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Re-Naming Oneself:
Miraji and the Politics of Gender

Mɪʀᴀᴊɪ, ᴛʜᴇ ᴘᴇɴ-ɴᴀᴍᴇ of Sana'ullah Dar, is one with which not even many aficionados of modern Urdu poetry are familiar. In fact, unless one is privy to a certain type of knowledge about Urdu poetry, one can entirely misread his name. When I tell people that I'm working on Miraji, and see the initial gestures of recognition, I usually hasten to correct a possible misconception on their part and add that Mira*ji* was a twentieth-century male Urdu poet who died in 1949 and not Mira*bai* the seventeenth-century, ubiquitous female *bʰakta.* Then I tell them the story of "how Miraji got his name." He fell in love with a Bengali woman called Mira Sen, whom he never got to know, and took her name. The three names have begun forming a triad for me, attached to each other like limbs. But it is only when I use or circulate Miraji's name that the other two are called up. I would like to address in this paper the implications of this connection among the three names.

I don't often, but perhaps I should, include the information that just before his death Miraji was translating the poems of Mirabai, which he intended to get published. He had made, as he did for many of his books, his own frontispiece, which read: "Miranjali, The Songs of Mirabai (Hindi, Gujarati and Marwari) Miraji." When I read the frontispiece out loud, the names run together. The oral repetition collapses the distinction between them—Miranjali, Mirabai, Miraji.[1]

Using Miraji's name, then, requires explanatory details. And one of

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[1] I have the only copy of this frontispiece. I am very grateful to Akhtarul Iman for presenting it to me along with copies of much of Miraji's unpublished work. Much of the work on my dissertation would not have been possible without his very valuable assistance.

the purposes of telling his tale is to distinguish between him, a man who had adopted the name of the woman he ostensibly loved, and a woman poet, queen, *b^hakta,* who ostensibly lived around the seventeenth century.

So, what's in a name, an author's name in this case? What does it do? How do people read it or encounter it? What are the ramifications of the name-story that accompanies the name or follows the name around? What is the difference between the two Miras? Is there a difference between the two Miras? Do listeners have different expectations when they use the name of both? What happens when one conflates Mira's name with "her real" gender and allows the other Mira's name to stand apart from "his real" gender? What happens to the Mira whose name is the nodal point of the explanatory story that accompanies Miraji? Therein lies a tale, but before I get to it, let me tell you the other stories that accrue around Miraji's name.

Miraji has been, even by his friends, constructed and then reproduced as a particular type of controversial persona. A generally known description of him, and one which animates narrative after narrative, was articulated by Sa'adat Hasan Manto (d. 1955)—a fiction writer and a self-styled friend of Miraji's—in "Tīn Gōlē" (Three Balls): "Miraji was a disgusting man who exerted the kind of fascination a stinking toilet might."[2] This description is underscored and made normative by a litany of events that become paradigmatic in the production and maintenance of the personality named "Miraji": he threw up at someone's doorstep, throwing up was a game to him called "making an omelet"; he peed regularly out of someone else's window; he scrounged money every evening to fill the bottle he always carried with him with the cheapest liquor available at the local dive.

The production of a personality in Miraji's case, as an isolationist, drunk, dissolute, self-centered, pathologically sexual, morally bankrupt man, unsuccessful both in love and in his work, requires the elision and minimization of other stories that contradict this picture of Miraji. These other stories are then left out as unimportant or relegated to Miraji's historical past, or the early part of his life.[3] One seldom hears the stories of his work-habits or his relationship to his work. For example, he worked assiduously every day from nine to five, if not on a job then on his poetry.

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[2]Manto, "Tīn Gōlē" in Kumār Pāšī, ed., *Mīrājī: Šaxṣiyat aur Fann* (New Delhi: Modern Publishing House, 1981), pp. 31–43.

[3]Aijaz Ahmad, "Mirājī: Šaxṣiyat aur Fan," in *Savērā* 36 (May–June 1966) 5:39.

