Research Articles

Femininity in the Great Indian Desert

'Women left on their Own' in Shah Abdul Latif's Risal

Ojaswini Shekhawat

Introduction

The relationship between literature and society has been at the centre of long standing debates; whether literature is reflective of society or actively constitutes it, or, what sections of society are represented through different forms of literature, are but a few themes in this debate.

Eagleton argues that it is the value system that emerges from a particular discourse that reflects what constitutes literature for that society.[1] On the other hand, Pollock emphasizes the historical development of literature,[2] and argues that it is essential to engage with the history of the definition of literature within the history of the literary in South Asia. This is essential especially in the context of India, where the understanding and classification of literature has been haunted by the colonial spectre. "Literary culture" came to be characterized by the written word, to the exclusion of entire corpuses of oral and performative works. New concerns also came up with this conceptualization of literature such as concerns about "authorship" and "originality" that are only peripheral in the world of orality, for "oral performative texts are synchronically and historically fluid, subject to being reformulated in performance and transmission".[3]

Literature in Sindh has a long history of orality which was ignored in favour of textuality in the colonial period, which pinned the first literary piece to the 17th century.[4] However, oral traditions (which can be traced back to the 9th century)[5] continued to flourish and were eventually absorbed into texts. This rendered the questions of firm dating, authorship and originality raised by the colonial classification of literature impossible to answer. The pace and manner of expression and communication also becomes confusing for a reader, as the compositions continue even now to target audiences rather than readers and are still largely orally performed in a tradition far richer and more dynamic than the readership of the text based on that tradition.

Ali Asani argues that in the wake of such definitions of literature, the history of Sindhi literature begins with the first instances of writing in the 17th century; stray Sindhi verses in Persian *malfū}zāt*, recorded discourses of Sufis which themselves straddle the worlds of written and oral literature. He points out the blurred boundaries between writing and speech even in texts that appear in the written form, for it is nearly impossible to ascertain who first came up with a verse. Instead, 'authorship' is defined as by John Hawley, who conceptualizes it as the "direction of authority rather than strict authorship",[6] borrowing from the *Oxford English Dictionary's* definition of the "author" as "a person on whose authority a statement is made".[7] This can, perhaps, set us on a path to think of the authority of a saint as a rhetorical strategy for the justification and legitimization of something that emerges from within the society itself.

In this paper, then, literature will be examined as both, constructing and emerging from, the discourse within a specific historical society; that of 18th century Sindh as drawn from the *Risālō* of Shah Abdul Latif.

The majority of verses are in the *Risālō* are in the *bait* format; a short rhymed verse with three of more lines, with a flowing metre without any strict syllabic adherence. The other format used is that of the *vāī*, which is composed of multiple mono-rhymed single verses, preceded by a refrain repeated after each verse.

Hereditary musicians at the Bhitshah shrine perform a sequence of thematically linked *abyāt* before concluding with the somber *vāī*.[8] The *abyāt* are sung in a high ecstatic falsetto, impersonating the high-pitched voice of women, as it was composed by Shah Abdul Latif from a feminine position.

* CHS, Jawaharlal Nehru University.

The stories which come up through the *Risālō* are drawn from the bank of popular folk romances loosely based on the pre-Mughal period when Sindh was ruled by Muslim-Rajput dynasties of Sumiros and Samos,[9] which he never fully narrates, choosing to instead only signal to iconic moments within those stories, depending on his audiences' familiarity with these tales.[10]

Sindh has historically been one of the several sub-regions that formed the Thar desert, alongside Marwar, Jaisalmer, Bikaner and parts of Kutch, and Multan which further consist of smaller ethno-regions.[11] Interestingly, when we encounter some of these landscapes in the compositions of Shah Latif, the sense of the "self" versus the "other" is at times very distinctly present, and at others is much more relaxed, while at yet other times does not appear at all as we will see in upcoming sections. This is, perhaps, because very often, the Thar as a whole would have constituted one supra identity, within which sub-ethnicities would abound.

