The Fragrance and the Fist: *Tawaif*, Urdu Poetry, and the Subversive Spaces of the Ghazal

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Abstract: *Tawaif*, who were all women, were major contributors to poetry, dance, and music in India. However, *tawaif* today are primarily recognized as a group of women involved in prostitution and sex work, and their contributions to poetry and performance have been largely forgotten. This reductionist view has obscured their vital contributions to the cultural and literary life of South Asia. This article, therefore, revisits the history of the *tawaif* in pre-colonial and colonial contexts and deconstructs the poetry of Mah Laqa Chanda (d. 1824), a *tawaif* and a poet, to address the erasure of women’s oral and written voices in Urdu literary traditions. The article employs Ferdinand de Saussure’s theory of sign to understand the interpretation of “*tawaif” as* both a word and an identity over time. Furthermore, it applies Jacques Derrida’s method of deconstruction to critically analyze Chanda's poetry, arguing that *tawaif* literature offers a powerful model for understanding how women appropriated dominant cultural forms to subvert patriarchal structures.

Introduction

Tawaif, who were all women, were major contributors to poetry, dance, and music in India.[1] However, *tawaif* today are recognized as a group of women involved in prostitution and sex work, and their contribution to poetry and performance is mostly forgotten. Mah Laqa Chanda (d. 1824), a *tawaif* from Hyderabad, is known to be the first woman to "compose a full *divan* of ghazals" (Kugle, 2016, p. 141).[2] Mah Laqa was an influential and independent woman in the court of Hyderabad, as well as an accomplished poet (Kugle, 2016, p. 142). This article aims to address the question of the erasure of women's oral and written contributions to Urdu poetry. I suggest that the stigmatization of *tawaif* is the reason behind the erasure of women's, hence *tawaif's*, written and oral contributions to Urdu poetry in the Colonial and Post-Colonial Indian subcontinent. I also suggest that *tawaif's* poetry is a model for understanding how women used appropriation to subvert patriarchy. This article, therefore, aims to revisit the history of *tawaif* and their relationship with poetry and re-examine their representation in the pre-colonial and early colonial Indian subcontinent. I will use Mah Laqa's poetry to build a case of resistance and subversion. In terms of time, I will look at the 18th century and beyond. The date selection is due to the end of Aurangzeb's reign in Mughal India. Aurangzeb was known for his orthodox Islamic beliefs and *tawaif* were at the peak of their influence after Aurangzeb's passing (Courtney, n.d.).[3] The 18th century is also the time of Mir Taqi Mir (d. 1810) and Khawaja Mir Dard (d. 1785), two of the not many poets regarded as the pioneer poets of Urdu poetry (Bailey, 1932, p. 41).

Understanding Ghazal and Urdu

Ghazal is a form of poetry mainly found in Arabic, Persian, and Urdu. Ghazals are poems that deal with matters of love. In simple terms, ghazals are love poems, an ode to love, or a tribute to a beloved. It is important to have a basic understanding of ghazal because many early Urdu poems were ghazals. The ghazal's unique and important characteristic is the autonomous or semi-autonomous couplet. It is pertinent to this study because when reading full poems, one can be confused by the shift from 'the season of spring' in one couplet to the 'hardships of earning' in the other (Faiz, 1995, p. 7). Moreover, it is the autonomy of the couplet that allows its analysis as a stand-alone object. Nevertheless, one theme that remains prevalent in the metanarrative is love; ghazal will always be a conversation between the lover and the beloved. However, the

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[1] *Tawaif* is both singular and plural, understanding depends on the usage.
[2] A *divan* is a collection of poems or ghazals.
[3] By saying orthodox I am not suggesting traditional or popular Islam instead it is used to point out his actions being on the extreme end of orthodoxy when compared to his predecessors.

beloved does not have to be human. An example is the poetry of Faiz Ahmed Faiz (d. 1984), a progressive writer from Pakistan. One of his ghazals' first couplet is (Faiz, 1995, p. 7):[4]

donoñ jahān terī mohabbat meñ haar ke
vo jā rahā hai koī shab-e-ġham guzār ke

Losing both worlds in love of yours
Enduring grieving nights someone goes

This couplet, on a surface level, looks like the cry of a broken-hearted lover, and the surface understanding calls for a human beloved. However, considering the history and the life of Faiz, we can deduce that the beloved in this couplet could be his country (and oppressed people) for whom he endured the hardships of jail and self-exile (Farooqi, 2008, p. 30).[5] This type of analysis, which moves beyond surface meaning, is essential to this study. We will observe later in this study that women were able to strategically call out the oppressive assumptions and structures while utilizing male dominant mediums. Moreover, they were able to raise their voices in ghazals using the traditional tropes just like Faiz did in his poetry.