His papers, which were his only property, were meticulously organized and beautifully written (he was an inveterate list-maker). He published continually in numerous journals, had five books published in the thirty-five years of his life and had five other manuscripts among his papers when he died, two of which were published posthumously. His generosity and capacity for friendship were well documented. He was generous with his money and gave it away as it came in, he was kind, and his friends knew that they mattered a great deal to him and could call on him if they needed him. And finally, one rarely hears about his careful, searching, ferocious intelligence.

As I sifted through the various biographical narratives associated with Miraji, including my own attempts to tell his story, and to explain him, I began to realize that his story was far more complex than I had envisioned. In Miraji's case I was dealing with discursive or linguistic formations, or stories in which he had been represented. The materials I had available to me were the oral and written narratives, including Miraji's letters, in which he had been created as a literary artifact. I had to cope with several competing narratives which depicted him in different contradictory ways. But the many accounts of Miraji that were not my own also pathologized Miraji's complexity or ignored it.[4]

The narratives about Miraji constructed him as an author. Miraji was written and spoken about *because* he was an author. As an author, he is someone whose name is attached to or associated with work, with writing and publishing, as well as with the oral performances of his work. But in Miraji's case, the construction of him as an author was also connected to the representation of him as a certain type of male personality, and to the fashioning of a biography for him that conformed to the personality. Miraji's biography superseded his work. His biographical narrative was imposed on his poetic œuvre, so that his writing came to mirror his biography. In order to make the poetry conform to norms that became standard for him, the poems that did not fit these norms were read as

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[4]I also had to contend with the accounts of many biographers, like Aijaz Ahmad, who wrote his article (cited in the preceding note) when a theory of unified self was firmly entrenched, and therefore appears to view this ability of Miraji's to be read as a series of different unconventional personalities, as a case of "multiple personality disorder," in keeping with Miraji's general pathological tendencies. This process of pathologizing or ignoring certain facets of Miraji's personality carried over into discussions of his work.

anomalies, marginalized in his œuvre and thus read out. Miraji's biography and his work then became templates for one another so that they mutually reinforced each other and kept the other intact.

But Miraji was not an entirely passive object of representation. He participated in the cottage industry to produce himself. His name, which was chosen by him, is one instance of a self-reflexive attempt to reconstruct himself. As a woman's name, the name foregrounded the issue of gender, and made gender one of the important issues around which Miraji's recasting of himself took place. When Miraji took a woman's name he also established his "difference" from a tradition of Urdu poetry in which male poets often took a male "poetic" name. The difference called for a story. The "author" Miraji came to be explained by and associated with a story, and the story became integral to the name of this poet. When Miraji's work was read, it was often read in the context of the name-story.

The name-story is a story of unrequited love—Miraji's for Mira Sen—in which a male lover takes the name of a silent female beloved. The story which is situated in Miraji's Lahore days goes as follows:

When Miraji was working on his matriculation, he saw the woman he called his "nemesis."[5] From this point in the story on, several variations of the tale describe their first encounter.

According to one version, Miraji and a friend, Salim Soz, were sitting on the Punjab University hockey field, when two Bengali women—Mira Sen and Protima Das—walked past them. Miraji fell in love with Mira Sen, stopped studying, and failed his university entrance exams. Mira Sen, meanwhile, joined the F. C. College. One of Miraji's friends, Muhammad Din Farazaq [*sic*], was at the same college. Mira Sen's sitting room was adjacent to Miraji's friend's sitting room so Miraji would visit his friend to catch a glimpse of Mira Sen.[6] Mira Sen's friends called her Miraji, so Miraji adopted that name.

In another version, Miraji saw Mira Sen at Kinniard College, where she frequently met her friends. One of Miraji's friends lived in a house that shared a wall with the college. So, Miraji and his friends would gather at the house, drink and look through a peep-hole in the wall at the girls next door. Miraji, during one of these gazing sessions, noticed Mira

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[5]Akhtarul Iman, in an interview with the present writer (Bombay, June 5, 1988).

