The Feminine and Cultural Syncretism in Early Dakani Poetry

More than twenty-five years ago the Hyderabad scholar Dr. Hafeez Qateel began an essay on the development of rəxtī in the Deccan with the following remarks:

Rəxtī is a badnām [disreputable] genre of Urdu poetry which is thought to serve specially for the expression of women’s particular emotions and generic concerns in women’s idioms . . . .

Both the sparse treatment by scholars and widespread popular ignorance reflect the stigma of disrepute which has attached to rəxtī. More recently, conventional wisdom has been challenged and very basic questions posed, e.g., is rəxtī really a poetic genre, given that it is used to refer to any Urdu poem whose narrator is female? Is rəxtī, rather, a poetic voice? The term was coined, as far as we can tell, toward the end of the eighteenth century by the Lakhnavi poet Rangin, and until the last thirty years or so, referred always to a corpus of poetry composed in Lucknow and Delhi in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. This poetry was light and racy, usually in what was called “women’s language” (‘aurtān ki

1 Dakani literally means “of the Deccan,” which is the south-central region of India. The term refers, generally, to the area covered by the modern states/provinces of Andhra Pradesh, Karnataka, and parts of Maharashtra.

2 Majalla-e ‘Umāniya, Dakani Adab Number, 1964, p. 139.


4 Lakhnavi means “of Lucknow,” a northern city in modern India and a major cultural center of Urdu during the 18th and 19th centuries.
bölü) though always composed and—as far as we know—consumed by men; récti was also often salacious or even obscene, and recited by male poets in female drag.

Even the erudite among Urdu readers have supposed that there was little of real value to be learned from these poems other than the names of female dress, adornments, household furnishings, or particular idiomatic expressions of an emergent dialect—that of pardā-nāsīn women. But there exists a large body of poetry from the sixteenth- and seventeenth-century Deccan, narrated in the feminine voice, whose tone is much different than the standard Lakhnavi récti. Produced in the Qutb Shahi court of Golkonda and the Adil Shahi court of Bijapur, this poetry predates northern récti by a good century and contrasts sharply with the former’s badnāmt (disrepute), for it is taken very seriously by Dakani literary critics. This female-narrated Dakani ḡazal is my present focus.

To understand récti as offering a catalogue for the modern reader of artifacts from a cloistered female culture is to grossly underestimate its historical value. While there is surely value in trying to reconstruct a concrete portrait of Qutb or Adil Shahi culture through material objects referred to in its texts, one might hypothesize instead an intellectual or literary portrait of early Dakani culture. Examination of Dakani poems in the feminine voice affords such an opportunity, but conventional understanding of what constitutes récti must be set aside in order to focus on the significance of the feminine voice.6

Perhaps the first significant feature of Dakani récti is that it exists at all, for there has not yet emerged any evidence of a female narrator in the earlier Perso-Arabic ḡazal tradition from which the Urdu ḡazal primarily descends. Furthermore, while this feminine ‘āliq (lover)7 is not predominant in the Dakani ḡazal, she is certainly widespread. Nearly

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5In Urdu, pardā-nāsīn refers to women who observe purdah or gender seclusion.

6Récti has yet to be defined satisfactorily, but in the case of Dakani poetry is understood to refer to ḡazals or šeʿr (couplets) whose narrator is female. This is easily determined because Dakani récti employs grammatical feminine gender markers. The term as applied here presupposes nothing about the content of the poetry.

7Calling the narrator of these Dakani ḡazals in the feminine voice an ‘āliq is deliberate and justifiable, since the only feature in which “she” differs from the ‘āliq-narrator of the “classical” ḡazal is the gender-marked language in which she speaks—the relationship is essentially the same.
every major poet of old Dakani wrote some ġazāls in the feminine voice,\textsuperscript{8} not merely poets of lesser or ill-repute. The presence of this female āšiq is almost certainly inspired by the virahīnī of Indic poetry,\textsuperscript{9} and the significance of this inspiration should be neither overlooked nor underestimated. It indicates a recognition on the part of Dakani poets that the virahīnī—who provides the lyric voice of both bhrākti poetry\textsuperscript{10} and secular Indic love literature—represents an expression fundamentally similar to that of the Perso-Arabic tradition’s āšiq who suffers the throes of firāq-e yār (separation from the beloved).

