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The *maṣnavī* of Lutf-un-Nisā ‘Imtiyāz’: mobility, memory, and courtly voice in the late-eighteenth-century Deccan

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Abstract

Focusing on the late eighteenth-century *kulliyat* by Lutf un-Nisa ‘Imtiyāz’ (1733?–?), arguably the first published Urdu poetess, this article seeks to explore the mobility—primarily metaphorical rather than physical—of a remarkable woman overlooked in historical accounts dominated by the male gaze. This mobility is enacted through her metaphysical, emotional, and literary navigation of time and space, rather than through geographic movement. Imtiyāz’s *maṣnavī*, functioning as an autobiography, employs time and space metaphors to offer a counter-archive for early women’s writing, providing a unique perspective into early modern feminine subjectivities. The examination underscores Imtiyāz’s agency in shaping her narrative, intertwining religious intercessions, canonical compositions, and literary sophistication. The metaphoric navigation through space and time illustrates the resilience and creativity of this woman, transcending her geographical and temporal constraints. At its core, Imtiyāz’s *maṣnavī* stands as a testament to her innovation, interwoven with convention through life-writing, crafting a rich narrative tapestry resonating within and beyond South Asian realms.

Keywords: gender studies; Islamic studies; literary studies; South India; Urdu poetry

Tracing Lutf un-Nisa Imtiyāz in the archive

This study examines the late eighteenth-century *kulliyāt* (complete works of an author) by Lutf un-Nisa ‘Imtiyāz’ (1733?–?),¹ the first female *ṣāhib-e dīwān* (published poet) in Urdu.²

¹ While there is no definitive date of Imtiyāz’s birth, many historians have deduced that she may have been born in AH 1154 or 1155 from the fact that she mentions the number 36 as the year when her fortunes turned and if that implies 36 years or marriage, and the date of her husband’s passing is well documented as AH 1204, then it can be gathered that they were married in AH 1168 and she was born about 13 or 14 years prior. I disagree with this assessment but want to provide the only possible date that has been explored by multiple sources below. Azmat Rubab, ‘اردو کی پہلی شاعرہ لطف النساء امتیاز اور اس کا شعری کلیات: تعارف اور امتیازی خصائص’, *Zorai* 10.1 (2024), pp. 49–66. <https://doi.org/10.58932/MULC0020>. ‘Feachers’ in this citation is likely a misspelling of ‘features’. However, I have retained the original citation as it appears on WorldCat.

² M. ‘Abdul Hai, *Tārīkh-e-Auraṅgābād Khujistā Bunyād* [The history of Aurangabad’s auspicious foundation] (Hyderabad, 2004), p. 395. According to ‘Abdul Hai, Imtiyāz was from Aurangabad but moved to and died in Hyderabad. He mentions her as *rafiqā-e ḥayāt* (companion/wife) to the *taẓkirah* compiler Mir Asad ‘Alī Khān ‘Tamannā’. Interestingly, he mentions two couplets from her *maṣnavī*, as opposed to her ghazals. I am using the *kulliyāt* definition used by Frances Pritchett. For more, see F. W. Pritchett, *Nets of Awareness: Urdu Poetry and Its Critics*

Yet, she is excluded from nearly all *taẓkirahs* (literary anthologies) of her time, from the little we know, she was a contemporary of the renowned courtesan poet Mah Laqa Bai ‘Chañdā’ from Hyderabad and compiled her *kulliyat* in the year AH 1212/AD 1797, one year prior to Chañdā.³ While Chañdā enjoys well-documented historical recognition for her multifaceted contributions, Imtiyāz and her husband Mīr Asad ‘Alī Khān ‘Tamannā’ (?–1789), also a poet of the same era, remain relatively obscure in history.⁴

Beyond the *maṣnavī* (a long narrative poem), Imtiyāz’s corpus includes panegyric poems. In a separate study, I translate three *qasidas* and several *qit‘as* (a series of couplets) addressed to Nawab Asaf Jah II, which shows a sustained practice of praise and petition.⁵ This kind of court-adjacent address aligns with patterns visible in the Deccan, while also distinguishing Imtiyāz from her contemporary Mah Laqa Bai ‘Chañdā’, who is securely documented as a courtesan-performer. The comparison helps frame a spectrum: Mah Laqa’s public performance is attested, whereas Imtiyāz’s *performerly* stance is textually staged on the page. The absence of biographical proof does not diminish the courtly functionality of her poems as communication, reputation building, and requests for favour.

Lutf un-Nisa Imtiyāz appears only briefly in a handful of literary and historical records from the Deccan, with minimal details about her life beyond her association with Tamannā. Naseeruddin Hashmi, a prominent literary scholar specialising in Dakani, the Deccan’s vernacular form of Urdu, wrote about Imtiyāz on two occasions. The first was in a detailed catalogue of the manuscripts housed in the Salar Jung Museum Library. He writes about Imtiyāz using the masculine verb agreement:

Imtiyāz was a poet of the Deccan. In childhood, his mother and father passed away. Relatives provided an upbringing. From childhood, there was an inclination towards reciting poetry, but we do not know who’s [sic] student he was, his writing is not mentioned in any old or new *taẓkirahs* ... in the last couplet, the word *kanīz* is mentioned and so it comes to mind that perhaps Imtiyāz was some poetess.⁶

(Berkeley, CA, 1994), glossary. The *kulliyāt* includes multiple genres, the entire oeuvre of a poet, and although the manuscript that is the *kulliyāt* of Imtiyāz is misnamed in the Salar Jung Museum Library as simply *Dīvān-i Imtiyāz*, it is indeed a *kulliyāt* because it includes more poetry genres than all her compiled ghazals (a *dīvān* consists of at least one ghazal for each letter of the Urdu alphabet). For one to be a *ṣāhib-e dīvān* means that they have accomplished the task of creating a *divan* of Urdu ghazals for each letter of the Urdu alphabet. As far as I understand, there is no technical term for one who has a *kulliyāt* of several genres of published poetry, although it is quite an impressive feat.

³ Here I am using the *taẓkirah* definition used by Frances Pritchett for simplicity. For more, see Pritchett, *Nets of Awareness*, p. 63. While the colophon of the manuscript has multiple dates—the year AH 1213 and the year AH 1223, the embossed stamp following the colophon reads—Syed Muhammad Ali Khan Bahadur, AH 1212—perhaps a seal by the owner of the manuscript. Additionally, she mentions in one of the final distichs of her *maṣnavī* the year she completed the *kulliyāt*—*kīyā sin-e hijrī ko jab main ‘ayān// hū’e ek hazār do sau par bārah hai jān*. Multiple scholars, including Naseeruddin Hashmi and Ahmad ‘Ali Shakeel agree that she wrote 1212 verses in her *ghazaliyāt* as another indicator of the year of completion. For more, see A. A. Shakīl, ‘Pehlī Ṣāhib e Dīvān Khātūn Luṭf un-Nisā Imtiyāz’ [The first woman poet, Lutf un Nisa Imtiyaz], *Nawā-e-adab*, Shumara Number 002, vol. xliii (October 1993), <https://www.rekhta.org/ebooks/detail/nawa-e-adab-shumara-number-002-nizamuddin-s-gorikar-magazines-10> (accessed 6 May 2021); N. Hashmi, *Dakkan meñ Urdū* [Urdu in the Deccan] (New Delhi, 2002), p. 475. Here I am using the 2002 edition of the text, originally printed in 1985.

⁴ The few scholars who have written about Tamannā and his literary output also briefly remark on his marriage to Imtiyāz. For more, see A. A. Shakīl, *Kulliyāt-i Imtiyāz: Tanqīdī Tadvīn* [The anthology of Imtiyaz: critical edition] (Hyderabad, 2004), p. 18; and M. Jahān, *Mīr Asad ‘Alī Khān Tamannā: Hayāt aur adabī kārnāme: maqālāh* [Mir Asad Ali Khan Tamana: life and literary works, a thesis] (Hyderabad, 1984), p. 95.

⁵ S. Shaikh, ‘Qaṣīdā: Poetic Presence in the Court Archive’ (unpublished PhD dissertation, McGill University, 2026), ch. 4.

⁶ N. Hashmi, *Kutub Khānā Nawāb Sālār Jāng Marhūm kī Urdū Qalmī Kitāboñ kī Wazāhātī Fahrīst* [A catalogue of the library of the deceased nawab Salar Jung’s Urdu manuscripts] (Hyderabad, 1957), pp. 423–424.