[6]Šāhid Aḥmad Dehlvī, "Mīrājī" in Kūmār Pāšī, *op. cit.,* pp. 25–26.

Sen and became infatuated with her. He began to follow her home from college, and continued to follow her till she left Lahore. Miraji managed to talk to Mira Sen just once. He went up to her just as she reached her house, and said, "I have something to say to you." Mira Sen turned to look at him but was completely silent. She remained completely expressionless: she looked neither happy nor upset. Then she turned away from him, and without saying a word walked into her house. Miraji never tried to talk to her again.[7]

In both versions of the story, Mira Sen is an object of love who changes Miraji. In both stories, too, because she is looked at but never speaks, she is a silenced specular object of desire.[8] He sees her, he changes, and then she disappears; what and how she feels is not a part of the narrative.[9]

Both stories, the first tentatively and the second more specifically, place Mira Sen in an enclosed feminine space, a sanctum sanctorum forbidden to Miraji as a male. In the "purdah" society or sexually segregated society of Lahore in the twenties, men's and women's spaces were often separated from each other and most men were not permitted in women's spaces. The "living room" with women in it, in the first story, would not have been accessible to Miraji. Kinniard College was—and still is—a women's college, and most men could not enter its walls. In order to see Mira Sen when she was in either of the two sanctums, Miraji had to be a voyeur, who looked at Mira Sen through a figurative or literal peep-hole.

Male sexuality was associated with voyeurism in a society where most women were "hidden" from the male gaze. In a society in which certain women were "hidden" from men, the only way that men had of establishing a sexual connection with them was through a peep-hole. "The encounter through the peep-hole" became one of the primary modes of expressing sexuality. Since most women in narratives about

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[7]In his papers are found many letters he wrote but never sent.

[8]This is a common theme treated in feminist film theory. For one discussion, see T. de Lauretis, *Technologies of Gender* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press), 1987.

[9]Except for the description of her in Aijaz Ahmad's article on Miraji (cited in note 3, above), she is not specularized—described as a visual object with visual details. Even Ahmad describes her as the antithesis of what he obviously considers an appropriate visual object of desire— "She is dark and not even pretty. One knows this from a photograph from her F.C. College days."

sexuality did not respond in kind, or reverse the peep-hole and look through it at men, they could not participate in the sexual process in the same way as men. They remained desexualized objects of male desire.

A way of gendering and controlling sexuality in stories was by denying women the "rights of the peep-hole." This was a position of power given to men that could be maintained only because it was kept unidirectional. It also required along with the unidirectional gaze of men, hidden women who could not look back. If women did look back, they could potentially take away the male position of power.

In the second story, Miraji, by pursuing Mira Sen in a space they both shared in which they could look at each other, abrogated or nullified his position of sexual power. He made himself vulnerable to her "gaze." By speaking to her just before she entered her enclosed space or house, he made her look at him before she disappeared into a space where he had no access to her at all. But the only thing he said to her was that he wanted to say something, so he never actually made a more than a superficial connection with her. Although she turned to look at him, her response was a non-response, expressionless and silent. In turning away from Miraji, Mira Sen refused to participate in the game Miraji was playing with her. So although the story that we encounter as listeners or readers is Miraji's story about *his* love for her, Mira Sen, by turning away from him, denuded him at that moment in the story of his power over her. But at the same time, because she disappeared after their encounter, she became an empty space, a floating name, that Miraji could occupy or use with impunity. This is precisely what happened, because the story remained Miraji's name-story, and the only part Mira Sen came to play in it was as the silent/silenced beloved whose name was taken from her.

