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The Feminine and Cultural Syncretism in Early Dakani Poetry[1]

MORE THAN TWENTY-FIVE YEARS AGO the Hyderabadi scholar Dr. Hafeez Qateel began an essay on the development of *rēxtī* in the Deccan with the following remarks:

> *Rēxtī* 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 . . . . [2]

Both the sparse treatment by scholars and widespread popular ignorance reflect the stigma of disrepute which has attached to *rēxtī*. More recently, conventional wisdom has been challenged[3] and very basic questions posed, e.g., is *rēxtī* really a poetic genre, given that it is used to refer to any Urdu poem whose narrator is female? Is *rēxtī*, rather, a poetic voice? The term was coined, as far as we can tell, toward the end of the eighteenth century by the Lakhnavi[4] 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" (*'aurtōṅ kī*

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[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 'Us̤māniya,* Dakani Adab Number, 1964, p. 139.

[3]See Carla Petievich, "The Feminine Voice in the Urdu Ghazal," in *Indian Horizons* 39:1–2 (1990): 25–41.

[4]*Lakhnavi* means "of Lucknow," a northern city in modern India and a major cultural center of Urdu during the 18th and 19th centuries.

bōlī) though always composed and—as far as we know—consumed by men; *rēxtī* 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 *parda-našīn* women.[5] 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 *rēxtī*. Produced in the Qutb Shahi court of Golkonda and the Adil Shahi court of Bijapur, this poetry predates northern *rēxtī* by a good century and contrasts sharply with the former's *badnāmī* (disrepute), for it is taken very seriously by Dakani literary critics. This female-narrated Dakani *ǧazal* is my present focus.

To understand *rēxtī* 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 *rēxtī* must be set aside in order to focus on the significance of the feminine voice.[6]

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

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[5]In Urdu, *parda-našīn* refers to women who observe purdah or gender seclusion.

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

[7]Calling the narrator of these Dakani *ǧazals* in the feminine voice an *ʿāšiq* is deliberate and justifiable, since the only feature in which "she" differs from the *ʿāšiq*-narrator of the "classical" *ǧazal* is the gender-marked language in which she speaks—the relationship is essentially the same.

every major poet of old Dakani wrote some *ǧazals* in the feminine voice,[8] not merely poets of lesser or ill-repute. The presence of this female *ʿāšiq* is almost certainly inspired by the *virahinī* of Indic poetry,[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 *virahinī*—who provides the lyric voice of both *bʰakti* poetry[10] and secular Indic love literature—represents an expression fundamentally similar to that of the Perso-Arabic tradition's *ʿāšiq* 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 *bʰakti,* which derives from the Sanskrit verbal root *bʰaj* (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 *bʰakti* poetry is the love of the cowherding woman Radha, for Krishna. *Bʰakti* 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 *bʰakti* 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 *ǧazal*, as well as for *bʰakti* poetry, to rationalize the manifest eroticism and sensuality of both bodies of literature with devotional interpretations.[11] Paralleling

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[8]I am indebted to the researches of Dr. Muhammad Ali Asar for my understanding of just how many Dakani poets wrote *ǧazals* in the feminine voice; especially useful has been his *Dakanī Ǧazal kī Našv-o Numā* (Hyderabad: Ilyās Traders, 1986).

[9]The *virahanī* is a woman who dwells in separation from her beloved, in the state of *viraha.*

[10]*Bʰakti* (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.

[11]With the popular deity Krishna so prominent a character in *bʰakti* lyrics, this rationalization is more explicit than in the *ǧazal.* Since the *ǧazal is* an Islamic

Radha's carnal/spiritual longing for Krishna is the idealized ambiguity between reading the *'āšiq's* expressions in the *ğazal* as either *'išq-e ḥaqīqī* ("true" love, that of humans for the divine) or *'išq-e majāzī* ("metaphorical" or mundane love, that of humans for one another). *Majāzī* 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 *bʰakti* poetry's *virahinī* is quite compatible with that expressed by the *ğazal*'s *'āšiq.* 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 *bʰakti* texts than in the *ğazal*[12]—it can be argued that in both *bʰakti* and the *ğazal* 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 *'āšiq.*

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,

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art form, it would never be illustrated in such a manner that human-divine union were visually depicted.