Perhaps a further word or two of explanation would be appropriate here: the majority of extant literary texts from this period in Indian literature are read as devotional and expressive of the emotion called bhrākti, which derives from the Sanskrit verbal root bhrj (to worship). This form of worship is embodied in an intense longing of the devotee for the divine. Such intense longing can easily blend into the erotic, and the quintessential example from bhrākti poetry is the love of the cowherding woman Radha, for Krishna. Bhrākti lyrics explore in great depth the longing and suffering of Radha as she pines for union with the divine in its manifestation as Krishna, a human cowherd. While much bhrākti poetry is rather more erotic in tone than overtly devotional, a dual reading (religious/secular) of these texts is made possible with the formulation of Radha’s persona as representative of the human soul. As the human soul, Radha loves at a symbolic, rather than a carnal or corporeal, level, and her love for Krishna is read metaphorically.

There exists a philosophical discourse for the Urdu ġazal, as well as for bhrākti poetry, to rationalize the manifest eroticism and sensuality of both bodies of literature with devotional interpretations.\textsuperscript{11} Paralleling

\textsuperscript{8}I am indebted to the researches of Dr. Muhammad Ali Asar for my understanding of just how many Dakani poets wrote ġazāls in the feminine voice; especially useful has been his Dakani ġazal ki Nais-o Numā (Hyderabad: Ilyās Traders, 1986).

\textsuperscript{9}The virahīnī is a woman who dwells in separation from her beloved, in the state of viraha.

\textsuperscript{10}Bhrākti (mystical/devotional) poetry celebrates a passionate, even erotic, devotion to Hindu deities, and represents the dominant voice of artistic expression over most of the Indian subcontinent for approximately the millennium between 800 and 1800 CE.

\textsuperscript{11}With the popular deity Krishna so prominent a character in bhrākti lyrics, this rationalization is more explicit than in the ġazal. Since the ġazal is an Islamic
Radha’s carnal/spiritual longing for Krishna is the idealized ambiguity between reading the ‘āiq’s expressions in the ḡazal as either ‘iq-e ḥaqiq (“true” love, that of humans for the divine) or ‘iq-e majāsr (“metaphorical” or mundane love, that of humans for one another). Majāsr love is legitimate insofar as loving other humans can be seen as a stage along the path toward perfecting oneself for the divine beloved. Yet the essential aesthetic in both bodies of poetry proceeds from a perception that the purest, most poignant, most profound love experienced by human beings is love in separation, touching at times upon the erotic; and the complex of emotions expressed by ḋhakti poetry’s virahīnī is quite compatible with that expressed by the ḡazal’s ʾāiq. Both literatures are essentially about the longing and straining toward union with the beloved. While union seems more possible for Radha—indeed the promise of resolution is perhaps stronger in ḋhakti texts than in the ḡazal—12—it can be argued that in both ḋhakti and the ḡazal the focus is upon longing, rather than upon union.

The recognition that Radha as a poetic persona represents the human soul in its quest for union with the divine beloved is, I would argue, at the heart of early Dakani poets’ adoption of the feminine voice: they saw in her an ʾāiq.

Some Dakani scholars have tried to address the significance of this feminine voice and to explain its origin in Hindu Sankhya philosophy.13 They suggest that the Muslim elite of Bijapur and Golkonda, in choosing to adopt Hindi’s feminine voice, demonstrate a familiarity with Sankhya, art form, it would never be illustrated in such a manner that human-divine union were visually depicted.

