

CELEBRATING

ABDUR RAHIM KHAN-I-KHANAN

STATESMAN

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POET

LINGUIST

HUMANITARIAN

PATRON

INTERGLOBE FOUNDATION | AGA KHAN TRUST FOR CULTURE

سید حاتم سالار عجم



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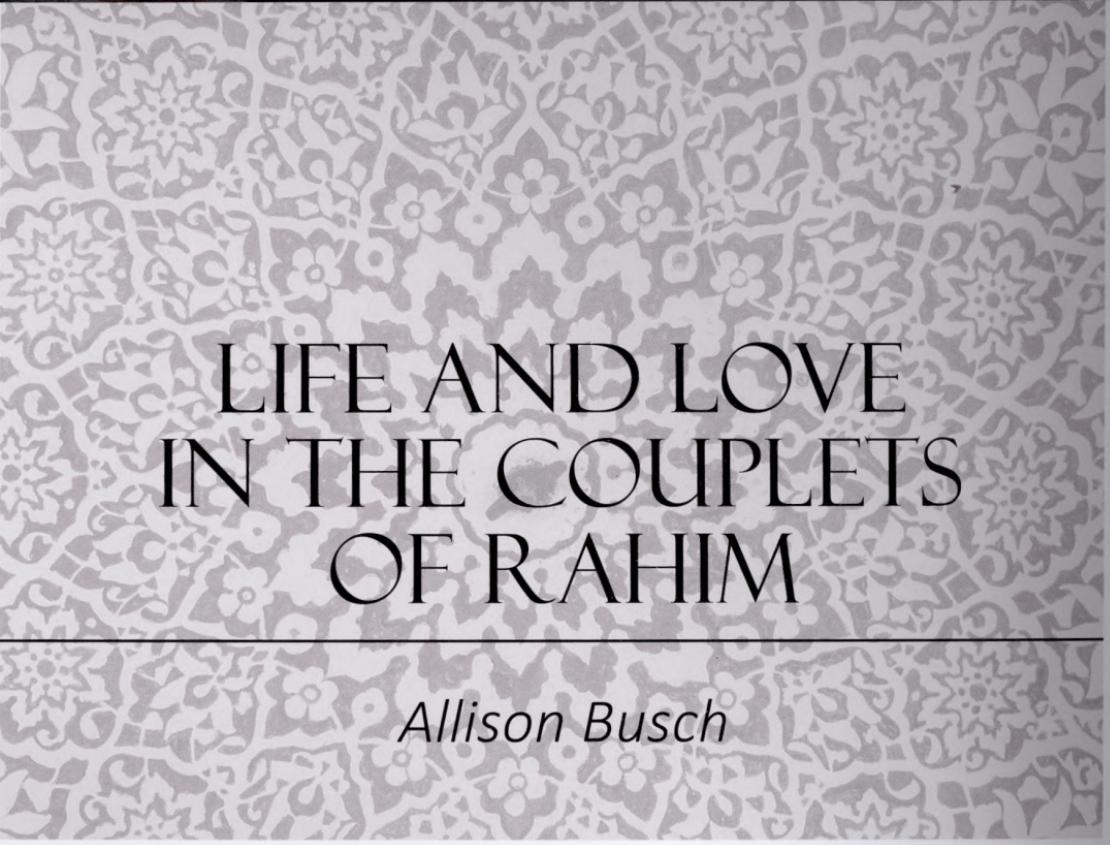
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LIFE AND LOVE IN THE COUPLETS OF RAHIM

Allison Busch



Too often, Indian history is recounted in terms of political dynasties, brute facts and military achievements, with matters that fall under the heading of “culture” somehow relegated to an extraneous status. ‘Abdur Rahim Khan-i-Khanan (Rahim) is a good example of why such an approach misses too much. To be sure, Rahim is rightly remembered as an accomplished statesman and general, a military lynchpin of the Mughal Empire under Akbar and Jahangir. But he must also be recognized as a learned polymath who epitomizes something important about the cultural achievements of Mughal society. He contributed prodigiously to Indian culture in ways too numerous to list (though this volume serves as a valuable testimony to many of them). Rahim was one of the most significant patrons of Persian literature anywhere.¹ He was also a translator, rendering Emperor Babur’s Turkish-language memoirs, *Bāburnāma*, into Persian, so that they could reach a wider audience. Rahim also sponsored great works of architecture and maintained a well-resourced painting atelier.² Art historians such as John Seyller³ and Molly Aitken,⁴ among others, have demonstrated how the painters in his employ were especially responsive to Indian aesthetic realms, producing a beautiful illustrated *Rāmāyana* and a series of *Rāgamālā* paintings that gave Indian musical modes a striking visual form. Rahim’s responsiveness to Indian aesthetic realms was also pronounced in his Hindi poetry.

Rahim is rightly celebrated in the annals of Hindi literary history as a master of the couplet. It is much easier said than done to write a good couplet (and the challenges of translating them are also considerable). The poet has only a few words to work with and is constrained by a tightly controlled metrical and rhyme scheme. The art of the couplet is to pack a lot of meaning into a tiny vessel. Or, in the words of Rahim himself,



A folio from the Persian translation of Valmiki's Rāmāyana commissioned by 'Abdur Rahim Khan-i-Khanan. The illustration depicts Rāma and Lakshman confronting the demons Marich and Subahu. Ink, opaque watercolour, and gold on paper, in modern bindings; 27.5 x 15.2 cm (10 13/16 x 6 in); Artist: Mohan; Reign of Akbar, 1597-1605. Freer Gallery of Art and Arthur M. Sackler Gallery, Smithsonian Institution, Washington, D.C.: Gift of Charles Lang Freer, Accession Number: F1907.271.1-172 vol-1: folio 38 verso.