Ghazal and the Different Regions of India

In Urdu poetry, ghazal is undoubtedly the most famous style of writing poems. The introduction of *Nazm* loosened the meter, refrain, and rhyme restrictions to some extent and successfully caught the attention of many progressive and post-colonial poets, yet ghazal remained a popular form. Urdu ghazal, especially written by the poets of Delhi, was heavily influenced by the Persian language and Persian ghazal. However, the people from the Deccan region in India remained mostly faithful to their vernacular and metaphors; hence, *Deccani* Urdu and ghazal do not show as much influence of Persian as Delhi's or northern region's Urdu (Azam, 2017, p.100; Kugle, 2016, p. 220). The northern region's developing Urdu or *Khari Boli,* which started to get influenced by Persian, was also called *Rekhta* in the 19th century. *Rekhta* in Persian translates to "interspersed or mixed" (Bangha, 2012, p. 3). However, *Rekhta* achieved a working meaning and the poets especially from the northern schools started to call their language *Rekhta,* for example, Mirza Ghalib (d. 1869) wrote (Ghalib, n.d.-b):

reḳhte ke tumhīñ ustād nahīñ ho 'ġhālib'
kahte haiñ agle zamāne meñ koī 'mīr' bhī thā

You are not the only master of *Rekhta* 'Ghalib'
In previous times, lived someone named 'Mir'

[4] All translations are mine unless specified.
[5] Faiz Ahmed Faiz was one of the most influential modern poets of Urdu language. Faiz is known to have used traditional ghazal imagery as a metaphor to depict the struggles of a common man of his times (Hussein, 2023, p.3). He was also known as "people's poet" (Yaqin, 2013, p. 2).

Tawaif, Courtesans, and Performance

The word *"tawaif"* is loosely translated as "courtesans" in English. However, the word "courtesan" cannot capture the range of meanings encompassed by the word "*tawaif"*. This is why I have avoided using the word "courtesans" to describe *tawaif* until now and will do so for this article. The term "courtesan" inherently brings notions that are not necessarily true to *tawaif.* The term "courtesan" today evokes prostitution and sexual services in exchange for money with upper-class clients (Ganguly, 2018, p. 237). The connotations attached to the word "courtesan" eradicates any possibility of the formation of an atmosphere essential for the appreciation of arts sustained by *tawaif.* In truth, *tawaif* were regarded as the finest artists, the epitome of etiquettes, and belonged to the "highest strata" of Indian society (Kumar et al., 2025, p. 4). It is critical to understand that *tawaif* did sometimes engage in sexual activities with their patrons, but sexual favor was not the primary service. Sexual intimacy was incidental, extremely exclusive and consensual. For example, in the city of Lucknow, a "wealthy courtier" could commit to regularly contributing to a *kotha,* the place where a *tawaif* lived and performed, and in return gain access to privileges that could include "an exclusive sexual relationship with a *tawaif*" (Oldenburg, 1990, p. 263). Moreover, it is also recorded that it was very hard to find historical accounts where *tawaif* were engaging in sexual activities as a primary service before the British started to rule over India (Kumar et. Al, 2025, p. 9). Engaging in sexual activities here suggests selling sex as a main source of income.[6] The differentiation is important because women engaged in prostitution were called *randi* (Vanita, 2012, p. 19) and a *randi* was sometimes associated with a *kotha* as well but at a "lower rank" (Oldenburg, 1990, p. 264).[7]

Courtesanship

The understanding of courtesans preferred in this study is the same as stated in *The Courtesan's Arts: Cross-Cultural Perspectives*: "…we define courtesanship roughly as the social phenomenon whereby women engage in relatively exclusive exchanges of artistic graces, elevated conversation, and sexual favors with male patrons" (Feldman et al., 2023, p. 5). Our main concern is the "artistic graces" that included poetry and performance. However, defining courtesans is not to say that *tawaif* is a synonym or direct translation of courtesan. Instead, it is to suggest that *tawaif* are part of a larger body that is categorized as courtesans of India by the English-speaking world. In my defense of not using the English term are two main reasons. One is the multitude of courtesanship in India; *dasi* (a slave prostitute), *devdasi* (the religious *dasi* or "god's mortal wife"), *Ganika* (the civilized courtesan), and more all fall under the banner of

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[6] It is not in the scope of this study to analyze and discuss the morality of consensual sex work and its social implications. This study also does not imply that consensual sex work is morally wrong or sex workers e.g.*randi* are of any less in status, dignity or regard than *tawaif.* In this study, the only reason for drawing distinction between selling sex as a primary and secondary service is to be able to understand and look at *tawaif* through the lens of poetry and performance.

[7] I understand the complexities associated with the word '*randi*'; however, I am relying on the late 19th century definition (Vanita 19).

courtesans (Feldman et al., 2023, p. 162). The second is the problem raised because of the multitude, the problem of the signifier and the signified.

