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Murad's travels: courtesanly mobility, honour, and defiance in late eighteenth-century Multan

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Abstract

This article seeks out the spaces and strategies through which hereditary women performers enacted mobility and articulated power in early modern South Asia. The fraught relationship between a Multan-based courtesan, Murad Bakhsh, and a Durrani aristocrat of Dera Ghazi Khan, Muhammad Raza Khan Pupalza'i, is at the heart of Raza's Persian memoir titled *Jaur-o-Jafā*, which is written in a distinctive literary style and lavishly illustrated with several miniature paintings. While overtly about the romantic entanglements of Murad and Raza, the story offers us a window into the cultural history of south-western Punjab during the political tumult of the late eighteenth century. It features a range of characters, including Multan's last Durrani ruler, Muzaffar Khan (1775–1818), and a vast retinue of courtiers, musicians, and messengers embroiled in Raza and Murad's love–hate story. The article focuses on the many journeys Murad took during her life, highlighting her 'courtesanly mobility'. Written by her paramour-turned-enemy, we read *Jaur-o-Jafā* against the grain to amplify the voice of Murad Bakhsh in order to highlight the arc of her mobility, resistance, and agency in defying the limits of both patriarchal honour and the determining social, legal, and political positionalities of women in the region.

Keywords: 'courtesanly mobility'; Durrani empire; law; music; south-west Punjab

Introduction

The eighteenth century saw the rise of powerful women as regents, advisers, and independent power brokers across North India and the Deccan. Highlighting figures such as Lal Kunwar, Qudsiya Begum, and Mah Laqa Ba'i 'Chanda' among others, Urvashi Dalal argues that this era uniquely foregrounded a femininity less bound by patriarchal constraints than ever before in South Asia.¹ Recent work, notably Jennifer Howes' study of Roshni Begum and Tipu Sultan's harem, also foregrounds the political agency of performing women.² This ascendancy and stark visibility of young, sexually powerful (as opposed to older, desexualised) performing women in the public realm endured into the early nineteenth century, albeit with regional variations.

¹ U. Dalal, 'Femininity, state and cultural space in eighteenth-century India', *Medieval History Journal* 18.1 (2015), pp. 120–165.

² J. Howes, 'Tipu Sultan's female entourage under East India Company rule', *Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society* 31.4 (2021), pp. 855–874.

Scholars have covered Delhi, Awadh, Lucknow, Kanpur, and Hyderabad: heartlands of the high Indo-Muslim literary and cultural traditions inhabited by elite courtesans or *tawa'if*.³ Beyond these, Richard Williams has analysed the nineteenth-century worlds of courtesans at Wajid Ali Shah's 'scattered court' in Matiyaburj in Bengal, while Radha Kapuria has demonstrated the power of elite *tawa'ifs* at Sikh ruler Ranjit Singh's early nineteenth-century Lahore durbar, especially Bibi Moran and Gul Begam, his two Muslim courtesan wives.⁴ For the same period, Anshu Malhotra has explored the sacred and sensual life-worlds of the common *kañjiri* (prostitute) Piro, whose eloquent poetry reflects her life and her devotion for her guru, Gulab Das.⁵

However, in the context of Punjab, studies on courtesans have exclusively focused on Lahore and Amritsar: cities deemed cultural centres of the region. Equally important cities in western Punjab and beyond—like Multan, Bahawalpur, and Dera Ghazi Khan—have received short shrift in the region's cultural histories and in histories of South Asian performing women. This is surprising for a cultural centre like Multan, west Punjab's oldest city, with origins in the ancient period. While in this article we focus on the case study of Murad Bakhsh, a powerful courtesan from the late eighteenth–early nineteenth centuries, the record reveals a more deeply embedded courtesan tradition in south-west Punjab.⁶ Multan's *Bazar-e-Husn* or courtesan's quarters—also termed the 'Haram Gate' of the walled city—rivals old Lahore's better-known Hira Mandi and purportedly goes back several centuries.⁷ Even today, an all-female assembly accompanies the 'Abdullahwala *ta'ziya* of Haram Gate during Muharram.⁸

Given this continuing impress of Multan's courtesan past on its present, the scarcity of historical research on the theme is noteworthy but perhaps unsurprising on account of the centuries-old moral censure reserved for this group. The Persian text *Jaur-o-Jafā* (Cruelty and spite in love, 1806)⁹ offers a unique window into the world of female performers in

³ Shweta Sachdeva Jha, 'In Search of the *Tawa'if* in History: Courtesans, Nautch Girls and Celebrity Entertainers in India, 1720s–1920s' (unpublished PhD thesis, School of Oriental and African Studies, University of London, 2008); the writings of Katherine Butler Schofield (née Brown), especially her recent monograph, *Music and Musicians in Late Mughal India: Histories of the Ephemeral, 1748–1858* (Cambridge, 2024); K. Leonard, 'Political players: courtesans of Hyderabad', *Indian Economic and Social History Review* 50.4 (2013), pp. 423–448; and T. Burman, 'From Pari Khanas to Lal Bazaars and further away: female performers in nineteenth century Awadh', *Pakistan Journal of Women's Studies: 'Ālam-e-Niswān* 28.1 (2021), pp. 1–20. On Hyderabad and Mah Laqa Ba'i 'Chāñdā' in particular, see S. Kugle, *When Sun Meets Moon: Gender, Eros, and Ecstasy in Urdu Poetry* (Chapel Hill, NC, 2016), pp. 141–253.

⁴ R. D. Williams, *The Scattered Court: Hindustani Music in Colonial Bengal* (Chicago, 2023); R. Kapuria, *Music in Colonial Punjab: Courtesans, Bards, and Connoisseurs* (Oxford, 2023), pp. 37–103.

⁵ A. Malhotra, *Piro and the Gulabdis: Gender, Sect, and Society in Punjab* (Oxford, 2017).

⁶ E.g., the seventh-century traveller Hsüen Tsang [Xuanzang] noted numerous female musicians at Multan's famous Sun Temple, see M. Arole, 'The institution of *devadasis* in literature and archaeology', *Bulletin of the Deccan College Post-Graduate and Research Institute* 50 (1990), p. 138; P. Darshini, 'Status of the *ganikas* in the Gupta period: change or continuity?', *Proceedings of the Indian History Congress* 64 (2003), p. 170, and R. Iftikhar, 'Colonial desire, orient beauty: army and prostitution in British India', *Journal of the Research Society of Pakistan* 55.1 (2018), p. 270.

⁷ S. Ahmed, 'The nightingales of Multan', *Dawn*, 4 May 2017; see also the oral histories in N. Jabbar, 'Symbology and subaltern resistance in Hira Mandi Mohalla', *Interventions* 13.1 (2011), p. 109. The major travelogues on Multan from the medieval period (of Ibn Battuta, F. Bernier, and F. Pelsaert) do not refer to Multan's courtesan quarters.

⁸ T. Lyons, 'Some historic *ta'ziyas* of Multan', in *People of the Prophet's House: Artistic and Ritual Expressions of Shi'i Islam*, (ed.) F. Suleman (London, 2015), pp. 227–228. A *ta'ziya* is a sacred portable replica of the shrine of Imam Hussain, a symbol of mourning used in Muharram processions across South Asia.

⁹ The main text of the manuscript has named itself only once, as *جورجفا* (*Jaur-Jafā* / *Jaur-e-Jafā*), an idiom which changes the usual, idiomatic valence of the phrase *Jaur-o-Jafā* that means 'cruelty and oppression'. For the purposes of this article, therefore, we have taken its name from the label offered by Hamilton's scribe, which is *Mašnavī Jaur-o-Jafā*. Despite the inaccuracy of the label *Mašnavī* (a term for the Persian-derived poetic genre composed of extended narrative poems in rhyming couplets), the title *Jaur-o-Jafā* matches the idiom commonly used in Persian

prominent south-western Punjabi cities like Multan, Dera Ghazi Khan, and Bahawalpur.¹⁰ Primarily a love-hate story between a Durrani aristocrat from Dera Ghazi Khan called Muhammad Raza Khan, and the Multan-based courtesan Murad Bakhsh, *Jaur-o-Jafā* also reveals regional specificities of cultural and gendered codes that marked the social lives of nobility and elite performers in south-western Punjab in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. Before we turn to the text, a brief account of the region's political history is in order.

South-west Punjab in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth century

Jaur-o-Jafā brings to the fore notable aspects of the social and local histories of south-west Punjab and illustrates Neelam Khoja's wider point about resituating the history of eighteenth-century Punjab from the lens of 'Iranian and Afghan intermittent power', by including 'legitimate Afghan claims to Punjab' in our accounts.¹¹ Drawing on Khoja's insights, we emphasise the importance of the Afghan presence to Punjab's cultural memory and its gender and social histories. What makes *Jaur-o-Jafā* novel is how a love-hate story also becomes the site for displaying the shifting legal and social dynamics in the turbulent political milieu of late eighteenth-/early nineteenth-century Multan.