The term *kaniz* marks gender, but its social index is unstable: it can denote a maidservant or enslaved girl, a devotee in elite households, or a conventional mode of self-effacement used by women poets.⁷ In some courtly settings, a *kaniz* could be placed within elite or salon circuits where literary skills circulated; in others it functions as a humble signature with no biographical implications.⁸ Given the thin documentary trail for Imtiyāz, I treat *kaniz* as an unstable self-marker rather than evidence of sale, performance training, or a fixed occupational identity, although it might. Following the ‘self in performance’ approach in *Speaking of the Self*, I read such terms as rhetorical positions through which women negotiated voice and audience in constrained archives, rather than as firm biographical data.⁹

Hashmi later mentions Imtiyāz in the 1985 edition of *Dakkan meñ Urdu*, where he explicitly mentions her as Lutf un-Nisa Imtiyāz Begum (lady) and includes more biographical details, stating: ‘Her upbringing was carried out in a *shāhī*, royal, household. She was wed to Mir Asad ‘Ali Khan Tamannā, but in her youth she was widowed.’¹⁰ Hashmi’s later notice presumes a royal upbringing and early widowhood, but the poem’s internal timeline allows more than one reading. The internal timeline of the *maṣnavī* is elastic: two couplets refer to ‘36 years’, which can be read either as the span of a conjugal bond or as an age marker. Neither reading, on its own, confirms professional performer status, yet both keep open the possibility of an earlier court-adjacent placement followed by marriage. I return to this point in the reading of the relevant couplets below, where I keep the hypothesis strictly cautious and tied to the poem’s wording.¹¹ Hashmi provides few additional biographical details, focusing primarily on the manuscript housed in the Salar Jung Museum Library in Hyderabad. Notably, by the time of this reference, he assumes Imtiyāz is a woman, consistently using feminine verb agreements to describe her poetry.

Elsewhere, Imtiyāz is mentioned by Maulwi ‘Abdul Hai in a history of Aurangabad. He writes about her poetry:

Her work is agreeable to the heart and full of pleasure. She was jovial and humorous. Lutf un-Nisa Imtiyāz is proven and acknowledged to have been the wife to the teacher and *taẓkirah* (anthology) author of ‘*Gul-e-‘Ajā‘ib*’ Mir Asad ‘Ali Khan Tamannā. The silence around this husband–wife duo by *taẓkirah* writers is astonishing. Lutf un-Nisa Imtiyāz is the first Urdu poetess to compose an entire *divan*. Her *divan* was compiled in AH 1212. The sources of information around Imtiyāz’s death are silent. After moving from Aurangabad to Hyderabad, she never returned. She died in Hyderabad itself.¹²

It is not clear how ‘Abdul Hai is able to discern so much information about Imtiyāz’s life, like the nature of her character or where she died. He describes a move from Aurangabad to Hyderabad, where she died. Read together with the *maṣnavī*’s refrains of *musāfir* (traveller)

⁷ J. T. Platts, *A Dictionary of Urdu, Classical Hindi, and English*, s.v. ‘kaniz (n.)’, https://dsal.uchicago.edu/cgi-bin/app/platts_query.py?qs=کَنیز&searchhws=yes&matchtype=exact (accessed 3 July 2024).

⁸ As Shweta Sachdeva Jha notes, ‘Historical evidence such as sale deeds in eighteenth-century Delhi reveals that girls were sold and bought into slavery for domestic households and kothas simultaneously’, and the word that is used is often *kanizak* or *kaniz*. S. Sachdeva Jha, ‘Tawa’if as poet and patron: rethinking women’s self-representation’, in *Speaking of the Self: Gender, Performance, and Autobiography in South Asia*, (eds.) A. Malhotra and S. Lambert-Hurley (Durham, NC, 2015), p. 147.

⁹ A. Malhotra and S. Lambert-Hurley, ‘Introduction: gender, performance, and autobiography in South Asia’, in *Speaking of the Self*, (eds.) Malhotra and Lambert-Hurley, p. 1.

¹⁰ Hashmi, *Dakkan meñ Urdu*, p. 441.

¹¹ This preview flags interpretive options only. The fuller discussion of dates and their implications appear in the ‘Temporality as travel’ section, after the citation of the ‘36 years’ couplets.

¹² ‘Abdul Hai, *Tārīkh-e-Aurāṅgābād*, p. 395.

and *be-vaṭan* (without country), the record registers both physical and affective displacement. In Hyderabad under the Nizam, women's artistic labour moved through households, shrines, and salons; Imtiyāz's poems participate in that courtly ecology even where documentary proof of embodied performance is absent. The *be-vaṭan* couplets, analysed later, allow the reading of loss of homeland as both a spiritual state and a material relocation.

She is last mentioned in the *Taẓkirah Riyāz Husainī* (The garden of Husain anthology) (1994) by Agha Mirza Beg. He writes: 'The wife of Asad 'Ali Khan Tamannā, whose name was Lutf un-Nisa Begum and *takhalluṣ*, penname, was Imtiyāz. She was the first *khātūn* (or lady) *ṣāhib-e dīvān* in the Deccan and of Hind. She has a relationship to the city of Aurangabad.'¹³ The entry is brief and only mentions her Persian couplets and Urdu couplets that date the *kulliyat* as examples of her poetry.

Lutf un-Nisa Imtiyāz is absent from contemporary *taẓkirahs*, both general and those dedicated to women poets, leaving little biographical record beyond her own verses. The few sources that do mention her rely heavily on inferences drawn from her poetry itself. This scarcity of historical documentation invites an exercise in reading her *maṣnavī* as a form of autobiography, offering insights into her life and subjectivity. However, I acknowledge the limitations of this approach, as poetic conventions, literary tropes, and artistic embellishments complicate attempts to reconstruct a definitive personal narrative.

While the archive of premodern women's writing is small relative to men's, it is not accurate to say that courtesan writing scarcely exists. Much of what survives is by courtesans or royal women. For instance, Fasih al-Din Rañj's *Bahāristān-e Nāz* (The garden of coquetry) gathers biographies of poet-courtesans, even if many are represented only by a few poems or couplets.¹⁴ This makes Imtiyāz unusual, since her *kulliyat* is comparatively full and internally organised. In the Hyderabad state of the Nizams, both Imtiyāz and Mah Laqa Bai 'Chañdā' wrote within a Shi'i, courtly milieu and addressed the same sovereign; in Imtiyāz's case, this includes panegyrics to Asaf Jah II in the form of *qasidas* and *qit'as*.¹⁵ The commonalities are striking, yet the divergence of preferred forms matters: Mah Laqa's extant collection is a *divan* of *ghazals*, optimised for salon performance and circulation, whereas Imtiyāz turns to the *maṣnavī* to stage an extended first-person arc that braids devotion, memory, and petition.¹⁶ The *maṣnavī* thus enables modes of self-narration that the couplet-based *ghazal* typically disperses. Read this way, the difference does not measure agency so much as it marks distinct strategies of subject formation and patronage within a shared courtly world—one embodied and public, the other *performerly* and textual.

Given the paucity of women's literature from this historical epoch, this article seeks to demonstrate how Imtiyāz's *maṣnavī* can serve as a unique avenue to explore her mobile and agentive self. This *maṣnavī* serves three primary functions: firstly, as an autobiography facilitating the construction of a counter-archive for early women's writing and an earnest attempt to discern a 'woman's voice'; secondly, by utilising time as a pathway to comprehend Imtiyāz's life story across past, present, and future; and thirdly, by employing

¹³ Āghā Mirzā Beg, *Taẓkirah Riyāz Husainī* [The garden of Husain anthology] (Aurangabad, 1994), p. 70.

¹⁴ Ḥakīm Faṣīḥ-ud-Dīn Rañj, *Bahāristān-e-Nāz: Taẓkira-e Shā'irāt* [The garden of coquetry: anthology of poets], (ed.) Khalīl-ur-Raḥmān Dā'ūdī (Lahore, 1965), an early dedicated *taẓkirah* of Urdu women poets (often rendered in English as 'Spring Garden of Coquetry') also analysed by C. Petievich, 'Feminine authorship and Urdu poetic tradition: Bahaaristaan-i-Naz vs Tazkira-Rekhti', in *A Wilderness of Possibilities: Urdu Studies in Transnational Perspective*, (eds.) K. Hansen and D. Lelyveld (New Delhi, 2005), pp. 223–250.