The Signifier and the Signified

The "signifier" and the "signified" are the terms used by the linguist Ferdinand de Saussure (d. 1913) to explain the "form" and the "concept" respectively (Hall, 2023, p. 31). Moreover, interpretation is understood as the "aspect of the process by which meaning is given and taken" (Hall, 2023, p. 33). Just as the word "courtesan" signifies different ideas and definitions in one's mind, the word *"tawaif"* does the same today. I can avoid using the word "courtesan" for "*tawaif"*; however, it does not solve the problem created by the stigmatization of *tawaif*. Not using the word "courtesan" only erases the unnecessary meanings attached to the word "courtesan". It is helpful since it allows us to look at *tawaif* as a unique identity, yet it does not deal with the problems caused by the meanings attached to the word "*tawaif"*. To understand the stigmatization of *tawaif*, we need to follow the pattern of the changes in interpretations of the word "*tawaif"*, hence following the trend of what was signified by the usage of the word "*tawaif*" over time. In other words, we need to find out why *tawaif* were once known as "intellectual equals" (Vanita, 2012, p. 191) to men and then merely "dancing and singing girls" (Oldenburg, 1990, p. 259).

Intellectual Equals to Men

What made *tawaif* intellectual equals to men was their excellence in multiple disciplines. *Tawaif* were trained in classical Indian music traditions such as *thumri* and classical dances such as *kathak* (Deewan, 2019, p. 2). They were also the teachers of etiquette and manners and were regarded to the extent that sons of the royal families would visit them for lessons (Vanita, 2012, p. 191, Kumar et al., 2025, p. 3, Oldenburg, 1990, p. 263). Bharatendu Harishchandra (d. 1885), the "father of modern Hindi", was known to have learned the arts from *tawaif* (Deewan, 2019, p. 2). In essence, *tawaif* were women who had mastered the arts of performance. Another important fact is that the only visible parts of a *tawaif's* body were her face, hands, and feet (Vanita, 2012, p. 191). This is not to say that *tawaif* were observing some kind of religious veil; instead, it is to make the point that *tawaif* were not selling their bodies as an object for sexual favors. Their patrons came to appreciate their voices in ghazal singing and their mastery of dances such as *Kathak*. *Tawaif* would dress just like any other nobility would dress, wearing exquisite Indian dresses. This glamorous wear and style were intentional as it showed the status they carried and the wealth they had accumulated. In the 1858-77 tax records, *tawaif* were found in the "highest tax brackets" (Oldenburg, 1990, p. 259).

Artistic Grace

We need to understand the aspects of "grace" to make sense of what *tawaif* offered and why they were valuable to society and Indian culture. An excerpt from Veena Talwar Oldenburg's (1990) article can help us understand the concept of "grace". Oldenburg, walking

with a *tawaif*, noticed that *tawaif* wore a *burqa* in the market. *Burqa* is a long loose garment worn by Muslim women to cover their body and face.[8] Oldenburg found the *tawaif's* choice to wear a burqa in public puzzling. She followed up with questions and the *tawaif* explained:

> We are not in the business of giving them cheap thrills. While we walk freely and anonymously in public places, looking at the world through our nets, they are deprived because we have blinkered them (274).

The *tawaif* also added, "…men long to see our faces" (274). Moreover, the reversal of "patriarchal logic" was displayed:

> … they chose to block the gaze of men. It was an extension of the autonomy they enjoyed in their living space and their jism (bodies), unlike "normal" women whose bodies were the property of their husbands and who were secluded but lacked privacy in their own homes (Oldenburg, 1990, p. 273).

The grace that they offered placed them in the center of power. The grace required mastery of arts; thus, it was precious. The grace was not cheap and was not offered on the streets, hence, it was sought. If anyone wanted to have a glimpse of this grace, they had to come to the *kotha.* The reversal of patriarchal logic and reclaiming of power was in process inside the *kotha.* In regular households, a wife was expected to satisfy the need of her husband with "quick sex" (Oldenburg, 1990, p. 272) whenever he desired, whereas a *tawaif* owned her body and art; she performed when she desired. Moreover, *tawaif's* choice of covering themselves, whether with glamorous wear during performances or in the market wearing a *burqa is* intriguing. This choice allowed her to control and appropriate the male gaze.

Although, the experience narrated by Oldenburg is from the 20th century, the art of a *tawaif* was consistent for multiple centuries until her complete degradation by the British and treatment as a "specimen" for providing sexual services to European soldiers (Oldenburg, 1990, p. 265). It can be said that a *tawaif* carried more autonomy than a housewife or other women of her time, however, it would be incorrect to assume that she was able to fully exit the economic and social structures of her time. The structures that were patriarchal and restrictive for women. An example is that the source of income for a *kotha* were its patrons, who were mainly men. Despite it all, I suggest that the practices such as consensual intimacy, freedom of expression,

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[8] Today the word "*Burqa"*, just like the word "*tawaif",* has multiple connotations attached to it. It would require another study to understand completely what burqa is, however, there is a need to provide a working definition for *burqa* in this study. This needs to be done without undermining any legitimate religious beliefs tied to the word *burqa*. The understanding I propose for this study is that *burqa* is a form of *hijab* (veil) in Islam for women. This form of veil is worn to hide one's parts of body from *ghayr mahram* (people with whom one can legally marry). *Burqa* can be worn by women with an intention of practicing their respective religious school of thought, however, at the same time *burqa* can be worn by women only because it is customary and is expected by society. If a woman wears a *burqa* solely for the second reason, then we can argue that this practice is coerced and is a form of oppression. If all the patrons of *tawaif* were *ghayr mahram* then one can propose that *tawaif,* at least, did not practice wearing *burqa* for the religious reasons. So, the question is whether tawaif wore burqa to abide by the customs of society? The customs that can be understood as patriarchal, oppressive and the ones that violate the freedom of practice and expression. Hence, according to my understanding, Oldenburg's inquiry was less about the burqa itself and more about the motivations underlying its use.

freedom of dance and poetry, freedom to manage their own finances and earn an income constituted a partial reclamation of power from men.

