Women's Voices in Shah Abdul Latif's *Risalo*

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One of the most distinctive features of mysticism is its defiance of verbal expression; yet, mystical experiences have inspired many a piece of outstanding literature worldwide, from Saint Augustine's *Confessions* to Rumi's *Diwan*. Through the example of 18th-century Sindhi poet Shah Abdul Latif, this essay looks at how medieval Sufi poetry from the regions of Sindh and Punjab conveys transcendental meanings by allegorizing the stories of beguiling female characters.

In the middle of Lake Kinjhar, one of the biggest freshwater reservoirs in Sindh, is a circular shrine which, according to legend, was erected by King Jam Tamachi of Thatta over the burial site of his beloved wife Noori, the daughter of a poor fisherman and an icon of beauty and humbleness. 45 km west of Karachi, in the mountainous desert of Baluchistan, is the alleged tomb of Sassui, another famous heroine of Sindhi folklore, who perished while roaming the wilderness in search of her lover Punhun, a Beluchi prince. Punhun was abducted by his brothers, who did not approve of his union with Sassui, and taken back to his kingdom on the Makran coast as the heroine lay asleep. The ancient fort of Umerkot, in the dusty plains of Tharparkar, is believed to be the place where young Marui, kept prisoner by the enamoured King Umar, pined day and night for her native village in the desert.

Noori, Sassui and Marui are but three of the many female characters who populate the folktales of the Indus Valley, a historical region spread across the provinces of Sindh and Punjab, in today's Pakistan. The secular love stories (*qissas*) of which they are the protagonists resurface in different variants across the oral literature of a vast portion of the subcontinent's northwestern corner, stretching from Baluchistan to the western-most fringes of the Indian states of Rajasthan and Gujarat. [1] Visual narratives of these ballads are also found adorning the walls of tombs and temples in this region and beyond -- evidence of their percolation into local vernacular cultures across a wide geographical expanse (Figs. 1 and 2). [2]

The account above would not be complete without mentioning Lila, who traded her royal husband with another woman in exchange for a precious necklace, and was for that doomed to a life of solitude and repentance; Sohni, who drowned in the stormy waters of the Indus upon

trying to reach her lover Mehar (for the half-baked earthen pot she used as a float dissolved in water) (Fig. 3); [3] Mumal, who jumped in the fire after a trick of jealousy gone wrong turned her beloved Rano away from her; and Queen Sorath, who sacrificed her life after her generous husband, King Rai Diyach, gave up his head to a minstrel as a reward for a beautiful performance.

Fig. 1. (left) Mural panel depicting romances of Laila and Majnun (above) and Sassui and Punhun (below) in a tomb within the necropolis of Mian Nasir Muhammad Kalhoro in Sindh. Photograph: Zulfiqar Ali Kalhoro. Image courtesy: Wikimedia Commons.

Fig. 2. (right) Mural panel of the Sassui Punhun folktale in the Sui Sibi Temple, Jammu, 18th or 19th century. Photograph: Navjot Kaur. Image courtesy: Wikimedia Commons.

In medieval times, “The Seven Queens of Sindh” (as the folk heroines came to be popularly known as) began appearing in the mystical compositions of local (Sindhi and Punjabi) Sufi saints in a new spiritual guise, as personifications of the human soul (*nafs*) trapped in the duality of the world. [4] In these poems, typically composed in local vernaculars and meant for musical recitation, the love metaphors (*ishq-e majazi*) taken from native myths served to translate the ineffable ideal of “the Love of God” (*ishq-e haqiqi*) into a more mundane, and thus intelligible, linguistic and affective vocabulary. [5] By doing so, Sufis aimed at educating commonfolk about the tenets of their mystical doctrine: the principle of the transcendent Unity of God (*wahdat al-wujud*), and the adherence to the Sufi path (*tariqa*), with its emphasis on the inward search for God, the pursuit of true knowledge, and the rejection of material expressions of religiosity.