Durrani rule in this region is best captured by an Afghan legend: before founding his empire, Ahmed Shah Durrani (1722–1773) borrowed bags of wheat from Jahan Khan Pupalza'i (d.1776), a prominent Durrani chief, joking that he would repay a thousand bags for each one. When Ahmed Shah founded his empire in 1747, he promptly repaid Jahan Khan, making the 'loan anecdote' legendary among Pashtuns. Jahan Khan later led key campaigns, including the 1761 Battle of Panipat, and was given honorific titles including Mīr Bizan (the gallant lord) and Khān-e-Khanānā (the Khan of Khans).¹² At the time, Dera Ghazi Khan was ruled by Nadir Shah's governor Ghulam Shah Ṣamṣām-ud-Daulah, who was later deposed by the Durrani. Ahmed Shah Durrani then appointed Jahan Khan as governor of Sindh, Multan, and Dera Ghazi Khan.¹³ Jahan Khan's tribe helped build the Durrani empire, securing future privilege—especially for his brother Zaman Khan Pupalza'i (d. 1776), who became governor of Dera Ghazi Khan when Ahmed Shah's son Timur Shah (1772–1793) took the Kabul throne in 1772.¹⁴ The author of *Jaur-o-Jafā*, Raza Khan, identifies himself as Zaman Khan Pupalza'i's son.¹⁵

Ahmed Shah Durrani's empire (1747–1772) was rooted in the ethnic supremacy of his own tribal confederation, and his rule was known for its heavy reliance on tributes and

and Urdu poetry and prose. Our decision to use *Jaur-o-Jafā* is further justified because the author/scribe of the main text has missed out the ڄ (wāo) letter in some compound words in other places too, where it was necessary.

¹⁰ Barring Murad Bakhsh, there is no mention in the text of Raza's existing harem of concubines or wives.

¹¹ N. Khoja, 'Sovereignty, Space, and Identity: The Politics of Power in Eighteenth Century Punjab', (unpublished PhD Thesis, Harvard University, 2018), p. iii; and N. Khoja, 'Immodest flirt or competent governor: Translating gender in colonial and post-colonial South Asian historiography', *Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society* 33.2 (2023), pp. 369–387.

¹² G. P. Tate, *The Kingdom of Afghanistan: A Historical Sketch* (Bombay, 1911), pp. 69, 77; Fayz Muhammad Katib Hazarah, *The History of Afghanistan: Fayz Muhammad Kaatib Hazaarah's Sirāj-at-Tawārīkh*, (trans.) R. D. McChesney and Mohammad Mehdi Khorrami (Leiden, 2013), pp. 10, 11.

¹³ 'Aziz-ud-Din Vakili Pūpalza'i, *Timūr Shāh Durrānī* (Kabul, 1967), vol. ii, pp. 626–629.

¹⁴ An administrator of Dera Ghazi Khan appointed by Timur Shah, Zaman Khan was one of the 14 exalted members of his imperial council. He also served as an administrator of Kashmir. He died in Kandahar in 1787 and was buried there next to his brother Jahan Khan. Munshī Daulat Rā'e, *Mur'āt-e-Daulat-e-Abbāsia* [Accounts from the Abbasia kingdom] (Delhi, circa 1850), p. 223; see also Vakili, *Timūr Shāh Durrānī*, vol. ii, pp. 373, 417, 462, 666, and 680.

¹⁵ Muhammad Raza Khan, *Jaur-o-Jafā* (1806), British Library catalogue number, MSS Or. 199, fol. 3v.

bounty from conquered areas. While some aristocratic women were allowed to participate in political affairs, this era is largely remembered for its regressive gender policies, including denying women property inheritance, allowing blood money for their killing, and using them as objects to broker peace between rival groups¹⁶—themes also reflected in *Jaur-o-Jafā*. This broader context helps lay the foundation for our feminist re-reading of this hybrid biographical-cum-literary narrative which echoes the enduring literary bias against women in the Persianate literature of the period. In offering such an interpretation of *qissas* in Punjab from this time period, our methodological stance also borrows from the re-readings of Punjabi and Persian *qissas* employed by scholars like Christopher Shackle, Anne Murphy, and Jeevan Deol, and their modern contextualisation of these texts within larger historical imaginaries of representation and negotiation.¹⁷

Contextualising *Jaur-o-Jafā*

The story of Murad Bakhsh reaches us through the 1806–1807 Persian manuscript *Jaur-o-Jafā*, written in Nasta’liq and set in Dera Ghazi Khan and Multan (southern Punjab, modern-day Pakistan). In 1850, an Amritsar shopkeeper sold it for wheat and cash to a buyer in Hargobindpura. It was later acquired by Colonel George William Hamilton (1807–1868), a British administrator in Delhi and Multan, known for commissioning works like *Hālāt-e-Multān* (a history of Multan) and *Risālah dar ‘Ilm-e-Mausiqī* (a copy of an Indic musical text).¹⁸ Hamilton’s interest in history and music aligned with his acquisition of *Jaur-o-Jafā* in the mid–late nineteenth century. Posted to Multan in 1849, he became commissioner in 1851. After his death, his collection was sold to various buyers, including the British Museum. The manuscript is now housed in the British Library.

Comprising 80 folios, the text is written in continuous prose, interspersed with excerpts from popular Persian poetry classics, contemporary poets, and possibly some original compositions. The quoted poetry likely reflects oral renditions drawn from musical and poetic gatherings, since it differs from more authoritative published versions.¹⁹ The story is set during the period spanning the reigns of Timur Shah Durrani (1772–1793) and his son Shah Shuja’ Durrani (1803–1809). Although constrained by Raza Khan’s one-sided perspective and offering only minimal detail on individuals like Murad’s servants and fellow musicians, *Jaur-o-Jafā* realistically portrays more notable mid eighteenth-century figures like Nawab Muzaffar Khan Saddoza’i, the ruler of Multan (1775–1818); Nawab Bahawal Khan II, the ruler of Bahawalpur (1772–1809); ‘Alam Khan, the dissident governor of Dera Ghazi Khan (ousted 1803); and ‘Ata Muhammad Nurza’i, the Durrani governor of Dera Ghazi Khan (ascended 1803). Lesser-known individuals such as Munshi Suba Rai and Amin Khan

¹⁶ Din Muhammad Javed, *Zan dar tārikh-i-Afghanistan* [Women through the history of Afghanistan] (Kabul, 2003), vol. i, p. 68.

¹⁷ C. Shackle, ‘Between scripture and romance: the Yusuf-Zulaikha story in Panjabi’, *South Asia Research* 15.2 (1995), pp. 153–188; A. Murphy, *The Materiality of the Past: History and Representation in the Sikh Tradition* (New York, 2012); and J. Deol, ‘Love and Mysticism in the Punjabi Qissas of the Seventeenth and Eighteenth Centuries’ (MPhil thesis, School of Oriental and African Studies, University of London, 1996).

¹⁸ We thank Jake Benson and Christopher Bahl for this information. J. Bensen and C. Bahl, ‘Colonel George Hamilton and his networks: collector, commissioner and connoisseur of Arabic and Persian manuscripts in nineteenth-century South Asia’ (working paper, 2025).

¹⁹ Within the manuscript, more than 200 couplets and poetic excerpts are quoted, among which many poets’ names are explicitly mentioned in 17 places. Many of these quotations occur in altered forms. Particularly noteworthy are several verses that articulate the author’s affection for Multan and Dera Ghazi Khan, which seem to be original compositions not yet located in other contemporary sources.

Saddoza'i—figuring in the text as either allies or adversaries of Raza Khan—were also recognised by contemporary historians.²⁰

Although secondary sources confirm the many people and events featured in the story, Raza Khan's own historical existence remains uncertain. Raza Khan refers to the poet Mir Hotak Khan Afghan, one of the leading literary and intellectual figures of the late eighteenth century during Timur Shah's reign, as his brother.²¹ According to the twentieth-century Durrani historian Aziz-ud-Din Vakili Pupalza'i (henceforth Vakili), Hotak had three brothers: Allahyar, Ibrahim, and Amin.²² Raza Khan also referred to Saifullah Khan of Multan as his elder brother, whose word outweighed his own in the conflict with Murad Bakhsh.²³ Were Raza and Saifullah actually Hotak Khan's stepbrothers, living at a distance from Kandahar and Kabul? This could explain why a credible source like Vakili omits their names when listing Zaman Khan's children. Some of Hotak's couplets are also quoted in *Jaur-o-Jafā*, and this family context of literary production could be one of Raza Khan's motivations for composing a text as ambitious as this in style, form, and content.

Overall, we posit that *Jaur-o-Jafā* is a conflated biography, since, quite apart from recounting the love-hate story at its core, it offers an unparalleled glimpse into the quotidian and political life of late eighteenth-century south-west Punjab. As a memoir focused on specific locales such as Multan, Dera Ghazi Khan, and Bahawalpur, *Jaur-o-Jafā* also embodies what Zahra Shah calls the 'literary-topographical writing' that served as a key mode for self-fashioning in the Persian literary culture of the Punjab at this time.²⁴ It combines the classical Persian *qissa* narrative style with the straightforward prose of *wāqī'āt* court chronicles: the *qissa* style of writing interacting with the more banal description of actual historical events. The literary style of *Jaur-o-Jafā* differs from that of fictional narratives known to its own time. Instead, its features align more with common eighteenth-century Persian historiography, exemplifying what Christine Noelle-Karimi has described as 'the dramaturgy created by the combination of prose, rhymed prose and poetry'.²⁵ In this, it also resembles another important contemporaneous eighteenth-century composition in Persian, Hasan Shah's 1790 manuscript *Afsanā-e-Ra'ngīn* or *Qissa-e-Ra'ngīn* (The multicoloured story), which is set in Kanpur in the Indo-Gangetic plains, and recounts his love story with the Kashmiri courtesan Khanum Jan.²⁶

²⁰ Munshi Suba Rai was a prominent courtier in Bahawalpur and a close ally of Raza Khan. As a diplomat, he represented the Bahawalpur Nawab during King Shuja' Durrani's (1803–1809) visit to Rajanpur, accompanying the historian Daulat Rai. He was also known to Ranjit Singh's historian, Sohan Lal Suri, through diplomatic meetings. Rāe, *Mur'āt*, p. 331; Sohan Lal Sūrī, *Umdat-ut-Tawārikh* (Lahore, 1888), vol. ii, pp. 185–186; also see Shahamet ali, *History of Bahawalpur* (London, 1848), p. 118. The Multani nobleman Amin Khan Saddozai played an active role during Murad Bakhsh's trial at the court of the nawab of Multan. Later, during the Sikh siege of Multan in 1818, he was among the four delegates who negotiated on behalf of the Multanis with the besieging *Jama'dar* (junior military officer) of Sikh prince Kharak Singh. Sūrī, *Umdat*, p. 217.