Miraji's name-story, and the way it fits into other narratives about him, puts gender in its place. He was a man, the story goes, who needed a silenced woman to get a woman's name. Narrative after narrative that I read or heard corroborates Miraji's role as a male, in direct repudiation of his female name. Miraji is depicted as a marginalized or unconventional *male* character. When Miraji was described by biographers, the descriptions of his life fit two different "life-styles" that are masculine "modes of social dissent."[10] Both "life-styles"—that of a poet-lover and of a male ascetic—are acceptable, even canonical, rejections of the *grihasta*

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[10]See V. T. Oldenburg, "Lifestyle as Resistance: The Case of the Courtesans of Lucknow," in *Feminist Studies* 16:2 (Summer 1990).

or male householder, a married breadwinner attached to an extended or nuclear family. Each appears in different narrative traditions. One, that of the drunken, dissolute poet-lover, suffering eternally from the pangs of unrequited love, who because of his passion ruptures the boundaries of convention, comes from the universe of Urdu literary discourse. The other, the poverty-stricken, unattached itinerant ascetic, is more commonly encountered in stories associated with a Sanskrit-Hindi story tradition. The norms of both the ascetic and poet-lover's lifestyles stand in opposition to those established by and subsumed under the reinforcement of the four-fold division of life for men, the central and most crucial one being that of a *grihasta* or householder.[11] The ascetic and poet-lover both slip out from under the guidelines predicated for the *grihasta* by "denying the core prescriptions that create the identifications for the male—sexuality, lineage and property ownership."[12]

As I read him, and read about him, I found that I wanted to rewrite Miraji's story and reorganize his corpus to include narratives that complicated the male author, poet, lover, ascetic, pictures of him that I have been describing above. I wanted to rewrite him as a series of personalities that shifted with context and that conformed to or played a range of roles that occasionally overlapped and every so often came into conflict with each other.[13] I have tried to do this in the first chapter of my dissertation, by describing him as a man who ranged from unconventional to conventional—insane, ascetic, drunk, sexual, to pedantic, celibate, careful, and intelligent.[14] I also described him as someone who sometimes indulged in bouts of self-hatred, and sometimes cared immensely about himself and his primary interest—his creative work. I do not in the process of writing my story want to replace other

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[11]The four-fold division of life for men includes the student, householder, forest-dweller and renunciant. For a discussion of the history of them see the article by Romila Thapar "The householder and the renouncer," in T.N. Madan, ed., *Way of Life, King, Householder, Renouncer: Essays in Honour of Louis Dumont* (New Delhi: Vikas Publishing House Pvt. Ltd., 1982), pp. 273–298.

[12]Oldenburg, *op. cit.,* p. 23.

[13]Stanley Fish discusses in great detail his own multiple role playing and the conflicts inherent in this process in his book *Doing What Comes Naturally* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1989), p. 30.

[14]I am currently completing a dissertation on Miraji from Columbia University, which discusses his life and work. It is titled "Miraji: A Liminal Figure in Urdu Poetry."

representations of Miraji with my own, but would like to add another picture to the pile of photographs.

I would like to return to the story of Miraji's name with which I started this paper, and add that story, too, to the pile. I would like to add another Mira story to the other stories of "how Miraji got his name." Instead of attempting to separate Miraji and Mirabai, if I allow myself to run their names together, as Miraji does in the frontispiece of his work on her, could Miraji be thought of as a twentieth-century Mirabai? Then the name Miraji and his biography intersect with Mirabai's, and Miraji's stories are intertextual with Mirabai's. This move reminds us, as readers of a renegade poet like Miraji, of the necessity of reinserting gender as a predominant issue into the biographical accounts of him. The intersection of his story with Mirabai's makes him doubly unconventional; now instead of describing him as an unconventional man, we can argue that *he* was living as an even more unconventional woman.[15]

Mira's hagiography tells of a queen who for the love of her Lord, the god Krishna, repudiates her family and husband and travels around with a group of itinerant musicians. In variants of the story she either resists her family actively and behaves like a besotted *bʰakta* while her husband is alive, or she leaves the fold after she is widowed, which is a less controversial choice for her to make. In either case, Mira is depicted as an ascetic who was also a poet-lover. Miraji's stories then, rather than just conforming to male paradigms for the poet-lover, could be read as a further contribution to the hagiography of the woman *bʰakta,* whose name he had taken as his own.