One of highest lyrical pinnacles of this genre is the *Risalo* (poetic compendium) of Shah Abdul Latif of Bhit (1689-1752), the most beloved Sindhi poet to date and “the first great exponent of the imaginative use of Sindhi language”. [6] In the 30 *surs* (chapters) that compose his oeuvre, [7] each set to a specific musical mood, the trials and tribulations of the seven heroines unravel as metaphors (*majaz*) for the struggle of the human soul pining to reach the Divine. Herbert Sorley evokes these poetic afflatuses beautifully when he writes that Latif “took the village folktales which the mothers sing to their children in their cradles and turned them into subtle psychological poems shot through with the deep intricacies of Sufi philosophy”. [8]

All tales in the *Risalo*, except for that of Noori-Jam Tamachi, have tragic underpinnings and are dominated by the emotion of pain-in-separation (*firaq*) -- an apt allegorical device to convey the Sufi emotion of longing for God. For example, Sassui, as she roams the desert alone searching for Punhun, says:

> *I am wretched, and my hut is filled with weeping and*
> *wailing. I am slain, and the pain of love is burning*
> *in my heart.* [9]
>
> *I must walk on and trace Punhun’s path. This is written in my fate;*
> *Why else would anyone travel through the desert?* [10]

The vicissitudes of these female protagonists are to be interpreted allegorically as the hardships faced by the seeker on the path of faith. The way these unfold closely recalls the various stages

(*maqam*) of the Sufi path, from tearing the veil of ignorance and self-deceit, to embarking on an inner journey in pursuit of the Divine, to the final, ecstatic self-annihilation by becoming one with God (*fana*). This last stage usually coincides with the death of the heroine, which removes all separation from the beloved, leaving behind no more longing or duality. To quote Sassui once again:

As I turned inwards and conversed with my soul,
there was no mountain to surpass, no Punhu[n] to care for;
I myself became Punhu[n];
only while Sassui did I experience grief. [11]

Through the motif of the "woman-soul", [12] Latif draws attention to the various conditions that prevent man from seeking the Divine -- blindness, greed, self-absorption -- but also to the spiritual virtues of the ideal seeker -- self-abnegation, bravery, and humility. Annamarie Schimmel suggests that each heroine can be seen as a personification of a particular state of the soul, as enumerated in the *Quran*. [13] The capricious and selfish temperament of Mumal and Lila is a perfect representation the *nafs-i ammara*, the "commanding soul" which is governed by a host of whims and desires. Thus, Latif blames Lila's greed and arrogance:

Beguiled by the jewels, you foolishly thought much of
yourself. [14]

What you thought was a necklace was a string of
sorrows. [15]

For her inattentiveness and ingenuity, Sassui embodies the *nafs-i lawwama*, the "self-accusing soul". Her negligence of the spiritual (personified by Punhun) brings her great suffering, spurring the feelings of self-reproachment and repentance that will eventually turn her into a redeemed soul. As much as the poet calls down her naivety, he also praises her courage and fervour, as evident in the comparison of the following verses:

Heedless one, abandon your heedlessness. How can
you doze, you shameless girl? Silently they set
out and got to their journey's end. [16]

She strides along and climbs the trees -- see how

strong she is. She stumbles along in the middle of
the night, with no mother or father at her side. [17]

Noori, with her modesty and composure of feelings, is the only heroine that can aspire to symbolize the *nafs-i mutmainna*, the "soul at peace", during her earthly existence. Unlike the others, she does not suffer the torment of separation, for she "has no pride or arrogance in her heart". [18] In an idyllic passage from *Sur Kamod*, set on the shores of Lake Kinjhar, the poet sketches in lyrical tones a scene of peaceful intimacy between Noori and Jam Tamachi:

There is water below, fresh sprouting branches above,
all trees around. In the midst of all this, she
comes and goes, to enjoy Tamachi. The north
wind blows and make Lake Kinjhar rock gently
like a swing. [19]

Fig. 3. "Sohni Swims to Meet Her Lover Mahinwal", Uttar Pradesh (Awadh, Lucknow or Farrukabad), c. 1780. Opaque watercolour and gold on paper. Image courtesy: Los Angeles County Museum of Art, Gift of the Felix and Helen Juda Foundation (M.72.2.1). © LACMA.

