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## **Female Voice in Urdu Poetry**

**Zayana Nasir**

*Department of History Jamia Millia Islamia, New Delhi, India,  
nasirzayana@gmail.com, <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-9438-7394>*

**Abstract.** This essay aims at understanding the development and struggles of a 'female voice' within Urdu poetic tradition through the writings of women poets of the Nineteenth century in contrast to the women poets of the twentieth-century feminist movement. The women in traditional Urdu poetry have remained a silent cruel beloved, the image offered is that of a 'feckless beloved, endowed with heavenly beauty, reigned: fair to face, doe-eyed, dark hair, tall and willowy, a woman who vacillated from indifference, shyness and modesty to wanton cruelty. The essay is an attempt to understand the level of autonomy of the female voice in the poems of women poets through the years. To portray the development of a feminine expression in Urdu poetry the paper will be ranging from the poems of tawaifs (courtesan) of the eighteenth century like Mah Laqa Chanda, their attempts to acquire a place within the patrilineal Urdu literary tradition; the rekhti tradition where men wrote poems in a female voice, to the twentieth century feminist poets like Kishwar Naheed and Fehmida Riaz. The paper is based on Hakim Fasihuddin Ranj's anthology 'Baharistan-i-Naz' which provides a brief yet important introduction on the status of various tawaif poets within the Urdu literary circle; Rahat Azmi's Halat-i-Mah Laqa, a biographical work on the life and works of Mah Laqa Bai Chanda; and Rukhsana Ahmad's 'We Sinful Women', a compilation of the original and translated works of feminist women poets of twentieth-century Pakistan. Various secondary sources have been used to understand the dynamics behind the writing style of these poets and how similar terms came to be used for portraying completely distinct themes.

**Keywords:** Rekhta; *rekhti*; poetry; tawaif; Mah Laqa; Kishwar Naheed; Fehmida Riyaz; Hudood Ordinance

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## Женский голос в поэзии урду

**Заяна Насир**

Университет Джамия Миллия Исламия, Дели, Индия,

nasirzayana@gmail.com, <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-9438-7394>

**Аннотация.** В статье рассматривается процесс борьбы за утверждение женского голоса в поэтической традиции урду XIX в. в сопоставлении с феминистским движением поэтесс урду XX в. на примере различных поэтических произведений, созданных ими на урду. В традиционной поэзии урду женщина предстала в образе безмолвной возлюбленной, за которой был закреплен строго определенный набор черт, включавших хрупкость и беспомощность, небесную красоту, светлый лик, глаза как у лани, царственный рост и гибкость стана, характер ее мог колебаться от застенчивой скромности до своенравной жестокости. И этот многогранный образ был, как правило, безгласным. В статье предпринята попытка определить появление автономного голоса женщины в поэзии урду и степень его автономии в разные эпохи. В статье прослеживается динамика укрепления женского голоса в литературной традиции урду от XVIII до XX в. на образцах поэзии *таваиф* (куртизанок) в лице поэтессы Мах Лака Баи Чанда с их попытками занять достойное место в патрилинейном традиционном стихотворчестве, поэтической традиции *рехти*, особенностью которой была стилизация мужских поэтических голосов под женские, и, наконец, поэзии феминисток, таких как Кишвар Нахид и Фехмида Рияз. Основной статьи послужили антология Хакима Фасихуддина Ранджа *Бахаристан-и-Наз*, которая представляет собой краткий, но компетентный источник сведений о статусе различных поэтесс-*таваиф* в литературных кругах урду, биографический труд о жизни и творчестве Мах Лаки Баи Чанды *Халат-и-Мах Лака* Рахата Азми, а также сборник как оригинальных, так и переведенных на урду произведений поэтесс-феминисток Пакистана XX в. Автором использовались также дополнительные источники, которые помогли в лучшей степени выполнить задачу исследования: проследить динамику изменения стиля обсуждаемых поэтов и выявить некоторые художественные особенности их поэзии.