12This notion is bolstered, of course, by the plethora of visual representations (primarily paintings, but also sculptures) of Radha and Krishna in union.

13Sankhya is one of the six primary schools of Hindu philosophy. For scholars positing a link between Sankhya and the feminine voice in early Dakani poetry, see Dr. Syeda Ja’far’s critical introduction to the Kulliyāt-e Muhammad Qulī Qutb Ṣāh (New Delhi: Taraqqī-e Urdu Bureau, 1985, pp. 208–212); and Dr. Hafeez Qateel, op. cit. Both scholars appear to draw very heavily on Hindi scholar Rajeshwar Parshad Chaturvedi’s Rītikalin Kavitā and Ram Ratan Bhatnagar’s Sur Sāhibiya ki Bhūmikā for their application of Sankhya philosophical precepts to interpretations of ḋhakti and, by extension, of Dakani poetry narrated in the feminine voice.
and the concept of *sagun-vādi bhaṅkti* deriving therefrom. Dr. Syeda Ja‘far explains that in the Sankhya system *spirit* is equated with the male principle, while *matter* is equated with the female principle. The divine occupies the spiritual realm, and human beings the material world. Thus did the poet Mirabai allegedly declare that there was only one male—Krishna—while everyone and everything else is female. Both the *virahini* and *‘āliq* represent passive matter, awaiting bestowal of union from the active agent. And since only God, the divine beloved, bestows such union, and Krishna embodies the divine beloved, only Krishna can represent the male principle. By this formulation, logically, the ‘āliq would indeed be feminine. Hence the explicit adoption of the feminine gender into the ḡazal’s articulation of ‘āliq.

Conventional wisdom assumes that the ḡazal appeared in Urdu literature by direct way of Persian literature, and does not appear to take into account the developments achieved in Dakani, or to attach them sufficient significance. Yet adopting the feminine represents a profound innovation in the ḡazal genre; and the Dakani culture which produced this female narrator necessarily must have achieved a high level of sophistication and enlightenment in order to effect such innovation, and deserves, therefore, to be taken far more seriously than scholars have taken it. The ḡazal has been constructed in Urdu literary criticism of the past century as a genre already perfected by the time it appeared in vernacular language in India, and I have elsewhere explored some of the implications

14 The term *sagun-vādi bhaṅkti* we may take to refer to that verse which expresses love for a divine beloved whose physical attributes are enumerated.

15 See note 13, above.

16 It has been suggested that a fundamental distinction between the ḡazal’s ‘āliq and *bhaṅkti*’s *virahini* is that the former is constructed formally as active, the lover, while God is passive, the beloved (*maḥbhūb*); whereas in *bhaṅkti* the roles are reversed, rendering the poet a passive beloved with God the active lover. The suggestion is provocative, but does not seem to me to take into account the complex tapestry of *bhaṅkti* literatures. For example, the Srivaishnavas in Tamil write of a devotee who strives, strains, and sacrifices, in a fashion reminiscent of the ḡazal’s ‘āliq, to prove him/herself worthy of divine grace; and while I do not argue against the ‘āliq persona as a basically active character, the point remains that in both bodies of poetry, union with the divine is bestowed by the divine rather than carried out by the human. This fundamental power dynamic is, I would maintain, what informs the literary equation at issue here between the ‘āliq and the *virahini*. 
of such a construction. ¹⁷ We need not go into them here except to suggest reasons why most critics have either ignored or underestimated the feminine narrator as a significant innovation in the historical development of the genre.

