



# EKPHRASTIC POETRY AND INDIAN MINIATURE PAINTINGS: ARTISTRY AND AESTHETICS OF DEBASISH LAHIRI'S *TETHER THAT LIGHT*

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## ABSTRACT

For an internationally acclaimed Indian English poet, Debasish Lahiri, time is a recording of the lingering of light, in nature, in the mind. His recent collection of poems, *Tether that Light* (2022) is an attempt to follow that trail of light left in selected Indian miniature paintings, particularly Mughal, Rajasthani, Pahari, and Deccani paintings. The intricate artworks and enchanting visuals of these incredible canvases have enthralled the poet who uses the treasure trove of Indian miniatures that work as intertexts for his ekphrastic collection of poems. Given the pictorial effect of words appearing as miniature paintings, the flawless transformation from one medium to the other, Lahiri's symbiosis between literary texts and performing arts, poetry, and painting, foregrounds how concepts, attitudes, and ideologies operate across a broader cultural spectrum that is not exclusively literary. Transcending the borders of time and space, *Tether that Light* not only makes way for a larger interdisciplinarity between sister arts but opens up new avenues for interrogating notions of historicity, textuality and appropriations.

**Keywords:** Miniature Paintings, Ekphrastic Poetry, Intertexts, Cultural Memory, Fluidity, Historicity, Rasa, Abhisarika Nayika, Ashta Nayika, Radha, Krishna

## 1. INTRODUCTION

*Tether that Light* (2022), an ekphrastic collection of poems by a contemporary Indian English poet, derives its inspiration from a maze of Indian miniature paintings and we are drawn into a historically rich, majestic, grand painterly world. The poet immerses us in a mystic world of royal opulence, grandiosity, and elegance. This is a pristine world of artistry, visuals, and aesthetics. The beauty of such miniature canvases echoes and resonates throughout Debasish Lahiri's poems, evocatively titled, *Tether That Light* (henceforth *Tether*). The collection documents

how cultural memory, in the shape of Indian miniature paintings, flows from an immemorial, legendary past to a contemporary politically striated present.

In *Tether*, Lahiri has creatively borrowed from the love legend of Radha and Krishna and his poems are beautifully titled, *Finding Radha*, *Radha by Alien Water*, *Radha: Reverie in Eventide*. Radha-Krishna poems in this collection are entirely the outcome of the poet's rich and vivid imagination. In the poems in the *Dusk Triptych* section like *Lost*, *Dusk Surprise*, and *Astray*, there has been a grand appropriation of the Radha Krishna myth found in Indian miniature canvases. Lahiri goes for a close reading/reworking or invoking of those Mughal, Rajasthani, Pahari, and Deccani miniature canvases, breaking the boundaries of time and space, in a rich and ever-evolving cultural mosaic. Julie Mehta states "in this latest accomplishment, he looks East, and pays tribute to the extraordinary beauty and mystery of the Mughal, Rajput, Pahari and Deccani paintings by which he has been inspired." [Mehta \(2022\)](#). In this magical process of reworking and invoking, much research is involved: the study of myth, folklore, vernacular poetry, art history, religious and mythological stories. Lahiri with his characteristic grace achieves a brilliant appropriation of these intricate Indian miniature paintings through the medium of imagistic poetry or ekphrastic poetry.

## 2. FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

It is quite intriguing to observe the depth and distance the poet maintains with miniature art and the delicate balance of symmetry and sensuality. The poet, a winner of The Naji Namaan Literary Prize, 2019, and the first South Asian poet to be published from Algeria with his collection *Paysage Sans Verbs (2021)*, states in his Introduction of *Tether*: "...I sought to complete a cycle that had begun with the imaginative rendition of a poetic text by an artist in the 16<sup>th</sup> and 17<sup>th</sup> centuries--- Word, Image and a Return to Word." [Lahiri \(2022\)](#). An honorary member of *Maison Naaman pour la Culture*, the poet recounts his experience of creating such poems. The extraordinary beauty and mystery of the Mughal, Pahari, and later Deccani school of paintings, the ragamala paintings (based on ragas or patterns of musical notes) are his precise focus. Therefore, a time of the day, or season and the melody combined with the vibrancy of colours reign supreme in Lahiri's verse. He aptly titles this collection *Tether that Light*. The precise ability of a great painter or artist: to restrain, control and ensnare light.