While nomadic pastoral communities were quite prevalent, by the 17th century, settled communities had become the norm after the settlement of several waves of Balochi mountain-dwellers who would earlier make appearances only to plunder.[12] Incidentally, as shall be seen, the strongest sense of the 'other' in the *Risālō* is expressed vis-à-vis the Balochis.

Scholars who work on Sindh argue that given its position as the buffer zone between the Perso-Arab and Indic cultural worlds,[13] the cultural practices in the region remained eclectic. Even as the population gradually converted to Islam, religious practices continued to overlap, and popular Islam evolved within a syncretic cultural framework.[14] One finds then that the overwhelming concern in historiography remains seeking an explanation of conversions, and how the Sufis facilitated it. For Eaton, women's songs were one of the major channels through which Sufi ideas penetrated through to the illiterate populace of 17th century Deccan,[15] while in Sindh itself for Ansari, "to an overwhelmingly unlettered following, they [Sufis] came to symbolize what it meant in practice to be a Muslim".[16]

There were two ways in which the message of Islam was spread among the common people; first, by the use of vernaculars, and second by the use of folk traditions. The purpose of both was to make the complex message intelligible, for which they relied on local musical traditions and folk poetic traditions.[17] However, according to Schimmel, it is not the use of folktales alone that led to Latif's success among the populations of Sindh, but his ability to connect with the daily struggles of people.[18] This essay seeks to tease out of a corpus of metaphorical literature, the gendered material foundation of society, on which its spiritual message stands.

The Complexity of Gendered Identities: Representations and Realities

The first problem when thinking about gendered identities in the *Risālō* is that femininity and masculinity are completely blurred in both the audience and the performers. The male singers sing as women, the poet has embodied his female characters, and the audience is also expected to emulate this adoption of femininity for at the end of most *surs*, the *vāī* addresses 'sisters' or 'ādiyūn', even though there is no evidence that listeners were ever exclusively women.

As far as the metaphorical sense of the poetry is concerned, it definitely weighs heavier than the material (as distinct from literal) aspects of it. In the context of Sufi poetry, it is the spiritual message that is dominant, while the material foundation, which is mostly constituted by tropes, allegories, and such, contains the incidental markers of the underlying discourse.

As far as the Sufi message is concerned, Annemarie Schimmel lays it out in a very straightforward manner. She argues that in early ascetic Sufism, the lower soul or *nafs*, a feminine noun, would typically be seen as an animal or a woman. There is a move away from this in the Arabo-Persian poetry where divine beauty is expressed in the form of a woman, and in Persian imagery where both the lover and the beloved are largely portrayed as men.[19] In the Indo-Persian tradition, however, the *nafs* symbolism is refined in the context of rich extant association of the woman as a seeker through the *virahi]nī* trope, where the soul's quest for the beloved (God) is represented through the seeking, separated females such as Radha.[20]

She points out that the contrast between male and female characters in the *Risālō* is brought out along typically 'class' lines for even 'high-class' women such as Lila and Mumal must subordinate themselves to reach the beloved.[21] However, after several close readings one can see that there is a lot of complexity within these larger formulae.

The study of femininity in the *Risālō* can perhaps only be of the representations within it, which can be sought through archetypes, the value of which lies "not in standardizing but in symbolizing' and in their function as 'cognitive codes', that are abstractions based on experiences perceived as important.[22] Second, even though there are barely any instances of female Sufi mystics in Sindh, the heroines in Shah Abdul Latif's *Risālō* find their own individualities within similarly scripted tales of quests that lead to surrender and union. Further, the identities of women in the *Risālō*, even at the peaks of individual journeys and expressions, are always rooted in their relationship with ideals of masculinity. Masculinity itself is not similarly bound.