¹⁵ S. Kugle, *When Sun Meets Moon: Gender, Eros, and Ecstasy in Urdu Poetry* (Chapel Hill, NC, 2016). See especially the Mah Laqa Bai chapters: 'Mah Laqa Bai's radiance', 'Mah Laqa Bai's men', 'Mah Laqa Bai's shame', and 'Mah Laqa Bai's true love'.

¹⁶ Māh Laqā Bā'ī Chañdā, *Dīvān-e-Māh Laqā Bā'ī Chañdā* [The *divan* of Mah Laqa Bai Chanda], (ed.) Shafaqat Rizvī (Lahore, 1990).

metaphors of space and place to depict imagined travel, expanding her mobility beyond the physical realm to personify a divine, literary, and historical traveller.

In this article I use *courtesanly* to describe a mode of voice and posture that the poem performs on the page: self-effacing self-markers such as *kaniz* in later notices, direct apostrophe to an addressee, oath sequences, and calibrated audience management through requests for lenient reception and correction.¹⁷ These are textual cues of a salon or court-adjacent ecology, not a biographical claim. In this sense, *performerly* names the poem's choreographed sequencing of address and response: entrance by apostrophe, set-piece vows, changes of scene, and a closing appeal to present and future audiences. I trace these cues where they appear in the *mašnavī*: the *kaniz* notice and its ambiguity, the apostrophe to the cup-bearer and to 'Ali, the extended oath sequence, and an appeal to 'noble ones' and the 'generous'. Before delving into Imtīyāz's *mašnavī*, however, a brief background to the *mašnavī* form itself is necessary.

Introducing the *mašnavī* form

The *mašnavī* is a long narrative poem composed in paired rhyming hemistichs—often summarised as 'aa bb cc'—that enables sustained storytelling across episodes, arguments, and scenes. Its exact technical prehistory is debated, but for our purposes the key point is functional: by the classical Persian period, the *mašnavī* offered poets scale and continuity beyond monorhyme lyric, supporting romance, didactic narrative, and spiritual instruction alongside autobiographical arcs. A concise definition captures this capaciousness as a 'poem with rhyming hemistichs (aa bb cc), which can be of any length and treat any topic', a flexibility that underwrites the genre's range.¹⁸

While scholars differ on early metrics and origins, they converge on the genre's affordance to expand poetic scope.¹⁹ As one formulation puts it, the *mašnavī* answered a 'wish to enlarge the scope of their poems', which helps explain its rise as Persian matured as a literary language.²⁰ Canonical exemplars—Firdawsī's *Shāhnāma* (The book of kings, circa 1010), Rumi's *Mašnavī-i-ma'navī* (The *mašnavī*, circa 1267), and 'Aṭṭār's *Mantiq-al-ṭayr* (Attar's conference of the birds, circa 1177)—illustrate how the form came to index epic, instruction, and spiritual journey without fixing a single template.²¹

Two features of this narrative technology matter for the analysis that follows. First, the *mašnavī* commonly deploys compact paratexts (often called *dibācha*) that shape reception: brief praise of God and the Prophet, invocations, a statement of occasion, and address to a patron, sometimes with moral or programmatic remarks; these elements are mobile

¹⁷ I am not advancing a feminist poetics claim about intention; I am describing textual performance conventions that travel between salon, shrine, and page.

¹⁸ M. T. Miller, 'Genre in classical Persian poetry', in *Routledge Handbook of Ancient, Classical and Late Classical Persian Literature*, (ed.) K. Talattof (Abingdon, UK, 2023), p. 80.

¹⁹ Reuben Levy purports that Abū Shukūr of Balḫ is known to have invented the genre due to the fragments which remain of a series of narrative *mašnavīs*. R. Levy, 'Mathnawī', in *Encyclopaedia of Islam First Edition Online*, (2012). https://doi-org.proxy3.library.mcgill.ca/10.1163/2214-871X_ei1_SIM_4603

J. T. P. de Bruijn, *Persian Sufi Poetry: An Introduction to the Mystical Use of Classical Persian Poems* (London, 2013), p. 85. De Bruijn states that the Pahlavi translation of the Sanskrit Panchatantram was known in Persia since the sixth century, but perhaps Rūdakī used the ninth-century Arabic version composed by Ibn al-Muqaffa'. Both de Bruijn and Levy agree that the oldest fragments of Persian poems of considerable length date back to around the tenth century, and as the earliest example, de Bruijn claims 'Rūdakī (d. 940), the most prominent poet of the court of the Samanids of Bukhara, wrote a version in *mašnavī* of the famous book of fables *Kalila va Dimna*, based on the Sanskrit *Panchatantram*'.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 84.

²¹ Jalāl al-Dīn Rūmī, *The Masnavi, Book One*, (trans.) J. Mojaddedi (Oxford, 2004), p. xx.

and may resurface as a closing appeal.²² Second, the genre shares a narrative toolkit with *dāstān* storytelling—recurring images, exemplary tales, and clear transitions that mark scene changes—so that shifts of voice or location read as deliberate staging rather than digression.²³

This minimal schematic clarifies why the *maṣnavī* is so well-suited to Imtiyāz's project. The form's scale permits an explicit sequencing of life events and reflections; its flexible paratexts sanction direct apostrophe and petition; and its episodic movement makes heavenly ascent, oath-taking, and return legible as organised 'set pieces' rather than incidental ornament. In later sections, I show how Imtiyāz uses an extended oath sequence (*saugandh*) to assemble audience and authority, how apostrophes to the cup-bearer and to 'Ali function as entrances, and how a closing appeal to 'noble ones' and the 'generous' manages readers' reception—each a *performerly* cue that the page inherits from salon and court-adjacent practice.

The genre's narrative elasticity also supports the article's key analytic moves. Because a *maṣnavī* can braid timelines, Imtiyāz can calibrate past loss, present petition, and future address without abandoning coherence—an ability that undergirds my readings of time as journey and the strategic placement of autobiographical markers. And because the form normalises scene change, metaphors of space and place—tavern, city, sky—operate not only as imagery but as stage directions that cue mood and tempo, setting up the mobility readings pursued later.

With this focused frame in place, the next section turns to Urdu practice, especially in the Deccan. There I outline how poets adapted the Persian *maṣnavī*'s paratexts and episode structure to local idioms and audiences, and how Imtiyāz situates her own poem within that tradition before retooling it towards self-narration and court-adjacent address.

Historicising form: early Urdu *maṣnavī*

Scholars argue that Urdu's earliest literary works emerged in poetry rather than prose. Jamil Jalibi, for instance, asserts that the first work in Urdu is not prose but poetry; this is Fakhr-e Dīn Nizāmī's *maṣnavī*, *Kadam Rāo Padam Rāo* (Kadam Rao Padam Rao), written between 1421 and 1434.²⁴ This suggests that the *maṣnavī* was central to Urdu's literary beginnings, shaping the language's poetic evolution from its very inception. The *maṣnavī* holds a foundational place in the development of Urdu poetry, distinguished by its vivid regional imagery, indigenous expressions, and broad appeal to everyday audiences. As a genre, it not only set literary standards but also laid the groundwork for the evolution of other genres. As one scholar observes,

The imagery of the Urdu *maṣnavī* is purely Indian, and in the use of local idioms, sayings, and diction nearest to the common man, few genres can rival the *maṣnavī*. In the matter of ornamentation and elaboration also, it always showed a preference for the

²² J. T. P. de Bruijn, B. Flemming, and Munibur Rahman, 'Mathnawī', *Encyclopaedia of Islam New Edition Online*, (ed.) P. Bearman (2012). https://doi.org/10.1163/1573-3912_islam_COM_0709. According to the authors, the *dībācha* was further enlarged to include the *mirāj* of the Prophet following the *naʿt*, or praise of Sufi spiritual guides; the location of these sections could also move to the epilogue.

²³ Anna Suvorova writes, 'these three genres have a common "inventory" of themes, images, and rhetorical, stylistic, and compositional devices. Many popular plots exist simultaneously in literature in its poetry, prose, and drama versions.' A. A. Suvorova, *Masnavi: A Study of Urdu Romance*, (trans.) M. Osama Faruqi (Karachi, 2000), p. 250.