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

[13]Sankhya 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 Muḥammad Qulī Quṭb Šāh* (New Delhi: Taraqqī-e Urdū 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 *Rītīkalīn Kavitā* and Ram Ratan Bhatnagar's *Sur Sāhitya kī Bhūmikā* for their application of Sankhya philosophical precepts to interpretations of *bʰakti* and, by extension, of Dakani poetry narrated in the feminine voice.

and the concept of *sagun-vādī bʰakti*[14] deriving therefrom. Dr. Syeda Jaʿfar explains that in the Sankhya system *spirit* is equated with the male principle, while *matter* is equated with the female principle.[15] 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 *virahinī* and *ʿāšiq* 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 *ʿāšiq* would indeed be feminine. Hence the explicit adoption of the feminine gender into the *ğazal*'s articulation of *ʿāšiqī.*[16]

Conventional wisdom assumes that the *ğazal* 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 *ğazal* 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 *ğazal* 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

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[14]The term *sagun-vādī bʰakti* 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 *ğazal*'s *ʿāšiq* and *bʰakti*'s *virahinī* is that the former is constructed formally as active, the lover, while God is passive, the beloved (*maḥbūb*); whereas in *bʰakti* 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 *bʰakti* literatures. For example, the Srivaishnavas in Tamil write of a devotee who strives, strains, and sacrifices, in a fashion reminiscent of the *ğazal*'s *ʿāšiq*, to prove him/herself worthy of divine grace; and while I do not argue against the *ʿāšiq* 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 *ʿāšiq* and the *virahinī.*

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 virahinī* and the *ġazal*'s *'āšiq,* 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 *'āšiqī* 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 *ğazal* 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 Golkonda (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 II, 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 *ğazal*.[19] In this context, let us return to Dakani poetry in the feminine voice.

Dr. Hafeez Qateel argues that *rēxtī* developed in stages, beginning with the *sūfīyāna* (mystical), proceeding to the *'āšiqāna* (romantic) and thence to the *vāqi'a-gō'ī* (realistic) stage.[20] In the earliest stage, consistent with the mystical (and Sankhya) perception that all *'āšiqs* represent the feminine, the *ğazal*'s familiar mystical ethos is maintained. The only remarkable characteristic of *rēxtī*, 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 *rēxtī*. One can see

[19]Consider, 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 *ğazal*'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 Hindī*, though that is beyond the purview of the present essay.

[20]Obviously, 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.

[21]Of course, this significance is enormous, as I argue in my "Heroes, *Virahinis* 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 *vāqiʿa-gōʾī,* 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 *šeʿrs* of Muhammad Quli Qutb Shah (1566–1611) and Ghavasi (seventeenth century), two reasonably contemporary poets.

Muhammad Quli Qutb Shah:[23]

sunō ēk dō bāt ṣāḥib hamārī
sahēlīyāṅ čatur maiṅ hūṅ bandī tumārī
Listen, my lord, to a thing or two:
My girlfriends are jealous, 'cos
I'm the one who's yours.

sahēlīyāṅ mēṅ šarṭān sūṅ ākar kʰaṛī hūṅ
munjē dēkʰ kar bʰavṅ mēṅ nā-gāṅṭʰ bārī
I've come and stood before you
on a dare from my girlfriends—
Don't look at me and knit your brow!

sunō mērī sātī piyā haurōṅ rātā
ke par-sēj par sāʾīṅ parsang gamātā
Listen, friend, my lover makes love
elsewhere—
My lord disports himself
on another(’s) bed.