The dominant archetypes within the *Risālō* are that of the married woman, or of the "woman left behind" or the *vān]d]hī*, which refers to a widow, a single woman or simply a woman without a family. Shackle at multiple points has translated this word as the "women who are left behind/on their own".[23] This broad, ambiguous term, at one point or the other can be used to describe all seven heroines of Shah Latif, and more importantly, the several unnamed women who are represented in Sur(s) Samundi, Kapaiti, Sarang and so on.

Risālō is famous for the seven heroines of local legends—Mumal (a Gurjar princess who falls in love with a Sodha Rajput prince), Marui (a Rabari –shepherd nomad-girl from Thar abducted by a Rajput ruler of Umarkot), Lila (a queen who exchanges her husband for a necklace for a night), Ramakali (a village woman who is pining for her teachers the yogis of Hind), Suhni (a woman who hides from her husband and crosses the bank of the Indus every night to meet her lover), Sasui (a 'brahmani' washerwoman in love with a Balochi), and Nuri (a fisherwoman of the *mohānā* caste which is considered to be at the very bottom of the caste structure). All of them star in poignant romantic tales, but Latif only picks iconic moments of separation and deprivation to show what they did wrong to lose their respective beloveds. But more than them, it is the unnamed wives of herders, traders, fishermen, and at times themselves professional pastoral women, spinsters, and so on, through whom several contradicting notions of femininity are portrayed and negotiated.

Femininity and Masculinity in Matrimony

It must first be pointed out that several verses of the *Risālō* construct gender identities not through mystic messages but by laying down moral and ethical boundaries.[24] He asks his followers to be proud of destitution, a common state in the desert, and to stop coveting health, beauty, and wealth. He asks them to be forgiving of gossip and negativity from others, and to embrace their own lowliness and misery. What is interesting is that while the spiritual message remains the same (of realization and union through suffering and subordination), the difference occurs in the behavioral norms which remain highly gendered:

> The blackness of mascara (*surma*) is suitable for women. As a man, do not apply blackness with a stick. Put the redness of the beloved in your eyes. (3.40)

> When they put red mascara on their eyes, they saw the splendor of a scarlet wedding outfit. (3.41)

Within the Indian tradition of mysticism, God is typically the masculine power and the Sufi initiate is the subordinate feminine power. However, at times the Persian imagery of both the lover and beloved as males comes forth in rare bursts:

> They who please the beloved are the ones who will enjoy their marriage beds. Standing as '*Those who believe and are constant in righteousness*', they are chosen and are adorned as bridegrooms. (3.55)

So the bridegrooms (*dhūlo*) are chosen from among worthy men, who will then get to enjoy their marital beds with the Beloved. Most references to marriage, however, revolve around heterosexual marriages, in which the husband often becomes the woman's lifeline.

Yet, most Surs in the *Risālō* present women struggling alone. They are often frustrated with the choices they have made in life; cries Sasui, "curses on the Harho, on the Hot, and on love. Mother, all that I have got from seeing him is death".[25] At other times they must keep convince others (and themselves) to stay within socially approved moral norms. We hear Marui plead, "Lord Sumiro, do not try to persuade me to break my chastity… Otherwise I shall not be able to hold my head high in Malir".[26]

Moments of regret and protest go hand in hand with the recognition that it is through the husband that they have an identity, and all attempts are made to keep it that way. The same Sasui who curses the Hot Punhun in 8.12, is also proud of her relationship with the 'mighty one' because of whom: "I have become famous in foreign lands. Otherwise who would the Brahman girl be, and who would she belong to? Sindh would not have heard of her, but now she is famous in many other lands." (9.7)

But having realized that her husband has slipped away from her as she slept she travels across the desert and towards Balochistan to find him, all that while plotting how to seduce him back. The woman who chose to boldly embark on a journey in impossible terrains, alone and fearlessly, abandoning even the basic supplies necessary for survival, plans to win her lover back saying:

> "I am helpless, weak, and without a guide… I will beguile my beloved Punhun with my helplessness. I will grind grain and cook it if you take me with you."(8.68)