Yet, all of Latif's women do eventually conquer, at the moment of death or shortly before, a state of spiritual quietude. This coincides with the dissolution of the boundaries between themselves and the object of their desire, and their final, blissful merging in spirit -- a sign that their process of inner purification is complete.

The feminine element is so ingrained in the imagery of Latif's poem-songs that we often see a slippage between the point of view of the poet and that of the protagonists: while the descriptions of feelings and events are mostly left to the voices of the heroines, Latif's own voice often chimes in to pull the strings of the narration and emphasize its philosophical-religious implications, [20] as in the following verses from *Sur Sohni*:

Where is Mehar, and where are the bells tinkling?
Where is my beloved's bonfire, and where is the
far bank? I have spent my whole life trashing
through the water to reach it.

She drank a draught of love from Mehar. The taste
of that drink intoxicated her. She was struck by
the arrow of love, which is sharper than steel, says
Latif. [21]

This form of "vocal masquerade", [22] alien to Middle Eastern and Persian literary culture, is in keeping with the Indic literary topos of the *virahini* (longing woman), popularized by Hindu devotional poetry. [23] Besides the heroines' sorrows, the heartaches of common women also find expression in the *Risalo*. In *Sur Samundi,* which plays on the allegory of seafaring as human life, the trader's wife laments the departure of her spouse in pitiful tones:

Mother, what can I do? My love cannot remain
unchecked.
My trader has set off, placing me on a pyre.
My marriage to a sailor makes me weep day and night.
Like termites, my sorrows have consumed me right up
to my topknot.
Sorrows have rapped themselves around my heart
Like creepers. [24]

Interestingly, in reciting the *Risalo*, some contemporary singer-musicians alternate between normal and high voice registers, the latter being reminiscent of the feminine pitch; in Kutch, this vocal modulation is referred to as *bacchi* (girl-child). [25] Yet, such fondness for the "aesthetics of the female voice" [26] should not mislead us into thinking of Latif as a feminist ante-litteram. Like other medieval mystics, for Latif these heroines-seekers are, in reality, "true men of God", [27] as the quality of devotion is, in the ascetic tradition, ascribed to men only. At one point, the poet states frankly that "He who seeks the Lord is male." [28]

We have seen how, along with the teachings of the *Quran*, the spiritualization of the indigenous legends of the Indus Valley constitutes a major strand in Latif's poetic fabric. [29] Consistently with this indigenizing tendency, the weft of the *Risalo* is interwoven with continuous references to the people, landscapes and traditional activities of 18th-century Sindh. Frequent are the allusions to household activities like grinding and spinning – linked, again, to female imagery -- whose rhythmic and repetitive gestures recall the cadence of *dhikr* (ritual litany). [30] For example, *Sur Marui* provides intimate glimpses into the life of desert nomads, Marui's kinsfolk:

> *Everyday, O Sumiro, they gather and cook food from*
> *the jungle. They pile up heaps of dried grass, says*
> *Shah. From the lanb grass, says Latif, they extract*
> *grains of rice to cook.*
>
> *Content with little food, they remain strong and*
> *healthy. This is how they go about, in shawls*
> *covered with dust.* [31]

Some of the most evocative passages in the *Risalo* are those describing the phenomena of the natural world, like the arrival of monsoon rains. In Schimmel's interpretation, the pouring of water, with its life-bestowing quality, also doubles for the descent of the Prophet's mercy (*rehmat*) upon His people. [32] Hence monsoon brings the uttermost joy and relief to men, as in *Sur Sarang*:

> *It has rained in the plains and deserts, it has rained*
> *on the lower ground. At dawn the sound of*
> *the churning sticks is heard on the plains. The*
> *prosperous farmers' wives rejoice, and their*

hands are full of butter. [33]

All these elements root the poetic imagination of the *Risalo* into the geographical, social and ecological reality of the time, thus facilitating the affective involvement of the listeners.