Given the high degree of sophistication for which the the Dakani courts of Bijapur and Golkonda are known, there is no reason to be surprised that early Dakani poets were familiar with Hindi poetry. It was, nevertheless, an invaluable insight on their part to have recognized the profound similarities between bhakti's virahini and the ġazal's āśiq, even if those of us familiar with one or the other may recognize the parallel easily. What is remarkable in the case of these Qutb Shahi poets is, however, that they were open to a recognition that impelled them across cultural lines differentiating the Muslim rulers of the Deccan and their largely Hindu subjects. Certainly, not all ruling elites are eager to identify with, rather than differentiate themselves from, the local populace of the ruled. Too often rulers justify their domination and privilege with ideologies which allow them to compare themselves favorably with those whom they dominate.

While the emperor Akbar’s court is famous for such cultural syncretism, and the genius of Mughal architecture is generally considered to lie in its blend of Persian forms with various indigenous elements, Mughal poetry in Urdu is perhaps not quite so adventurous. As Urdu became accepted as a literary language by the Mughals, the voice of āśiq became reified as male. The reason for this convention is often explained as fidelity to the Persian ġazal, where, because of Persian grammar, no gender distinctions are indicated between lover and beloved.¹⁸ If that is so then we can assume that Mughal culture had chosen to differentiate itself from India in favor of Persia—even at the cost of a certain artificiality in the Urdu ġazal’s diction. The choice is perfectly legitimate both artistically (in the sense that any creative choice in art is legitimate) and politically, but it is important to recognize and understand its

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¹⁷ Carla Petievich, “Heroes, Virahinis and Gender-Bending in the Urdu Ghazal.” In Sandria B. Freitag, ed., Culture as Contested Site: The State and Popular Participation in the Indian Subcontinent (Delhi: Oxford University Press, forthcoming). The implications need not be rehearsed here except, as in the following argument, to suggest the political reasons for cultural segregation.
¹⁸ In other words, the third-person singular in Persian does not bear the gender differentiation one finds in English or French.
implications.

One implication of this choice, I would suggest, is that the later Urdu gazal is a cultural expression of a political entity threatened by instability. Its desire to emphasize Persian, over Indian, identity can be seen as a defensive gesture. It indicates a ruling elite tightening its ranks. And a familiarity with the political situation of the eighteenth- and nineteenth-century Mughal empire corroborates this interpretation, for there were numerous serious contenders for supreme power over northern India during this time.

One may argue that the Qutb Shahi kings of Golconda (present-day Hyderabad) and the Adil Shahis of Bijapur, by contrast, enjoyed relative stability. This is especially true of poet-kings such as Muhammad Quli Qutb Shah and Ali Adil Shah, both great patrons of the arts. Their relative wealth and stability allowed them to expand more into their physical environment than the later Mughals; they did not require the greater abstraction of the later Urdu gazal.19 In this context, let us return to Dakani poetry in the feminine voice.

Dr. Hafeez Qateel argues that röxti developed in stages, beginning with the sūfīyānā (mystical), proceeding to the āšīqānā (romantic) and thence to the āqi'ā-gō'ī (realistic) stage.20 In the earliest stage, consistent with the mystical (and Sankhya) perception that all āšīqs represent the feminine, the gazal’s familiar mystical ethos is maintained. The only remarkable characteristic of röxti, argues Dr. Qateel, is that verb conjugations, names, and physical attributes are rendered in the feminine.21 It is only later that a particular female language (nisvānī zabān), or particularly female (zanānī) thoughts or emotions—as distinct from male or “regular” thoughts or emotions—began to appear in röxti. One can see

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19Consider, for example, the historical coincidence of the Mughal emperor’s physical confinement within the walls of the Red Fort in Delhi during the period of the nineteenth-century gazal’s great refinement into abstraction. It would be interesting to consider also the parallels between great political contestation in the seventeenth century and the abstract Indo-Persian poetry of Sabk-e Hindi, though that is beyond the purview of the present essay.

20Obviously, this formulation is quite consistent with our general understanding of the overall progression of Urdu literature. Sufis, Mughal courtiers, and Progressive writers of the mid-twentieth century would provide a broad spectrum of development along these lines.