"the *dohā* is long in meaning though short in syllables".⁵ Some *dohās* comment, at times wryly, on ethical matters, as in this famous verse from Rahim's most celebrated work, the *dohāvalī* ("array of couplets"):

अब रहीम मुश्किल पड़ी, गाढ़े दोऊ काम।
साँचे से तो जग नहीं, झूठे मिलैं न राम॥१॥⁶

*Oh Rahim, I'm quite in a bind. Both options present serious difficulties:
The way of truth means giving up the world. The way of falsehood forecloses salvation.*

As the very word *dohā*, or couplet, makes clear, the poet has only two lines to work with. These may be further divided into four *pādas* or quarters, with *pāda*s one and three carrying 13 metrical counts, and *pāda*s two and four 11 each, a symmetrical pattern that Rupert Snell has aptly termed "foursquare".⁷ Note how the verse about a bind carries us relentlessly forward into that very bind, one *pāda* at a time. The first announces the predicament; the second signals its intractable nature. The third and fourth *pāda*s present each of the two unsatisfactory options but do not offer a solution. By the end of the verse, we too are stuck in Rahim's bind. Rahim's Hindi couplet expresses all of this far more trenchantly for its tight conformity to the metre than my wordy quarter-by-quarter English translation can hope to do.

A second example will help reinforce this point about the *dohā*'s structure with its special progression:

रहिमन गली है साँकरी, दूजो ना ठहराहिं।
आपु अहै तो हरि नहीं, हरि तो आपुन नाहिं॥११३॥
*Oh Rahim, the lane is narrow, with no room for another.
With me there, Hari can't enter; with Hari, there is no room for me.*

This verse operates in a fashion similar to the first, with each quarter leading us further into a bind that cannot be resolved: the incompatibility of one's all-too-human self with spiritual attainment.

Many of Rahim's *dohās* similarly probe the central dilemmas at the very heart of human existence. One concern that preoccupied the intellectuals of his day was whether men were free to exercise agency over their own lives.⁸ What kind of power did men really have over their fate? The Braj Bhasha poet Keshavdas framed a debate on this very topic for Rahim's son Iraj Shah Nawaz Khan.⁹ Rahim, too, addressed the issue, pronouncing unequivocally on the side of fate:

ज्यों नाचत कठपूतरी, करम नचावत गात।
अपने हाथ रहीम ज्यों, नहीं आपुने हाथ॥६३॥
*Our bodies are the mere playthings of fate. Puppet-like, we dance.
Even our own hands aren't in our hands.¹⁰*

The stress on "*apane hātha*", or one's own hands, repeated across *pāda*s three and four, paradoxically stress how little we do control. Everything we experience is the inscrutable work of somebody else's hands, the unseen puppet master of fate. This theme of making peace with things that are not in our hands recurs in the *Dohāvalī*:



A Rāgamālā painting, produced in the atelier of 'Abdur Rahim Khan-i-Khanan. The illustration depicts the musical mode, Gunakalī Rāginī, in a visual form. The folio belongs to the album now titled "Laud Rāgamālā". Opaque watercolour and gold on paper; 38 x 24.6 cm; Attributed to Fazl. Bodleian Library, Oxford, MS. Laud Or. 149 fol. 8a.

निज कर क्रिया रहीम कहि, सुधि भावी के हाथ।

पाँसे अपने हाथ में, दाँव न अपने हाथ॥१२०॥

Concern yourself with your own duty. Let the rest be fate's concern.

Rahim says, You may hold the dice but you don't control the throw.

As Deshraj Singh Bhati points out, there is more than a passing resemblance to the principles of *karmayoga* from the *Bhagavad Gītā*.¹¹

Rahim's couplets range across a broad spectrum of themes. Some hint at the profundity of religious experience. These can often be read in both Sufi and *bhakti* registers. Many draw inspiration from the *Rāmāyana*, the *Mahābhārata* and other Indian traditions. A few are more light-hearted. Especially prominent are passionate invocations of Indian female beloveds, especially in the two works that we will explore in the remainder of this essay: *Nagarshobhā* and the *Barvai Nāyikā Bhed*.

The Beauty (and Beauties) of the City

Rahim's *Nagarshobhā* (Beauty of the City) is a lively collection of *dohās* that explores the social and affective landscape of a fictive Indian city. Descriptions of the city (*nagarvarnan*) have a long history in Indian *kāvya*, and they also figure prominently in Persian.¹² At the heart of Rahim's *Nagarshobhā* is a quasi-ethnographic approach that celebrates the beauty of Indian women based on their occupational group.

Each encounter with women of different *jātis* (castes) sparks a poetic tribute, often quite fantastical, to her beauty. He starts at the very top of the social hierarchy, with the Brahman's wife, the *brāhmanī*, playfully building his poems out of images that appropriately stress gestures of honour, hierarchy, purity, deliverance and *darshan*.

उत्तम जाती ब्राह्मनी, देखत चित्त लुभाय।

परम पाप पल में हरत, परसत वाके पाय॥३॥

Beholding the highborn Brahman woman, my heart is infatuated.

Touching her feet swiftly absolves me of even the worst sins.

परजापति परमेश्वरी, गंगा रूप समान।

जाके अंग तरंग में, करत नैन अरनान॥४॥

She is the Creator, the supreme goddess. Ganges-like is her beauty,

her body the waves in which my eyes bathe.