Though *Tether* is a tribute to Indian miniature paintings that have evolved as chroniclers of knowledge over time; he is a poet who is much inspired by European art and European art history, particularly the impressionist paintings of Claude Monet, Van Gogh, and Cezanne. The impact is more prominently felt in *Poppies in the Post and Other Poems (2020)*. Lahiri, with his modernist sensibilities, has always had a curious blend of diverse energies. In *Tether*, one could locate a strong influence of the Deccani school of paintings that was practiced in Golkonda, Hyderabad, Bijapur, and Aurangabad. The mystic overtones of the Deccani school of paintings have always intrigued us in their ability to capture the sensual bodies of female figurines, their symmetry and their sensuality, the rhythmic delicacy of Persian and Islamic cultures, and the restraint of European and Turkish portraiture. All seem to reverberate with characteristic elan in his Radha Krishna poems. It renders *Tether* and *Tinder Tender: Poems of Love and Loitering (2018)* their delicate balance and poise.

There is often a fine juxtaposition of sensual and spiritual language in Lahiri's verse, to describe the ecstasy of love, the intimacy, the bliss, the pain, and agony of separation. Radha Krishna's disregard for imposed social boundaries in love, sacred

or profane, the act of transgression, and the moment of a joyous union are all beautifully presented through his verse. There is often a subtle hint of the elevation of sensual passion to spiritual virtue. A moment of union is at times preceded by ecstasy or completely thwarted as in *A Painter's Distraction*.

O Rai and Krishna,  
Only the absence of two desires  
and the ache of one body's burden  
Remains in my painting.

I have thwarted your union.

Let the bloom of the lotus  
Be the only witness  
Of your inevitable union,  
But on some other painter's canvas. [Lahiri \(2022\)](#)

### 3. OBSERVATIONS

When the poems are based on a particular painting as the one referred to above or the poems in the *Dusk Triptych* section, it appears that the poet's verse is in complete harmony with the paintings. The artifacts and the poems surrounding the paintings offer proof of a living tradition that permeates every sphere of life, from the mundane to the spiritual. The legend of Radha and Krishna rich in emotion has been reinterpreted and retold in India, countless after the success of Jayadev's influential 12th-century classic, *Gita Govinda*. Unrivalled in expression and style, it took India by storm for its stark portrayal of sensuality. Two hundred years after Jaydev's *Gita Govinda*, Vidyapati's composition stands out for its sensual and tender celebration of the many moods of Sri Radha's love as she negotiates her relationship with Krishna. Any act of reading plunges us into a network of such textual relations. To interpret a text, here in context Lahiri's highly evocative poems, is to rediscover its meanings, to trace those intricate and powerful co- relations, through a network of intertexts.

Figure 1



Figure

1

Source

[https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Radha\\_and\\_Krishna\\_Walking\\_at\\_Night\\_folio\\_from\\_the\\_Tehri\\_Garhwal\\_series\\_of\\_the\\_Gita\\_Govinda.jpg](https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Radha_and_Krishna_Walking_at_Night_folio_from_the_Tehri_Garhwal_series_of_the_Gita_Govinda.jpg)

Often when Lahiri writes about Radha waiting by the banks of the Yamuna, the tenderness, elegance, and sensuality of the portrayal, again reminiscent of the Deccani school of paintings, touches the reader but the poet may have been inspired in this section by the Pahari school of paintings too, particularly canvases from Guler, Basholi, Kangra, Chamba, and Garhwal. A famous painting of Radha waiting for Krishna in Kunjavan by Raja Ravi Varma may also have echoed as intertext while the poet was silently crafting his poems and his craftsmanship is admirable.

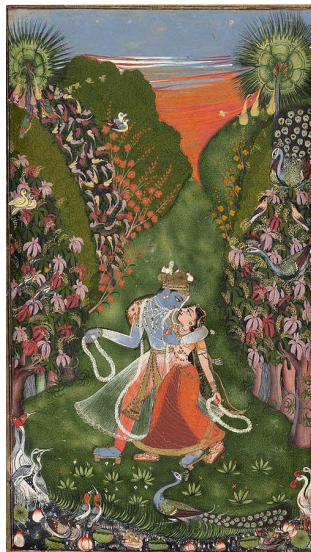
**Figure 2**



**Figure 2** Raja (n.d.) Source [https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Raja\\_Ravi\\_Varma,\\_Radha\\_Waiting\\_for\\_Krishna.jpg](https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Raja_Ravi_Varma,_Radha_Waiting_for_Krishna.jpg)

A Radha who is ubiquitous in her role as the supreme lover and devotee enlightens Ravi Varma's canvas. Legends have made us aware of the transgressive, adulterous, and incestuous elements of her erotic attachment to Krishna.