²¹ *Jaur-o-Jafā*, fol. 7r. Hotak, a prolific Dari/Persian poet, was also known for compiling the *diwan* of Mirza Bedil Dehlvi. Vakili, *Timūr Shāh Durrānī*, vol. ii, pp. 462–464. See also 'Aziz-ud-Din Vakili Pūpalza'ī, *Durra-tu-Zamān fī Tārikh-e-Shāh Zamān* [Jewel of the time, on the history of King Zaman] (Kabul, 1915), pp. 294, 436; and 'Aziz-ud-Din Vakili Pūpalza'ī, *Dār-ul-Qaza dar Afghānistān* [Judiciary in Afghanistan] (Kabul, 1949), p. 230.

²² Vakili, *Timūr Shāh Durrānī*, vol. ii, pp. 666–668.

²³ *Jaur-o-Jafā*, fols. 75r–78v.

²⁴ Z. Shah, 'Genre, place, and the Persian literary imagination in the Punjab, ca. 1650–1750', *Journal of Asian Studies* 83.4 (2024), pp. 980–1000.

²⁵ C. Noelle-Karimi, 'Afghan politics and the Indo-Persian literary realm: the Durrani rulers and their portrayal in eighteenth-century historiography', in *Afghan History Through Afghan Eyes*, (ed.) Nile Green (Oxford, 2016), p. 65.

²⁶ H. Shah. *Qissa-e-Ra'ngīn* (1790). This manuscript was translated into Urdu in 1899 by Munshi Sajjad Husain as *Nashtar* (The surgeon's knife—a reference to the torment of the lovers' separation), which in turn was then translated and adapted into English by Qurratulain Hyder as *The Nautch Girl: A Novel* (New Delhi, 1992). See the book review of Hyder's translation by C. M. Naim in *Edebiyat* 5.2 (1994), pp. 350–354; and by V. Lal, 'The courtesan and the Indian

Equally, though, the essential arc of the plot in *Jaur-o-Jafā* relies on older Persianate tropes: whether the cautionary ‘courtesan tale’ found in the Mughal historical chronicles explored by Katherine Schofield,²⁷ or a range of text-genres featuring the recalcitrant, wily, cunning, and deceitful woman who must be subdued by a man, as studied by Pegah Shahbaz.²⁸ The negativity and suspicion heaped on the courtesan in these genres also acts as a framing device for *Jaur-o-Jafā*, with Raza Khan remarking early on: ‘I named this text *Jaur-e-Jafā* as a caution to those who follow the path of virtue: never trust the words of the ill-born, even if they swear by their firmest faith.’²⁹ Here, the ascription of the courtesan Murad Bakhsh as ‘ill-born’ recalls the usual censure reserved towards communities of hereditary performers in South Asia.³⁰

Jaur-o-Jafā also exemplifies the abiding trope of what Margaret Mills terms ‘Afghano-Persian trickster women’ abundant in the *kayd-un-nisā* (Arabic: ‘deceit/trickery of women’)/*makr-e-zan* (Persian: ‘wiles of women’) folk-tales.³¹ Traditionally, this genre has been established through the story of the Prophet Yusuf and Zulaikha, prevalent across various Islamic texts and traditions, most popular in Persia and also in Punjab.³² The 28th verse of Sūrah Yūsuf, chapter 12 of the Qur’an, encapsulates these words uttered by Yusuf to Zulaikha, which are also quoted early on by Raza Khan: ‘*Inna Kayd-e-Kunna ‘Azīmun*’ (your trickery is great indeed).³³ Though not as straightforward as the Yusuf–Zulaikha story or the Afghan folk-tales studied by Mills, *Jaur-o-Jafā* follows the arc of seduction–temptation–resistance–rejection–vengeance, which Afsaneh Najmabadi has identified as the core plot of these ‘wiles-of-women’ tales.³⁴

Finally, in recounting the relationship between an Afghan nobleman and a Multani courtesan, *Jaur-o-Jafā* also recalls the mapping of geographical boundaries onto gendered relations in early modern Persianate literature studied by Sunil Sharma, especially the threat posed by the ‘temptress’ Indian woman in Persian Safavid accounts. As he notes, in early modern Safavid literature, ‘the Hindu [or Hindustani] woman symbolized the love–hate relationship of the Safavids with India: for an extended period of time she was the faithful beloved, then oftentimes she showed a more alluring and dangerous side’.³⁵

novel’, *Indian Literature* 38.5 (1995), pp. 164–70. The connections between *Qissa-e-Raṅgīn* and *Jaur-o-Jafā* need further research.

²⁷ K. B. Schofield, ‘The courtesan tale: female musicians and dancers in Mughal historical chronicles, c. 1556–1748’, *Gender and History* 24.1 (2012), pp. 150–171.

²⁸ P. Shahbaz, ‘Symbolic feminine role in Indo-Persian narratives’, in *2nd ENN Conference Kolding 2011 ‘Working the Stories: Narrative as a Meeting Place for Theory, Analysis and Practice’*, March 2011; and P. Shahbaz, ‘Women in the realm of “true men”: a study of gender in Persian devotional literature of South Asia’, in *Literature, Social Movements and Gender Issues in South Asia*, FINDAS The Center for South Asian Studies—Tokyo University of Foreign Studies (March 2021), pp. 2–21.

²⁹ *Jaur-o-Jafā*, fol. 3r.

³⁰ K. Butler Brown, ‘The social liminality of musicians: case studies from Mughal India and beyond’, *Twentieth-Century Music* 3.1 (2007), pp. 13–49.

³¹ M. A. Mills, ‘Afghano-Persian trickster women definitions, liminalities, and gender’, *Marvels and Tales* 32.1 (2018), pp. 33–58.

³² G. K. Merguerian and A. Najmabadi, ‘Zulaykha and Yusuf: whose “best story”?’ *International Journal of Middle East Studies* 29.4 (1997), pp. 485–508. On the Yusuf–Zulaikha story in Punjabi *qissas*, see Shackle, ‘Between scripture and romance’, pp. 153–188.

³³ *Jaur-o-Jafā*, fol. 5v.

³⁴ A. Najmabadi, ‘Reading—and enjoying—“wiles of women” stories as a feminist’, *Iranian Studies* 32.2 (1999), p. 213.

³⁵ S. Sharma, *Mughal Arcadia: Persian Literature in an Indian Court* (Cambridge, MA, 2017), pp. 185–186. In a later presentation, Sharma extends this observation: ‘Persian poets evinced a particular fascination for the Indian, specifically Hindu, woman who possessed the best qualities of a lover ... in the latter half of the seventeenth century, the Indian woman had taken on a more ambivalent role, not just as a devoted lover but also a temptress and courtesan who posed a potential threat to the moral values of the Persian male’ (emphasis added). See

Therefore, in our analytical reading, *Jaur-o-Jafā* emerges as both a conflated biography packed with details of historical events and figures, and a *qissa* narrative in the typology of the trickster lover/gold-digger/‘wiles of women’ paradigm—plotted upon the social divide between a Durrani nobleman and a local Multani courtesan.

Beyond the textual, *Jaur-o-Jafā* also contains 36 lavishly illustrated miniature paintings of events narrated in the story. Bearing inimitable compositions of the elements, colours, perspectives, and figurative treatments, these paintings reveal a confluence of Pahari style and sub-Mughal miniature styles.³⁶ In this regard, it temporally coincides with, and most closely resembles, the Punjab plains miniature painting style that developed during Sikh rule (1799–1849), which R. P. Srivastava has described as ‘an eclectic style standing in its own right characterising its own Punjabi manifestations’, shaped by ‘external influences from Himachal Pradesh’, yet ‘neither the prototype of pure Pahari, nor perfect Mughal ... nor properly Awadhi’.³⁷ The paintings include numerous details and figures absent from the text, lending weight to two competing assumptions: first, that the paintings—although produced before 1850—represent a later recension shaped through oral retelling; or second, that they were made contemporaneously with the events they depict, while the text—likely composed later—allowed its author to omit certain characters from the narrative.

Visual clues provided in these paintings, among other things, help us read between the lines of this fraught love-hate story. By doing so, we can gain an insight into the life of a remarkably resilient and mobile courtesan from eighteenth-century Multan, and her negotiation and exercise of power within local, regional, and tribal limits of patriarchal honour. At its core, *Jaur-o-Jafā* is equally an illustration of the power, autonomy, and the frequency of travel and mobility in the life of a well-regarded courtesan; and of attempts to curb that mobility by a local chief motivated by patriarchal notions of honour. In the recurrence of the travel motif attached to Murad’s story, *Jaur-o-Jafā* fits in particularly well with the larger themes of this special issue on the ‘travelling female performer’ in South Asia.