Ghavasi:

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

[23]The three verses here are taken from three different *ǧazals* (see Syeda Jaʿfar, *Kulliyāt,* pp. 706, 707, and 692, respectively).

sahēlī nis ṭalī jyūṅ tyūṅ ṣubā hū'ī sūr bāhar āyā
jalānē munj birahnī kūṅ nikal jyūṅ garm aṅgār āyā
Friend, dawn broke and the sun came out
just like a hot ember to burn this poor *virahinī*[24]

sīnē mēṅ dil kō ḍʰūṅḍʰ na pā'ī kin kisē pūčʰūṅ
ke čārā munj nahīṅ distā nipat čʰāṅdkār āyā
I've searched my breast, but whom can I ask
to help me find my heart?
I find no remedy in sight
no matter how deeply I plumb the darkness.

Sayeda Ja'far has called Muhammad Quli's poetry "the first in which lines of *rēxtī* appeared in Dakani."[25] According 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 *rēxtī*) that contrasts rather dramatically with the two *še'rs* by Ghavasi above. His couple of *rēxtī* verses strike the reader as more "romantic" (*'ašiqāna*) than "realistic" (*vāqi'a-gō*), and the imagery is more abstract by far than most of Muhammad Quli's *ğazal* poetry. One might even go so far as to say that they are reminiscent of the later Urdu *ğazal* 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.

[25]See her *Kulliyāt-e Muḥammad Qulī Quṭb Šāh* (New Delhi: Taraqqī-e Urdū Bureau, 1985), p. 208.

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.[26] But both *še'rs* 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 *ğazal* developed in its treatment, over time, from more concrete to a more abstract expression. In Qutb Shah's *ğazals* 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 *viṣāl-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 *'āšiq* in more abstract *ğazal* poetry longs for a union which has never been, which arguably cannot come to pass during his lifetime,[27] and which, therefore, can hardly be conceived of. Human experience supplies him no concrete images to match the empty bed evoked in that first *še'r* 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

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[26]See such historical surveys as those by Muḥammad Ḥusain Āzād, *Āb-e Ḥayāt* (Allahabad: Rām Narāyan Lāl Bēnī Mādʰav, 1880), or Alṭāf Ḥusain Ḥālī, *Muqaddima-e Še'r-o Šā'erī* (Aligarh: Maktaba Jāmi'a Ltd., 1893); or by Muhammad Sadiq, *A History of Urdu Literature* (London: Oxford University Press, 1964), Annemarie Schimmel, *A History of Classical Urdu Literature from the Beginning to Iqbal* (Wiesbaden: Otto Harassowitz, 1976), Ahmed Ali, *The Golden Tradition* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1973), and others.

[27]This point of view can be gleaned from Ğālib's famous

ye na tʰī hamārī qismat ke viṣāl-e yār hōtā
agar aur jītē rahtē yehi intiẓār hōtā

where, had the *'āšiq* 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 *ğazal* by Muhammad Quli Qutb Shah, also in the feminine voice, in which the mood is very different from that of the few *še‘rs* above:

sakī bātāṅ šakar kartī valē miṭʰā’ī asē nā
divānī nīškar mēṅ kō’ī kadhīṅ nābāt bāsē nā
My girlfriend speaks sugary words
but it doesn't result in sweetness:
O mad one, don't look for rock candy in sugarcane![28]

xabar hū’ī šah hū’ē savarā yakā-yak ā’ē muj ṭʰārā
na pūčʰē ṭuk pʰirē bʰārā tō ab birhā sahā sē nā
Word has it that the king came galloping up to my door,
then left without even asking after my health—
how can such pangs of separation be borne?

kahūṅ apan birah jis kan agin š‘ula pṛē us tan
sū muškil ḍā’yā muj man haman dukʰ kō’ī sunā sē nā
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 k^{h}ōlē xudā aē duk^h dik^{h}āvē us suraj
kā muk^h
and^{h}ārī nain pāvēṅ suk^h tō muj^h par duk^h
dahā sē nā
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 *ğazal*, 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 *b^{h}akti*'s *virahinī* that inspired these explorations of the theme of love in separation that became so crucial to the later *ğazal*, 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 *ğazal* tradition when Dakani poets adopted the feminine voice and the "female principle."