**Ключевые слова:** Рехта; *рехти*; поэзия; таваиф; Мах Лака; Кишвар Нахид; Фехмида Рияз; Постановление Худуда

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## Introduction

The collapse of the distinction between prostitutes, lower-class singers, and elite courtesans, which came along with the Anti Nautch movement<sup>1</sup>, af-

<sup>1</sup> Anti-Nautch Movement (Anti Dance Movement); The British Government made an official declaration by which all *nautch* girls (dancer girls) were banned. This came about as a result of the Social Purity Movement in Britain. In the pot Mutiny era, the British Government proscribed any interaction between British Officials and Indian nautch girls.



affected the history writing of Urdu literature. The year following the rebellion of 1857, saw a decline in the position of the tawaifs as they were taken to be a threat to the British power. The Administration made sex cheap as beautiful and healthy women were forcefully sent to serve the English soldiers. Parallel to this decline was the popularity of a great number of literary representations of tawaifs in Urdu print culture [1, 2015, p. 143]. Many tawaifs came to hold their Diwans. Through poetry, these women could move above and beyond their relation with the bazaars and troops and extended their access to the cultural arena of literary performers. However, internalising the British reformist zeal, *Muhammad Hussain Azad*, writing his masterpiece *Aab-e-Hayat*<sup>2</sup>, which set the tone for later histories of Urdu, elided the mention of almost all female poets, particularly the courtesans [2, 2003, p. 366], as it was taken to corrode the respectable image of Urdu, which he and others were aiming to build. Courtesans thus struggled to live in the ambiguous space between performer and prostitute. This paper is divided into two parts. The first part will talk about courtesan poetry through the *tazkira*<sup>3</sup> work of *Hakim Fasihuddin Ranj*, and will aim to understand their attempts to acquire a place within the patrilineal Urdu literary tradition through the poetry composition of *Mah Laqa Bai Chanda*. The second part covers the works of Feminist writers of Pakistan during the rule of General Zia Ul Haq.

### Part one. Courtesan poetry

The first mention of the female poets comes from a biographer of poets and also a poet himself, *Hakim Fasihuddin Ranj*. He assembled *Baharistan-i-Naz* (Springtime Garden of Coquetry, the first compiled anthology (*tazkira*) of women poets, in 1864 [3, 2017, p. 601]. A *tazkira* dedicated exclusively to women was a novelty in the existing Urdu literature [3, 2017, p. 601]. “The collection included 174 female poets placed in alphabetical order, majority of them wrote in Urdu but 49 of them wrote in Persian and three of them wrote in both Persian and Urdu” [2, 2003, p. 366]. *Ranj* brings together in *Baharistan*, the tawaif and the ‘*pardah-nasheen*<sup>4</sup>’ poets, thus erasing the line of respectability to an extent. “Literary talent afforded all types of women access to a shared cultural arena” [3, 2017, p. 607]. While *Ranj* describes women as possessing the same abilities as men, though strictly in terms of education (*taleem*), he praises some tawaifs as possessing better poetry skills than men. He describes poet *Banno’s*

<sup>2</sup> Kugle seems to have confused Muhammad Hussain Azad with Altaf Hussain Hali. Muhammad Hussain Azad has written *Aab-e-Hayat*

<sup>3</sup> *Tazkira*, collection of biographical notes (on poets, etc.), memoir, biography, discussion, remembrance, rumour, fame, to have a dialogue/ a biographical memoir. – See: *Rekhta Dictionary* [www.rekhtadictionary.com].