We meet a whole ecology of women on our tour through Rahim's fictional *nagar*. But no men. The women are the *shobhā* of the city. As a rule, Rahim devotes two couplets to each type of woman, coding them with stereotypical referents to the occupation of that social group. For instance, in the poet's imagination, pen and ink, the tools of the *kāyastha* (an important scribal class in Mughal society), become implements of the erotic, as in this poetic description of the *kaithinī*, the *Kāyastha*'s wife:

कैथिनी कथन न पारइ, प्रेम कथा मुख बैन।
 छाती ही पाती मनो, लिखै मैन की सैन॥१॥
*The Kāyastha's wife is unable to tell her tale of love in words.
 Her heart¹³ itself becomes the paper on which she writes love's signs.*

In his description of the painter's wife (*chiterin*), Rahim conjures up the world of Indian miniature painting with its tendency to show faces in profile:

चतुर चित्तेरिन चित हरै, चख खंजन के भाइ।
 द्वै आधौ करि डारइ, आधौ मुख दिखराइ॥११॥
*The clever painter's wife steals my heart with her wagtail-eyes.
 Showing me just half of her face, she slices me in half.*

This verse on the *pānwālī* (betel seller) has some delightfully playful features:

सुरंग बरन बरइन बनी, नैन खवाये पान।
 निसि दिन फेरै पान ज्यों, बिरही जन के प्रान॥१३॥
*The pānwālī is beautiful, her skin a lovely reddish hue. With her eyes she offers up pān.
 She sets the hearts of separated lovers aflutter day and night, like a leaf.*

The *pānwālī* is *suranga* (beautiful) but also red, the same colour as her wares. The verb “*pher*” conjures up the passing around of a tray of pan but also the turning topsy-turvy of a lover’s heart.

One after another, each Indian woman infatuates the onlooker with her charms. This verse envisions the merchant’s wife all decked up in an unusual marketplace, that of beauty. The play on *baniāin* (merchant’s wife) and *bani āī* (beautifully adorned) is delightful:

बनिआइन बनि आइ क, बैठि रूप की हाट।
 पेम पेक तन हेरि क, गर्लए टारत बाट॥१७॥
*The wife of the merchant comes all dressed up, and sits in beauty's marketplace.
 One loving glance¹⁴ at her and I am transfixed, stopped in my tracks.*

One mark of a fine poet is the use of artful *double entendres*. Here, Rahim does not disappoint. The word “*bāt*” means path as well as (a merchant’s) weights. In the first case, the onlooker is mesmerized by her beauty and helpless to continue farther on his path. Taking the other meaning as predominant, we have the “*baniyā* beauty” rigging the scales in her favour. The mercantile imagery is equally appealing in the verse’s sequel, which seems to be envisioning the lively, dancing eyes of the merchant’s wife as the pans of a balance going up and down:

गरब तराजू करत चख, भौंह मोरि मुसक्यात।
 डाँड़ी मारत बिरह की, घित विन्ता घटि जात॥१८॥



A banjärin, a gypsy girl. Image source: Mukesh Srivastava, www.redbubble.com.

*Her proud eyes weigh the onlooker, her brows dance as she smiles.
She sells me short on the pain of separation (virah), my heart's burden is lightened.*

The *banjārin* or gypsy girl is just as arresting:

और बनज व्यौपार को, भाव बिचारै कौन।
लोइन लोने होत हैं, देखत वाको लौन॥२६॥
*Who can think about business transactions?
My eyes are bewitched by her beauty.*

The word play in the second line does not easily yield itself to translation. Braj Bhasha poets often bended and twisted words in interesting ways to surprise and delight the reader. This lady's *launa*, a Braj derivative of *lāvanya*, meaning "saltiness", but more idiomatically "beauty", has the effect of rendering the eyes (*loina*, from *lochana*) of her admirer *lone* (beautified/bewitched /salty).

The traveller to Rahim's *nagar* is bombarded at every moment by visions of beauty. When he encounters the dyer's wife (*rangrejin*), she sets him afloat in waves of liquid passion:

रँगरेजिन के संग में, उठत अनंग तरंग।
आनन ऊपर पाइयतु, सुरत अंत क रेंग॥११॥
*The company of the dyer's wife unleashes waves of passion.
Freshly arrived from lovemaking, her face is tinted with afterglow.*

And heaven help him when he comes across the *luhārī*, the iron worker's wife. Sparks begin to fly:

बिरह अगिन निसि दिन धवै, उठै यित चिनगारि।
बिरही जियहिं जराइ कै, करत लुहारि लुहारि॥२९॥
*The fire of separation burns night and day. Sparks ignite in the heart.
That iron lady makes the lover's heart red hot with her ironwork.*

A butcher's wife (*kasāin*) is like a bloodthirsty murdereress, wielding the weapon of her sex appeal:

हाथ लिये हत्या फिरै, जोबन गरब हुलास।
धरै कसाइन रैन दिन बिरही रकत पियास॥३७॥
*She roams about murderously, in the bloom of youth, haughty and exuberant.
The butcher's wife is ever thirsty for the blood of the lover.*

The imagery selected for the cloth printer's wife, appropriately, bursts forth in a spray of colour:

छीपिन छापौ अधर को, सुरँग पीक भरि लेइ।
हँसि हँसि काम कलोल में, पिय मुख ऊपर देइ॥५१॥

*The cloth printer's wife stamps you with her lips, loaded as they are with pān-juice.
Happy, she colours her lover's face in the heat of passion.*

The following verse, from the same set, draws its power from the way that *rang* can mean both colour and passion/joy:

मानों मूरति मैन की, धरै रंग सुरतंग।
नैन रंगीले होतु हैं, देखत वाको रंग ॥५२॥
*She is like love's icon, flushed with passion's hue.
Beholding her colour brings colour/joy to the eyes.*

Here, the onlooker is aptly described as *rangi*, with all the combined associations of colour and sensuality that the word conjures up.