²⁴ J. Jalibi, *Maṣnavī Nizāmī Dakhani, al-ma'rūf bah Kadam Rāo Padam Rāo* [The *maṣnavī* of Nizami Dakhani, known as Kadam Rao Padam Rao] (Karachi, 1973).

native. As verse fiction, it has set many standards and has served as the foundation on which the imposing edifice of the powerful form of *naẓm* has rested for long.²⁵

The early *maṣnavī* thus functioned not only as a narrative form but also as a literary space where vernacular expression and classical influences converged.

From the start, the *maṣnavī* demonstrated remarkable adaptability, drawing upon Persian models while embracing distinctly Indian themes. Early poets like Rustami, who composed *Khāwar Nāmāh* (1649), engaged in translation and adaptation. This long *maṣnavī* is a translation from the Persian *maṣnavī* of the same name, and ‘it tells the story of adventure and romance, based entirely on unhistorical and imaginary events’.²⁶ Meanwhile, others in the Deccan like Malik Khushnud and ‘Abdul captured regional cultures in their poetic narratives—Malik Khushnud was the poet laureate for the seventeenth-century sultan of Bijapur, Muhammad ‘Adil Shah, and is known for his *maṣnavī*, *Hasht Behisht* (Eight paradises, circa 1646), penned in the style of Khusrāu.²⁷ The *Ibrāhīm Nāmāh* (circa 1604), written as an extended qasida by ‘Abdul to celebrate Sultan Ibrahim ‘Adil Shah II is also notable for its vivid portraiture of Bijapur’s culture during the seventeenth century.²⁸

Further, the *maṣnavī* functioned as a repository of folklore and local storytelling traditions. Muqīmī’s *Chandrabadan-wa-Mahiyār* (Chandrabadan and Mahiyar, circa 1686), for instance, retells a love story drawn from South Indian oral traditions.²⁹ Muqīmī was so captivated by the tale of Mahiyar and Chandrabadan that he felt compelled to render it in verse, believing it could surpass the legendary love story of Laila and Majnun. Mahiyar first encountered Chandrabadan during a pilgrimage and confessed his love, but they were separated for a year. When they reunited at the next pilgrimage, he collapsed at her feet, only for her biting remark—‘So, you are still alive!’—to strike him dead. As his funeral procession passed her home, it mysteriously came to a stop. Draped in white, Chandrabadan emerged, lay beside his lifeless body, and took her final breath.

Similarly, Nuṣratī’s *Gulshan-e-Ishq* (The rose garden of love, circa 1657) reflects the *maṣnavī*’s fluidity, blending Persian, Hindi, and Dakhani influences in an artistic retelling of the love story of Manohar and Madhumati. Manohar and Madhumati are the star-crossed lovers of a North Indian Hindavi Sufi romance (*prem-akhyān*) first attributed to Shaykh Manjhan and later Persianised, a tale whose allegorical journey between lovers made it ideal for adaptation. He was perhaps the most outstanding poet of this age, and as Ali Javad Zaidi recounts, ‘although from a Brahmin background, he talks respectfully of the Gulbarga Sufi, Gesu Daraz, and other mystics. This popular story was first told in Hindi by Sheikh Manjhan (1649) and retold in Persian by ‘Aqil Khan ‘Razī’ in his *Mehr-o Māh* (1654–1655).’³⁰ Nuṣratī enriched the narrative with the additional love story of Champawati and Chandrasen, reshaping the original with his unique portrayal of physical nature.

A distinct feature of the Urdu *maṣnavī* is its interplay between historical reality and literary imagination. Waj’ihī’s *Qutb-i-Mushtarī* (Qutb and Mushtari, circa 1609) is a skillful example of this, and according to Zaidi, possibly recounts a king’s own love affair while embedding personal experience within a broad geographical and cultural canvas, from

²⁵ A. J. Zaidi, *A Long History of Urdu Literature* (New Delhi, 1993), p. 16.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 40.

²⁷ T. Grahame Bailey, *Urdu Literature* (Calcutta, 1932), p. 28.

²⁸ A. A. Husain, ‘The courtly gardens of ‘Abdul’s Ibrāhīm nāmā’, in *Garden and Landscape Practices in Pre-colonial India: Histories from the Deccan. Visual and Media Histories*, (eds.) D. Ali and E. J. Flatt (New Delhi, 2011), pp. 82–89.

²⁹ Zaidi, *Long History of Urdu Literature*, p. 40.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 42.

Bengal in the north-east to the Deccan in the south.³¹ The poet laureate at the seventeenth-century court of Abdullah Qutb Shah of Golconda, Ghawwasi, on the other hand, seamlessly integrated Indian and Iranian motifs, using allegory and fables to convey philosophical and moral themes: his *Ṭūṭī Nāmāh* (Tales of a parrot, 1631), for instance, contains fables that convey deeper truths, such as the story of a *bulbul* (nightingale) whose greed led to its downfall:

The sky is a net and the stars a veritable seed-bait.
For sure, it serves aright as a bait.
Never disregard the net that the sky casts wide;
Never ignore the job it is always busy with.
Rising in the morn, it burns the sun
And erodes the full moon out progressively.³²

Meanwhile, the tradition of gendered representation in Dakani poetry, as seen in Hashmi's *Yūsuf Zulekhā* (Yusuf and Zulekha, 1687), reflects an engagement with Hindi poetic conventions, portraying women as active lovers rather than passive beloveds. As Zaidi notes, while discussing Hashmi,

The woman in his ghazals is portrayed as the lover and the man as the beloved, and in this regard, he follows the broad pattern of the earlier Hindi poetry. He is not alone; a number of other Dakhani poets had adopted the tradition, which, as time rolled, was given up altogether.³³

Thus, the Urdu *maṣnavī* emerged as a dynamic and evolving genre, simultaneously preserving cultural memory, experimenting with narrative structure, and influencing later poetic forms. Its ability to weave together elements of history, mythology, folklore, and personal reflection not only defined the genre but also ensured its enduring relevance in Urdu literary tradition.

Reading Imtiyāz's *maṣnavī* as autobiography

Following Dwight Reynolds' scholarship on the Arabic autobiography, this article attempts to broaden the characterisation of which genres constitute an autobiography in early modern and, more importantly, non-Western literature.³⁴ Imtiyāz's *maṣnavī* meets the two criteria that Reynolds outlines: it qualifies as a 'text that present[s] themselves as a description or summation of the author's life, or a major portion thereof, as viewed retrospectively from a particular point in time', and the personal and inner lives of the authors 'is made manifest only through careful, close reading of the texts and a thorough awareness of their social milieus and literary strategies'.³⁵ Through a thorough close reading of the *maṣnavī*, it is evident that it behaves as a form of life story for an otherwise unknown woman.

Imtiyāz's *maṣnavī* is unique in its particularly autobiographical nature; it consists of approximately 219 verses and follows a distinct timeline. It begins with a romantic stage, moves to a period of longing, a metaphysical journey to the heavens, then a flashback to

³¹ *Ibid.*, p. 44.

³² *Ibid.*, p. 45.

³³ *Ibid.*, p. 43.

³⁴ I am grateful for the insight on alternative autobiographies provided to me over the course of a graduate seminar with Professor Prashant Keshavmurthy in 2017 and for the feedback he has provided on my work since then.

³⁵ D. F. Reynolds, *Interpreting the Self: Autobiography in the Arabic Literary Tradition* (Berkeley, CA, 2001), p. 30.

describe the life events of Imtiyāz from birth, and finally concludes with remarks to the future readers of her *maṣnavī*. Imtiyāz masterfully deploys the *maṣnavī* genre as a means of crafting a memoir, particularly during a period of personal melancholy in her life. Through this perspective, we are afforded the opportunity to hear a genuine woman's voice, not solely as a stylised piece of poetry but as a profound testament to her life's purpose and journey. The journey Imtiyāz undertakes in her *maṣnavī* is not physical but metaphorical: it moves through inner time, emotional landscapes, and spiritual reflection rather than across real geographies.