<sup>4</sup> *Pardah-nasheen* is a veiled woman, litt. “sitting behind a veil”, here it is used as a juxtaposition of the status of Tawaifs considered to be ‘public Woman’



style of writing as delicate and visionary (*nazuk khayal* – elegant style) and her words to be superior to thousands of men [4, 1965, p. 107]. Another was *Badshah Begam Khafi*, introduced by him as a *Khangi*, who was known as Missy (honorary nickname) *laqab* in the English circles [4, 1965, p. 139]. She was a praised poet inclined towards versification (*sher-goi*). Her skills in recited composition were characterized as sweet-voiced harmony (*khush-ahang saz*). The recitation and singing of the ghazal were closely associated with the courtesans. Their ghazals<sup>5</sup> were part of their performances, not just the private expression of inner identity [5, 2016, p. 343]. Poetry involved singing and dancing and gestures to attract an audience and patronage. Zahra of Lucknow was a celebrated Urdu Poet, but her recitation of Ghazal (*ghazal khwani*) was held in higher esteem than her composition.

Another known tawaif and a relatively unknown poet was Mah Laqa Bai of Hyderabad. Her name was Chanda BiBi and Mah Laqa was her court title. She is considered to be the first female poet with a Collection of Poetry or Diwan (*Sahib-e-Diwan*)<sup>6</sup>. There was probably another tawaif, Lutf-un-Nisa, who published her Diwan much earlier, but this does not affect the status of Mah Laqa [6, 1998, p. 121]. Mah Laqa's Diwan '*Gulzar-e-Mah Laqa*' ('Mah Laqa's Flower Garden') holds around 125 ghazals, each having five couplets (*ashaar*) [6, 1998, p. 128]. Rahat Azmi complains that many Urdu experts have not given Mah Laqa and her writing the status they deserve, they have confined her poetry to the Kothas by placing her writings within her profession of tawaif, calling it the words of a *Kasbi kanchani* (whore) [6, 1998, ch. 3, p. 139]. Complimenting her, he writes that although Mah Laqa was not a Master of Poetry (*Ustad-e-Sukhan*), her work was worthy enough to be kept with those of the known Masters (*Ustads*).

Although it's tempting to think that courtesans were able to defy the patriarchal setting by building a world of their own, these women, very evidently, manipulated the existing patriarchal construction and relations to their advantage. Courtesans operated through the 'network of "cultured" men to acquire education and patronage' [3, 2017, p. 604]. Many tawaif took correction (*islah*) of their poetry from male *Ustads* (Masters). Mah Laqa's poetry teacher was Muhammad Sher Khan Iman, who was also her great admirer. Scott Kugle writes that Mah Laqa offers a rich example of how a woman constrained by patriarchal demands of femininity manipulated them to achieve her artistic and spiritual goals [5, 2016, p. 225]. Poems of flattery and praise were important at the court of Nizams of Hyderabad, therefore her ability to compose poetry played a crucial role in court life. Many of her ghazals in fact function as *qasida* (panegyric

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<sup>5</sup> Ghazal, a genre of poetry dealing largely with topics of both worldly and spiritual love, comprising couplets, the second part of which are in rhyme. – See: Rekhta Dictionary [www.rekhtadictionary.com].

<sup>6</sup> A Diwan is a collection of poems of a single author.



form) praising a ruler or hero, mainly Aristu Jah and Nizam Ali Khan, her early patrons [5, 2016, p. 258]. These ghazals were very specific to the occasion, praising the patron's might and generosity to win his favor and repay his patronage. Kugle very precisely, concludes that 'as a courtesan, Mah Laqa Bai had to attract the male gaze, seize it, captivate through it, and manipulate it so that her vulnerable position as an unmarried but sexually available woman translated into an empowered position with protection by aristocratic men, their money and the status they conveyed' [5, 2016, p. 262]. Mah Laqa Bai's Diwan, 'Gulzar-e-Mah Laqa', serves to indicate her status, probably why she had more than one copy of her Diwan, one of which she presented as a gift to John Malcolm, a British East India Company's official. The use of the Diwan as a tool of political networking becomes clear through this [1, 2015, p. 150–151]. Thus poetry and its performance became a tool of political action and diplomacy. Instead of breaking out of the chains of male dependency, courtesans used them to their advantage. They tend to intensify their dependency on the powerful men placed on the top of the social and political hierarchy and thus gain control over the men who came farther down in the hierarchy.