By interweaving mystic thought and popular imagination, Latif was able to compile a work of great visionary and allegorical power, which appealed to the sensibility of ordinary men and women. Significantly, the poet refers to his own verses as *ayat* ("divine signs"). [34] It is therefore not surprising that the *Risalo* is revered by both Muslim and Hindu Sindhi-speaking communities as a sacred script, not unlike the *Quran*. [35] To date, Latif's poetry is remembered in Sindh and beyond, as testified by the unbroken tradition of the *ragi faqirs* (singer-musicians) of Bhit Shah (Sindh, Pakistan) and Kutch (Gujarat, India). The *faqirs* of Bhit Shah, who trace their lineage back to Latif, recite verses from the *Risalo* in the courtyard of the poet's *dargah* every day and night, to the accompaniment of a five-stringed *danburo* (Indian lute) (Fig. 4). The same tradition is kept alive on the other side of the border in a much smaller scale, through the informal gatherings of a group of Sindhi-speaking *faqirs* from Bhagadia village in Banni, Gujarat. [36]

Fig. 4. *Ragi faqirs* perform to verses of Latif at the poet's *dargah* in Bhit Shah, Sindh. Photograph by the author, November 2022.

Besides surviving through mystical songs, poems and murals, these folktales have also seeped into the contemporary popular culture of India and Pakistan through the entertainment industry. The famous movie *Umar Marvi* (1956), by Sheikh Hassan, was the first Sindhi feature film to be made in Pakistan and had a successful run there and in India. It tinged popular myth with strong nationalistic overtones, in line with G.M. Syed's essentialist framing of Latif's poetry as representative of the values of Sindhi society: patriotism, self-sacrifice and loyalty. [37] *Umar Marvi* came out just two years after Pakistan released its first major hit *Sassi* (1954), an adaptation of the Sassui-Puhnun folktale, which ran in theatres for more than 50 weeks. Sohni-Mahiwal also got a famous cinematic retelling in a 1984 Indo-Russian co-production, starring Sunny Deol and Poonam Dhillon (Fig. 5). Some of these stories were also adapted for the small screen, such as the teledrama *Marvi* run by Pakistan Television Corporation in 1993.

