95, 114).<sup>14</sup> Perhaps, then, in the polemic, Father Knowles was not necessarily one participant amongst others in the formation of a modern public as Tareen argues, but engaged in Christian polemics with Saraswati and Nanautvi.

The Protestant critique of miracle was tied to another question: why would God need to perform miracles to re-prove what was already established in scripture? As the public display of truth alongside scripture took precedence, miracles became objects that needed evidence and, to ward off potential fraudulence, miracles had to function harmoniously with preexisting doctrine (Daston 1991, 119–120). There had to be, to use a historian's language, correspondence between the primary sources and their context. At the same time in the 17<sup>th</sup> Century, this correspondence is also critical to the emergence of a secular theology that some call History, but perhaps is better termed the banality of Christianity (Funkenstein 1986; Ginzburg 2010).

We see this banality in the polemic as Tareen highlights how hadith shifts away from questions of ethical conduct in relation to the Divine and becomes a historical document that serves as evidence to authenticate miracles. Hadith is turned into the “pre-existing doctrine” that comes to legitimate the miracle to follow Daston's line

<sup>12</sup>Against intentionality, regularity takes root. As Daston and Park write, “These new evidentiary criteria signaled a new metaphysics that favored nature's regularities over its variability, as well as a new epistemology that feared the acceptance of the false more than the exclusion of the true” (Daston and Park 2001, 252).

<sup>13</sup>As Ian Hacking writes, “Probability was the shield by which a rational man might guard himself against Enthusiasm” (Hacking 1990, 89).

<sup>14</sup>Helen Parish explains, “the re-evaluation of the miracles of the medieval church was to be an important part of the shaping of a historical identity for the nascent Protestant church” (Parish 2015, 100).

of argumentation. For example, Tareen highlights a degenerative miracle: the moon-splitting event from hadith. The hadith, for Nanautvi, were exemplarily historical documents because they were a perfect account that could authenticate the miracle. There is then a promise of reconciliation between the historical account and the miracle – a promise of reconciliation that elicits desire while also remaining an impossibility.

Who could deny that History is constituted by the promise of reconciliation, which is a desire to lay to rest that phantasmatic object that continues to enthrall: the past? The desires History conjures promise reintegration of the past into the present, but also to make primary sources correspond to their context. And yet there is also endless deferral, although the desire for the final gap to be filled persists.<sup>15</sup> “Philius Fillagap and Lucy Lacuna” are seductive, alluring, especially since “Historyland” remains an attractive destination (Cohn 1987, 21). This is not to say there are not critiques, but the temptation, the promise, remains now – even the critiques are historicized today – but then too. Indeed, as Tareen explains, even “for Nanautvi, history represented the discursive battleground on which the authenticity of a religious tradition was to be contested and determined” (98).

One could say that in *Perilous Intimacies*, Nanautvi himself is reconciled to his context, to his episteme – a methodological move that reaffirms Christian desires and promises. Yet by tracking and trailing multiple forms and articulations of desire, Tareen importantly does not secure an object of desire, looking for reconciliation; Tareen does not secure correspondence or harmony nor does he offer its promise. As he writes, his goal is to disturb and disrupt, to challenge “pathological inheritances” (271–272). But we also know the dangers of the desire for the normal against the pathological (Canguilhem 1991). That distinction itself is another inheritance, one that should trouble us, especially as Tareen unsettles the promises of harmony that lead to condemnation of subjects to shore up the always impossible fantasy. Consider for example the role of the fundamentalist or traditionalist in liberal secular democracy. The promise of liberal democracy is that there could be a functioning pluralistic society if not for the Jew, if not for the Muslim, if not for the Khalistani, if not for Hamas.

But we can say instead that by centering the multiple objects desired in colonial South Asia, Tareen takes us away from a desired object, disturbs us, as the recuperative returns us to absence, to borrow from Anjali Arondekar (2009). Tareen reorients desire because we are asked to pause our pursuit to capture or fortify an object. Instead, failure itself is the goal as we drive at an object without end. In this drive, the goal is to encircle without incorporation, without domination, to encounter the other as an enigma, which returns us to the question of hospitality, friendship, and the Other, what Tareen calls, perilous intimacies. The peril is in dissipating objects conjured in the desire for sovereignty. It is a dissipation that requires one drive at “something strange to me, although it is at the heart of me” (Lacan 1991, 71).

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<sup>15</sup> borrow from Marika Rose’s brilliant analysis. She writes, “Linear, teleological desire, aiming consciously at the reintegration of the lost object and unconsciously at its endless deferral, is associated with time and with historical progress; circular, repetitious drive, which simply circles around the hole at the center of being is associated with eternity” (Rose 2019, 65).

## Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

## Notes on contributor

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