One of the most powerful actions that Mah Laqa adopted was the manipulation and adherence to religion and its symbols. Mah Laqa Bai fashioned herself to be remembered as a woman of piety. Apart from patronizing religious festivals and architecture, Mah Laqa combined romantic and mystic themes in her poems. The ghazals integrated *Shia* spirituality, the final couplet of each ghazal was dedicated to showing her love to Imam Ali. Being dependent on Ali as a slave, a devotee and a lover meant gaining the power to stay independent of other men. Mah Laqa Bai helped to create a dignified place for *Shia* devotion in a *Sunni* court through her poetry and patronage.

Urdu poetry, as we know, is a gendered genre, the poetic literature is known as *rekhta* if the speaker expresses in masculine voice and *rekhti* if the speaker's voice is feminine. The *rekhta* poetry is spoken by a masculine lover (*ashiq*) to a grammatically masculine beloved (*mashuq*), although this *mashuq* can be a female [7, 2001, p. 228]. While in *rekhti* poetry, the speaker is a female who seduces the beloved who again, could be either a male or female.

Mah Laqa adopted the *rekhta* style of writing in her poetry. Although the gender of the author often remains ambiguous, she does take on a male persona to describe, in detail, his charming and formidable lover, who is, evidently, a female. Some contemporary South Asian feminists have argued that Mah Laqa Bai's work does not speak with an 'authentic feminist voice' about the struggles of real women in achieving freedom and independence from male supremacy or the experiences of the woman for empowerment [5, 2016, p. 335]. Women, however, do not seem to be completely absent in her writings, even if the poem is not in her voice, the silence displays a position of strength, as against the speaker who is a weak and helpless lover. 'Silence is the prerogative of a beloved who is aloof, independent, and happy without the forlorn lover' [5, 2016,



p. 329]. Moreover, as a woman, the tawaifs, including Mah Laqa Bai Chanda, even when writing in a male voice, could write about themselves as the subject. In one of her ghazals, Mah Laqa depicts the beauty of the beloved, and this beloved is not just any woman, but a courtesan. This is suggestive from the exaggerated description of the woman with fingertips dyed bright with henna, *paan*-reddened lips and a choice to insult her admirers in supplication, these are seen as the characteristics of a courtesan by Kugle [2, 2003, p. 370]. What can be taken out of this portrait of a tawaif is an attempt on the part of Mah Laqa to see herself and describe herself through the male gaze. Therefore, through the voice of the male gaze, Mah Laqa is able to describe the feminine allure that she embodies in the actual social setup as a performer. Although, in general, Mah Laqa writes love poems in which the speaker is male, whenever she makes the use of idioms (*muhawara*), she uses those which were generally used by women [6, 1998]. Moreover, in many of her ghazals, the gender shifts to female when she expresses her love and devotion to Imam Ali.

For a tawaif, the ghazal was a form that offered opportunities to express her desires and agency, however, she adopted a male voice, not expressing feminine desire or Lesbian love. The question to ask here is what led them to such a decision. Carla Petievich argues that it was so because these women understood the convention of the poetic tradition, in which they aimed to fully participate. To adopt the voice of *rekhti* would have affected full participation [8, 2005]. *Rekhti* was considered a petty genre fit for 'jokes and erotic humor'. The women it depicts as lovers are not 'powerful social actors', therefore, it was not a suitable genre for women who were trying to make it in a man's dominion. Equal participation seems to be more important to women poets like Mah Laqa than indulging in poetry that expresses their experiences as women [2, 2003, p. 371]. The dominance of male voices in Urdu poetry can be seen as a product of the patriarchal environment in which Ghazal writing evolved. Instead of defying this patriarchal tradition, Mah Laqa and others appropriated it to their benefit. Women poets had to prove themselves among male poets by adopting the normative male voice of the poem [2, 2003, p. 371–372]. The tawaifs and their poetry did not aim to challenge the patriarchal system but to attain for themselves a dignified position within it.