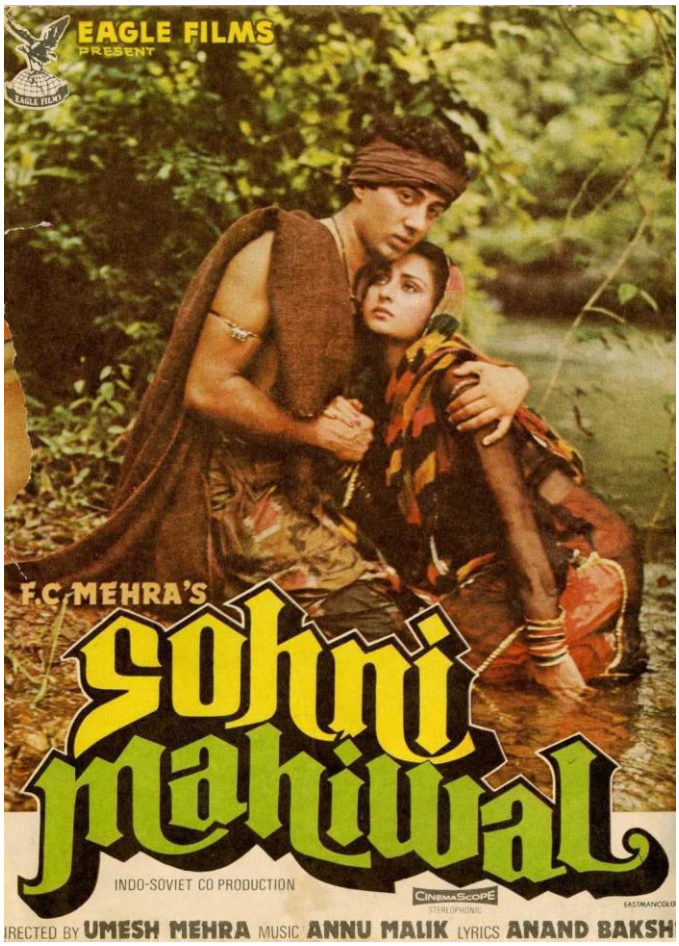

Fig. 5. Poster of the Indo-soviet movie, *Sohni Mahiwal* (1984).
Source: The Movie Database (TMDB).

More recently, the heritage of Sindhi folktales has entered the global music scene though the contemporary renditions of mystical songs by professional singers such as Allan Fakir, Nusrat Fateh Ali Khan, and Abida Parveen, and the folk revival projects of Coke Studio Pakistan. [38] As Shemeem Abbas argues, the circulation of the *Risalo* across time and space has gradually turned the native myths into "complex cultural tropes", and their tragic heroines into "cultural icons" in Sindh and beyond. [39] This once again speaks to the modernity of Latif's verses, which, like most classics from any epoch, have the ability to condense different layers of meanings to appeal to the subjective experiences of each listener/reader. Even today, the *Risalo* has the power to make *the strings of seeking resound with the mystery of unit* in those men *whose body is a rosary, whose mind is a bead, and whose heart is the lute.* [40]

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Notes

Unless otherwise specified, all translations in this essay are from Shah Abdul Latif, *Risalo*, edited and translated by Christopher Shackle (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2018).

[1] Kutch (in Gujarat) and Barmer (in western Rajasthan) maintain close cultural ties with Sindh, of which they were a part before the 1947 Partition of the subcontinent.

[2] Zulfiqar Ali Kalhoro, "Representations of Sasui and Puhun in Sindhi Tombs," *The Friday Times*, June 4, 2021.

[3] In the more famous Punjabi version of the myth, the male protagonist's name is Mahiwal, and the river that serves as the backdrop to the tragic love story is the Chenab.

[4] In a similar fashion, Persian and Arabic mystical poetry would often make use of love stories from the *Quran*, in particular the tale of Zuleikha and Yusuf, as spiritual allegories. See

Annemarie Schimmel and Susan H. Ray, *My Soul is a Woman: The Feminine in Islam* (New York: Continuum, 1997), 71-72, and Ali S. Asani, "Folk Romance in Sufi Poetry from Sind," in *Islam and the Indian Regions*, Vol. 1, edited by Anna L. Dallapiccola and Stephanie Zingel-Ave Lallement (Stuttgart: Franz Steiner Verlag, 1993), 229-237.

[5] Shemeem Burney Abbas, *The Female Voice in Sufi Ritual: Devotional Practices in Pakistan and India* (Austin, TX: University of Texas Press, 2002), 117.

[6] Herbert T. Sorley, *Shah Abdul Latif of Bhit: His Poetry, Life and Times* (Karachi: Oxford University Press, 1966), 20.

[7] The *Risalo* was composed orally and collected in written form only after the death of Shah Latif. The parallel regime of oral transmission accounts for the existence of other versions that differ from the printed ones. Not all *surs* focus on the folktales; even then, allusions to this material are frequent throughout the entire collection. For a detailed account of the content of each *sur*, see Shackle, "Notes to the Translation", in *Risalo*, 625-649, and Annemarie Schimmel, *Pain and Grace: A Study of Two Mystical Writers of Eighteenth-Century Muslim India* (Leiden: E.J. Brill, 1976), 151-262.