Walk of the Moon

To expand further on the concept of artistic grace, understand the style of a *tawaif*, and read their poetry, I will look at the work of Mah Laqa Chanda (1768 -1824). Mah Laqa Chanda was a poet and a *tawaif.* She was an expert in writing poetry, especially ghazal (Awasthi, 2024, p. 6). Mah Laqa was a poet from Hyderabad; hence, she belonged to the Deccan region. However, her poetry was not necessarily in *Deccani* Urdu, instead, it is open to debate and my understanding suggests that her poetry was influenced by the developing *Rekhta* in the northern region of India (Kugle, 2016, p. 223). Her pen name was *Chanda,* which is translated as "moon" in English. "*Chanda"* as a noun is feminine whereas "*chand"* is masculine. Mah Laqa passed away before the events of the latter half of the 19th century that played a major role in unfolding and forming negative connotations associated with *tawaif.* However, it is not to say that Mah Laqa was not subject to the tensions of the porous line between a performer and a prostitute, a notion that is explored later in this study. Nevertheless, it is accurate to say that the severity of the tension was not as intense as seen in the later centuries. Mah Laqa was not only an excellent poet but also a woman actively involved in "Hyderabad's courtly and religious life" (Kugle, 2016, p. 142). Hence, it is critical to remember that Mah Laqa also represented the life of a *tawaif* among the royal members and the nobility. Mah Laqa is regarded as the first woman to have a published *divan* (a collection) of ghazals (Kugle, 2016, p. 143, Tharu and Lalita, 1991, p. 122). It is challenging to say that she was the only woman writing poetry since poetry writing and music composing were essential practices among *tawaif.* However, the absence of historical records and possibly the failed recovery of the texts are some reasons we do not have significant poetry preserved (Kugle, 2016, p. 143, Tharu and Lalita, 1991, p. 121).

Deconstruction

To analyze her poetry, I will use the deconstruction method, a concept introduced by the French philosopher Jacques Derrida. The understanding of this method that I aim to use for my poetry analysis is based on the principle of reversal of the hierarchy. It suggests that no one meaning is absolute in terms of authority, hence, no one meaning carries the strength to claim complete truthfulness. The strategy involves looking at the marginalized meaning, and the meaning is marginalized because of the hierarchy created by binaries. The presence of a hierarchy asserts one understanding or representation to be superior to the other, as a result, it gradually keeps diminishing the light of the other possible meaning or understanding which eventually leads to believing one popular meaning to be the origin. Hence, our task is to disturb this hierarchy, cause significant displacement, and change the origin, as Derrida wrote:

> In a traditional philosophical opposition we have not a peaceful coexistence of facing terms but a violent hierarchy. One of the terms dominates the other (axiologically,

> logically, etc.), occupies the commanding position. To deconstruct the opposition is above all, at a particular moment, to reverse the hierarchy (Positions, 1981, p. 41).

Gulzar – e – Mah Laqa

Mah Laqa's *divan* was published after her death (Tharu and Lalita, 1990, p. 121). Her *divan* was named *Gulzar – e – Mah Laqa*, which translates to "Mah Laqa's Garden". The word "*gul*" can be translated as both flower and rose. Similarly, *gulzar* could mean a garden and a rose garden. *Gul* is borrowed from Persian. Although this noun is masculine in Urdu, in Persian it carries no gender since Persian does not assign gender to its nouns. However, *gul* has also been used in a non-gendered sense, not necessarily grammatically but contextually. For English, we will use the translation "flower" for *gul.* A flower suggests delicacy and beauty. *Gul* is a symbol of the beloved in Persian poetry and is famously known as the companion of *Bulbul*, the Arabic and Persian nightingale, and the lover in Persian poetry (Krasnowolska, 2024, p. 111). These meanings from Persian poetry also entered Urdu, especially *Rekhta,* and the poets started using these metaphors. However, another word "*Kalii*" is used for the flower, specifically bud – the one that awaits the bloom. *Kalii* is a feminine noun and is used in Urdu and Hindi. A *kalii* represents the stage where one can at least see the color of the petals of a flower, but it has yet to bloom. It is used in poetry to represent the youthfulness and beauty of a girl, not a woman. Mah Laqa has a couplet that mentions both *gul* and *kalii* (Chanda, "*gul ke*")*:*

> *gul ke hone kī tavaqqo pe jiye baiThī hai*
> *har kalī jaan ko muTThī meñ liye baiThī hai*
>
> She lives while hoping that the flower exists
> Holding her life in her fist, every bud sits

Focusing on the flower aspect in poetry and its primary role of "beloved", the question comes: did Mah Laqa Chanda see herself only as a beloved as described in Urdu and Persian poetry? Did she, by using the terms *gul* and *kalii,* accept the connotation of delicateness, a young girl, and an object of the male gaze? Moreover, did she as a performer decide to write in a position of being a beloved who always needs a lover and lives by practicing coquetry and seduction? Or was she inverting the meanings and seeing herself as a lover who was bold enough to do anything for her beloved? In simple words, was she keeping power, hence control, in her hands, or was willingly giving it to others?