Part two. Feminist poetry. Urdu poetry for a large part remained a personal expression of love and romance up until the nineteenth century and beyond, however it did witness the beginning of a reformist and didactic trend. Apart from Altaf Hussain Hali (1837–1914), one of the well-known poets of his time taking up societal issues in his poetry including a minor discussion on the matter of women' plight [9, 2003, p. 31] it was the renowned poet, Dr Muhammad Iqbal (1877–1938), who established political themes as valid subject matter [10, 1991]. This could account for the choice of adoption by the women poets of the twentieth century, of using the medium of poetry to convey real, contemporary issues, abandoning the more conventional forms with traditional imagery



of women. Some of the famous female poets include Kishwar Naheed, Femida Riyaz, Zehra Nigah, Ishrat Afreen and many others. Since many of the women poets were also members of the WAF (Women's Action Front)<sup>7</sup>, their poems represented the larger struggle of the women against the socio-religious and political hegemony of the state [90, 2003, p. 29].

Unlike the female poets of earlier centuries mentioned above, these poets aimed to take the existing modes and strived to develop a genre that can enable women to articulate their expression for personal and political freedom. They also tried to extend the scope of language. Fehmida Riaz is one such poet who acted on the issue of language and deliberately chose words that are of Indic origin, moving away from more Persianized literature, preferred by most poets [10, 1991, p. 4]. Kishwar Naheed also confessed the restricting character of the existing poetic language in expressing a radical thought.

While *rekhti* had remained the only genre that supposedly presented women's voices, it did not, as already discussed, provide a space for feminist intervention. It is argued that they (*rekhti* poets) may pretend to look at women and themselves through the eyes of a woman, but they mostly saw what their 'masculine and hetero-sexual selves desired' [9, 2003, p. 34].

While *rekhti* never became a voice for the female Urdu poets, the women poets of the initial phase, who mainly were the tawaifs, largely chose to adopt a male voice in their poems describing women subjects as the conventional object of beauty and cruelty as it has been discussed in detail above. The poets of the feminist movement made an attempt to acquire the female voice, not for the entertainment of male consciousness, but to bring to the fore the issues and experiences that came along being a woman in Pakistan under the state of Gen. Zia ul Haq. The most immediate background to the poetic genre that developed in this period is the imposition of the Hudood Ordinance that was enacted in 1979 as a part of Gen. Zia ul Haq's 'Shariatization' or 'Islamization' process. Most of the poems directly confronted the implications of the Hudood Ordinance and the law of Evidence. The resistance can be seen in the usage of the terms that otherwise represented the delicate beauty of the women, for instance, flowers, jewels etc.

*ladkiyañ maañ jaise muqaddar kyoñ rakhtī haiñ  
tan sahrā aur aañkh samundar kyoñ rakhtī haiñ  
aurteñ apne dukh kī virāsat kis ko deñgi  
sandūqoñ meñ band ye zavar kyoñ rakhtī haiñ  
vo jo aap hī puujī jaane ke laa.eq thiiñ  
champā sī poroñ meñ patthar kyoñ rakhtī hai  
o jo rahī haiñ khālī peT aur nañge paañv  
bachā bachā kar sar kī chādar kyoñ rakhtī hai*

<sup>7</sup> Women's Action Forum/Front is a women's rights organization in Pakistan. The Women's Action Forum was established in Karachi in September 1981. The WAF was formed to respond to the implementation of the Hudood Ordinance penal code and to strengthen women's position in society generally.