This use of Mira's name and hagiography as a paradigm was consonant with the way both have been used to add to Mira's oeuvre. Some of the recent work on Mirabai makes it clear that for her, even more than for her male mystic-poet counterparts, her name and the hagiography that was associated with it was a cloak that could be assumed, and was assumed, by people composing as Mira. One could compose as Mira, and in doing so could adopt her name, her particular hagiography and a style of composition. Poems ostensibly by Mira would

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[15]Miraji's prose pieces on other poets reflect his own interests. Miraji's discussions of the poets he writes about, Baudelaire and Mallarmé for example, diverge from other accounts of them and so look strange to anyone who has read them but does not know Miraji.

fill in lacunae in the hagiography, and transform or explain knotty stories associated with her. So Mira's corpus and hagiography molded each other over time. Mira's corpus and story, since it was not collected in the appropriate annals of *bʰakti* literature and biography until the eighteenth century, two hundred years after her supposed life, was freely available to people who wanted to add to it.[16]

One important difference, however, between the use of Mira's name to expand Mira's corpus and Miraji's use of it, is that Miraji did not entirely become a female Mira. Under the rubric of the name he still retained an identity that kept, among other things, his gender. He also had another Mira to add to his name, a Mira who unlike the two poets, only existed as a character in another person's story.

I would like to close with other ramifications of adding Mirabai to the women who were "responsible" for re-naming Miraji, and thus placing him in a lineage of women poets. This act not only transforms the description of Miraji as an author, but also has profound effects on the way his poetry is read.

Readers like Aijaz Ahmad—who have read him as a male poet who merely specularizes the women in his poetry, creating women as objects completely subservient to a prurient male gaze and male desire—miss one of the important tenets that Miraji subscribed to as a poet. He wanted to write poetry in women's voices, as a woman.

There are certainly masculinized spaces in Miraji's poetry, like those described by Aijaz Ahmad, in which women function as stereotypical sexual objects. One example is an early poem "Dēvdāsī aur Pujārī" (The Devadasi and the Priest). The kind of reader who restricts his or her reading of Miraji to this sort of poem, however, elides poems that I will discuss below, in which masculinized and feminized spaces operate quite differently. I will provide below three quick examples of an alternative way to view feminized spaces in Miraji's poetry. In the poems "Ras kī Anōkʰī Lahrēṅ" (Rare Waves of Passion) and "Taḥrīk" (Emotion), Miraji uses a powerful female voice.

"Rare Waves of Passion" is a reverie in a female protagonist's voice. It explores female desire, including the desire to be free to desire, and rewrites and dissolves the female body in metaphoric correspondences

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[16]For an account of Mirabai that addresses this point, see J.S. Hawley and M. Jergensmeyer, eds., *Songs of the Saints of India* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1988).

with nature. Another poem that could be more fruitfully read as written in a feminine voice is "Emotion." The voice in "Emotion" is not specifically gendered, but its tropes and language of emotions permit it to be read alongside poems attributed to Mirabai, and it could be read as a twentieth-century free verse addition to Mira's corpus.

And finally, in yet other poems like "Ābgīnē kē us Pār kī ēk Šām" (A Night on the Far Side of the Wine Glass), where Miraji has both masculine and feminine protagonists and voices, Miraji does not unknowingly succumb to the politics of gendered power in poetry. He writes from a self-reflexive awareness of the arrangement of gender in literary or poetic space. In "A Night on the Far Side of the Wine Glass," although the woman's voice is, at the end of the poem, reappropriated by the male voice, it is a powerful voice, separate from the other—masculine—voice in the poem. It is also a voice that is listened to, by both the poet Miraji and the male protagonist in the poem.

To close: In this paper I have discussed and analyzed the ways in which Miraji is represented in most biographies of him. I have also attempted to add my own series of representations to the extant ones, in order to allow him to be read in a less constraining fashion than he has been in other biographies. By reasserting and bringing to the fore the gender his name seems to imply that he possesses, I would like to expand the gendered options open to him as a poet and thus open to readers of his poetry when they read him.