**Figure 3**



**Figure 3** Kota (1720) Source [https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:4a1\\_Radha\\_and\\_Krishna\\_Walk\\_in\\_a\\_Flowering\\_Grove.\\_Kota,\\_1720,\\_Metmuseum.jpg](https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:4a1_Radha_and_Krishna_Walk_in_a_Flowering_Grove._Kota,_1720,_Metmuseum.jpg)

Lahiri's dew symbolism in *Finding Radha* brings into play the very idea of symbolising mystery associated with Radha, a Radha who is unmindful of social proprieties, and unbounded by conventions: "Have you moved/from stealing hearts/to stealing light, /o beauty,/beside whose bedstead /night's desire/has gathered like dew, hot dew." Lahiri (2022). The poet recognises the subtle nuances of Radha's energy, having thoroughly observed her beauty of body and spirit and her unconditional love for Krishna. Like his earlier collection, *Tinder Tender: Poems of Love and Loitering*, a fine balance of sense and sensibility permeates *Tether*. Radha's body becomes a sight for philosophical and mythological musings. In her love and longing, Radha follows her heart, and her instincts, to seek union with her "dark god of love." Hindu religious texts may have perceived this as the union of the human soul with divine love, the union of the *atma* with the *paramatma*, or the *jivatma* in pursuit of the *paramatma*. Such resonances permeate our cultural memory from the *Bhagavad Puran* to *Gita Govinda*. The latter has had its beautiful rendition in the Orissa school of painting depicting majestic landscapes of eastern India, with bold brushstrokes depicting *Krishna Leela*. Sanskrit poetry, Bangla poetry, Urdu poetry, poets like Gyandas, Govindadas, Vidyapati, Chandidas, and Surdas (and Lahiri refers to Surdas), in his collection, all have excelled in composing timeless lyrics on Radha Krishna's trysts, love, and union, longing and abandonment, pain, loss, and separation.

*Tether* invokes this rich tradition of *kavya*, of literary and poetic texts, whether it is *Gita Govinda* or *Vaishnav Padabali*, a long line of bards and balladeers, not just miniature paintings, but bhakti movement and bhakti poets, or the Vaishnav tradition associated with bhakti yoga; to performing arts with vocalists like Pandit Jasraj, thumris, ghazals or say, bhajans and kirtans from Bengal all exist as intertexts. In lovelorn Radha's grace and elegance, *Tether* allures to Indian dance forms like Bharatnatyam, Kuchipudi, and Mohiniatyam from South India. Lahiri's collection is an integral part of a larger socio-cultural context or textuality. Whatever meaning we discover may occur through a network of prior texts that provide the context of possible meanings and our recognition of such meanings.

*Tether*, with its pictorial effects, visuals, and newness of language, is noted for its fluidity, historicity, and the moving between texts, which is not just a delicate interweaving of a Rajasthani or Pahari painter's canvas to a poet's painterly text. It is the plethora of culturally rich intertexts that the poet's collection brings into play, combined with the impressions of calligraphy, music, and rhythm. Lahiri attempts to capture the exciting, fleeting moments of the senses (like any impressionist painting) and the myriad ways in which love's pleasures and pains are felt before retrospective recollection, foregrounding the strength and sensitivity of the poems.