The reader pauses briefly in a seemingly endless sequence of enchanting yet potentially dangerous sociological spaces. Predictably, the Rajput girl evinces fierceness:

सोभित मुख ऊपर धरै, सदा सुरत मैदान।
छूटी लट्ठै बँदूकची, भोहें रूप कमान ॥६०॥
*The lovely rājpūtanī holds her head up high on the battlefield of love.
Her dishevelled hair bursts forth like musket shot, her brows are bows of beauty.¹⁵*

An encounter with the Turk prompts cautionary words about her incendiary anger:

चतुर चपल कोमल बिमल, पर परस्त सतराइ।
रस ही रस बस कीजियै, तुरकिन तरकि न जाइ ॥६१॥
*The Turk girl is clever, capricious, delicate, pure. But if you touch her, she flares up.
Keep the Turk under your control with your love lest she burst out in anger.*

The poet's wife is also intensely passionate, though the lover is not at risk of bodily harm. It's his heart that is at risk:

भाटिन भटकी प्रेम की, हटकी रहै न गेह।
जोबन पर लटकी फिरै, जोरत तरकि सनेह ॥६५॥
*The bard's wife wanders for love. She won't stay at home.
She is under the sway of her passion. She loves you, and leaves you.*

And as for the *natnī* (acrobat/dancing girl), her playful arts just about undo him:

बाँस चढ़ी नट नंदनी, मन बाँधत लै बाँस।
नैन मैन की सैन तें, कटत कटाछन साँस ॥७१॥

*She scampers up the bamboo staff, that acrobat-girl. A wave of her wand captivates the heart.
Her seductive sidelong glances take my breath away.*

The *bājigarin*, in a related line of work (juggling/magic), sets the dazed spectators spinning:

पीवत वाको प्रेम रस, जोई सो बस होइ।
एक खरे घूमत रहै, एक परे मत खोइ॥१९॥
*He who drinks the elixir of her love becomes infatuated.
One onlooker begins to spin, another falls unconscious.*

These richly evocative figures are plausibly taken from Mughal social worlds, but Rahim transforms them into poetic subjects. Some of his *nāyikās* are feisty and cruel beloveds in the Persian style, rather than the more domesticated types that we often find in classical Indian literary representation. One possibility is that Rahim conceived these verses in terms of Sufi hermeneutics. Images like *prem ras* (love's "juice" or elixir) and losing consciousness have a long history in Indian Sufi poetry.¹⁷

The opening lines of the *Nagarshobhā*, with their emphasis on light and primal beauty, are certainly in keeping with the Indian tradition of poetic *mangalācharan* (auspicious verses that begin a literary work), but they also seem to steer the interpretation down a more Sufi path.

आदि रूप की परम दुति, घट घट रही समाइ।
लघु मति ते मो मन रसन, अस्तुति कही न जाइ॥१॥
*The paramount lustre of the primal form infuses every heart.
My mind and tongue cannot adequately praise it with my limited intellect.*

नैन तृप्ति कछु होतु है, निरखि जगत की भाँति।
जाहि ताहि में पाइयै, आदि रूप की काँति॥२॥
*Seeing the ways of the world fills my eyes with satisfaction.
Since everywhere I behold the luminous beauty of the primal form.*

The women who inhabit the world of *Nagarshobhā* are evocative instantiations of "luminous beauty". And as a rule, they are utterly unattainable, or unattainable without great difficulty, as with the beloveds who inhabit Sufi poetry. The Persian writer Hafiz, and many poets before and since, warned of the grave difficulties that await the mystical seeker on the path of love:

*ki 'ishq āsān namūd avval vale uftād mushkil hā
for love seemed at first a cinch and then the problems came.¹⁸*

Another striking image from the world of Indian Sufi poetry that Rahim adopts is the *panihārin* (water carrier) on her way to the well. Amir Khusrau, famous Persian court poet to the Delhi Sultans, is credited with a beautiful *qawwālī* whose tagline is "*bahut kathin hai dagar panghata kī* (the way to the well is very difficult)", a metaphor of the soul's yearning to be united with God.¹⁹ The Hindi tradition's Sufi poet



Mugdhā abhisārikā nāyikā (*the young heroine who goes to meet her lover at an appointed place*). Opaque watercolour on paper; Overall: 21.3 x 30.6 cm (8 3/8 x 12 1/16 in.) Image: 18.6 x 28.6 cm (7 5/16 x 11 1/4 in.); Indian, Pahari, painted in Jammu or Mankot; c. 1730–40. Provenance: Given to the MFA in 1917 by Denman Waldo Ross; Purchased in 1917 from Ananda Coomaraswamy; Purchased in India prior to 1916. Museum of Fine Arts, Boston, Ross-Coomaraswamy Collection, Accession Number: 17.3115.

(Facing page) **Detail from mugdhā abhisārikā nāyikā.** The striking imagery beautifully captures the plight of the nāyikā, seeking her lover on a thunderous rainy night, paying no heed to the dangerous serpent at her feet.



extraordinaire, Malik Muhammad Jayasi, writing in Jaunpur a couple of generations before Rahim, was powerfully taken with the *panihārin* figure. In introducing the magical place of Simhaladvipa, home to the wondrous Padmavati, he lingers over a scene at the well in a passage freighted through and through with mystical imagery:

पानि भरइ आवहि पनिहारी । रूप सुरुप पदुमिनी नारी ।
पदुम गंध तेन्ह अंग बसाहीं । भँवर लागि तेन्ह संग फिराहीं ।
लंक सिंधिनी साँरग नैनी । हंसगामिनी कोकिल बैनी ।
आवहि झुंड सों पाँतिहि पाँती । गवन सोहाइ सो भाँतिहि भाँती ॥३२॥