21Of course, this significance is enormous, as I argue in my “Heroes, Virabīnis and Gender-Bending in the Urdu Ghazal” (see note 17, above).
how this argument follows logically from the equation between concrete matter and the female principle: if the feminine represents matter and is specific or concrete, then the presence of the feminine represents equivalence with *tāqi’u-gā’ī*, or speaking of physical reality.22

Even while acknowledging Dr. Qateel’s argument as quite plausible, one could still take some exception to it. I would like to speculate in a slightly different direction, based on a few *še’rs* of Muhammad Quli Qutb Shah (1566–1611) and Ghavasi (seventeenth century), two reasonably contemporary poets.

Muhammad Quli Qutb Shah:23

\[
\text{sunō ēk dā bāt sāḥib hamārī} \\
\text{sahēliyān ētāur maiṅ hāṅ hāndī tumārī} \\
\text{Listen, my lord, to a thing or two:} \\
\text{My girlfriends are jealous, ’cos} \\
\text{I’m the one who’s yours.}
\]

\[
\text{sahēliyān mēṅ sārtān sāṅ ākār kʰaṛī hāṅ} \\
\text{munjē dēkʰ kar bʰavī mēṅ nā-gāṅʰ bāṛī} \\
\text{I’ve come and stood before you} \\
\text{on a dare from my girlfriends—} \\
\text{Don’t look at me and knit your brow!}
\]

\[
\text{sunō mēṛī sāṭī piyā haurōṅ rātā} \\
\text{ke par-sēḥ par sāṅ’īn parsang gamātā} \\
\text{Listen, friend, my lover makes love} \\
\text{elsewhere—} \\
\text{My lord disports himself} \\
\text{on another(’s) bed.}
\]

Ghavasi:

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22In that same logical universe, the *sūfyāna* would parallel the divine and the *šāiqīna* the masculine, thus maintaining a hierarchy in which divine stands higher than masculine and masculine higher than feminine.

23The three verses here are taken from three different ḡazals (see Syeda Ja’far, *Kulliyāt*, pp. 706, 707, and 692, respectively).
Sayeda Ja’far has called Muhammad Quli’s poetry “the first in which lines of rēxt appeared in Dakani.” ToAccording to Dr. Qateel’s formulation these lines should then express an abstract mysticism; yet there is concreteness of lived, physical experience in these three verses (which Dakani experts cite as representative of Muhammad Quli’s rēxt) that contrasts rather dramatically with the two še’rs by Ghavasi above. His couple of rēxt verses strike the reader as more “romantic” (‘aṭiqūna) than “realistic” (vāqi’-a-gō), and the imagery is more abstract by far than most of Muhammad Quli’s gāzal poetry. One might even go so far as to say that they are reminiscent of the later Urdu gāzal associated with northern

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24 An alternative translation:

Friend, I survived the night
to see the morning sun emerge:
It acted as a spark,
rekindling separation’s fire.

India in the nineteenth century, where the feature of abstraction was so developed as to have been called “artificial” by nearly every critic of stature in Urdu literature. But both šer’s just presented date from the late sixteenth or very early seventeenth century, and are fairly contemporaneous.

It would be equally plausible to argue, in contrast to Dr. Qateel, that the central theme of love in separation in the Urdu gazal developed in its treatment, over time, from more concrete to a more abstract expression. In Qutb Shah’s gazals in the feminine, the basic theme treated almost exclusively is viraha, as characterized in Radha-Krishna bhakti poetry. The narrator is a woman who has tasted, at a previous time, the joy of union (saṅgati or viśāl-e yār) but whose lover has since left her. A secondary scenario is that of a woman longing for a beloved in closer proximity but not actually present, as in the first example of Muhammad Quli’s verse (“Listen, friend, my lover makes love elsewhere . . .”). Her suffering is acute and specific, whereas the ‘aṭīq in more abstract gazal poetry longs for a union which has never been, which arguably cannot come to pass during his lifetime, and which, therefore, can hardly be conceived of. Human experience supplies him no concrete images to match the empty bed evoked in that first šer by Muhammad Quli. Rather, he has moved beyond bedrooms and their furnishings. Now the cosmos itself has come to serve as the backdrop against which he experiences separation, a scenario so vast that even the sun is only a glowing ember.