To answer the questions, I need to deconstruct "*gul*". The task is to find an alternative meaning for *gul.* Mah Laqa practiced Shiite spirituality.[9] Shiites believe in Imams (spiritual mentors from Prophet Muhammad's family) and regard Ali, the cousin and son-in-law of Prophet Muhammad, as the first Imam and successor to Prophet Muhammad. Mah Laqa was a devoted and spiritual Shiite (Kugle, 2016, p. 224). Many of her ghazals end with a couplet presenting her

[9] Shiite or *Shi'a* branch is one of the two main branches of Islam, the other and larger one is Sunni.

as a devotee of Imam Ali. Keeping this reverence for Imam Ali in mind, I will look at a famous quote associated with Imam Ali, “Be like the flower that gives its fragrance to even the hand that crushes it.” (Suleman, 2024). This quote is commonly heard in Muslim gatherings and conversations. The task is to determine what the flower represents in this quote and then compare it with Mah Laqa’s use and try to find the other meaning by causing displacement of the prominent perspective. First, let's keep aside the dichotomy of lover and beloved and focus on the action of the flower. A flower in Imam Ali’s quote primarily plays the role of “sacrificing”, the flower chooses to spread good and act good even in front of its enemy. Therefore, the flower may be read as representing a high level of spirituality, particularly within an Islamic ethical framework. The flower is also in a position of power and control since its dispersing of fragrance is presented as a voluntary action in the quote. Now, let’s look at it in terms of the beloved and the lover, the flower or *gul* usually represents the beloved, the one who is cherished and is mostly not in a position of sacrifice. Instead, the beloved is subject to reverence and even worship. On the other hand, the lover is usually seen in the position of sacrifice and is ready to do anything to please the beloved.

The above analysis established a conceptual tension: the roles of the “beloved” and the one who “sacrifices” are mutually exclusive. Either one could play the role of sacrificing and become a lover, or hold the position of a beloved. However, how does Mah Laqa use the word “*gul*”? Her affinity for Imam Ali raises the possibility that she understood the flower through the lens of sacrifice rather than through the conventional lover–beloved binary. Why is it important to us? It is because if she presented herself as a beloved then she was most likely a beloved of her patrons, hence, she limited herself to being a product and object of the male gaze. Such a reading narrows the possibilities for resistance and subversion within her poetry. However, if she wrote about *gul* by keeping in mind the aspect of “sacrifice” and the role of the lover, then, in a way she was inverting the standard understanding and manipulating with words to be in her favor. Therefore, she as a flower was not a delicate or a youthful object, instead, she was the one who was in power to bestow glances to her patrons. Moreover, she sacrificed every time by being generous to her patron, no matter her patron's behavior, no matter if he came with a loving eye or a lustful eye, she chose to be generous and act as a lover who voluntarily pleased her beloved. Moreover, she represented the highest level of spirituality by being good and dispersing fragrance to the hands that tried to crush her. Hence, her *divan* is not merely a flowery collection by a woman who wrote about herself in the capacity of the beloved (and the male gaze). Instead, her *divan* is a collection of “sacrifice” that she wrote in the capacity of a lover, who carries autonomy, is in love with her cherishers, and represents the highest level of spirituality.

Reading Chanda’s Ghazal

The reading that involves deconstruction and active inversion is necessary to read poems by women and *tawaif* since they were “appropriating and subverting” the male-dominant practices (Khan, 2015, p. 186). Although Mah Laqa wrote in a style that met the standards of her time, which was also patriarchal and masculine, her subversion by inviting open meaning and

different interpretations of the same words shows her resistance and autonomy.[10] This strategy is similar to the one in "*Bodies that Remember*", which highlights that using male-constructed meaning provided access to the "public sphere" and helped "secure other rights for women" (Anantharam, 2012, p. 9). Mah Laqa strategically engaged with existing poetic structures to popularize her name but also not lose her woman identity. Moreover, at the same time, she playfully used poetry to deal with problems related to her occupation of performance. While keeping her ghazals at the best of the standards, Mah Laqa was a contributor to the canon of Urdu literature, and by keeping her identity as a *tawaif* and a woman alive, she was a feminist of her time. We will also briefly look at one complete ghazal of hers to expand on how she used poetry as resistance (Chanda, "hue janab"):

hue janāb meñ ab tak na tere ham gustāḳh
ḳhudā ke vāste ham se na ho sanam gustāḳh
chhupāyā rāz-e-mohabbat ko dil meñ par haihāt
kare hai naam mirā bad ye chashm-e-nam gustāḳh
jo aave jī meñ so kah le maiñ huuñ vo ai pyāre
rahūñ hazār huzūrī meñ par huuñ kam gustāḳh
kahā gale se lagā le tū iltifāt nahīñ
kahe hai tis pe mujhe kyuuñ tū dam-ba-dam gustāḳh
yahī umiid hai 'chandā' ko ḳhūb-rūyoñ meñ
rakhe hamesha terā yā 'alī karam gustāḳh