*The water carriers come to collect water. They are padminī women, beautiful in form.
Bees follow them everywhere, attracted to the scent of their lotus-bodies.
Slim-waisted as lions, doe-eyed, their gaits like swans, and cuckoo-sweet their voices,
They arrive in groups, row after row, and then disappear, in beautiful multiplicity, just as
they came.*²⁰

As described by Aditya Behl, the point of dwelling on a powerful disabling beauty, such as that of the *padminī*, is to spark longing in the mystical seeker.²¹ All of this forms the relevant cultural backdrop to the figure of the *panihārin*²² in a verse from Rahim's *Nagarshobhā*:

घरो भरो धरि सीस पर, विरही देखि लजाइ ।
कूक कंठ तै बाँधि कै, लेजू ज्यों लै जाइ ॥२२॥

*She fills the water pot and balances it upon her head. Seeing her,
the lovelorn man is taken aback,²³
She hums to herself sweetly, binding him further with [love's] rope.*

The emphasis on sight with its implications of mystical vision, a kind of losing of self, and being bound, are all deeply consonant with traditions of Sufi writing in Hindi. Many of the *Nagarshobhā* verses are similarly tinged with Sufi hues. This description of the *kanchinī* (dancing girl), with its reference to a moth captivated by the flame, builds on a classic trope from Sufi poetry:

बहु पर्तग जारत रहे, दीपक बारे देह।
फिर तन गेह न आवही, मन जु चैटुवा लेह ॥८०॥

*Countless moths have met their end, burning up their mortal body in the lamp.
They house themselves in a body no longer, like baby birds hatching.*

Seen through a Sufi lens, the female beloveds of *Nagarshobhā* become avatars of divine perfection, symbolic of the exquisite supernal beauty that manifests in human form but remains forever beyond reach. The apprehender of this beauty, the onlooker in all of the poems, is then the male Sufi seeker.

But we need not restrict the meaning too much, for surely co-opting poetry into the service of a single vision is inadvisable. The *Nagarshobhā* couplets are, however we choose to interpret them, delightful poems that, as with poetry everywhere, tantalize with their rich surfeit of meaning. And I would not want to preclude

discussions of the female sexual power and assertion that are also surely important to the meanings of the *Nagarshobhā* verses, filled as they are with female figures of great liveliness, energy and sauciness.

Barvai Nāyikā Bhed

Potent female figures are also the building blocks of Rahim's *nāyikā* couplets. These are in the *barvai* metre a short and challenging couplet form for which Rahim is especially well known.²⁴ The *Nagarshobhā* poetry stresses a man's often consternating experience of female beauty, arguably with Sufi overtones. By contrast, the *Nāyikā Bhed* poems engage powerfully with female life cycles and emotions. Formalized treatments of this motif have a long history in Indian aesthetics. In Rahim's day, *nāyikā* themes were all the rage in painting, poetry and music.

The tour de force of a *barvai* lies in the semantic loading of an entire story into just 19 metrical counts. Such a brief container presupposed a great deal of literary knowledge. Having the backdrop of Indian *nāyikā bhed* and other motifs from aesthetic theory at his disposal helped Rahim and other *rīti* (as Hindi court poetry is known) authors to tell their poem-stories concisely. Connoisseurs, too, needed to be conditioned in the literary arts so that they could make sense of the poems. Consider the literary framework that is ideally in place to support the meaning of a poem such as the following, on the *anushayānā* or distraught *nāyikā*:

जमुना तीर तरुनिअहि लखि भो सूल।
झरिगो रुख बेइलिया, फुलत न फूल॥३६॥

*The young woman saw that the vines of the tree on the banks of the Yamuna had withered, their flowering now over. It was like a spear thrust into her heart.*²⁵

What is the backstory here? How do we make sense of this poem-story about a *nāyikā* who is, enigmatically, unhappy at the changes to the landscape with the encroachment of summer? At the heart of her discontent is the fear that she will not be able to meet her lover anymore. The literary conventions of centuries work their magic in the process of interpreting this tiny verse. Every word matters. "Jamunā tīra" tells us we are in the realm of the Krishna story. *Rūkha* (<*vriksha*) or trees that are vine covered (*beiliyā*) would form the *kunj* or bower where Krishna and Radha used to meet. But now, the once-verdant *kunj* flowers bloom no more (*phūlata na phūla*), and all of the lush vegetation at the trysting spot has dried up ('*jharigo*', modern Hindi '*jhar gayā*'). This is what the young woman sees, experiencing a thrusting pain as though a spear has pierced right through her ('*taruniahin lakhi bho sūla*'). Whereas it has taken a whole paragraph to unpack this story, Rahim needed only 38 syllables. However, this conciseness is predicated on the expectation that readers are well versed in literary conventions.

The *nāyikā* verse cycles explore the various scenarios of romantic love to the fullest, all from the point of view of the woman. Let's have a close look at another popular subtype.

पवढ़ु पीय पलंगिया, मीजहुँ पाय।
रेनि जगे कर निंदिया, सब मिटि जाय॥५४॥

My love, lie down on the bed. Let me rub your feet.
All of the tiredness you feel from staying up all night will fade.

॥मध्यघंडिता॥



At first glance, it might appear that this verse features a *pativrata*, a woman who is utterly devoted to her husband, attending to his every need. Look again. *Pāda* 3, “raini jage kara²⁶ nindiyā, (tiredness of being awake the night)” is the key. These are the words of a “*praudhā khanditā nāyikā*”, an experienced woman who is angry with her lover. A real aficionado might notice that she evinces additional characteristics, such as being “*sādaradhihīrā*”, or outwardly respectful and composed, i.e., she does not lash out at him in an intemperate rage.²⁷ Whatever her external mask, inside she is seething with anger and the tone of her speech is passive aggressive. She is laying the kindness on as thick as possible because she wants him to feel really guilty. Her assiduous concern for his well-being is entirely feigned.