In fact, it is not the husband alone to whom the woman must subordinate herself. While the mother-in-law is a frequent archetype through the *Risālō*, it is the entire clan of the husband that the wife must prostrate herself in front of. Sasui asserts over and over again her identity as the slave of her beloved, and of his entire clan, "I will be the humble servant of the Arichos".[27] It is extended to physical and bodily subordination as well, for domestic violence is flippantly used as a motif for liberation and transcendence; "Bitter cries are heard in the mountains over the fate of the sad girl. When the Kechi struck her it was because of some quarrel".[28]

Women must employ every trick up their sleeve to keep their husbands. For the unnamed wives of seafarers, this is doubly hard. The short meetings with the husband are properly wrung for all their social, ritual and emotional potential. Albeit indirectly, the woman asserts her jealousy and possessiveness towards her husband, aiming to set herself apart from and above her rivals for his romantic attention as well as the socio-economic status that follows from it:

"Before you depart, eat cardamoms and sandal as your feed. It is you to whom my words are directed, do not tell them to anyone else. Cry out as you go, and make my rivals envious." (4.4)

For the wife, attempting to reach her husband, just as for the soul attempting to unite with God, the essential values are of patience and gratitude, for "the time of delight is long gone".[29] Despite this, effort must also be constant. In Sur Kapaiti, the women are advised to turn their wheels and spin "fine embroidery" for their "festive day",[30] and those who remain stretched out in languor and make no effort to spin, are warned of deep regret waiting for them very soon.[31]

Further, any kind of coquetry or flirtation does not fly well with the husband who is portrayed as a jealous lord. In an unfortunate incident, Mumal, pining for her husband dresses her sister in his clothes and makes her sleep beside herself. Her husband Rano comes to visit her at night, but seeing a figure clad in male attire, leaves in a huff of anger, never to return.[32]

It is not just Mumal's husband; in any verse in that presents a husband in his marital role, he is portrayed as someone not to be trifled with, and one who is well beyond the wife's control:

Lila, you cannot match up to him by talking to Chanesar. The one you thought was your own is a king jealous of his honor. Love for anyone else does not please your husband. (13.20)

Latif impresses upon us several times that actual infidelity is more common than one might think, and that it is to be detested. Especially when men were away for long periods of time, women often had time for dalliances on the side, for which they are berated by Latif:

You have been disagreeable to your husband but are merry with his foolish rival. You stupid woman with no sense, you leave the grain and gather the chaff. (28.24)

When Lila lets her maid, Kaunru, sleep with her husband, the king Chanesar, for one night in exchange for a necklace, his retribution is immediate and fearsome. Not only does he turn to the maidservant, discarding his wife,[33] she also suspects that the necklace was only a pretext, and that he had been waiting to do so.[34] This premonition was based on the several popular ways of judging the bride and groom at the time of marriage, and bodily markers are considered to be reflections of their character:

I saw that the groom's feet were crooked at the time of the covering. I realized at the time that he would treat his bride badly. (13.11)

In general, however, men, whether named kings or unnamed herders, fall under a similar archetype of masculinity that is associated on the one hand with jealousy and pride, but on the other hand, also with honour, dignity and generosity. They are sought not only by their own wives, but also by other households in the community, and are known for their hospitality to travelers.[35]

In matrimony, the interactions between men and women are not always very simple to understand. We see a range of relationships, which, given the spiritual setting of the text are largely centered on the falling out of husbands and wives. Even in that limited sphere, we see internal conflicts and external difficulties, social pressures and rivalries, communal responsibilities, and often a bitter acceptance of a fate of subordination which Latif encourages individuals (both male and female) to embrace.

True turbulence and confusion, however, is reserved for the women without masculine bedrocks to rest their identities on. Even so, it is not independence that they are associated with, but are instead characterized by that very lack of masculinity. We do not see an equivalent of the *ga]nikā* in the imagination of the desert, but the more ambiguous category of the 'women left on their own'.