As Lahiri's poems on Radha and Krishna try to regain a lost control over emotional life, love's inevitable confusions, the several stages of love bordering on *purbarag*, *anurag*, *avisar*, *milan* to *biraha* to the seasons that are related to it, owing to the ambience or subtle moods these verses create: from *bhakti rasa* to *madhur rasa*, *shringar rasa*, *karun rasa*, *shanta rasa* to *bhakti rasa* again, the poems are noted for their balance and poise. Beautiful pictorial depictions, nature imagery, and an obsession with colours, as the distinguished art historian B N Goswami who has written the preface of the book has identified : "he (Lahiri) plays with the dark of the evening and the golden flash of lightning" (Goswami, 12) or one could go to the extent of say the music in his verse combined with the vibrancy of colours, is visible, heard and palpably felt in the poet's canvas as we come across recurrent visions of the pristine landscapes of Braj, Vrindavan, Yamuna, and the Tamal grove:

Cinders of night  
fall around the light  
of Radha's passion  
and my lord Krishna  
becomes that night.

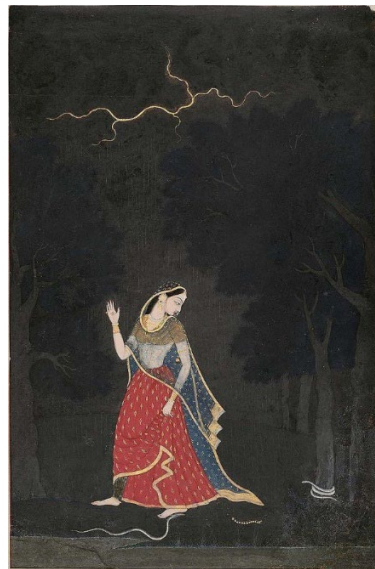
Drawing her nails of fire  
down the flank of a tamala trunk,  
as though  
down her lover's back,  
Radha waits  
at the end of the tether  
of my brush. Lahiri (2022).

The imageries in *Tether* are exquisitely magical to the extent of becoming surreal as they add to our sheer delight.

In the poem, *Lost Radha* speaks, and the Yamuna is evocatively personified as human "Come, and take your crown off/ o lord/and make the stars/above the Yamuna/blind/on their voyeur perch---/still the flow/of Yamuna/with your hand on my breast/that she might not flow downstream/ and tell every village in Braj/about what the tamal grove heard/and the absent moon might have seen/tonight." In the last stanza the poet writes: Night shall be long/and out of time, /and sight/shall be possible, /without light." Lahiri (2022).

Radha is seen as not just the great consort of Lord Krishna: an emblem of love, longing, desire, eroticism, and beauty but *Tether* alludes to the "Nityapriya" Radha or the "abhisarika nayika" and the "ashta nayika's" woes and apprehensions are alluded to with a fine blend of sense and sensibility.

**Figure 4**



**Figure 4** Mola (n.d.) Source <https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Abhisarika-nayika-mola-ram.jpg>

The *ashta nayika* Radha is the central theme of several Pahari embroideries, a combination of miniature paintings and needlework. But does her “dark god of love” care about the sheer weight of social expectations and propriety that Radha has to brave in order to be with her “lord”, is the subject of the poem, “Radha’s Colours” Lahiri (2022). We wonder why is Krishna missing. Has her dark god of love gone to play with colours with her rival Chandrabali, the other *nityapriya* who challenges Radha? Is there a lover who cares about Radha's moods, her privations, vulnerabilities, and her hurt, which she conceals even from the eyes of Krishna? Lahiri unfailingly captures several shades of love: Radha’s coyness, the way she dresses to please her lover, her sulking when her lover breaks a promise, and her jealousy when Krishna is engaged with the gopis.

**Figure 5**



**Figure 5** Purkhu (n.d.) Source <https://www.alamy.com/stock-photo-radha-imagines-krishna-with-other-women-from-gita-govinda-attributed-143469308.html>

Only a silent, bemused, and tongue-tied Yamuna stands witness to Radha's reflections on her predicament. The world moves on but can Radha stop the march of the seasons by deciding not to play Holi? Radha's reluctance to play Holi stops nothing. Some “Hladini Shakti,” *nityapriya* Sri Radha, in the popular imagination will dance with her Lord Krishna on the festival of colours, while the other Radha broods by the Yamuna. Perhaps only the Yamuna, another dying voice, truly understands Radha. Such pure sentiments, such emotional subject matter, are very well handled in Lahiri’s rich collection.

In the poem “Rising,” the night of joyous union and *shringar* has made way for the morning— “How do you wake up like morning/dappled/from the bed of the god of love,/the pollen of his sweat/on the petals of your skin?” Lahiri (2022). How the *shringar rasa* leads to infinite and eternal bliss and their mystical union in *Rising* is the ultimate *rasa*.