[8] Sorley, *Shah Abdul Latif of Bhit*, 60.

[9] *Risalo, Sur Husaini*, par. 64, 311.

[10] *Risalo, Sur Desi*, par. 2, 251.

[11] *Risalo, Sur Sassui Abri*, translated from Motilal Jotwani, *Shah Abdul Latif: His Life and Work* (New Delhi: Publications Division, University of Delhi, 1975), 136.

[12] Schimmel and Ray, *My Soul is a Woman*, 118-138.

[13] Ibid.: 70: (*nafs* in *Quran*), 135 (*nafs-i ammara* and *nafs-i mutmainna*), 142 (*nafs-i lawwama*).

[14] *Risalo*, *Sur Lila Chanesar*, par. 4, 325.

[15] *Risalo*, *Sur Lila Chanesar*, par. 7, 327.

[16] *Risalo*, *Sur Kohiyari*, par. 3, 277.

[17] *Risalo*, *Sur Mazuri*, par. 52, 247.

[18] *Risalo*, *Sur Kamod*, par. 12, 411.

[19] *Risalo*, *Sur Kamod*, par. 18, 413.

[20] Asani, "Folk Romance in Sufi Poetry from Sind," 232.

[21] *Risalo*, *Sur Sohni*, par. 43 and 44, 165.

[22] Carla Petievich, *When Men Speak as Women: Vocal Masquerade in Indo-Muslim Poetry* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2007).

[23] Annemarie Schimmel, *As Through a Veil: Mystical Poetry in Islam* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1982), 152-154. See also, Ankur Barua and Hina Khalid, "The Feminization of Love and the Indwelling of God: Theological Investigations Across Indic Contexts," *Religions*, 11, no. 8 (2020): 414.

[24] *Risalo*, *Sur Samundi*, par. 46V, 145.

[25] Brian E. Bond, *A Heavy Rain Has Fallen Upon My People: Sindhi Sufi Poetry Performance, Emotion, and Islamic Knowledge in Kachchh, Gujarat* (PhD diss., City University of New York, 2020), 196.

[26] Abbas, *The Female Voice in Sufi Ritual*, preface, xxi.

[27] Schimmel, *As Through a Veil,* 156.

[28] *Idem.*

[29] The third major thread in this "web of many strands", as Sorley describes the *Risalo* (*Shah Abdul Latif of Bhit*, 136), are the verses of Persian poet Rumi.

[30] Schimmel, *As Through a Veil,* 145-146.

[31] *Risalo*, *Sur Marui*, par. 52 and 54, 383-385.

[32] Schimmel, *Pain and Grace*, 256-260.

[33] *Risalo*, *Sur Sarang,* par. 13, 505.

[34] Schimmel, *Pain and Grace,* 53.

[35] Schimmel, *As Through a Veil*, 135.

[36] Ethnomusicologists Brian Bond and Pei-Ling Huang have studied the traditions of the *ragi faqirs* of Kutch and Sindh, respectively. See Bond, *A Heavy Rain*, and Pei-Ling Huang, *Ways of Love: Self-making and Repertoire Formation through the Musical Legacy of Shah Abdul Latif in Sindh, Pakistan* (PhD diss., Harvard University, 2021).

[37] Julien Levesque and Camille Bui, "Umar Marvi and the Representation of Sindh: Cinema and Modernity in the Margins," *BioScope: South Asian Screen Studies*, no. 5 (2015): 123.

[38] See "Moomal Rano" by Fakir Juman Shah, Coke Studio Pakistan (Season 3), and "Dastaan-e-Moomal Rano", by the Sketches, Coke Studio Pakistan (Season 11).

[39] Abbas, *The Female Voice*, 97.

[40] *Risalo*, *Sur Asa*, par. 57, 85.