Within the field of courtesan studies in South Asia, the distinctive format of *Jaur-o-Jafā* also helps us make a methodological intervention, that, though similar to the feminist thrust of the research by Anshu Malhotra on Piro, and Scott Kugle and Shweta Sachdeva Jha on Mah Laqa Ba’i ‘Chañdā’ (among others), differs from this scholarship in an important respect. This scholarship is predominantly focused on the recovery and/or analysis of courtesans’ agency and voice during this period. In a slightly different but related vein, Abhishek Kaicker’s work on eighteenth-century Mughal courtesans like Nur Ba’i and Bihna’i has emphasised these courtesans’ relative insouciance and their autonomous self-expression.³⁸ In contrast, *Jaur-o-Jafā*, although focused intensely on a single courtesan, is penned by a scorned lover-patron trying to reclaim her—making our feminist ‘reading against the grain’ and attempt at recovering her voice all the more complex.

We now relate the bare bones of this story, including several of its complex turns and allegorical framings with as much sequential fidelity as possible, through four broad thematic rubrics: (1) the role of music, dance, and performance in defining the initial romance; (2) the significance of wealth, property, and negotiations around material belongings in the establishment of relationships; (3) most importantly, the centrality of Murad Bakhsh’s

S. Sharma, ‘The Indian Woman in the Persianate Literary and Artistic Imagination’, 10 January 2018, FLAME University talk: <https://www.flame.edu.in/flame-events/253/the-indian-woman-in-the-persianate-literary-and-artistic-imagination-a-talk-by-dr-sunil-sharma-boston-university-usa> (accessed 5 April 2025).

³⁶ During Timur Shah’s reign, the Durrani had brief control over notable Pahari provinces like Kangra, Chamba, Mandi, Basauli, and Guler. His administration also created a position for a visual draftsman, designated as Munshi Taşvīrī, to handle documentation tasks. See Vakili, *Timūr Shāh Durrānī*, vol. i, p. 242; vol. ii, p. 312.

³⁷ R. P. Srivastava, *Punjab Painting: Study in Art and Culture* (New Delhi, 1983), p. 15.

³⁸ A. Kaicker, *The King and the People: Sovereignty and Popular Politics in Mughal Delhi* (Oxford, 2020), pp. 132–133.

travels (and the curbs on them) in propelling the story forward; and finally, (4) notions of patriarchal honour in shaping local adjudication against Murad, in Raza's favour.

The four sections unfold a tale suffused with literary metaphors and allegories drawn from the standard framing devices of Indo-Persianate writing but equally saturated in an excess of emotion. The story oscillates between love and its many cognates (loss of control over mind and body; enchantment, infatuation, and stupefaction) on the one hand, and hate and its associated emotions (betrayal, theft, deceit) on the other. Being so foundationally concerned with emotional states, *Jaur-o-Jafā* can also open a potentially new chapter on the history of emotions in early modern South Asia.³⁹

Musical enchantment, lovers' pursuit

Jaur-o-Jafā opens on a fine day when Raza Khan was engaged in reciting the poetry of the bygone masters with his friends on his terrace. Mullah Ghani, Raza's friend, apprised him of the arrival of the courtesan Murad Bakhsh in Dera Ghazi Khan from Multan.⁴⁰ Although initially reluctant, Raza acknowledged Mullah Ghani's eagerness and invited the new courtesan to his home.

Murad Bakhsh then arrived at Raza's with her band of musicians to present a sublime performance. Raza describes every instrument, lyric, and dance gesture as being perfectly tuned to the moment. Below, he emphasises the spell cast by Murad's physical presence alone, and her use of silence to entice the audience into requesting a performance:

When that Venus-faced beauty arrived at the *mehfil* [assembly/gathering], she did not utter a single word. As she robbed the hearts and souls and no one in the *mehfil* remained in senses ... as a master says:

*She stole patience from heart, and the crazy heart too,
My thief snatched the home along with the things at home
When she came to steal the heart, first she stole the mind,
A wise thief turns the light off before he steals.*

...When the *mehfil* came back to its senses, I was wondering in what words should I have spoken to this cataclysmic beauty ... all the harness of my control on myself was in her hands. Neither was I left with a word to say nor could I dare to bid farewell to her. With intense desperation, I sat bewildered, and my condition was as the poet has said:

*O Jāmi, at last you turned into a toddler's toy in the hand of that young beauty,
Now you tell, what it brings to fall in love in this old age.*⁴¹

³⁹ On a history of emotions in South Asia, see R. Khan, 'The socialproduction of space and emotions in South Asia', *Journal of the Economic and Social History of the Orient* 58.5 (2015), pp. 611–633; and the special issue edited by M. Pernau, 'Feeling communities: introduction', *Indian Economic and Social History Review* 54.1 (2017), pp. 1–20. For connections of music with the history of emotions, see K. B. Schofield, 'Emotions in Indian music history: anxiety in late Mughal Hindustan', *South Asian History and Culture* 12.2–3 (2021), pp.182–205.

⁴⁰ *Jaur-o-Jafā*, fols. 4v–5v. The trope of poetry recitation of the bygone masters serves to firmly establish Raza's reputation as a nobleman. It specifically recalls the aspiration to become a Mughal *mīrza* (an official awarded with a *maṣṣab* (rank) higher than 1,000 under the Mughal *maṣṣabdāri* system). The *Mīrzanama* (A mirror for princes, circa 1660) details the etiquette for such *mīrzas*, who were encouraged to create *mehfils* of poetry with friends. A. Ahmad, 'The British Museum Mirzanama and the seventeenth century mirza in India', *Iran* 13.1 (1975), pp. 99–110; and K. B. Schofield, 'If music be the food of love: masculinity and eroticism in the Mughal "mehfil"', in *Love in South Asia: A Cultural History*, (ed.) Francesca Orsini (Cambridge, 2006), pp. 61–86.

⁴¹ *Jaur-o-Jafā*, fols. 6r–7v; Appendix Excerpt No. 1.

Through the repetition of Persian poetic tropes implying loss of control over mind and the senses, and by casting Murad Bakhsh as a thief who steals the heart or transforms a grown man into her 'toddler's toy' (*bāzichah-e-tiflān*), Raza assigns incontrovertible power to the courtesan in the lines above. By referring to her beauty as 'Venus-faced' (*Zuhrāh Jabīn*; in other instances, *Zuhrāh Simā*, *Zuhrāh Āsā*) and 'cataclysmic' (*ghārat-e-dil-hā*, *Khanomān soz*), the author relies on time-worn similes about the celestial power of music.⁴² Time and again, Raza notes that he was not alone in being bewitched by Murad; indeed, her control extended over the entire *mehfil*, over the musical instruments themselves, as evident below:

Sārang with a thousand shades became a drunken eccentric. *Nafīr* took the sphere of the sky into its grip. *Ṭāl* player Ustad Muhammad Panah was so into the ups and downs that he had lost himself. Suddenly that moon-like beauty began to sing ... [and] finished this Ghazal, the participants of the *mehfil* ... uttered a cry that reached from the world to the sky, as a master has said:

The clamour of bemoaning reached the seventh sky

...After a moment she ... asked for leave to get back to her home. My rationality was gone away from my head, I was out of my senses, I held myself together and asked, O, the paramount of the guild of hearts ... tell me if I should hope to see you again. Whatever is your will, she replied. I replied:

*Before this I had some power over my will,
But as I saw you, I lost control over the reins*

With a heartthrob's glance she promised to see me in the evening, and with a gesture of the eyebrow she departed to her place.⁴³

At the conclusion of the above passage, we note Murad Bakhsh parting from Raza with a 'heartthrob's glance' (*nigāh-e-mahbūbānah*) and a 'gesture of the eyebrow' (*wā'dāh bah goshāh-e-abrū*); drawing on a familiar skill from the South Asian courtesan's repertoire. As the remaining story reveals, Murad was entirely unprepared for the intensity of Raza's response. After this first performance (Figure 1), Raza Khan fell irreversibly in love with Murad Bakhsh, who apparently left him with no power over his prudence and reason. Murad then appeared in many group performances and private meetings at Raza's residence. For one such performance, Raza uses religious metaphors to describe the impact of Murad's arrival, and the tactile, embodied response it precipitated among both human and non-human (musical instruments) witnesses:

...she dismounted the horse and stepped in the gathering. I greeted her, as a master has said:

He bowed his back, and his head lowered in Sajda

The soul had left the body ... That charmer magician ordered the music maestros who stood humble and respectful as her disciples, to start playing the instruments ... Her anklet-bells, in the ecstasy of kissing her feet, rang so loudly that the thunder of the Day of Resurrection was ascribed to this clan. Meanwhile, that crowned queen

⁴² On the supernatural powers of Hindustani music in Mughal era treatises, see Schofield, *Music and Musicians in Late Mughal India*, pp. 35–44.

⁴³ *Jaur-o-Jafā*, fols. 7r–8v, 9v; Appendix Excerpt No. 2.



Figure 1. Murad Bakhsh and her troupe of musicians at their very first performance before Raza Khan. Source: From the British Library Collection: MSS Or. 199, *Jaur-o-Jafā*, fol. 12v.

of temperament ... remained unaware that a whole world of spectators in the *mehfil* had lost itself.⁴⁴

Above, Raza describes Murad's arrival in spiritual terms, with his own response invoking the *sajda* or prostration in Islamic prayer before a superior power. Further, Raza paints the impact of Murad's performances in cataclysmic, profoundly world-altering terms. For instance, referring to the Day of Judgement, Raza recalls that after Murad finished singing a *ghazal*,

*The soul fled the body. It was like a Day of Judgement, and bewildered people were wailing. She adorned the mehfīl in a manner that rendered all other equipage of the performance useless.*⁴⁵

The transformational impact of musical performers is a feature of Persian and Urdu writing on musical *mehfils* and dance performances in Punjab,⁴⁶ and more generally too,⁴⁷ but it acquires greater and specific relevance for later developments in the story.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, 17v–17r; Appendix Excerpt No. 3.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, fols. 18v–18r; Appendix Excerpt No. 4.