'Women Left on their Own': A Transitive Femininity

A woman, even temporarily away from her husband, has been 'left on her own', and must struggle. That struggle often comes to define and empower her. Sasui, half dead and trudging through the forested Vankar, is transformed once she familiarizes herself with the terrain, and learns 'the ways of the foragers'.[36]

However, women must constantly walk on eggshells for it is incredibly easy to lose one's husband to another woman, even though Latif inverts the values that women need to possess; the attributes of femininity that, according to most normative literature of the period,[37] are wielded by women to get by in the world, are useless in Latif's Sufi universe. Even mirrored, however, the task of the woman remains to continuously live up to the expectations of her beloved in order to ensure his favour:

She who took nothing with her reached her beloved. She who wore fine clothes lost the chance to be with him. (9.11)

With vermilion in the parting of her hair and kohl on her eyes, she lost the chance to be with him. She was robbed like Lila, who exchanged her lover for gems. (9.12)

If after all effort, one is still deserted by the husband, the abandoned woman is to "weep, abandon gaiety, and cling to the thought of his caravan",[38] so that all may see that her "hut is filled with weeping and wailing",[39] and is portrayed as ready to melt the Harho with her blood.[40] She is chided by all, who mock her, "what will you gain by weeping, is your Baloch coming back to you now?"[41] and, "If you had died yesterday, you would have joined your beloved then. No case was ever heard of a healthy woman being united with the one she loves."[42] However, it is interesting to note that despite the grief, there also seems to be a sense of retribution, for she responds by telling her friends that she intends to die on the way so that her blood may be on her beloved's head.[43]

One of the most powerful *Surs* in the *Risālō*, is *Sur Samundi* which is composed in the voice of the unnamed wives of traders who are left behind on land, as the traders themselves negotiate with the seas. The land itself becomes a backward extension of the sea, as the imagination of those left behind remains propelled towards the seas. Time acquires ghastly qualities of both, a rapid movement, as well as a complete pause, for life as such can only be lived with the lover:

Those were the days of my youth, when my beloved departed on his travels. Though I weep, my beloved does not stay. Mother, what can I do? The trader has put me on a pyre and set sail. (6.5)

There is both, the pain caused by the fear of having been abandoned, as also the anticipation caused by the fear of loss.[44] There is almost a sense of the ocean being a fearsome rival, from whom she is keeping her husband safe as long as she does not let him venture out.[45] Time itself gets divided between long painful periods of separation, sprinkled with a few nights with the beloved, marked with the anticipation of the next upcoming voyage.

While the arrival of the sailors at the 'landing place' is thrilling news, it is their entry into the household, through the courtyard, that truly brings joy. This voyage into the home itself is performed by the sailors, and received passively, albeit in anticipation, by the wife and her rivals:

They left when the north wind was blowing, and they return on the spring breeze. I want nothing to do with the sailors' trade. For those whose courtyards they enter, today is a happy Eid. (6.26)

If he enters my courtyard, friends, I am filled with joy. I give to others the precious gems that I vowed to my beloved. (27)

The landing place itself becomes the site of ritual separation and reunion, and acts as the mediator between the wives and the ocean. The women make various offerings to the ocean,[46] and without such rituals, Latif declares it impossible for the husband to come home safely *to that wife*:

She who performs pilgrimage to the water and does not offer lamps should not desire her husband's return. (6.33)

When nothing seems to be working, they complain to their mothers-in-law, and regret marrying their husbands.[47] The unfairness registers when Latif makes the woman suggest that her husband took up the trade after marrying her, leaving her helpless and desolate. In effect, she bemoans how she is getting what she never signed up for:

If you, my husband, were a trader, I never should have married you. You are planning to travel abroad after spending only twenty-four hours with me. (6.44)

To seek relief from this pain, the hurting wives in this story advise the mirrored listening wives of audiences, to turn to the Pir for solace.[48] This *Sur* brings women to Sufism not simply as a metaphor, but as an escape from a rather painful, excruciating reality. Even though the separation from the husband at times seems to be a metaphoric separation from the source of all reality, the suffering itself is not turned into something glorious. Its intense pain is registered, perhaps for the sake of the audience, and the guide is offered not simply as a mediator, but as refuge from the pain caused by the constant absence of the husband.