The beginning of the *maṣnavī* occurs at the throne of Hazrat 'Alī, the fourth Shi'i imam, where she bares her soul and narrates the poignant tale of her own life, revealing detailed examples of various life stages and circumstances that ultimately left her in a state of profound loneliness following her husband's passing. She states:

If I state the narration from the beginning
Then the wise men won't remain conscious, rightly so.³⁶

Here Imtiyāz embarks on a temporal journey through the crucial moments of her life story, commencing with her parents. She narrates how she was parted from her birth parents at the tender age of merely one year and three-quarters. It becomes apparent that, despite coming from a sizable family, she was raised by what she refers to as 'outsiders'. Imtiyāz goes on to provide intricate details of those formative years, shedding light not only on her own intricate character but also on the social status and dynamics of her adoptive family. She writes:

That the first separation was done by father and mother
Without a doubt, this life was only one and three quarters old
So, at that time, mother passed away
When death came to give a gown of night's lodging...³⁷

Alas, I had my upbringing with outsiders
Those fortunate days were like Eid and Shab-e Baraat
They raised me with much affection
They kept a just and righteous midwife
But I didn't drink anyone's milk
The separation from my real mother was with me at every moment
The mother who raised me
Forget gold and wealth, she would sacrifice her life.³⁸

She proceeds to paint a vivid picture of her adoptive family, revealing that they were childless and consequently doted on her lavishly. Imtiyāz reminisces about her infancy when she cried vehemently and the entire household would go to great lengths to soothe her. They would cradle her in their arms and remain awake throughout the night, contributing to the development of a rather skittish disposition, which left everyone around her without

³⁶ Luṭf un-Nisa Imtiyāz, *Dīvān-i Imtiyāz* (MS 20, Catalogue of Oriental Manuscript Collection, Salar Jung Museum Library, Hyderabad), p. 153, verse 143; Shakīl, *Kulliyāt-i Imtiyāz*, p. 158, verse 143. All translations that follow are my own. I used a combination of an edition published in Hyderabad with the unpublished manuscript scan I acquired from the library. There are a few mistakes and some missing verses in the published edition. Both are cited here, and I will provide corresponding verse numbers that I have tracked on the folios of the original manuscript and the edition.

³⁷ Imtiyāz, *Dīvān-i Imtiyāz*, p. 153, verses 146–147; Shakīl, *Kulliyāt-i Imtiyāz*, p. 158, verses 146–147.

³⁸ Imtiyāz, *Dīvān-i Imtiyāz*, pp. 153–154, verses 153–156; Shakīl, *Kulliyāt-i Imtiyāz*, p. 158, verses 153–156.

any grounds for complaint. Her narrative then transitions to a pivotal moment in a Muslim child's life: the bismillah ceremony, which marks the formal initiation of Islamic education.

When the beginning of my fifth year began
I was given a teacher of good character
When I read the words bismillah with excitement
The name of Allah became my guide.³⁹

As we delve into the subsequent section focusing on her upbringing and education, it becomes evident that Imtiyāz enjoyed a social life and status that were highly formalised. Her exemplary ethics and refined demeanour suggest that she was nurtured within a *jagirdari* (landed gentry) class. She writes:

They raised me to be competent in reading and writing
As if to kill the bad luck of the universe...⁴⁰

Whatever was necessary for the pedigree of aristocracy
For the children of nobles or the wealthy.⁴¹

She continues to chronicle the inner conflict she grappled with as she grew closer to her adoptive family, expressing deep gratitude for their exceptional care. Imtiyāz reveals the joy of being surrounded by the love of many, yet she could not escape the frustration of not having her own biological parents. Then, at the age of nine, a pivotal moment unfolds as her birth father re-enters her life. Initially, it feels like an encounter with a stranger, but in a remarkable twist, he too showers her with love and affection, filling her life with newfound warmth and care.

She says:

I had the unmeasurable sorrow of not having a mother or father
Not like my tribe was any less than a few thousand
All the kinsmen were high minded and close
Passionate, and upstanding everywhere you looked
But why should I not say to the tyranny of the heavens
I was raised on such possessions
Some kinsman came and started meeting me
At the age of nine I learned he was my father
He stayed unfamiliar to me for some time
For this is a stranger turned father
But I was his darling child,
The power of his soul, the light of his eyes
He would sacrifice his life to me at every moment
He would sacrifice himself in many manners.⁴²

Following this, Imtiyāz delves into her early inclination towards poetry, which emerged at a tender age. She laments the absence of an *ustad*, or mentor, to guide and correct her poetic

³⁹ Imtiyāz, *Dīvan-i Imtiyāz*, p. 154, verses 163–164; Shakīl, *Kulliyāt-i Imtiyāz*, p. 159, verses 163–164.

⁴⁰ Imtiyāz, *Dīvan-i Imtiyāz*, p. 155, verse 166; Shakīl, *Kulliyāt-i Imtiyāz*, p. 159, verse 166.

⁴¹ Imtiyāz, *Dīvan-i Imtiyāz*, p. 155, verse 168; Shakīl, *Kulliyāt-i Imtiyāz*, p. 159, verse 168.

⁴² Imtiyāz, *Dīvan-i Imtiyāz*, p. 155, verses 173–179; Shakīl, *Kulliyāt-i Imtiyāz*, p. 159, verses 173–179.

endeavours. It becomes apparent that her husband played a pivotal role in providing *islah* (corrections) for her poetry, a role that continued until his passing.

From childhood, my heart yearned
To take up the hobby of composing couplets and poetry
What can I say of the ability to recite poetry
There was merely an ambition to quietly recite and listen
Where was the discernment of understanding poems
Whoever has the conviction, they can make of it what they might
Nor was there a group of poets
Nor was there a pedigree of wise men.⁴³

In a subsequent part of this section, Imtiyāz humbly implores for the mercy of those who peruse this *divan*. She goes on to explain that her husband has regrettably passed away and the *divan* was assembled in haste. This is when the autobiographical section of the *maṣnavī* transitions from a past tense recollection to a present tense composition. The very specific details indicate that Imtiyāz uses the *maṣnavī* to tell her own life story, not too dissimilar from an autobiography.

The close reading of Imtiyāz's *maṣnavī* as an autobiography is important for two reasons. The first is that it approaches genres in a counter-hegemonic manner, incorporating diverse poetic forms to explore individual subjectivities in the early modern period. The transformation of certain, 'traditional' genres is also fascinating to trace with the growing influence of colonialism and English genre systems. As articulated by Pasha Khan, genres like the *qissah* were intersectional, intertextual, and multigeneric, which raises important questions about the hierarchical matrix of the genre system, especially after colonialism.⁴⁴

In their introduction to *Speaking of the Self*, editors Anshu Malhotra and Siobhan Lambert-Hurley state, 'if we look at autobiographical practice as a "self in performance", we begin to appreciate the historical, social, and cultural milieu in which the self was imbricated, and what enabled gendered subjectivity and speech'.⁴⁵ Given the dearth of early modern women's writing, it is necessary to read the writing that survives carefully and creatively, to recreate an authentic narrative from the words that were judiciously chosen by these women to describe their own life stories.

The second and related reason to read this *maṣnavī* as autobiography is to imagine a form of selfhood for this woman that is distinct from the male gaze, one that is both anti-patriarchal and anti-colonial. Here, scholarship by Erica Wald, Katherine Butler Schofield, Veena Talwar Oldenburg,⁴⁶ and Radha Kapuria provide an excellent socio-cultural framework to understand courtesan lives in early modern India.⁴⁷ This method traces female

⁴³ Imtiyāz, *Divān-i Imtiyāz*, pp. 155–156, verses 182–185; Shakīl, *Kulliyāt-i Imtiyāz*, p. 160, verses 182–185.

⁴⁴ See P. Khan, 'Reason and romance in the age of the novel', in *The Broken Spell: Indian Storytelling and the Romance Genre in Persian and Urdu* (Detroit, MI, 2019), pp. 164–208.

⁴⁵ Malhotra and Lambert-Hurley, 'Introduction', p. 1.

⁴⁶ V. T. Oldenburg, 'Lifestyle as resistance: the case of the courtesans of Lucknow, India', *Feminist Studies* 16 (1990), pp. 259–287. Oldenburg occupies a liminal space in both this category of scholars as well as the next because she combines a historical analysis of civic records and literature with an ethnographic study of 30 'courtesans' living in Lucknow in the late 1970s. In this way, she offers both an external and internal perspective to courtesan lives.