⁴⁶ On the recurrence of stupefying metaphors to describe audiences watching a musical performance in Punjab, see R. Kapuria, 'Ephemeral embodiments: the materiality of music and dance in colonial Punjab', in 'Living Archives and Decolonial Potentialities', *Third Text* (online forum), (eds.) Aditi Chandra and Sanjukta Sundareson, May 2023, <http://www.thirdtext.org/livingarchives-kapuria> (accessed 6 November 2025).

⁴⁷ Schofield, *Music and Musicians in Late Mughal India*, pp. 35–44.

These many ‘performance visits’ by Murad are punctuated by a series of messages exchanged between her and Raza. During these exchanges, Murad (albeit refracted through Raza) clearly reveals an initial reluctance to accept Raza’s invitation to stay with him permanently. She also exhibits a level of ethnic difference with and defiance towards the Afghans in general. For example, given below is an interaction with one of Raza’s messengers, where Murad articulates her reservation against maintaining relations with an Afghan on ethnic grounds:

She became angry and said: go and say that this clan is like a peacock, not like a pigeon that may get down at every terrace:

*The heart is not a pigeon that it may alight at every terrace,
Once we fly away from a terrace, we fly once and for all.*

What love and link of relation may we have with the tribe of Afghans, a relation that will end in downright regret. By the will of God and the fate, I had two or three sittings with you, yet:

*We are the nightingales of a heavenly nest,
It is not that we will stay in a cage.*⁴⁸

Here, Murad makes an interesting poetic choice in comparing her clan to the peacock, a bird signifying pride, royalty, graceful movement, and dignity, unlike the humbler and more fickle pigeon that is keen to alight at ‘every terrace’. In using metaphors drawn from the avian world, Murad Bakhsh subtly but unambiguously refers to the distinction between an elite *tawa’if* and a common *kañjri*. Continuing with the avian metaphor, in highlighting the reluctance of the ‘nightingale to be caged’, Murad further conjugates the purity and exalted nature of the artist (a nightingale belonging to a ‘heavenly nest’) with the independence of a skilled performer such as herself. In instances like these, we can postulate how class gradations within performer communities and ethnic differences between Afghan chiefs and local Multanis are alluded to in the flowery idiom of Persian poetry.

Throughout these intervals of the abovementioned ‘message exchange’, when Raza was away from Murad, he would find solace in the company of one Lala Hari Singh Kandhari, one of his close friends, clearly depicted in the paintings as a Hindu with the sacred mark on his forehead (Figure 2). After consulting with Hari Singh, Raza invites Murad Bakhsh to stay with him at his residence, since their love had been already declared through the message exchange. Murad took an oath of loyalty by the Holy Book, after which Raza Khan offered Murad valuable gifts and built a house for her nearby.⁴⁹ Perhaps Murad obliged Raza with this initial oath of loyalty on the Qur’an as routine in the course of her professional duties, expecting him to be a temporary patron, never anticipating the harder curbs on her movement and autonomy that were to follow.⁵⁰

⁴⁸ *Jaur-o-Jafā*, fols. 25v–25r; Appendix Excerpt No. 5.

⁴⁹ See Figure 6 for a painting depicting this oath.

⁵⁰ The nature of Raza and Murad’s relationship, at least from Raza’s perspective, recalls concubinage practices in this period. For the contiguous region of Rajasthan, see R. Sreenivasan, ‘Drudges, dancing girls, concubines: female slaves in Rajput polity, 1500–1850’, in *Slavery and South Asian History*, (eds.) Indrani Chatterjee and Richard Eaton (Bloomington, IN, 2006), and more recently, D. Cherian, ‘Stolen skin and children thrown: governing sex and abortion in early modern South Asia’, *Modern Asian Studies* 55.5 (2021), pp. 1461–1509.



Figure 2. Left to right: Barkhurdar with fallen turban, Muhammad Raza Khan, Hari Singh Kandhari, and Murad Bakhsh, with musicians in the foreground. Source: From the British Library Collection: MSS Or. 199, *Jaur-o-Jafā*, fol. 29v.

Wealth and valuables: ownership and negotiation

As the story progresses, Murad's hold over Raza is revealed beyond the intangible force of her musical and dance performance. Soon after the oath on the Qur'an and the exchange of gifts, she apparently gained full control over his business, wealth, and everyday affairs. So entranced was Raza that he surrendered all sense and reason, handing over to Murad the reins to his entire estate.⁵¹ To what extent this was actually the case is another matter since there is an element of exaggeration here. However, the text also frequently mentions the

⁵¹ This description of the cunning, wily, and trickster woman also recalls another Persian text dating from the same time as *Jaur-o-Jafā*, the *mašnavī* collection *Dilafrūzī*, written in 1810 by one Himmat Bahadur of Azimabad (near Patna, Bihar). For more, see S. Wigh, "If your bibi is from Hindustan": geography as a marker of sexual behaviour in North India' (working paper, 2025).

exchange of material possessions between them: whether wealth, gifts, property estates, etc. Raza details this in unequivocal terms:

The management of all affairs, even those of life and wealth came at the disposal of that chief of all beauties. Since I ... was too content by the promise on the words of God made by that wreath-wearer on a head full of deceit and artifice, I resigned all my affairs and bestowed them upon that Venus-like beauty. *I was left bewildered in her love and gave absolutely no attention to my business.* And that ruthless friend kept devastating my home behind the curtain.⁵²

During this initial exchange of gifts, Raza mentions that a man named Barkhurdar (Murad's then guardian/husband) apparently asked for his jewellery, valuables, wealth, and belongings to be returned to him in exchange for 'releasing' Murad to Raza's guardianship.⁵³ It was after this 'release' that Raza bestowed Murad with gifts and also built her a house. There is a sartorial representation of the insult this implied for Barkhurdar, evident in his turban (a symbol of masculine honour in the region) having fallen on the ground (Figure 2).

In this first, love-struck half of the tale, by framing the impact of Murad's musical expertise and her resulting hold over listeners/spectators in such absolute terms, Raza attributes immense, even 'cataclysmic' power to her. In contrast, the developments in the second half of the story can be seen as Raza's attempts to regain this lost power, by controlling what we term the specific, 'courtesanly mobility' enjoyed by Murad on account of her status as an elite *tawa'if*. The next subsection discusses this mobility from the lens of physical travel.

Murad's travels: between Multan and Dera Ghazi Khan

The fact that Murad travelled to Dera Ghazi Khan from Multan accompanied by her troupe of musicians and dancers reveals the routine nature of travel for a professional courtesan of her stature. As the main employer of a large cohort of musicians and performers, she was expected to be mobile and itinerant in search of patronage. The story thus opens with Murad travelling independently and of her own accord to Dera Ghazi Khan; but as it progresses, her movement is policed with greater control by Raza Khan. In an early part of the story, while awaiting Murad's arrival for one of her performances, Raza writes:

...the sweepers would clean the avenue next to the Kasturi canal ... Since the arrival of that sun-like beauty was delayed, I sent a messenger of yearning ... to that dame of beauties with this chant:

*Pass, O breeze, through the land of Multan
From me, who has fallen on earth on the way to Multan
To Multan, take my life and go offer as a gift
Not one life but a sacrifice of a thousand lives for Multan...*⁵⁴

In the above *rubā'i* (verse form in Persian and Arabic poetry comprising four-line stanzas), the land of Multan stands as a substitute for Murad herself, and the ecological landscape is effectively used when describing the courtesan's comings and goings. A visual depiction of this is evident in Figure 3, where we see Murad Bakhsh crossing the Kasturi canal wearing

⁵² *Jaur-o-Jafā*, fol. 30r, emphasis added; Appendix Excerpt No.6.

⁵³ Barkhurdar's rights and responsibilities as Murad's guardian are not detailed. After Murad's settlement with Raza, her needs were to be met by him. She was made to return her belongings to Barkhurdar and received new ones from Raza.

⁵⁴ *Jaur-o-Jafā*, fol. 15r, Appendix Excerpt No.7.



Figure 3. Murad Bakhsh crossing the Kasturi canal on horseback. Source: From the British Library Collection: MSS Or. 199, *Jaur-o-Jafā*, fol. 6v.

an indigo robe, riding on a white horse surrounded by her servants and fellow musicians.⁵⁵ Murad is accused of funnelling Raza's wealth from Dera Ghazi Khan to her home in Multan, across the eastern side of the river Indus.

The couple's time together was first disrupted by news of Mir 'Alam Khan Nurza'i's arrival from Kabul as the new administrator of Dera Ghazi Khan. Soon at odds with the rulers of Multan and Bahawalpur—Raza's allies—Mir 'Alam's presence sparked a series of battles.⁵⁶ As a result, Raza sent Murad Bakhsh away and sat alone, mourning the peace shattered by the arrival of the belligerent Kabul patriarch. Murad was summoned back to Dera Ghazi Khan within three days. Later in the story, her final departure from Dera Ghazi Khan

⁵⁵ Being on the arterial trade route between Persian and Afghan lands, the canals in this area were integral to indigo production, linking to markets in Kabul, Kandahar, and Bukhara. See J. Lally, 'Beyond tribal breakout: Afghans in the history of empire, ca. 1747–1818', *Journal of World History* 29.3 (2018), pp. 369–397.