In Sur Sarang, marked by the abundance and celebration of monsoon, the women without a family have a conflicted place. While rain acts as a geographical unifier bringing together "plains and deserts" along with "the lower ground" in the experience of the downpours, women are depicted neither as uniform in their enjoyment of it, nor in their experience of it. In the "lower grounds", "the farmers' wives rejoice" with hands full of butter as they begin churning at dawn. The buffaloes that are milked are also depicted as overjoyed, as are both the "maids and mistresses… in their huts".[49]

However, it is in the context of the parched desert that the motif of rain visits the "women left on their own" (*vān]d]hīyun* or *vān]d]hī*) creating a sense of joy despite separation:

It has rained in the plains and deserts, it has rained in Jaiselmer. The sky is overcast and the rains have come to the desert. Women left on their own have lost their worries, says Latif. The paths have been made fragrant, and the herdsmen's wives are happy. (22.14)

On the other hand, the landscape is richly and erotically turned into a metaphor for love, so the *vān]d] hīs*, situated outside the narrative of love and pleasure, are recommended to not get soaked in the rain. While there is relief from the scathing summer heat, rains as symbols of love act as reminders of what they do not have, or have lost. Even though they have otherwise let go of their worries,[50] and have built their households afresh on their own,[51] they are depicted as emotionally helpless and desolate.[52]

Thus, the motif of a woman who has either lost her family or doesn't have one, is given the dimensions of a mythical motif as the ultimate seeker, for she lends herself as the perfect symbol of incompleteness, given the context of the desert that demands strong social ties in order to even survive. In the absence of a family, it is divine protection that is then sought from the beloved, at the same time as a family is sought, or the return of the husband prayed for.[53]

Femininity and Intersectionality

While Annemarie Schimmel points out the "class" orientation in the portrayal of subordination, it is neither a consistent trope (for people of varied classes are shown as subordinating themselves), nor is it a comprehensive engagement with the hierarchies that emerge within the *Risālō*. This particular section seeks to engage with the intersection of caste, class, and femininity in the *Risālō*. What one observes is that caste is used to depict the social position of a character vis-à-vis another character within the text. The word "shackle" which translates to caste is *}zāt*. Another word, *kamī]nī*, is used to denigrate a character, which, again, seems to be a function not so much of their actual hierarchical position but the difference between the "self" and the "other".

The lamentation of Sasui, the "brahman girl", on being abandoned because of her caste, has more to do with the norms of endogamy and exogamy, for she laments that had she been of the Aris' clan, things would have been different.[54]

Being of the same social group allows one a certain amount of freedom in engaging with the husband's family. Skill and training are required for being able to subsist in any terrain in the desert and she suspects that her lack of appropriate skills must also have turned her husband's brothers off:

If I was their kinswoman, I should have complained about my brothers-in-law. Out of respect I did not say a word to them. Mother, my caste (*}zāt*) is a disgrace to the people of Kech. (12.27)

It is, however, not simply a case of a "high-class" woman subordinating herself. For, at the same time, she herself regrets falling for someone from outside her own land. Despite the metaphorical representation of the husband as God, the experiential base is still of the 'other'. The insecurity of a woman who weds a stranger finally belonging neither to her own home nor to her husband's, is put quite bluntly:

One should have a lover from one's homeland, what sort of a lover does a stranger make? Having loaded up their goods, they leave for their own land. Now that the beloved is departed, have done with Bhambhor. (10.7)

In what Latif portrays as a conversation with her mother, the distaste for marrying outside one's own caste comes across again as Latif chides her. The complexity of the situation can be gauged from the following verses:

Why did you get tangled up with a foreigner (*para]dehī*)? Your wits were confused, Sasui, when you made a mountain man your husband. Oh Brahman girl who is lost, did you think that loving the Baloch was a game? (12.36)

The other case is of Nuri the Mohānī, who belongs to the *Mohānā* or *Me* caste, traditionally considered the lowest in Sindh with women noted for "beauty" and "loose morals".[55] Latif describes the *Mohānā*s thus:

Their baskets are full of stinking fish, and their trays are full of fish smell. It makes one ashamed if the edge of one's garment touches theirs. The Samo prince stands there and is kind to them. (16.5)

They are dark, ugly, base, and in no way attractive. They sit beside the road with their baskets of stinking fish. Who besides the Samo can tolerate their coquetry? (16.6)

While the prince is portrayed as the magnanimous, non-discriminating Tamachi, Nuri herself is portrayed as ashamed of her caste. Humility and debasement are her only ways of maintaining her favour in the eyes of Tamachi, and thus accessing some power:

You are Tamachi, lord of the landing place: I am a fisher woman of the *Me* caste. Do not reject me now that I have been given the title of your wife. (16.3)

It was her graceful helplessness (*niyāz*) that helped her access the beloved, and is declared the gold standard of femininity:

The fisher-woman has no pride or arrogance in her heart. She delighted the king with her eyes filled with graceful looks (*nai]non son nāz karīn*). Her artful ways won the Samo for her over all the others. (16. 12)

Nuri's helplessness (*niyāz*) was wonderfully hard to grasp. The fisher girl charmed the Samo, who was the ruler of them all. Having lost their claims to him, the queens came and stood behind her. (13)

However, given the picture that has been painted of her, the need is also felt to dissociate her from her caste, and relocate her in royal femininity:

> In hands and feet, or in face and appearance, she is no fisherwoman. She is a queen among queens, like the main string on a lute. From the beginning she behaved like royalty. The Samo recognized this and tied the wedding band on her arm. (16.14)

The notion of impurity (*nāpāk*) is also built into the ideal of femininity, which is specially brought about when a woman is away from her husband. Alongside it is the notion of a clean fresh beauty which can and should only be pampered when one is with one's husband:

> Away from Sahar, Suhini is utterly impure. In the place where he lives, her impurity is destroyed. She becomes pure when she is beside the milk drinker. (7.108)

Finally, there is also a strong moral beckoning throughout the text, as Latif sings about various professions—salvation and God lie within the professional duty of the individual. It seems as though for the "women left behind", that duty is to suffer their separation. For it is within these different moral obligations that Latif shows them how to find God, and so for these women, it is shown within suffering, the socially acceptable state they should ideally be in. This is also because by and large, people are expected to adhere to the social role into which there are born. In Sur Piribhati, for instance the bards are told that singing and playing the *tamburā* is their moral duty, for "Singers have no opportunity besides singing".[56]

Conclusion

This paper has explored a few archetypes and representations of femininity as they emerge from the Risalo, in its various interactions with representations of masculinity, time, space, caste, and so on. We find that meaning is both created and translated from the discourse itself, and grafted on to the natural world across the sub-regions within Thar where the legends emerge. The narratives themselves are all either rooted within stationary identities, or itinerant identities, or traverse both.