In your presence, never have I been insolent
God's sake my love, with me, don't act insolent
I hid my secret of love in my heart, Alas!
Have come to defame me, these teary eyes insolent
Say whatever you want, dear, I am what you say
I stay in service, yet you are the above par insolent
I said forget courtesy and hug me now!
Listening to my urge, why do you call me insolent?
This is what hopes among pretty faces, Chanda
May your grace always, O Ali, keep me insolent

The ghazal above has the refrain (*radeef)* set to "insolent" or "*gustakh".* There are multiple words to replace "*gustakh"* in English such as "impudent" or "arrogant". However, keeping in context the flow and multiple interpretations of the word *"gustakh"* in this ghazal, I chose the word "insolent" since "insolent" in my opinion carries the weightage to show the contextual changes within this ghazal. While an extensive literary analysis of the entire ghazal is beyond the

[10] Meeting standards could be one of the reasons why her writing is inclined towards *Rekhta* more than *Deccani* since *Rekhta* at some point was considered the Urdu poetry language.

immediate scope of this study, a close reading of the opening three couplets can isolate the themes of subversion and resistance.

For the scope of this study, I will only interpret the first three couplets by keeping subversion and power in mind and not focus on dominant surface-level interpretations of the couplets or the plain lover and the beloved binary. The first couplet could be a warning to all those who used to sit in the gathering of Mah Laqa when she performed.[11] She explicitly said that she never acted insolently, which could suggest rude or arrogant behavior in front of her patrons, and she did not expect any of them to cross the boundary she had established. So, the second verse of this couplet is a polite warning to remind them to stay within their limits. This could also be related to *tawaif* being covered and not giving cheap glimpses, controlling her dispersing of the fragrance.[12] The second couplet resists a stable interpretation and opens multiple interpretive possibilities. It is difficult to find a marginalized meaning. It is a simple yet a powerful cry. In the couplet, she tries to hide her love from the world, but her flowing tears testify against her and reveal her love. Could this couplet be the cry of Mah Laqa as a woman trying to create room for her in the male-dominated world? Could it be the depiction of her pain when she sometimes wrote in a male voice and style? If it is true, then the tears are the portrayers of her struggles to infuse the female identity into *Rekhta* e.g. inverted meaning of *gul.* If this is correct, then the tears revealing her love could mean her conscious inversions revealing her female identity and autonomy. It would be interesting to analyze her use of "defame" and "alas", however, it is not essential for this study.

The third couplet is powerful and fascinating. It is a proclamation, and a bold statement made to inform everyone that she is not concerned about what anyone thinks. The first verse of the couplet is to some extent a summary of Sandra Cisneros's poem "Loose Women" (Cisneros, n.d). Could the carefree statement "Say whatever you want" be for people who tried to slander her? In the second verse of this couplet, she uses the word "*huzuri"* in Urdu. This verse was especially difficult to translate because I wanted to keep the same connotation attached to "*huzuri"* alive. The closest according to the sentence structure was "service" (here service suggests her occupation of serving her patrons through music, poetry, dance, or performance.) So, could the second verse be for those who tried to defame her? Could it be possible that they are insolent because they forgot morality and started slandering? The contextual play of words is in process and in this couplet "insolent" is related to the questions of morality. Interpretations like these are essential because ghazals were used to speak out in a poetic manner when one could not articulate otherwise. An example to solidify the point is the story associated with Mirza Ghalib (d. 1869), who sarcastically aimed a verse at Ibrahim Zauq (d. 1854). Zauq was the poetry mentor of the Mughal Emperor Bahadur Shah Zafar II (d. 1862) and Ghalib would later become one of the most celebrated Urdu poets. According to the narration, Ghalib, on the street, when saw Zauq passing said: *huā hai shah kā musāhib phire hai itrātā,* and my translation of it is, "has become a companion of the king, look how high he flies" (Ghalib, n.d. - a). The "fly

[11] Ghazal is also sung in different *ragas* (melodic modes) and is therefore a performance.
[12] Read the Artistic Grace section to understand.

high" was said sarcastically, and later when called in the emperor's presence to explain, Ghalib masterfully added his name to the second verse of the couplet and changed the whole meaning and scenario. The point of looking at this anecdote was to understand the multiplicity of uses of ghazal and its couplets. Since *Tawaif* were the major contributors to poetry at that time, the erasure of their work and forgetting of their words is in a way strengthening the stigmatization of *tawaif*, hence of poetry by women.