⁵⁶ For the events details, see Ali, *History of Bahawalpur*, pp. 109–116; also see Rāe, *Mur'āt*, pp. 329–336, and King Shuja', *Wāqī'āt-e-Shāh Shujā'* [Chronicles of the King Shuja'] (Ludhiana, 1842), p. 61.

came with the arrival of the Durrani king, Timur Shah, whom Raza, as a Durrani chief, was duty-bound to escort through his territory.⁵⁷

Though this second travel decision also appears to rest with Raza Khan, Murad Bakhsh's autonomy remains evident, since her demeanour precipitates an intensely angry response in the former. Within two pages, Raza Khan unleashes a torrent of negative labels—'apostate of conduct' (*kāfar-kesh*), 'deceitful' (*fareb bāz*), and more—while casting himself as the suffering victim through phrases like 'humble folk' (*faqīr, khāksār*) and 'desolate dweller of the desert of melancholy' (*zāwiyah nashīn-e-bādiyah-e-ḥirmān*). These contrasting portrayals reinforce our reading of the text as a love-hate narrative, marked by oppression and the anguish of a 'deceitful' beloved. The moment below is written to capture the intense anguish Raza felt at Murad Bakhsh's second departure from Dera Ghazi Khan to her hometown near Multan:

At last, the glorious flags of the ... all-majestic king approached, I feared that that *apostate of conduct* might be summoned. Therefore, relying on her, I asked now what was to be done. She said, quite pompously, that grant me leave for a month so that I may go and enjoy some good moments with my children and then I will come back. I made an oath on the Qur'an, and I was ignorant of what the poet had said (couplet):

*Do not have high hopes from a low-born menial,
That the rust could not be whitened by washing.*

...with the supply of gold objects, grandiose jewellery, carpets, pottery, woollen dresses, and cash expenses ... all that could have been needed..., I—the *humble person*—gave to her, collecting it to the point that she asked me to stop, adding more than was needed. I—the *desolate dweller of the desert of melancholy*—was bothered by people's taunts that Murad Bakhsh was in the service of Raza Muhammad, and he sent her to her hometown not covered and dressed in a proper manner. With so many efforts, I made her accept the luggage and bid her farewell ... And I addressed the cameleer who held the rein of the carriage of that deceitful beloved, and expressed through my visible conditions (couplet):

*O Cameleer, go slow, that the comfort of my heart is leaving
And the heart that once I had with me, is going along with the heartthrob.*⁵⁸

Above, Raza is stupefied by Murad's assertiveness in carving out some autonomy and wresting physical mobility back for herself when she suggests returning to Multan. In response, Raza describes Murad as 'low-born' (*nā-pāk-zādah*), terminology he also assigns to her at other places in the text, affirming his hierarchical stance as a high-born Durrani noble.⁵⁹ Raza's insistence that Murad accept his gifts before she leaves Dera Ghazi Khan for Multan stems from a need to signal to the world that she belongs to him, and travels upon *his* favour, *not* as an autonomous *tawa'if*. Her reluctance to receive so many gifts is equally telling—signalling her defiance and attempt at reasserting her status as an independent and autonomous performer. Further, Murad's interest in leaving to meet her children was also mirrored elsewhere in a later part of the nineteenth century in Nawab Wajid Ali Shah's exchanges with some courtesans in his *PariKhana*.⁶⁰ This also reveals the different roles

⁵⁷ Munshī 'Abdul Karīm, *Wāqī'āt-e-Durrānī* [Chronicle of the Durrani] (Lahore, 1963), p. 146.

⁵⁸ *Jaur-o-Jafā*, fols. 40v–40r, emphasis added; Appendix Excerpt No.8.

⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, fols. 2v–3v, 40v.

⁶⁰ Sachdeva Jha, 'In Search of the *Tawa'if* in History', pp. 164–166.

and aspects of female performers, where one of their primary reasons for travel was on account of familial responsibilities. Unlike Raza's desperation to stay together, Murad is portrayed throughout this half of the story as eager to leave, prompting Raza's usual barrage of negative epithets, as seen in the rest of the passage:

And that adversary said, seated for departure (couplet):

*You are my lord, you are my master,
Thus, I leave, would you spare any words.*

And when I—this humble person—heard this couplet from that *corrupt-minded figure of the time*, I burst into tears and replied (couplet):

*Be blessed with the journey you set for,
Go safe and sound, and do come back.*

Later, that *guildmistress of artifice* stepped foot into the *howdah of vanity* and departed to the destination.⁶¹

Again, the poetry-filled passage above ensures that only the most negative labels are reserved for Murad: 'corrupt-minded figure of the time' (*fasād andīsh-e-daurāñ*), she is the 'guildmistress of artifice' (*anjuman ārā-e-majlis-e-hīlah-warī*) who steps into her 'howdah of vanity' (*haudah-e-nāz*). After her departure on camelback (Figure 4), Raza Khan sent her a heartfelt letter, expressing his anguish at their separation. Her affectionate reply, delivered by a swift messenger, prompted Raza to send ten crates of Kabul grapes and other gifts. But as his men lingered at Murad's home for two days, doubt set in—her response, he felt, was deceitful. He sent another letter, now filled with complaint and longing, though the servants carrying it spoke to her in ways he disapproved of. The story's final turn sees Raza, aided by local forms of patriarchal justice, attempting to restrict Murad's physical mobility.

Patriarchal honour, violent justice

Interpreting Murad's defiance as betrayal, Raza issued a verbal order for her arrest. She declined to return to Dera Ghazi Khan, her refusal unequivocal. Confrontation became inevitable; swords were drawn as persuasion gave way to force. A subsequent attempt framed the dispute as a matter of restitution – Murad was asked to surrender the wealth allegedly owed. She consented to repay a sum that apparently amounted to a scarce tenth of Raza's claim. In response, she turned to Haji Murtaza Khan, a local chieftain from her native town, whose refusal to support Raza—despite their shared Afghan lineage—cast him as a tacit adversary in *Jaur-o-Jafā*.

The conflict escalated into violence. One of Murad's musicians, emerging at midnight for prayer, was assaulted by a member of Raza's retinue (Figure 5). Forewarned of the impending attack, Murad had already positioned armed guards at her Multan residence, a quiet act of resistance cloaked in foresight.

⁶¹ *Jaur-o-Jafā*, fol. 41v, Appendix Excerpt No.9. The second couplet is a traditional Persian farewell proverb. The first, by Murad Bakhsh, cleverly leads the listener to respond with that very proverb through its rhyme and metre—a poetic trick of putting words into another's mouth.



Figure 4. Murad Bakhsh departing in a howdah on a camel. Source: From the British Library Collection: MSS Or. 199, *Jaur-o-Jafā*, fol. 41r.

Though Nawab Bahawal Khan II (r. 1772–1809) navigated the uneasy line between war and peace with Kabul, even Durrani historians commend his governance.⁶² Raza Khan sought his support, yet after three arduous months, Bahawalpur officials failed to trace Murad Bakhsh. Aided by a courtier, Raza secured a letter of appeal to Nawab Muzaffar Khan of Multan, invoking shared Durrani lineage. While the letter made its way through

⁶² Vakili, *Tīmūr Shāh Durrānī*, vol. i, p. 228.



Figure 5. Murad Bakhsh and her handmaidens sleeping at night, with armed guards stationed outside her Multan home for protection. Source: From the British Library Collection: MSS Or. 199, *Jaur-o-Jafā*, fol. 52r.

official channels, Raza sent Murad a stern summons to return to him before returning himself to Dera Ghazi Khan. In Multan, Nawab Muzaffar Khan, advised by his nobles, called upon Haji Murtaza Khan to bring Murad to court. A private hearing was granted, though Raza dismissed Murad's words as delirium. He claimed the Multani nobles acted out of self-interest. Lacking consensus, the nawab proposed escalation to Bahawalpur, but the

courtiers opposed it and ruled in Raza's favour after he paid a 400-rupee bond. Thereafter, Murad was expelled from Multan. More consequentially, she was barred from contact with her community of performers. Now deeply vulnerable, she lived in flight, seeking distant assurances of safety from Raza. The financial dispute fades from record after this failed mediation by Haji Murtaza.

Was the nawab of Multan's ruling a denial of justice? Was the referral to Bahawalpur abandoned because Nawab Bahawal Khan had already failed to resolve the matter? More crucially, where was Murad Bakhsh's agency in navigating this legal terrain? The account suggests that either nawab could have potentially ruled in her favour. Though rare, such outcomes were not unprecedented—Fayz Muhammad recounts a late nineteenth-century case with a different ending from the reign of Barakza'i Emir Abdur Rahman Khan (d. 1901).⁶³ Apparently one Colonel Babu Jan Khan, stationed at Shinwar, once extorted money from and proposed to a widow under duress, threatening her father when she refused. The widow was afraid that the colonel would make her his concubine, especially fearful of the label 'slave girl' (*kaniz*) or 'mistress' (*surriyat*) being attached to her name.