Many of these themes were also popular in songs and paintings, which would have reinforced for connoisseurs knowledge of the various subtypes. These lines from a song collected at the behest of Emperor Shah Jahan (r 1628–57) feature a far less patient *khanditā nāyikā* who really lets him have it:

मेरे आंगन होइ और कें पाये धारत पीतम भोर भई पूछें ते उतर देत सतरात।
 अधरन रंग कहूँ अंजन और पनरेख, पीठ पहुँची गड़ी नैन सुरंग मीन तरात।
*My love, how is it you make your way to my courtyard at dawn,
 after passing the night somewhere else?*
And when you ask me what's wrong I say to you angrily:
I can see your pan-stained lips, with a bit of her collyrium mixed in.
Her bracelet has left a mark on your back.
*Your reddened eyes dart around, fish-like, and avert my gaze.*²⁸

Another example of a *khanditā nāyikā* comes from the painting on the facing page depicting an abashed lover being subjected to a jealous tirade.

So far, the *Nāyikā Barvai* examples have centred on a woman being disappointed in love. This is indeed a prominent theme, with many variations. One is the *kalahāntaritā*, or quarrelsome woman. Here, anger is deeply coloured by regret. In this sequence, and this is typical of *Nāyikā Bhed* poetry, Rahim takes us through a particular theme from the point of view of each of the *nāyikā* subtypes. His are *mugdhā*, the innocent, *madhyā*, the somewhat experienced, *praudhā*, experienced, *parakīyā*, the wife of another, and *ganikā*, a courtesan, and each one is posed as a *kalahāntaritā*.

An innocent gets angry only to regret it later:

आयेहु अबहि गवनवा, जुरुते मान।
 अब रस लागिहि गोरिअहि, मन पछतान ॥५७॥
He has just come back to you and is leaving again because you got into a huff.
Now he is off with some other beauty, and you regret it.

(Facing page) **Khanditā nāyikā (the heroine who is angry with her lover and shows it).** Ink and white priming on paper; 147 x 202; Indian, Pahari. Second half 19th century. Attributed to The Family of Nainsukh, Kangra style, Punjab Hills, Northern India; Given to the MFA in 1917 by Denman Waldo Ross; Purchased in 1917 from Ananda Coomaraswamy. Purchased by Coomaraswamy in India prior to 1916; Museum of Fine Arts, Boston, Accession Number: 17.2486; Ross-Coomaraswamy Collection.

A somewhat experienced woman gets angry only to regret it later:

मैं मतिमंद तिरिया, परिलिँ भोर।
तेहि नहिं कंत मनउलेँ, तेहि कछु खोर ॥५८॥
*What an idiot I am! I was trapped by my own foolishness.
That's why I didn't make up with him. What fault is it of his?*

An experienced woman gets angry only to regret it later.

थकि गा करि मनुहरिया, फिरि गा पीय।
मैं उठि तुरति न लायेँ, हिमकर हीय ॥५९॥
*He got tired of trying to appease me and then took off, my lover.
I didn't rush to bring him back, the soother of my heart.*

The wife of another gets angry only to regret it later.

जोहि लगि कीन बिरोधवा, ननद जिठानि।
रखिँ न लाइ करेजवा, तेहि हित जानि ॥६०॥
*It was for his sake that I fought with my sisters-in-law.
I didn't hold him close, in realization that he loves me.*

A courtesan gets angry only to regret it later.

जिहि दीन्हेउ बहु बिरिया, मुहि मनिमाल।
तिहि ते रुठेँ सखिया, फिरि गे लाल ॥६१॥
*Oh my friend, he would always give me a jewelled necklace.
And now I've gotten cross with Lal so he went away.*

The give-away of the subtype in this last *barvai* is the costly necklace, the *manimāla*, since a courtesan expects to be paid by her lover. It is precisely such clues that help the reader discern the subtle gradations among the types of *nāyikā*.

For all of the verses about the disappointments of love—and there are many—plenty of *Nāyikā Barvai* also feature moments of marital happiness. A *navorha* (newly married woman) looks excitedly through her trousseau and adorns herself for her husband:

पहिरति चूनि चुनरिया, भूषन भाव।
नैननि देत कजरवा, फूलनि चाव ॥११॥
*She carefully picks out which saree to wear. She loves her ornaments.
She applies kājal to her eyes. She delights in flowers/her desire grows.*

It does take some time for the new bride to accustom herself to her husband's expectations, however. The *vishrabdhā nāyikā* has gained enough confidence in him to actually go to bed with him, but she is still terrified of sex:

जंघन जोरत गोरिया, करत कठोर।
 छुअन न पावै पियवा, कहुँ कुच कोर॥१२॥
*The fair one locks her thighs together.
 Her lover doesn't even get to touch her breasts.*

Eventually, she does become sexually experienced, and even fond of sex, as is the case with this “*praudhā ratipriyā nāyikā*”, who wishes the night would never end:

भोरहि बोलि कोइलिया, बढ़वति ताप।
 घरी एक घरिअलवा, रह चुपचाप॥१४॥
*Oh Koel bird, why do you cry out at the crack of dawn, increasing my misery?
 Morning bell, stay silent for a little while still!*

Other moods include the *premagarvitā*, the woman who is proud that her husband loves her so much. He is at her beck and call:

अवरन पाय जवकवा, नाइन दीन।
 मुहि पग आगर गोरिया, आनन कीन॥३१॥
*Usually, it's the barber's wife who applies the henna to one's feet.
 But he bends right down there and decorates them himself.*