⁴⁷ Wald's work is important to understand the colonial impact on the decline of the courtesan's social status, even among indigenous Indian consciousness, whereas Schofield highlights the affective power of music and enumerates the various types of female courtly performers in the Mughal court which creates more nuance to the term *ṭawā'if*. E. Wald, 'From *begums* and *bibis* to abandoned females and idle women', *Indian Economic and Social History Review* 46 (2009), p. 6; K. B. Schofield, 'The courtesan tale: female musicians and dancers in Mughal historical chronicles', *Gender and History* 24 (2012), p. 165. Oldenburg's early ethnographic study makes a bold claim—'courtesans

subaltern consciousness by paying attention to the text's embeddedness in a history of colonialism and patriarchy. The female subconscious is, therefore, read through 'strategic essentialisms', which involve encounters between elite narrators and gendered subaltern subjects.⁴⁸ The pitfall of this kind of historical analysis is that it reifies fixed essences of male–female, Hindu–Muslim, elite–subaltern, western–eastern, etc. However, this method does allow one to analyse dominant discourse to understand the constructs of women when source material is limited or non-existent.

Other scholars engage with an internal perspective from the courtesan herself or from those in direct contact with her. These studies often explore themes of subjectivity, selfhood, and autobiography through a close reading of source material. In the second category, Scott Kugle and Shweta Sachdeva Jha⁴⁹ analyse the poetic works of Chañda, Imtiyāz's contemporary poet, as a representation of her selfhood by constellating poetic works authored by the subject with other biographical information, such as biographies, *taẓkirahs*, and epistolary works. Kugle and Sachdeva Jha take the perspective that Chañda imitates masculine modes of imperial self-fashioning. Kugle characterises this craft explicitly as strategic persona-shifting calibrated to a male audience:

This gives us a hint as to why she, as a woman poet, often writes in a male voice. As a courtesan, she is adept at changing personas and seeing herself through the eyes of another. She must, after all, behave not just as it pleases her to behave but as it pleases the male audience that she must hold rapt.⁵⁰

However, I would question whether this kind of power must be conceived of as imperial, whether imperial power must necessarily be masculine and whether women's participation in self-fashioning in these contexts can only be understood as an imitative masculinity. I use this as a foil for Imtiyāz: her poem adopts male-coded protocols of authority yet stages them *performatively* on the page rather than in embodied salon performance. A close reading of the *maṣnavī* as a form of autobiography helps us go beyond such understandings to allow Imtiyāz's words to speak for themselves. In particular, the next section focuses on her use of time to frame the larger narrative of the *maṣnavī*.

have logically "constructed" lesbian existence as a legitimate alternative', as a unique resistance which combines a struggle for material needs with an ideological struggle against patriarchal values. Oldenburg, 'Lifestyle as resistance', p. 283. This raises the question of how one can assert power or agency without the imitation of masculinity. Radha Kapuria's work on Ranjit Singh's court highlights the central role of the female body as a legitimizing and negotiating force in the face of British imperial hegemony. R. Kapuria, 'Of music and the maharaja: gender, affect, and power in Ranjit Singh's Lahore', *Modern Asian Studies* 54.2 (2019), pp 1–37.

⁴⁸ K. Shandilya. *Intimate Relations: Social Reform and the Late Nineteenth-Century South Asian Novel* (Evanston, IL, 2017). This idea is elaborated by Shandilya in *Intimate Relations*, where she analyses the narration of subaltern women through elite male discourses of reform because these discourses dominated the social and political landscape of nineteenth-century India and informed conceptualisations of the women's question. In this process, concepts like 'elite' and 'subaltern' become fixed essences and gendered subaltern agency can only be recovered by examining the ways dominant consciousness (elite male) narrates the subaltern.

⁴⁹ Sachdeva Jha, 'Tawa'if as poet and patron', pp. 141–162. Sachdeva Jha takes a more nuanced approach to self-representation. She posits that Chañda is an exemplar of *tawa'ifs* who re-employed 'conventional acts of imperial image making such as composing poetry, architectural patronage, and commissioning chronicles' as significant acts of authorship and autobiographical articulation. Kugle, *When Sun Meets Moon*, pp. 210–234. Kugle describes her masculine modes of self-fashioning through the choice of a male voice in her Rekhta ghazals, 'to analyze "gender" as a kind of performance and to see Mah Laqa Bai as a consummate performer' (p. 210).

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 216.

Temporality as travel

Imtiyāz employs time as a narrative device in three major ways. First, she uses temporal symbols and motifs within the narrative to affirm her religious and historical knowledge. Relatedly, the narrative engages with and reflects on a cultural and historical context that better allows the reader to situate her past and present. Lastly, she manipulates temporal shifts and flashbacks to provide insight into her personal character development and builds nuance for a thematic resonance that carries into the future.

While multiple motifs of time appear in the *maṣnavī*, the most prominent are the following three. First, the arrangement of major religious figures in a chronological order beginning with the Prophet Muhammad, the Ahl al-Bayt, and then all twelve Shi'i imams. Next, a historical nod to three Persian literary couples that reaffirm Imtiyāz's formal education and experience in the genre of *maṣnavī*. Finally, a sequence of Imtiyāz's life, marking the important features, from a past childhood to a dismal present, and culminating in a message for a future reader. Imtiyāz adheres to conventional tropes by structuring her *maṣnavī* around established religious and literary frameworks, yet she innovates by weaving in her personal timeline, infusing the narrative with her own lived experiences and unique voice.

After beseeching the cup-bearer to hear the story of her sorrow and share her burden of grief, Imtiyāz transitions to a *saugandh*, or *qasam-nama*, which is an extended sequence of solemn oaths.⁵¹ Notably, she employs each couplet to solemnly swear by the name of the Prophet Muhammad, Ahl-ul Bayt, and subsequently, each of the Shi'i imams, almost in sequential order, using their respective Arabic epithets. She states:

I swear to you by the guiding Prophet
That you please lend an ear to my condition
I swear to you by Murtaza
I swear to you by Khair ul Nissa
I swear to you by Hazrat Husain and Hassan
I swear to you by my restless soul
I swear to you by Zain-ul-Abidin
For I am without homeland, having left my country
I swear to you by the learned leader
I swear to you by Jafar entirely
I swear to you by Musa al-Kazim
I swear to you by the greatest healer
I swear to you by the majesty of the king of goodwill
I swear by the leader of the path of righteousness
I swear to you by the king of piety of the world
I swear to you by the merciful bountifulness of the sea
I swear to you by Imam al-Naqi
and then I swear by Hasan al-Askari
I swear to you by the Imam of the Age
Without a doubt I swear by the king of both worlds
It is the Mahdi and leader, well-known king
Who is completely the intercessor on judgement day
Say under oath of the Fourteen Infallibles
From that show of kindness, have mercy.⁵²

⁵¹ P. Losensky, 'SAQI-NAMA', *Encyclopædia Iranica* (2016). <http://www.iranicaonline.org/articles/saqi-nama-book> (accessed 20 August 2023).

⁵² Imtiyāz, *Dīvān-i Imtiyāz*, pp. 144–145, verses 15–26; Shakīl, *Kulliyāt-i Imtiyāz*, pp. 151–152, verses 15–26.