Dissimilar to the Murad Bakhsh story, this case from nearly a century earlier ends with the king Abdur Rahman Khan issuing a scathing rebuke, warning the colonel against abuse of power and vowing harsh punishment.⁶⁴ Like the much later example of the Shinwari widow, it is likely that Murad's refusal to be subdued by Raza was made on the grounds of her fear at having the label of 'concubine' or 'mistress' attached to her name. Unlike the Shinwari widow though, Murad's fate was shaped by the more regressive outlook of Durrani polity in late eighteenth-century south-west Punjab. The disdain reserved for Murad could also stem from her status as a *kanchni*, or courtesan, as opposed to the widow who conformed to the heteronormative marriage ideal.

Lacking a secular legal system, Durrani justice rarely extended beyond tribal codes and Sharia courts. Murad Bakhsh's rare case became a stage for Multani nobles to pursue personal gain, deepening Raza Khan's disillusionment with the fracturing of so-called superior Afghan identity. In these local adjudication battles, Murad refers to herself as a common *kanjiri*, shedding her stature as an elite *tawa'if*.⁶⁵ As noted, the ruling barred Murad from contact with her performers, secured by Raza Khan's payment of 400 rupees:

Nawab Muhammad Muzaffar Khan had sanctioned the *disloyal Murad Bakhsh not to go near any musician and singer by any means*. If she would go, that would be held against her ... She would say to her friends that *what was she to do now, when it had become hard to earn a livelihood and she had been impoverished*.⁶⁶

The ban on the 'disloyal' (*be-wafa*) Murad Bakhsh from associating with her troupe of musicians and dancers reiterates that her power and autonomy accrued to her skills as a performer. After losing her case, she reluctantly returned to Dera Ghazi Khan under the nawab of Multan's order, sending envoys ahead to seek assurances of safety from Raza. She then travelled to Multan to visit a revered Sufi saint—whom Raza had urged to rebuke Murad for her alleged betrayal. In Multan, penniless and fearing assassination by Raza's men, she requested and received 60 rupees from Raza via a messenger. She conditioned her final return to Dera Ghazi Khan with a written promise of assurance for her life. This insistence on the *written assurance* of her life reveals her awareness of the very real possibility of honour-killing at Raza's hands.

⁶³ Katib Hazarah, *History of Afghanistan*, pp. 795–796.

⁶⁴ *Ibid.*

⁶⁵ *Jaur-o-Jafa*, fol. 70r.

⁶⁶ *Ibid.*, fols. 75v–75r, emphasis added to 75v; Appendix Excerpt No. 10.

Since the text is authored by Raza, his mention of sparing Murad's life serves to highlight that killing her was culturally acceptable—yet he portrays his restraint as magnanimity. Within the broader narrative, he casts Murad as a powerful, autonomous woman who ultimately must be subdued, echoing literary tropes where defiant women and women of autonomous sexuality are brought under male control and are eventually suppressed.⁶⁷

After ten days of hesitation, Murad eventually returned to Raza in Dera Ghazi Khan. Though Raza Khan claimed joy at her return, his tone remained cold until the end of his tale. Murad Bakhsh's final act of physical mobility was to travel to Multan, but this too was only permitted so the Sufi saint she revered could reprimand her for what Raza saw as betrayal. She was never able to move without fear, Raza writes, whether in Multan or Dera Ghazi Khan, as she knew that Raza's concealed armed men might be around. After visiting the Sufi saint, she was never permitted to leave again—not even to attend her son's wedding across the river. At the tale's conclusion, Murad Bakhsh seems to remain in Dera Ghazi Khan ever after.

The anti-climax of *Jaur-o-Jafā* exposes its moralist core: women, especially the clan of performers to which Raza's former beloved Murad belonged, are portrayed as inherently disloyal.⁶⁸ While the story begins in a rich Persian-inspired romantic tone, slowed by ornate poetry, emotional language, and letter exchanges, it eventually shifts to the mode of patriarchal critique. The second half trades intimacy for ideological condemnation, using proverbs and intertextual quotes to generalise women as deceitful and morally flawed:

What a pearl has been harvested by another master, Ruba'i:

*If you want to see what is inside a woman's heart
Eat a handful of rubbish grass and drop it on a stone
There are three things you can never straighten
The tail of a dog, the corner of a doormat, and the heart of a woman*

No, I am wrong, Firdausi has said even better than this (Quatrain):

*If a woman and her view were virtuous,
The (Persian) word for a woman should have been 'don't hit (her)' ('Mazan') instead of 'hit (her)' ('Zan')
A woman and a dragon are better only if they're underneath the earth
The world is better if it is clean of these two unclean.*⁶⁹

Through the comparison of women to dangerous animal like dragons, to the unruliness embodied in the tail of a dog, and to cultural symbols signifying roughness or coarseness like the corner of a doormat, the allusion is to their intrinsic, even enigmatic, violence.⁷⁰

⁶⁷ This trope recalls the discussion on *yoginis* and female *djinns* as sources of danger and immense power in a sixteenth-century Bijapuri astrological encyclopaedia delineated in E. J. Flatt, 'Spices, smells and spells: the use of olfactory substances in the conjuring of spirits', *South Asian Studies* 32.1 (2016), pp. 8–9. For a reference to how similar tales enter the corpus of *Laẓẓat-un-Nissā* (pleasure of women) literature, see S. Wigh, 'Contour and classify: sexual categorizations in early modern South Asia', in *Literary Cultures in Early Modern North India: Current Research*, (eds.) Imre Bangha and Danuta Stasik (Oxford, 2024), pp. 279–320.

⁶⁸ *Jaur-o-Jafā*, fol. 38r.

⁶⁹ *Ibid.*, fols. 39v–39r; Appendix Excerpt No. 11.

⁷⁰ The doormat or sackcloth metaphor may derive from a couplet by Khāqānī (1120–1190), evoking the beloved's coarse and unyielding heart:

*Bar chūñ parañd-o lek dilash gūsha-e palās
Man bar palās-e mātām-e hijr az parañd-e ū*

Coupled with the iteration of the phrase ‘unclean’—each of these terminologies serve to paint women as inherently impure and untrustworthy. Despite Murad’s defeat at the close of *Jaur-o-Jafā*, though, we can glean her agency through other clues, provided most clearly in the lavish miniature paintings.

A brief note on the miniatures

Visual elements reflecting emotional and existential states of the characters in the paintings further contribute to the narrative economy of *Jaur-o-Jafā*. Some illustrations feature characters that are not mentioned in the text itself, likely from either an earlier depiction, a later recension, or an oral retelling of *Jaur-o-Jafā*, pointing to the perhaps wider circulation of the Raza–Murad love–hate story. Most prominent are two women who each show up twice in the miniature paintings. The first is a darker-skinned female attendant labelled ‘Kando Kanchni’ (Figure 6), with the epithet ‘Kanchni’, the term for elite skilled and elite female performers in Mughal chronicles; also used in many paintings to label Murad herself as ‘Murad Bakhsh Kanchni’.⁷¹ Kando Kanchni was likely one of Murad’s employees and accompanies her in the early stages of the story, when she first arrives at Dera Ghazi Khan.⁷² She is also present when Murad Bakhsh takes her oath of loyalty to Raza (Figure 6): we can therefore surmise that Kando Kanchni was possibly one of Murad’s closest female confidantes.

The other figure who appears in two paintings towards the end of the story, when Murad finds herself irrevocably in Dera Ghazi Khan, is an elite older woman dressed not dissimilarly to Murad in terms of her jewellery and lavish clothes (Figure 7). Unlike Kando Kanchni, this woman is depicted as being an equal size and stature to Murad Bakhsh and seen to be offering her some counsel. Was she a retired courtesan, formerly powerful, offering Murad sympathy and wisdom? Or was she an elite woman from a non-courtesan background presenting Raza’s case? We can only speculate.

Either way, the presence of figures like Kando Kanchni and the unnamed older woman could mirror the centrality of the cunning female friend, and especially the ‘older woman’ as a stock character in the ‘wiles of women’ tales. The presence of these women, Mills notes, inevitably signals ‘the onset of a set of deceptions, stealthy invasions, and evasions of normal social boundaries, especially relating to gender’.⁷³ The obverse interpretation would be to see an assertion of autonomy, especially in the counsel Murad sought from other women in a world defined and controlled by men. Our feminist re-reading for the field of critical courtesan studies would posit the presence of these figures in the *paintings alone* as recognition of the support available to Murad from elderly (and likely autonomous and powerful, given her clothes and jewels were similar to those worn by Murad) courtesans from her own community. That at least three other unnamed women are featured in the paintings—but not the text—also points to an acknowledgement by the artist of the female assistance Murad likely enjoyed across age groups.

Reading the paintings can equally yield clues that amplify Raza’s apparent victimhood at Murad’s hands. To specify a few, the red stains on Murad’s hands while sleeping on the night of the violence (Figure 5; fol. 52r) and while sitting with Murtaza (whose robes are also stained red; fol. 63v) can be interpreted as an attempt to shift the blame for the violence. Further, the sartorial style of the dress collars across the paintings differentiates Afghan

Her skin is like silken cloth, yet her heart a corner of a doormat,
I fall upon the coarse cloth of grief, parted from her silken skin.

⁷¹ On the *kanchani* in Mughal chronicles, see Schofield, ‘Courtesan tale’, pp. 152–153, 157.

⁷² She appears in Figure 8.

⁷³ Mills, ‘Afghano-Persian trickster women’, p. 36; and see pp. 51–52 for how elderly women characters often play the role of messengers in these tales.