A related trope is the *svādhīnapatikā nāyikā*, “the woman whose husband is completely devoted to her”. This was a popular theme, perhaps because it seemed so preposterous and, thus, shaded into humour. In a version by Keshavdas, Radha's *sakhī* (female companion) pokes fun at her for putting none other than Lord Krishna himself to work in such a demeaning fashion:

...ता हरि पै तु गँवार की बेटी महावर पाइ झँवाइ दिवावै।
 हौं तौ बची अब हाँसिनि हूँ ऐसे और जौ देखै तौ ऊतरु आवै।
*I can barely stifle my laughter to see that a simple village girl like you
 has Hari scrubbing her feet and applying henna. What will you say if somebody sees this?*²⁹

The earlier Sanskrit tradition of *nāyikā bhed* was largely a secular pursuit, with the *nāyikā* envisioned as a generic courtly heroine. By the time Keshavdas and Rahim were writing, the tradition had, for many authors, become deeply tinged with *bhakti*, and often, painters explicitly showed the *nāyak* and *nāyikā* as Krishna and Radha.³⁰

In his rendition of the *nāyikā* tradition, Rahim does not generally make the Vaishnava message quite so explicit, but there is, nonetheless, plenty of scope for *bhakti* readings. The reference to “*Jamunā tīra* (the bank of the Yamuna)”, discussed above, is an invitation to situate the “*anushayānā nāyikā*” in a Krishnaite milieu. Rahim's occasional references to the captivating sound of a flute (*muraliyā, bansuriyā*³¹) are hardly dissociable from a Krishna context. Occasionally, Rahim even uses common epithets of Krishna (*Kanhaiya, Lal, Nandkumar, Nandkishor*)³² that point to a divine *nāyak*. Moreover, the deep yearning of a woman that



Abhisārikā nāyikā (the heroine rushing to her lover). Opaque watercolour and gold on paper; 19.5 x 29.5 cm (7 11/16 x 11 5/8 in.).
Late 18th century, attributed to The Family of Nainsukh. Provenance: Given to the MFA by Denman Waldo Ross in 1917. Purchased from Ananda Coomaraswamy in 1917. Purchased in India prior to 1916. Museum of Fine Arts, Boston, Ross-Coomaraswamy Collection, Accession Number: 17.2612.

is so central to many *Nāyikā Bhed* verses also lends itself to spiritual interpretations. The *parakiyā* verses, for instance, frequently stress the tension between all consuming passion and social strictures. In verse 60, translated above, a key signifier of the *parakiyā* is the struggle with her sisters-in-law, defiance of social strictures being a motif that recurs in Rahim and other *Nāyikā Bhed* works, often as a metaphor for divine love that knows no bounds.³³ Poems about the *abhisārikā nāyikā*, the woman who brazenly rushes out to meet her lover, were also understood to have a spiritual subtext.³⁴

Interpretations of *rīti* literature, as courtly Hindi verse is known in scholarly circles today, would eventually be infected by colonial and nationalist views of the Mughal past as a decadent and morally suspect era. *Nāyikā* poetry, which was held to persevere on micro differences among female characters, was associated with intellectual stagnation and untoward sexuality. It is a shame to have these wonderfully clever and beautiful poems subjected to such an un-nuanced analysis, as I have argued elsewhere.³⁵

This discussion of Rahim's *Nāyikā Barvai* has instead focused on the poet's mastery of a classical literary system and his agility with tightly controlled *barvai* couplets. These lovely poems contain playful and evocative scenes of couples making love. They also sketch the emotional upheaval of deeply painful separation, whether engendered by a quarrel, his infidelity or some other reason. Domestic worlds come into view, as do hints about women's yearnings to escape them. The *nāyikā* verses, though framed in conventional terms, often foreground the inner world of women's thoughts and feelings and are, thus, very different in tone from the more ethical and even spiritual thrust of the *Dohāvalī* (though a few of the *dohās* are on love themes too). Still, as with the *Nagarshobhā* verses, more spiritual readings are certainly possible.

One thing is certain: Rahim's poetry has much to recommend it. He was a master of the couplet, and the poems that have come down to us today under his name brim with insights into life, love, mystical yearnings, as well as politics and ethics. He embraced both Persianate and Indic culture and, while respectful of literary tradition, offered up fresh imagery for connoisseurs' enjoyment. A clever use of various poetic techniques and a deftness with both the structural and semantic possibilities of the couplet make his poetry a real pleasure to experience. His poems must have delighted the *mahfils* of Mughal India. They still delight us today.