The Porous Line Between a Prostitute and a Performer

The above discussed how poetry was used as a tool of subversion and resistance. However, understanding of the events that caused a significant change in what is signified by *tawaif* is yet to be fully discussed. By looking at the spheres in which *tawaif* resided and examining her actions, we can deduce that there has been a thin line between a prostitute and a performer who mostly catered to the male gaze. Scott Kugle (2016), a Professor of South Asian Studies at Emory University, says that a courtesan lived in an "ambiguous space" between a performer and a prostitute (150). Hence, a *tawaif* was the resident of the porous line between a prostitute and a performer. She moved between two different roles and spaces as required; this statement could be completely wrong, completely true, or partially true depending on the era. During the time of Mah Laqa Chanda (d. 1824), *tawaif* were performers, however, after the independence of India in 1947, *tawaif* were also known to be involved in "dirty work" (Feldman, 2023, p. 335). This porous line is not exclusive to Indian courtesans instead it is found around the globe, for example, *geisha* (the Japanese "artistes") have their beginnings in the "pleasure quarters" of Japan (Feldman, 2023, p. 223). The task is to find how this porous line completely diminished in the case of *tawaif* and how this diminishing reduced their status to mere prostitutes in India. It is pertinent to this study because if an occupation is slandered, its associated activities are also maligned. In the case of *tawaif,* since they were the preservers of poetry through performance, poetry by women will also be scrutinized in later years.

The Concerned Housewife

The binary of an independent woman and a housewife is already created in this study and was present in the real world. For example, a word used for tawaif is "*peshawali",* which translates to "professional women", however, this term today is exclusive to women involved in prostitution (Feldman, 2023, p. 343). It would require another study to examine how "professional women" became a synonym for "women in prostitution". However, it is sufficient for this study to assume that *tawaif* were considered independent women. Unfortunately, this was not how they were known to the wives of the "royal" and "noble" men who spent significant time at *kotha*, hence, the housewives played a role in making them infamous as "mistresses" or "other woman" (Kumar et al., 2025, p. 11). The similar point of view is present in Kugle's (2016) work, who writes that for a "conventional woman," they were "considered prostitutes who, even if they did not sell their bodies for sex, still displayed their bodies through performing dance in ways that were considered immoral" (150). The examples reveal the negative meanings and roles

attached to a *tawaif* from the beginning. There were groups present who instead of appreciating the "poetry, song, and dance", demeaned their profession (Kugle, 2016, p. 151). To completely diminish the porous line established earlier, one only needs to give popularity to the thought of the minority e.g. the opinion of the housewives. In the case of *tawaif*, it was done through maligning the reputation of *tawaif* at a national level which we will explore below.

The Rebellion of 1857

The sepoy mutiny of 1857 or the Indian rebellion of 1857 was not necessarily a significant military threat to the British but undoubtedly questioned the British governance in India (Summer 46). This led to the exit of the East India Company in terms of ruling India and the incoming of British to India as part of the British *Raj* under the new "Empress of India": Queen Victoria (Summers, n.d., p. 47). The events of 1857 were not only restricted to the politics of India, instead, they changed or maybe created the "public sphere" (Kumar et al., 2025, p. 8).[13] The notion of the creation of the public sphere needs to be examined more, nevertheless, the changes in the public sphere were strong enough to have the public question the traditions, beliefs, roles, and morality in India (Kumar et al. 8). These questions, consequently, must have led to a change in the interpretations of different signifiers in India. My concern is understanding how the interpretations of "*tawaif*" changed during this period and for this purpose I need to examine the role of *tawaif* in the rebellion of 1857.

Since *tawaif* were wealthy and independent women, one of the ways of contributing to the mutiny was financial support (Oldenburg, 1990, p. 259, L. Singh 2). *Kotha* became a space for the rebels to meet and plan (Kumar et al. 10). *Tawaif* turned warrior Azeezun Bai was responsible for the massacre of British women and children in Kanpur (Deewan 65, L. Singh, 2007, p. 1). Dharmman Bibi who was a partner of Kunwar Singh, a well-known and remembered hero of the mutiny, also insisted on participating in the rebellion and gave birth to twin girls amidst the events of the rebellion (Dewan, 2019, p. 64). Another interesting way of participation by *tawaif* were manipulating British soldiers. They were held responsible for "enticing" the soldiers to get information for the rebels (Kumar et al., 2025, p. 10). With all this information in front of us, the most important question that remains is the need for *tawaif* to partake in the mutiny. If *tawaif* was primarily seeking a patron to fulfill her role, as defined by the British as a "singing and dancing girl", or if she merely as a prostitute was in search of a client, then why would she bear the burden of a heinous rebellion and act oblivious to the events of the aftermath?

Ab chhod re firangiya! hamar deswa
O British, leave our country now!

