Sacred & Profane Season 2, Episode 2: "Field Notes: In the Halo of a Moment"

[00:00:00] **Kurtis Schaeffer:** I'm Kurtis Schaeffer.

[00:00:02] **Martien Halvorson-Taylor**: And I'm Martien Halvorson-Talyor. And this is Sacred and Profane. Last week, we brought you the story of how American Buddhism broadened American principles of religious freedom—thanks largely to thousands of people of Japanese descent who were forcibly removed from their homes by the government during WWII—including a Zen priest and poet named Nygoen Senzaki.

[00:00:37] **Kurtis Schaeffer:** This week, we'll be diving into our archives to highlight some of the great documentary work by students here at the University of Virginia. And we couldn't help thinking of a piece from grad student Meghan Hartman, which also prominently features poetry that pushes boundaries; specifically, the work of the poet Mira-ji. Mira-ji was the pen name of Muhammed Sanaullah Dar. Dar wrote striking, modernist poetry in Urdu. The height of his literary career came at a time of great possibility - as India moved towards independence from the British Empire. But the years before independence also saw divisions along religious lines—particularly between the Hindu majority and the large Muslim community — grow, harden, and become more violent.

[00:01:29] **Martien Halvorson-Taylor:** Which makes it all the more remarkable that while Dar was Muslim, his alter ego, Mira-ji, was a Hindu woman, whose poetry pushed against the boundaries of religious and gender identities, as well as standard concepts of time. And it all hangs on a word. We'll let Meghan take it from here.

[00:01:58] **Meghan Hartman:** Alone in a hospital room, with only a book as his witness, he finally got his wish: he died. As he had lay deteriorating, his body slowly turning in on itself, he would say to Akhtar ul-Imān, his dear friend, "ilāhi! Agar Mīrā jī ko sahat nahin ho sakti to unhen maut de de. Kam az kam isī taklīf se to nijāt ho jayegi."

[00:02:25] **Meghan Hartman:** "God, if Mira ji can't have health, then give him death. At least he will be free from this suffering."

[00:02:35] **Meghan Hartman:** So God listened to him. He died in the evening on November 3rd, 1949 in the King Edward Memorial Hospital of Mumbai. He was 37. But it is hard to be sure which suffering exactly Mira ji was referring to. Was it the crippling loneliness after nearly all of his friends had abandoned him? Or was it his fellow poets kicking him out of the literary circles which Mira ji had considered family, unlike the conniptive kinship tie of his brother who had long ago sold some of Mira ji's work to serve as packaging for veggies? Or was it the tumors enflaming his body? Or was it the doctors threatening to "correct" him with electro-shock therapy, straightening out a "seemingly" بھٹکا ہوا شاعر, a wayward poet as one biographer later dubbed him, rather unceremoniously? Or was it amorphous frustrations that to be different, to be queer, to write startlingly new poetry in a new genre, would just land you in the pits of ridicule?

[00:03:42] **Meghan Hartman:** Maybe all those painful questions pulsated as intensely as the tumors engulfing his body. But isī taklīf, this suffering. His emphasis on particularity, this, isī, a demonstrative so sure of a "here" and "now." So completely confident in space-time, in the halo of a moment seemingly demarcating the past from the future, as if a moment were a forge between two mountains.

[00:04:12] **Meghan Hartman:** This suffering. This. Mira ji had spent a life time of writing Urdu poetry, crafting a new genre of long narrative poems called "nazms," which would unmoor our faith in a clean definition of time and space, mixing up the chain of past-present-future, unsettling any reliance on chronology really. His nazms would always measure our measurements of time and remind us: What is a millisecond from a cosmic perspective? What is a second to a god? What does that look like?

[00:04:48] **Meghan Hartman:** So maybe, as he withered on the hospital bed with his book and shouted out to God to be free of this suffering, this actually referred to a moment which had accumulated other fossil-moments buried deep with memories not only belonging to him – but memories of other epochs, like the time of a pre-colonial India without British oppression, without British technologies of cruelty in the forms of outright massacres, or more subtly suffused in the syllabi of schools…or the time of Prince Siddhartha, poised to become the Buddha, which then wound up painted on the walls of the Ajanta Caves, which then trickled from the open veins of those living rocks into the eyes of Mira ji standing before them, who then wrote a poem about it. Ajanta ke ghār, "The Caves of Ajanta." Fossilized space-time enchanted Mira ji.

[00:05:44] **Meghan Hartman:** But all of this is not to say that Mira ji was an escapist or apolitical, though many of his contemporaries and biographers lobbed such insults. Mira ji was much more brilliant than he received credit for. He understood that he was a creature of his social environment as much as he was an accretion of multiple time streams coalescing in his body. So as anti-colonial efforts gathered more and more steam, but began to ring in monochromatic colors, Mira ji meanwhile was crafting his non-identity politics, his slippery dance between inter-temporal dimensions, first darting to the time of gods in Krishna's Brindavan, then taking a pit-stop at the beginning of time. His resistance came in these subtler ways, etched into the scaffolding and themes of poems, or the resistance to succumb to simple definitions of identity… he was always pluralizing and specifying.

[00:06:38] **Meghan Hartman:** Perhaps that is why Miraji liked small words like (isī meaning 'this') or magar (meaning but). He liked small words because he saw worlds in them. Proliferating worlds saved from the brink of extinction, always a kaleidoscopic fervor. He once wrote this about a tiny little conjunction we call "but:"

"مگر۔۔۔ یہ مگر بھی عجیب لفظ ہے۔ میں سمجھتا ہوں کہ یہ لفظ بڑھتی ہوئی زندگی کی علامت ہے جہاں ایک فقرے کی بستی معدوم ہونے لگے۔ یہ مختصر سا لفظ اسے موت سے بچا کر آگے بڑھا دیتا ہے۔"

[00:07:20] **Meghan Hartman:** "But – this is a wondrous word too. I understand that this word [but] is a symbol of ever-expanding life where the existence of a phrase would begin to slip into extinction. This somewhat brief word saves the phrase from death and amplifies it."

[00:07:39] **Meghan Hartman:** His jagged ending of a life cut short is – or at least I'd like to think so – his version of a "but." Though he died alone with only four people attending his funeral, his death has left him hanging in a wide open space, not exactly a void or an abyss, but a large expanse, the types of expanse he would write about in his poems, where you feel like the ecstasies of dissolving into a vital space, where breath and air start to merge. Though Mira ji lies buried somewhere in Marine Line Cemetery, he still speaks through his poems and essays today. I would like to think that I can still hear your voice whenever one encounters the worlds you created in your poetry. One of your fellow writers once described your voice like this:

آواز بہت عمدہ اور بھاری پائی تھی۔ ریڈیو پر اکثر ڈراموں میں بولتے تھے۔"

[00:08:30] **Meghan Hartman:** "His voice had been rich and full of gravitas. On the radio he often used to perform plays." And another writer-friend wrote this:

میراجی گراموفون کی طرح بولتے رہے۔ یوں تو میرا جی کو گفتگو کا بڑا سلیقہ تھا۔ "

[00:08:46] **Meghan Hartman:** "Miraji would speak like a gramophone. That was his flare in conversation." Mira ji, your voice still echoes in every present moment. We hear you.

[00:09:15] **Kurtis Schaeffer:** This project was funded by the Religion, Race and Democracy Lab at the University of Virginia. It was created by Meghan Hartman. Ashley Duffalo is our communications manager. Our senior producer is Emily Gadek. Kelly Jones is the Lab's editor.

[00:09:32] **Martien Halvorson-Taylor:** Next week, we'll be returning with a full length episode of Sacred & Profane. Stay tuned.