Acknowledgements

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1. Annemarie Schimmel, "A Dervish in the Guise of a Prince: Khān-i Khānān Abdur Rahīm as a Patron," in *The Powers of Art: Patronage in Indian Culture*, ed. Barbara Stoler Miller (Delhi and New York: Oxford University Press, 1992).
2. Corinne Lefèvre, "The Court of 'Abd-ur-Rahīm Khān-i Khānān as a Bridge between Iranian and Indian Cultural Traditions," in *Culture and Circulation: Literature in Motion in Early Modern India*, eds. Thomas de Bruijn and Allison Busch (Leiden and Boston: Brill, 2014).
3. John Seyller, *Workshop and Patron in Mughal India: The Freer Rāmāyaṇa and other Illustrated Manuscripts of Abd al-Rahīm* (Zurich: Artibus Asiae, 1999).
4. Molly Emma Aitken, "The Laud Rāgamālā Album, Bikaner, and the Sociability of Subimperial Painting," *Archives of Asian Art* 63, 1 (2013): 27–58.
5. Deshraj Singh Bhati, *Rahīm Granthāvalī* (New Delhi: Naman Prakashan, 2011), v. 104. Vidyaniwas Mishra, Govind Rajnish, *Rahīm Granthāvalī* (New Delhi: Jainith Publishers, 2005), Vol. 105. The second half of the line compares the art of the *dohā* to the art of a *nātā* or acrobat with his spirited twists and leaps.
6. Vidyaniwas Mishra and *Rahīm Granthāvalī*, v. 9. All verse numbers hereafter refer to the numbering in the Mishra edition unless otherwise stated.
7. See Rupert Snell, this volume, for further elaboration on the structure of the *dohā* and the related but more challenging *barvai*.
8. Ali Anooshahr, "Author of One's Fate: Fatalism and Agency in Indo-Persian Histories," *Indian Economic and Social History Review* 49, 2 (2012): 197–224.
9. This work, the *Jahāngīrjaschandrikā*, doubled as a panegyric for Emperor Jahangir.
10. Compare Bhati v. 93, Mishra v. 94, "Tana rahīma hai karma basa, mana rākho ohi ōra/Jala mein ulatī nava jyon, khainchata guna ke jora" and Bhati v. 248, "Rāma na jāte harina sanga, sīya na rāvana sātha/jo rahīma bhāvī katahun, hota āpane hātha."
11. *Bhagavad Gītā* 2.48, "Karmanyevādhikāraste mā phaleṣu kadācana/mā karmaphalaheturbhūr mā te saṅgo' stvakarmanī," cited in Bhati, 132.
12. On the *nagarvarnan*, see A.K. Ramanujan, "Toward an Anthology of Indian City Images," in *Urban India: Society, Space, and Image*, ed. Richard G. Fox (Durham: Duke University, 1970), 224–44. On the Persian *shahrāshūb*, see Sunil Sharma, "'If There Is a Paradise on Earth, It Is Here': Urban Ethnography in Indo-Persian Poetic and Historical Texts," in *Forms of Knowledge in Early Modern Asia: Explorations in the Intellectual History of India and Tibet, 1500–1800*, ed. Sheldon Pollock (Durham: Duke University Press, 2011), 240–56.
13. With his use of the word *chhātī*, Rahim may also have intended a racier meaning: breasts.
14. Bhati takes *pek* as *pherīwālā*, but it could also perhaps be a derivative of "pekh", to see.
15. In Indian poetry, eyebrow bows shoot arrow glances.
16. Bhati, v. 61.
17. Aditya Behl and Simon Weightman, "Introduction," in *Madhumālatī: An Indian Sufi Romance* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), xi–xlvi.
18. Shantanu Phukan, trans., "Through a Persian Prism: Hindi and Padmavat in the Mughal Imagination," Ph.D. diss. (Dept. of South Asian Languages and Civilizations: University of Chicago, 2000), 1. Compare Bhati, *Dohāvalī*, v. 219, v. 227, v. 225.
19. I am grateful to Shantanu Phukan for first introducing me to this song. A translation of this and other Hindavi songs attributed to Amir Khusrau is in Ruth Vanita and Saleem Kidwai, eds., *Same-sex Love in India: Readings from Literature and History* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 2000), 129.
20. Malik Muhammad Jayasi, *Padmāvat*, ed. Mataprasad Gupta (Allahabad: Sahitya Bhavan, 2006). v. 32.
21. Aditya Behl, *Love's Subtle Magic: an Indian Islamic Literary Tradition, 1379–1545* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2012), 22 and 155–64.
22. Also see Heidi Pauwels, "'The Woman Waylaid at the Well' or *Paṇaghāṭa-līlā*: An Indian Folk Theme Appropriated in Myth and Movies," *Asian Ethnology* 69, 1 (2010):1–33.
23. The expected image is that the bashful village woman carrying the water pot would be taken by surprise, but, along with Bhati, I prefer a reading that emphasizes the male observer's state.
24. See Rupert Snell, "'Barvai' Metre in Tulsidās and Rahīm," in *Studies in South Asian Devotional Literature*, eds. Alan W. Entwistle and Françoise Mallison (New Delhi: Manohar, 1994), 373–405.
25. Compare *Rasamañjarī*, in *Bouquet of Rasa and River of Rasa of Bhanudatta*, trans. Sheldon Pollock (New York: New York University Press and JJC Foundation, 2009), 27, v. 27.
26. *kara* is a genitive form in Avadhi.
27. Compare Mishra, v. 3 and v. 53. Connoisseurs would readily have understood subtle distinctions between, say, a *praudhā*, who is seasoned enough to remain composed, and a *madhyā*, a less experienced woman who artlessly calls out his infidelity, Mishra, v. 52.

28. Nayak Bakshu, *Sahasras*, ed. Premlata Sharma (New Delhi: Sangit Natak Akademi, 1972), Vol. 98.
29. Keshavdas, *Rasikpriyā* 7.5. In *Keshavgranthāvalī*, ed. Vishvanathprasad Mishra. (Allahabad: Hindustani Academy, 1954). Rahim's son Iraj Shah Nawaz Khan and Keshavdas were acquainted, which means Rahim probably knew Keshavdas's authoritative writings on *nāyikās*.
30. Vidya Dehejia discusses these overlaps in *The Body Adorned: Dissolving Boundaries between Sacred and Profane in India's Art* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2009).
31. V. 16, v. 38.
32. V. 63. In v. 108 Rahim invokes both Krishna and Radha with the epithets "Nandkishor" and "Vrishabhānu kumariyā".
33. See *parakīyā khanditā*, v. 55: *I fell in love with him and gave up everything, my house, my well-being, my family. And now I have the misery of being other to him/he is preoccupied with another.*
34. Two paintings on the *abhisārikā* accompany this article; three poetic examples are translated by Snell in this volume.
35. Allison Busch, *Poetry of Kings: The Classical Hindi Literature of Mughal India, South Asia Research* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011), 11–17, 241–47.