'Why do girls follow the destinies of their mothers?  
Why are their bodies deserts, their eyes the ocean deep?  
Why do women keep their jewels locked in trunks?  
To whom will they bequeath their legacy of grief?  
Those who were themselves worthy of worship  
Why do they clutch stones between jasmine fingertips?  
Those who remained hungry and barefooted  
Why do they not let their Chadur slip? (Afreen, 1991)

The images of jewels and jasmine are not used here to define the beauty of the women but to present the atrocities. The locking up of jewels and the clutching stones between jasmine fingertips tries to achieve the effect of subversion [9, p. 33]. In one of the compositions, Kishwar Naheed writes:

*Mere muñh par tamāñcha maar kar  
Tumhāre hāthoñ ki uñgliyoñ ke nishān  
Phūlī hui roti ki tarah  
Mere muñh par sad rang ġhubbāre chodh jaate haiñ*

'While hitting my face,  
The imprints of your finger  
Like stuffed bread  
Leave hundred-coloured balloons on my cheeks' (Neelam Ghar)

The physical features that were identified with the image of a woman such as cheeks, forehead, eyes and lips, are used in a context completely different from conventional trends in Urdu poetry. This poem challenges the male authority on a female's body and mind. In one of the couplets of Naheed from her poetry collection 'The Speaking lips' ('Lab-i Goya') she uses another conventional metaphor to signify an unusual stance. She writes:

*maiñ qaid-e-jism meñ rusvā tū qaid meñ merī  
badan pe daāgh liye qaid-e-be-sa.ūbat ke*

'I am disgraced in the prison of my body, you are in my capture  
bearing in your body the scar of painless imprisonment.' [11, 2009, p. 215]

The image of imprisonment is often used in mainstream Urdu poetry signifying the state of being in love, one being imprisoned by the emotion of love. Imprisonment functions in this Ghazal as a marker of gendered subjectivity. The couplet tells us the power relationship between the lover and the beloved is uneven, while she is disgraced because of imprisonment of her body, he remains unharmed. This highlights the distinct experience of men and women [11, 2009, p. 215].

In Fehmida Riaz's work, the veil is made analogous to prison (four walls) wherein the dignity and freedom of a woman are sacrificed. She covers the oppression perpetrated by men on women like the sexual assault of handmaidens where the veil which is signified to protect provides no protection. Even after wearing a veil, women's bodies are violated by men, thus the objective of wearing a veil is eventually lost.





Another important aspect to note is that in these poems, women reinvented themselves, depicting their experiences and creating a feminist space and a sense of belonging among the women of not just their country but also beyond. This can be evident through the use of the words like 'Hum'(We) as in 'Hum Gunahgaar Auratein' (We Sinful Women) by Kishwar Naheed, 'Humare Halaat' (Our condition) or 'Humari Zaban' (Our tongue/Our voice) and many other examples. Through this, they do not confine the poem reflecting just their experiences, but put them as the experiences of women all around.

## Conclusion

To conclude, we can bring up the three phases of women poets which Elaine Showalter talks about: the 'feminine' phase when women write and imitate the male masters sometimes concealing their true self; Second, the 'feminist' phase which coincides with the development of suffragette movement; lastly, the 'female' (ideal) phase, where women began to write about their own experiences and disregarded the world of men [12, 2014, p. 13–14]. The first phase can be seen to an extent in the writings of the tawaifs, particularly Mah Laqa Bai Chanda, who made her little spot in the Urdu poetry culture by adopting the ongoing trend dominated by male trend-setters. While the second phase is seen in the works of twentieth-century women poets who wrote against not just social patriarchy but also provided a reply to the political hegemony of men over women and their lives and bodies.

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### Информация об авторе

**Заяна Насир** – научный сотрудник, кафедре истории, Университет Джамия Миллия Исламия, Дели, Индия.

### Information about the author

**Zayana Nasir** – Research Scholar, Department of History, Jamia Millia Islamia, New Delhi, India.

### Author's Links



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