The first couplet uses the epithet *nabī-ul-hudā*, which corresponds literally to the prophet who guides towards the right path, for the Prophet Muhammad. The metaphorical path or journey in the quest for knowledge is a recurring theme that we see elsewhere in the *maṣnavī*. After that, she uses the term *mājrā* to describe a present condition but can also be understood as a narration, series of events, or past occurrences. Through this word choice, Imtiyāz is again tuned to a temporal aspect of her autobiography and relaying a story from the past into the present. Murtaza and Khair ul-Nissa refer to ‘Alī bin Abu Talib, the cousin of the Prophet, and his wife Fatima, the daughter of the Prophet, respectively. Interestingly, they are mentioned in two hemistichs of the same couplet, just like the literary lovers mentioned in the following section. The following couplet uses the term *Ḥasnain*, which includes both Imam Hasan and Imam Hussain, the two grandsons of the Prophet Muhammad, followed by an admission of a *jān be chain*, or restless soul. One can interpret this as the anxiety around the historically important Battle of Karbala in which Hussain was martyred. Following this, she swears by Zain-ul-Abidin and connects her own displacement with the displacement that occurred in the lifetime of the Fourth Imam when he was taken prisoner to Damascus. Again, we have the juxtaposition of religious history with the narrative of Imtiyāz’s own life story to render an emotional response from the reader. After this, she swears by the epithets of the fifth, sixth, seventh, eighth, and ninth imams, al-Baqir, al-Jafar, Musa al-Kazim, al-Riza, al-Hadi, and al-Taqi in near perfect order. She then repeats the mentioning of the tenth Shi’i imam with another epithet, al-Naqi, and then moves on to swear directly to Hasan al-Askari—the Eleventh Imam—and the Imam of the Age—Muhammad al-Mahdi or the twelfth Shi’i imam in occultation. The last two couplets of this section implore on the strength of intercession by the *chārdah*, or Fourteen Infallibles mentioned on the Day of Judgement. The progress of time as traced in these oaths, from the early leaders of Islam to the Day of Judgement, acts as a vehicle for the personal struggles Imtiyāz describes elsewhere in the *maṣnavī*. She is using time to connect with the past, placing her promises alongside the revered figures of the Prophet and imams. Then, she looks ahead to the Day of Judgement, to win favour from the arbiters of justice. Time is therefore a mechanism of agentive expression for Imtiyāz that links her present to the past and future. Read as performance, the *saugandh* functions like a set-piece in recitation: a measured sequence that assembles audience, authority, and testimony, moving from prophetic and imamate invocations towards a judgement-day horizon. The arrangement of oaths thus marks tempo and scene changes as much as belief.

She proceeds by invoking a further series of oaths, extending her commitment to the lives of renowned lovers and beloveds from Persian *maṣnavīs*, such as Yusuf and Zulekha, Layla and Majnun, and Shirin and Farhad. She begins:

All are lovers, O beloved, only you are pure
 I swear by all of them, O heart soother
 I swear to you by the beauty of Yusuf
 Then I swear by the love of Zulekha
 I swear by Zulekha’s malignant gaze
 I swear by that innocence of Yusuf
 Continuously, I swear by Layla’s tresses
 I swear by lamentations of Majnun
 I swear by Farhad’s sacrifice
 I swear by that restlessness of Shirin.⁵³

⁵³ Imtiyāz, *Dīvan-i Imtiyāz*, p. 145, verses 31–35; Shakīl, *Kulliyāt-i Imtiyāz*, p. 152, verses 31–35.

It is interesting to note that Zulekha is perceived in two ways, positively and negatively. Her love is pure and consummated in Jami's popular Persian *maṣnavī*, deserving of an oath in the first couplet. This indicates that Imtiyāz was familiar with the poem and perhaps even understood the metaphysical dimensions of Jami's version, where Zulekha's love is a mere metaphor for the pursuit of God.⁵⁴ In the second couplet, however, Imtiyāz follows the Qur'anic narrative more closely, whereby Zulekha is accused of a deadly gaze against the innocent Yusuf. The inclusion of both gives the impression that Imtiyāz is savvy in both literary and doctrinal anecdotes.

Next she turns to the love duo of Layla and Majnun where a *zila' jugat*, or stretched metaphor, provides multiple meanings of the term *musalsal*, which can be defined as consecutive, continuous, or to be linked, chained, or connected. With the first meaning, a continuous or unending pledge is imagined, in which Imtiyāz continues her litany of oaths beyond the family of the Prophet, beyond the imams, beyond the cup-bearer, and all others to again profess an oath by the lovers Layla and Majnun. Alternatively, the term *musalsal* might play on the imagery of Layla's concatenated curls through the word *zulf* (tresses). Finally, and perhaps most amusingly, the term *musalsal* might be playing on the chains that bound Majnun in some renditions of the *maṣnavī*.⁵⁵ In all three interpretations, there is a remarkable emotive element that plays through the verse due to a combination of vivid imagery and aural components.

Following the precedent of Layla and Majnun, Imtiyāz next moves to Nizami's other tragic romance, *Khusrow va Shīrīn* (Khusrow and Shirin), focusing on the secondary love story that takes precedence in South Asia between Farhad and Shirin. In some accounts, Farhad bangs his head on the very rocks that he is excavating to win over Shirin; therefore, the use of *sar chaḥrnā*, literally 'sticking one's neck out to save another', has a double meaning here. Shirin's restlessness can also be understood as impatience and in this regard harkens back to the original idea of time being used as a narrative device to connect the historical tale to Imtiyāz's present condition. From the original story, one knows that Shirin is relayed the message of Farhad's death, implying that she was waiting to hear news about him, furthering nuancing time's presence in both narratives. The inclusion of these three sets of lovers also relocates the narrative of Imtiyāz's *maṣnavī* beyond the South Asian context to the broader Persianate and Arabic settings of the three romantic love duos.

As indicated earlier, Imtiyāz most obviously uses the *maṣnavī* to sequence her life journey in her own terms, with her own words. She explicitly mentions various ages alongside major life events. For instance, she describes the moment when her mother died and her father left, 'Without a doubt, this life was only one and three quarters old.'⁵⁶ She adds the celebration of her bismillah ceremony, 'When the beginning of my fifth year began/I was given a teacher of good character.'⁵⁷ It is later followed by a reunion with her father, 'At the age of nine, I learned he was my father.'⁵⁸ When she includes the compilation date of the *divan* explicitly, one can put Imtiyāz's life story in actual historical terms. She states:

What is the Hijri year when it became clear

⁵⁴ For more on this, see C. Yaghoobi, 'Zulaykha's displaced desire in Jami's Yusuf va Zulaykha', *Journal of Islamic and Muslim Studies* 4 (2019), p. 62ff.; and C. Shackle, 'Between scripture and romance: the Yusuf-Zulaykha story in Panjabi', *South Asia Research* 15 (1995), pp. 153–188.

⁵⁵ For an iconic image depicting this scene, see *Majnun*, in *Chains, Is Led by the Old Woman to Layla's Tent* (The Walters Museum, Accession Number W.609.149B). <https://art.thewalters.org/detail/81272/majnun-in-chains-is-led-by-the-old-woman-to-layla-s-tent/> (accessed 12 December 2025).

⁵⁶ Imtiyāz, *Dīvan-i Imtiyāz*, p. 153, verse 146; Shakīl, *Kulliyāt-i Imtiyāz*, p. 158, verse 146.

⁵⁷ Imtiyāz, *Dīvan-i Imtiyāz*, p. 154, verses 163–164; Shakīl, *Kulliyāt-i Imtiyāz*, p. 159, verses 163–164.

⁵⁸ Imtiyāz, *Dīvan-i Imtiyāz*, p. 155, verse 176; Shakīl, *Kulliyāt-i Imtiyāz*, p. 159, verse 176.

It was 12 on 1200.⁵⁹

In two other couplets, she recalls that her love story spans 36 years, alluding, perhaps, to the duration of her marriage, which abruptly came to an end with her husband's death.

My love is 36 years old
And so in this inauspicious moment, this [death] happened⁶⁰

And later she says,
The age of toils and trouble at 36
And so all at once was washed away⁶¹

The number '36' admits two readings: It is worth noting that we have the recorded date of her husband Tamannā's demise in Aurangabad, which occurred due to an illness in AH 1204/AD 1789.⁶² If this moment marks the duration of a marriage ended by Tamannā's death in 1204/1789, then given the common practice of marrying girls upon reaching puberty, a marriage around 1754–1755 is plausible, which would place Imtiyāz's birth earlier in the 1740s. If alternatively, these couplets mark her age at bereavement, then a birth in the early 1750s is more likely. Neither reading by itself secures biographical facts beyond a reasonable window of life events. At most, the longer-span reading allows a hypothesis that an earlier phase of court-adjacent placement preceded marriage, especially given her *kulliyat*'s courtly address elsewhere; this remains a scenario, not evidence.⁶³ By contrast, Nasir al-Din Hashmi reads '36' as her age at marriage to Tamannā; my evaluation stays anchored to the couplets' wording and avoids treating an interpretive number as a documentary claim.⁶⁴

The end of the *masnavī* takes on the form of a supplication in which she requests the future readers to look on her divan kindly, without too much scrutiny. She states:

This alone is the aim, the wish of heart and soul
that from the noble ones there be praise, and the spirit be glad
There is no successor, nor any heir
let these few words stand like the engraving on a signet-stone
Let this remain a memorial from me
if any discerning one should see it, may he speak of mercy
So that the reader, having read, may say, Well done!
and perhaps I may come near to forgiveness.⁶⁵

These closing verses script reception as prayer and protocol. Imtiyāz petitions 'the noble ones' for *āfarīn* (Well done!) and asks future readers for merciful judgement; she marks the absence of a *khalīfa* (successor) or *jānashīn* (heir) while deliberately installing the poem itself as *yādgār*, a lasting memorial. The image of 'few words stand like the engraving on a signet-stone' frames the text as a seal that carries her name forward in time; it is courtly in posture

⁵⁹ Imtiyāz, *Dīvan-i Imtiyāz*, p. 157, verse 205; Shakīl, *Kulliyāt-i Imtiyāz*, p. 161, verse 205.