Notes

1. Terry Eagleton, *Literary Theory: An Introduction.* Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1983, pp. 12-14.
2. Sheldon Pollock, ed. *Literary Cultures in History: Reconstructions from South Asia.* Berkeley: University of California Press, 2003, p. 9.
3. Ali Asani, 'At the Crossroads of Indic and Iranian Civilizations: Sindhi Literary Culture', in Pollock ed. *Literary Cultures in History:Reconstructions from South Asia.* Berkeley: University of California Press, 2003, p. 617.
4. Asani, 'At the Crossroads of Indic and Iranian Civilizations' in Pollock ed. *Literary Cultures in History*, pp. 615-616.
5. *Ibid.*, pp. 615-616.
6. *Ibid.*, p. 621.
7. *Ibid.*, p. 621.
8. Shah Abdul Latif, *Risalo.* Translated by Christopher Shackle. London: Murty Classical Library of India, 2018, pp. xv-xvi. (Henceforth abbreviated as *Risalo*)
9. *Ibid.*, p. xix.
10. Shabnam Virmani and Vipul Rikhi, *I Saw Myself: Journeys with Shah Abdul Latif Bhitai.* Gurgaon: Penguin Random House India, 2019, p. 9.
11. Tanuja Kothiyal, *Nomadic narratives : A History of Mobility and Identity in the Great Indian Desert.* Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2016, p. 28.
12. Sarah F. D. Ansari, *Sufi Saints and State Power:The pirs of Sind, 1843 - 1947.* Cambridge: Cambridge University Press , 1992, p. 12.
13. Asani, 'At the Crossroads of Indic and Iranian Civilizations' in Pollock ed. *Literary Cultures in History*, p. 612.
14. Ansari, *Sufi Saints and State Power*, p. 13.
15. Eaton, 'Sufi Folk Literature and the Expansion of Indian Islam', pp. 117-127.
16. Ansari, *Sufi Saints and State Power,* p. 9.
17. Asani, Ali, "Sufi Poetry in the Folk Tradition of Indo-Pakistan." *Religion & Literature* 20, no. 1 (1988), p. 84.
18. Annemarie Schimmel, 'Sindhi Literature', *Mahfil*, Vol. 7, No. 1/2 (Spring - Summer 1971), pp. 71-80, p. 4.
19. Annemarie Schimmel, *Pain and Grace: A Study of Two Mystical Writers of Eighteenth-Century Muslim India.* Numen Books, 1997, pp. 172-173.
20. Schimmel, *Pain and Grace,*pp. 172-173.
21. *Ibid.*, p. 174.
22. Shonaleeka Kaul, "Women About Town: An Exploration of the Sanskrit Kāvya Tradition." *Studies in History* 22, no. 1 (2006), p. 60.
23. Different translations within Sur Sarang itself.
24. *Risalo*, 2.100-2.101, 2.119.
25. *Ibid.*, 8.12.
26. *Ibid.*, 15.40.
27. *Risalo* 11.18.
28. *Ibid.*, 9.42.
29. *Ibid.*, 8.86.
30. *Ibid.*, 25.3.
31. *Ibid.*, 25.4.
32. *Risalo*, 14.49
33. *Ibid.*, 13.7.
34. *Ibid.*, 13.10.
35. *Ibid.*, 28.47 -28.50.
36. *Risalo*, 8.96.
37. Rosalind O'Hanlon, in 'Manliness and Imperial Service in Mughal North India', *Journal of the Economic and Social History of the Orient* 42, no. 1 (1999): 47-93, talks about the notion of femininity in the late 17th century through the *Mau'iẓah- i Jahāngīrī* of Muhammad Bāqir Najm-i S◎ānī,

which she argues is representative of the majority of the normative literature of the period and portrays women as faithless, cunning, disloyal, and a deficient sex, pp. 66-68.

38. *Risalo,* 12.63.
39. *Ibid.,* 12.64.
40. *Ibid.,*
41. *Ibid.,* 12.65.
42. *Risalo,* 12.67
43. *Ibid.,* 12.68.
44. *Ibid.,* 6.7.
45. *Ibid.,* 6.13-6.15.
46. *Ibid.,* 6.31-6.32.
47. *Risalo,* 6.42-6.43.
48. *Ibid.,* 6.46V.
49. *Ibid.,* 22.13.
50. *Ibid.,* 22.14.
51. *Risalo,* 22.24.
52. *Ibid.,* 22.24, 2.25.
53. *Ibid.,* 22.29, 22.31.
54. *Ibid.,* 12.25-12.26.
55. Schimmel, *Pain and Grace,* p. 175.
56. *Risalo,* 26.15.