The above is the first verse of a folk song from the Bhojpuri region of India, the place of Dharmman Bibi and Kunwar Singh (Narayan, 1998, p. 88, Deewan, 2019, p. 55). The song

[13] The term "public sphere" is from Kumar and others' study. It is a concept by Jürgen Habermas and is defined by them as a term that "propagates the idea of a realm of social life that guarantees the participation and the freedom of expression and public opinion to all the members of society." (5).

carries the pain of the Indian public but also highlights the anger and urgency growing in the public. The main reason behind this was British rulers' inability to respect, appreciate, and understand "Indian customs and religions" (Deewan, 2019, p. 61) and *tawaif* were affected by this as well. *Tawaif* were seen as entertainers and sex workers by the British and their identity as carriers of culture, art, music, and poetry was continuously rejected and neglected (L. Singh, 2007, p. 3). Therefore, *tawaif* participated in the rebellion as part of society and public that had decided to have British leave their land immediately.[14]

The Contagious Diseases Act of 1864

The British did not forgive people who participated in the rebellion in any way and *tawaif* were proven to be involved (Oldenburg, 1990, p. 260). They punished *tawaif* by demeaning and stigmatizing their profession through the Diseases Act of 1864. Although the act was passed in 1864, the regulations related to it were already in the process of formation after the mutiny (A. Singh, n.d., p. 17). After the rebellion, the British realized that their soldiers did not die because of "combat" but "venereal diseases" (Oldenburg, 1990, p. 260, Deewan, 2019, p. 75). In response, the British decided to impose body checkups on all women who fell under the "dancing and singing girls" category created by the British during the same time (Oldenburg, 1990, p. 259). These body checkups were part of the British aim of developing "regulated prostitution" (A. Singh, n.d., 17). Earlier in this study, we decided to use the word "*tawaif"* instead of "courtesans" to eliminate unnecessary signs and interpretations. However, the word *"tawaif"* in itself was undergoing a significant change in terms of interpretation. The placing of *tawaif*, who were once companions of royalty and nobility, in the dancing and singing girl category and then further placing them into the prostitution category by requiring their body inspection erased the porous line that we established earlier. The efforts to redefine groups and identities were part of the British rulers' struggle to impose Victorian models on Indian society (Kumar et al., 2025, p. 8). The women who fell under the British dancing and singing girls category certainly did not fit the Victorian model of placing women in the "domestic sphere" (Hughes, 2020). Hence, these women were not considered respectable (A. Singh, n.d., p. 14). *Tawaif,* who had been appropriating patriarchy in the past, did not surrender to this Act, instead, they were known to bribe nurses to avoid "bodily inspections" (Oldenburg, 1990, p. 261). Despite the resistance, the restructuring of society in terms of policies and morality by the British ensured that the stigmatized interpretation of "*tawaif*" gained popularity.

Conclusion

Several more events took place after 1864 that changed multiple interpretations in Indian society; hence, they affected the interpretations of signifiers such as *tawaif*. In 1921, Gandhi's non-cooperation movement and his teachings of being morally right by leaving the lifestyle of

[14] An interesting observation here is that *tawaif* were allowed to participate in the communal resistance which tells us that they were accepted in the traditional Indian society. Moreover, they did not only passively support the rebellion. They were active by allowing the use of *kotha* which again mark their importance but also the autonomy and power they held to manage themselves and their spaces.

tawaif only strengthened the stigmatization (Deewan, 2019, p. 305, Kumar et al., 2025, p. 2). Moreover, after the partition of India, in 1958, the enacting of the Suppression of Immoral Traffic in Women and Girls Act (SITA) recklessly neglected the difference between consensual sex-work and sex-trafficking (Deewan, 2019, p. 501). Although *tawaif* were not simply sex workers, consensual intimacy was part of who they were. The increased scrutinization of consensual sex as a service or part of service in both social and legal spheres harmed the reputation of *tawaif*. India in the 20th century was witnessing changes in domains ranging from political ideologies to determining what modern literature is e.g. forming the Progressive Writers Movement in 1936 (Farooqi, 2008, p. xxvii). The historical records and the treatment of *tawaif* inform us that the stigmatization of *tawaif* was only intensified over time. Stigmatization reached the extent that poetry by women was not considered noble, at least in Pakistan, as Zehra Nigah (b.1935), a prominent Urdu poet, in her interview at the 14th *Aalmi* (Global) Urdu Conference – Karachi, Pakistan (2021) said that in 1956 while publishing poetry, with Ada Jafri (d. 2015), in journals all other ghazals in the women's section were by *tawaif* (Arts Council of Pakistan Karachi, 2021). Her statement shows the contribution of *tawaif* to poetry and the problems faced by women who were not *tawaif* when publishing poetry. An important task that needs to be done is to collect, translate, and analyze the poetry by *tawaif* and women after 1857. Using Mah Laqa's poetry, the study has established an understanding of how poetry can be used as resistance even in traditional forms. Hence, looking at the poetry by *tawaif* and other women after 1857 can help us understand their contributions to the changes in the 20th and 21st century Indian Subcontinent. Another task is to find *tawaif* in today's India and Pakistan and understand how the stigmatization has affected these contributors of poetry and performance.

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