However, if there is a “truth” to be found here, it might lie in yet another direction, viz., one in which we allow for a complex present in every era of Urdu poetry. Those poets who have maintained great repute


27This point of view can be gleaned from Ḡālib’s famous

\[
\begin{align*}
\text{ye na tē hamārī qimat ke viśāl-e yār bōtā} \\
\text{agar aur jīte rahtē yēhi intizār bōtā}
\end{align*}
\]

where, had the ‘aṭīq gone on living, he would have necessarily remained waiting, since the beloved here is understood as Divine, and union with the Divine beloved can only come about after death.
over the centuries have necessarily demonstrated great versatility, an
ability to compose in a variety of situations and moods, to be both
contemplative and glib, plaintive and sassy. Witness, for example, another گازال by Muhammad Quli Qutb Shah, also in the feminine voice, in
which the mood is very different from that of the few ڑےrs above:

\[
\begin{align*}
\text{sakt hātān šakar karii valē mipla'i ase nā} \\
\text{divāni nįškar mēn kō'ī kadhiṅā nābāt bāsē nā}
\end{align*}
\]

My girlfriend speaks sugary words
but it doesn’t result in sweetness:
O mad one, don’t look for rock candy
in sugarcane! 28

\[
\begin{align*}
xabar hā'ī šah hā'ē savarā yakā-yak ā'ē muj pāra \\
a pāçe ḫuk pʰirē bʰārā tō ab birhā sabā sē nā
\end{align*}
\]

Word has it that the king came gal-
loping up to my door,
then left without even asking after my
health—
how can such pangs of separation be
borne?

\[
\begin{align*}
kahāṅ apan birah jis kan āgin s'ula pṛē us tan \\
sū muskil ḍā'ā muj man ēman dukb kō'ī sunā sē nā
\end{align*}
\]

Were I to even speak to another
of separation’s burning tumult
its flames would scorch their body

\[28\]In other words, “Don’t expect your companion, with her rudimentary
understanding of love, to articulate the crystallized essence of love that your own
experience has distilled.” While it is the role of the sakī (the female companion of
the woman in love) to cajole and humor the heroine-narrator as she suffers the
pangs of separation, the isolation she feels from others who do not share her
plight cannot be bridged—the companion’s words stem from her own callow
experience, and are incapable of touching the narrator.
so I keep it locked safe in my heart.

magar kʰọlẽ xuءa b getStatusCode a getStatusCode dukʰ dikʰavẽ us suraj
kạ mukʰ
andʰãrī nain pãvẽn sukʰ tõ mujʰ par dukʰ
dahã sê nã
But let God lose me this sorrow
and show me the face of that sun:
if solace could come to these darkened
eyes
sorrow would burn me no more.

Whether our personal preference is inclined more toward abstract, elegant poetry such as the couple of Ghavasi’s še’rs above, or more toward the pungency or piquancy of the first examples of Muhammad Quli Qutb Shah, both poets have expressed familiar human emotions in these verses in the feminine voice. Such sparks of recognition measure success in the realm of Urdu ãzal, and its field is wide enough to contain both.

In only three out of nine verses discussed here is it even reasonable to consider the emotions expressed as “particular to women,” or the concerns only “female.” However, if it was the voice of bhakti’s virahini that inspired these explorations of the theme of love in separation that became so crucial to the later ãzal, then let us remember that we are indebted to the climate of cultural tolerance achieved by the Qutb Shahi rulers for the enrichment supplied the Urdu ãzal tradition when Dakani poets adopted the feminine voice and the “female principle.”