Figure 6

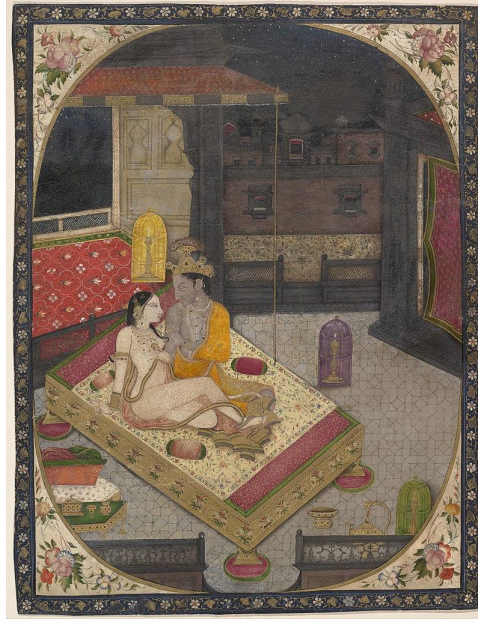


Figure	6	Anonymous.	(1830)	Source
<a href="https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Anonymous_Radha_and_Krishna_on_a_Bed_at_Night_-_1985.398.13_-_Metropolitan_Museum_of_Art.jpg">https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Anonymous_Radha_and_Krishna_on_a_Bed_at_Night_-_1985.398.13_-_Metropolitan_Museum_of_Art.jpg</a>				

No wonder in the poem *Astray* Radha fails in her duty to escort Krishna. The poet pens his verse thus: In that lane/time's latch is broken: it pours out of silent houses./ Radha has gone/ escorting Krishna home/on lord Nanda's orders/a short distance,/ but none of them/have returned home/yet.....And evenings are prohibited these days, I am told, except in miniatures." Lahiri (2022).

However, the pleasure of union conversely contains a feeling of "biraha" or separation. In *The Last Miniaturist's Testament*, the poet writes of this "drama of rasas" in that "theatre of your body," Lahiri (2022) in the act of disrobing which is not carried away by force, the act has the power to exalt or transport with joy. The poet goes on to utter "The more the dark god advances/ the more he drowns/in the memory of your body,/in your Yamuna/where you dip your body's happiness/every day." Lahiri (2022). This is not an impetuous dalliance, there is the romantic playfulness of the *raas leela*, Radha herself being an ocean of *rasas*, to the soulfulness of Krishnapriya's undying love and Lahiri's mystic allure of her depictions in poetry.

#### 4. CONCLUSION

The poet may have been inspired by Surdas, Kesavadas, Tulsidas, Amir Khusrau, and Faizi (Akbar's court poet during Akbar's reign). *Tether* exists in a rich socio-historical context and given the subject of his poems, the variety of cultural intertexts and the socio-historical texts that exist in the field from *Gita Govinda* to *Vaishnav Padabali*, *Bhagavad Puran* to *Chaitanyacharitamrita*, not just literary texts but also performing arts, the *periphery* of *Tether that Light* is rather vast, or more appropriately "fluid" as it foregrounds emblematic imageries, significant iconographies from different art forms, from different historical periods. Though it is impossible to escape *Tether's* historicity, its meaning is fluid, never fixed. *Tether* is a product of a historical context, and its self-reflexivity is a means to understand



cultural and intellectual history. Given the pictorial effect of words appearing as miniature paintings, the effortless transition from one medium to the other, Lahiri's synergy is a pointer to how concepts, attitudes and ideologies operate across a broader cultural spectrum that is not exclusively literary.

With a view toward larger interdisciplinarity and a dynamic view of culture, the bonding between two sister arts, poetry, and painting, has considerably intensified over the years. Through constant appropriation, translation, and recontextualization of Mughal and miniature paintings into ekphrastic poetry, concepts of cultural memory too have regained fresh meanings, opening up new horizons of research in humanities and social sciences. Lahiri's rare collection of such self-revelatory poems in contemporary Indian English poetry will expand the dialogue around the historicity of texts, cultural memory, and transcreations.

### **CONFLICT OF INTERESTS**

None.

### **ACKNOWLEDGMENTS**

None.

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