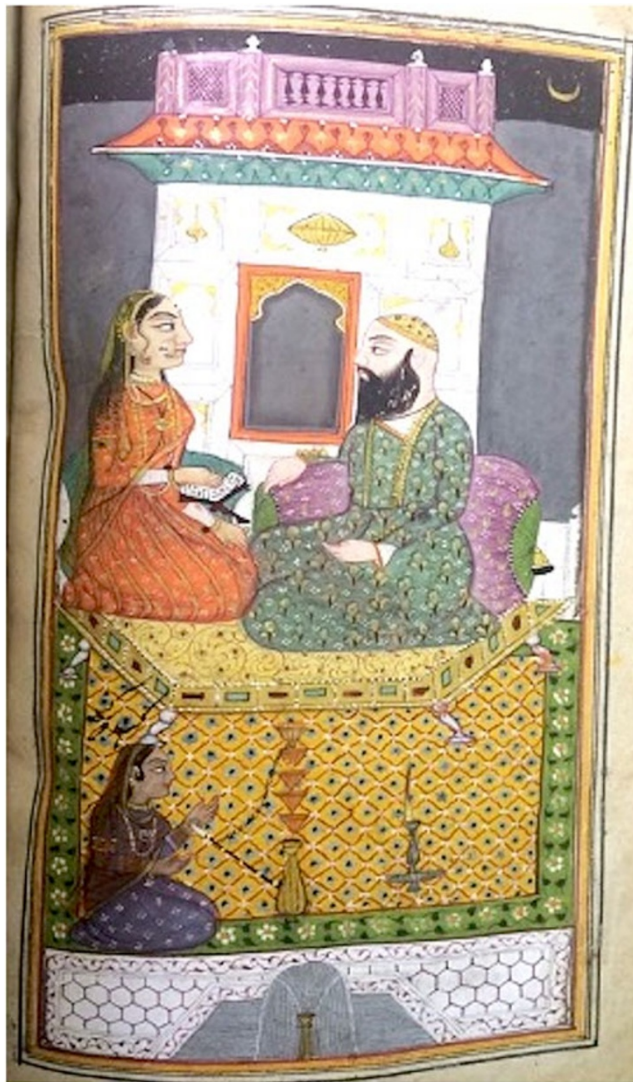


Figure 6. Murad taking an oath of loyalty to Raza on the Qur'an, with Kando Kanchni in the foreground. Source: From the British Library Collection: MSS Or. 199, *Jaur-o-Jafā*, fol. 13v.

characters from local Multanis. Most significantly, the black stains on Raza's face when he encountered the nawab of Bahawalpur (fol. 54v) could represent the shame he felt at the public nature of the tussle with Murad. This matches the larger thrust of *Jaur-o-Jafā* which depicts Raza Khan as a weakening aristocrat trying to save his reputation amidst political isolation and social backlash in the face of such a public scandal.

Ultimately, *Jaur-o-Jafā* reveals the imbrications between travel, mobility, and autonomy for a courtesan during this period. While we have only featured a few miniature paintings here, many other paintings are replete with images of the modes of transport used by Murad: whether horse or camel, depending on the ecological context of her travels. Animal-powered transport was an abiding feature of what we have termed Murad's 'courtesanly



Figure 7. Murad Bakhsh speaking to an elderly woman in the presence of other men. Source: From the British Library Collection: MSS Or. 199, *Jaur-o-Jafā*, fol. 70v.

mobility', with transport animals framing many paintings of her 'negotiations' or 'discussions' with Raza. In both [Figure 8](#) and [Figure 9](#), a horse and a seated or resting camel, with saddle and howdah respectively intact, wait patiently for the Raza–Murad interchange to end, so that they can help Murad travel back to her home. Indeed, the anonymous but skilled painter has depicted them as one of the many key members of Murad's entourage, keeping a friendly eye of concern over her exchange with Raza.⁷⁴

⁷⁴ The same animals can also be glimpsed earlier. The horse in [Figure 3](#) (fol. 6v), which depicts Murad Bakhsh riding on horseback, and the camel in [Figure 4](#) (fol. 41r), where she is travelling on camelback.



Figure 8. Murad Bakhsh and Raza Khan, with Murad's musicians, Kando Kanchni, and a travelling horse in the foreground. Source: From the British Library Collection: MSS Or. 199, *Jaur-o-Jafā*, fol. 9r.

Conclusion: gender, mobility and resistance

From the perspective of South Asian literary genres in Persian and Urdu, *Jaur-o-Jafā* fits into the tradition of contemporaneous eighteenth-century male authors writing in a feminine voice. A contrasting example is the early eighteenth-century poet Valih Daghistani (1712–1756), whose famous tale of true romantic fidelity to his lover Khadija Sultan was composed in 1747 by his friend Faqir Dihlavi, as discussed by Mana Kia.⁷⁵ A similar example comes from the *rekhti* poetry of Raza's near contemporary Sa'adat Yar Khan Rangin

⁷⁵ M. Kia, 'Lingering with *adab* before rushing to literature', *History of Humanities* 9.1 (2024), p. 73; and also M. Kia, *Persianate Selves: Memories of Place and Origin Before Nationalism* (Stanford, CA, 2020), pp. xxi–xxii, 178–179.



Figure 9. Murad Bakhsh and Raza Khan with Murad's musicians and a seated travelling camel in the foreground. Source: From the British Library Collection: MSS Or. 199, *Jaur-o-Jafā*, fol. 36v.

(1757–1835) as analysed by Carla Petievich and Ruth Vanita, among others.⁷⁶ Raza Khan's text, though different in tone from both Dihlavi's sympathetic version of Valih's love story and Rangin's more colourful and decadent verses, matches that of his contemporaries in its mediation of women's experiences and voices through their writing, an example of 'male ventriloquism', to quote Butler Schofield.⁷⁷ In this, it is similar to Allison Busch's insights

⁷⁶ C. Petievich, 'Rekhti: impersonating the feminine in Urdu poetry', *South Asia: Journal of South Asian Studies* 24 (2001), pp. 75–90; C. Petievich, *When Men Speak as Women: Vocal Masquerade in Indo-Muslim Poetry* (New Delhi, 2007); and Ruth Vanita, "'Married among their companions": female homoerotic relations in nineteenth-century Urdu Rekhti poetry in India', *Journal of Women's History* 16.1 (2004), pp. 12–53.

⁷⁷ Schofield, 'Courtesan tale', p. 152.

on *riti* poetry compositions that ‘may often have a female voice’ but with ‘a male gaze’.⁷⁸ This context of male authorship remains important even if our larger argument is about the mobility of courtesans through our feminist methodological re-reading of the text at the intersections of critical courtesan studies, *qissa*, and literary studies of Punjab, and biographies from, and historiographies of, eighteenth-century North India.

A mere one-sided account of the rift between two individuals across social class and ethnic divides, the primary themes permeating *Jaur-o-Jafā* are those of justice and morality. For Raza Khan, the main rationale behind writing the text seems to be an outpouring of emotion against the injustices wreaked upon him by the ‘cruel’ courtesan Murad, who apparently ruined his estate due to her negligence, since he had relegated all administrative decisions to her. This is contrasted, by the end of the story, with the regaining of control and righting of such wrongs in Raza’s favour through the legal systems of the time. Ironically, of course, the cruellest outcome at the tale’s conclusion is reserved for the formerly autonomous, mobile, and powerful courtesan Murad.

Despite the abundance of detail, *Jaur-o-Jafā* leaves intriguing gaps in its narrative. Hence Raza Khan has not only made a delicate effort of self-preservation before his ‘astute readers’ but also provided a candid record of his friends and foes and his criteria for trust and distrust in his servants, perhaps in an attempt to guide his heirs in the larger chaotic and fragile political world of the late eighteenth century, where both power and servitude were hereditary.

The distinctive fusion of autobiographical reflection, depiction of aristocratic pleasures, and cautionary narratives on feminine wiles in *Jaur-o-Jafā* resonates with the broader aesthetic and moral preoccupations of Persian literary genres in this period. The primary reason to deem the story true is the presence of contemporary historical actors and the author’s apparent intent in writing it, even if the question of Murad Bakhsh’s identity, motivations, and ultimate fate requires further research.

To conclude, the agency exercised by Murad Bakhsh, a travelling courtesan navigating the shifting topographies of power in south-west Punjab, may be delineated across four distinct yet interwoven modalities. First, she emerges as an aspirant figure, departing Multan for Dera Ghazi Khan in pursuit of economic opportunity and social ascendancy—emblematic of the itinerant courtesan’s pursuit of self-fashioning within regional circuits of prestige. Second, she appears as a beloved in retreat, withdrawing from Dera Ghazi Khan amidst mounting political instability, marked simultaneously by a growing scepticism towards her erstwhile patron, Raza Khan, and by resistance against his encroachment upon her personal autonomy. Third, her identity shifts once more, this time into the figure of the fugitive—pursued by legal and extra-legal forces, her movement refracted through the lens of criminality and moral transgression. Lastly, she is rendered a figure of existential vulnerability: no longer the self-assured performer but a frightened woman, diminished and imploring, desperately seeking credible assurances that her life may yet be spared. Through these stages, her subjectivity is constantly reframed by external pressures and internal recalibrations, illuminating the complex interplay between gendered agency, mobility, and state power in late eighteenth-century Punjab. In the ultimate analysis, Murad Bakhsh’s story deserves to remain open as a generative site of inquiry within the intersecting histories of gender, affect, and cultural practice, which resonates across the broader geographies of northern India and the entangled worlds of South and Central Asia during this period.

Supplementary material. The supplementary material for this article can be found at <https://doi.org/10.1017/S1356186325101326>

⁷⁸ A. Busch, *Poetry of Kings: The Classical Hindi Literature of Mughal India* (Oxford, 2011), p. 83.

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