⁶⁰ Imtiyāz, *Dīvan-i Imtiyāz*, p. 152, verse 132; Shakīl, *Kulliyāt-i Imtiyāz*, p. 157, verse 132.

⁶¹ Imtiyāz, *Dīvan-i Imtiyāz*, p. 152, verse 139; Shakīl, *Kulliyāt-i Imtiyāz*, p. 157, verse 139.

⁶² M. Jahān, *Mīr Asad 'Alī Khān Tamannā: Hayāt aur adabī kārnāme: maqālāh* [Mīr Asad Ali Khan Tamanna: life and literary works: dissertation] (Hyderabad, 1984).

⁶³ I use 'court-adjacent placement' to describe household or salon proximity in which literacy, recitation, and panegyric circulated. This is distinct from asserting a contract as a *tawā'if*. The term is methodological, not biographical.

⁶⁴ Hashmi, *Dakkan meñ Urdū*, p. 475.

⁶⁵ Imtiyāz, *Dīvān-i Imtiyāz*, pp. 157–158, verses 213–216; Shakīl, *Kulliyāt-i Imtiyāz*, p. 161, verses 213–216.

and *performerly* in effect, yet achieved on the page. Read beside earlier motifs of *musāfir* and *be-waṭan*, this ending converts displacement into textual permanence; where home and heirs are uncertain, the authored book becomes the vessel that travels through time.

The temporal aspect of Imtiyāz's *maṣnavī* contributes to the understanding of her experiences and agency as a woman. A deferential nod to the Ahl-ul Bayt and the infallible imams in order of succession, preserves her religious reputation in the face of those who would malign her character. The chronological order, which additionally incorporates the titles of the imams, cleverly indicates Imtiyāz's religious education and a strategic inclusion of herself within the broader Shi'i Muslim community. This inclusion of the imamate allows for an even deeper spiritual intercession on behalf of Imtiyāz whereby she beseeches and swears on the qualities of each of the imams to elevate herself from the lonely and destitute state at which she has arrived. While placed later in the *maṣnavī*, the inclusion of a canonical *na't* (encomium for the Prophet Muhammad), also positions Imtiyāz among other male literati who understand the conventions of writing proper poetry. Similarly, the inclusion of past literary lovers reaffirms Imtiyāz's understanding of the *maṣnavī* genre and exemplifies her literary sophistication. This persuasive positioning also correlates her own suffering and grief within a cultural and historical context thereby elevating her personal love story to the status of epic love stories. Most importantly, in the *maṣnavī*, time functions as a journey for life and gives Imtiyāz control over her own life story and how it transforms. In the final section of the *maṣnavī*, we see great emphasis placed on the pen and paper used to dictate this narrative. Might we conceive of the pen as a vehicle of travel through the major eras of Imtiyāz's life? Time in the *maṣnavī* is not only remembered past; it is projected reception. Through subjunctive wishes and address to later readers, Imtiyāz moves from past loss to a hoped-for future of recognition and forgiveness, with the pen as her vehicle across those eras.

Imagined travel through space and place metaphors

Imtiyāz's *maṣnavī* is replete with metaphors related to space and place. Beyond the customary tropes evoking locales like the tavern and the rose garden, two pre-eminent motifs emerge—the recurrent journeying towards the celestial heavens and the profound abstraction of homeland loss intertwined with a poignant solitude. In tandem, these thematic elements coalesce to unveil a narrative wherein Imtiyāz not only traverses the conventional boundaries of her domicile but transcends the corporeal realms of mobility, embracing a profound and spiritual expedition.

From the beginning, the *maṣnavī* reads as a deeply spiritual and personal journey through various spaces and places, beginning with the season of love in the place of the tavern. Imtiyāz implores the *sāqī* (cup-bearer) to take notice of this spring-like season in which she is united in youth with her beloved. She quickly transitions to a grief-stricken state at the discovery that she has lost her beloved and is alone in a strange land. She says:

Would you listen to the commotion of my heart
 I'm a traveller, heart wounded and without homeland
 Alas here no one is my grief sharer
 Here no one is from my country
 That heart stealer is no longer, nor is there a companion
 Nor is there any kind one on my state
 Here is no friend, nor a drinking companion
 Nor is my sweetheart with me anymore
 I have no kith nor kinsmen

I'm restless, my heart puller is far.⁶⁶

Repeatedly, the loneliness Imtiyāz describes is directly related to a loss of homeland and feeling out of place. This homeland could refer to Aurangabad, where she was originally from, according to 'Abdul Hai, located at a considerable distance from Hyderabad, where she moved to and died.⁶⁷ The apostrophe to the cup-bearer and the self-naming as *musāfir* work like entrance cues. They summon an audience, set the scene, and license the speaker's petition, much as a salon performance would frame mood before the central piece. The recurring *mehfil* (gathering or party) and *shehr* (city) imagery further simulates a venue where voice and response are expected. She uses the term *musāfir* (traveller) to describe herself, which at the same time can be translated as 'stranger'. Along these lines, one can see a self-reflexivity of how she might perceive her present condition. Perhaps Imtiyāz views her own self as a stranger; she is uncomfortable or distant within herself due to the loss of her beloved and the absence of other companions. There is also a possibility that she views this as a temporary condition that might ameliorate once she is in her homeland.

The choice of the term *be vaṭan*, or 'without country', is also curious because it implies a sense of permanency whereby one has been exiled or stripped of a right to country or home. Taken with Abdul Hai's notice of her move from Aurangabad to Hyderabad, *musāfir* and *be-vaṭan* carry both spiritual and material weight. The poem stages estrangement, but it also allows us to register relocation and the courtly world that relocation implies. Her displacement from Aurangabad to Hyderabad, read alongside the *mehfil* and *shehr* imagery, suggests a court-adjacent ecology in which women's artistic labour circulated through households, salons, and shrines. Her contemporary Mah Laqa Bai 'Chaṇḍa' offers a useful foil, especially since her own family of courtesans moved from Aurangabad to Hyderabad.⁶⁸ Mah Laqa's mobility is documented in embodied performance and biography, while Imtiyāz's mobility is *performerly* and textual, simulated on the page through address, petition, and praise. On this reading, *be vaṭan* marks an inward state and a lived itinerary, since at least one notice places her end in Hyderabad after leaving Aurangabad; the poem's courtly venues (*mehfil*, *shehr*) let that migration read as court adjacency rather than only metaphor.

A motif of desolation and a related physiological condition continue elsewhere. Imtiyāz writes:

Quickly come to the gathering and be manifest
Without you the city of the heart is desolate
Quickly come inhabit the uninhabited
Give me some consolation, listen to the matter
In this journey, O stone-hearted one
Look at my headache and yellow colour
O give your affection to the indigent
For I too was once your intimate friend.⁶⁹

⁶⁶ Imtiyāz, *Dīvān-i Imtiyāz*, p. 144, verses 9–13; Shakīl, *Kulliyāt-i Imtiyāz*, p. 151, verses 9–13.

⁶⁷ 'Abdul Hai, *Tārīkh-e-Aurangābād*, p. 395.

⁶⁸ Kugle notes the itinerant life of Mah Laqa Bai's ancestors: He recounts that Chaṇḍa Bibi (the maternal grandmother of Mah Laqa Bai) left Ahmedabad with her three daughters to settle with the *bhagat* minstrels in Deoliya, who sang and danced for a living. Out of necessity, after the death of Chaṇḍa Bibi, the three daughters fled to Aurangabad and earned fame. After favourable matches with the Asif Jahi nobility, 'With the patronage and support of Rukn al-Dawla, the family of courtesans moved to Hyderabad when the capital shifted there in 1763.' Kugle, *When Sun Meets Moon*, p. 204.

⁶⁹ Imtiyāz, *Dīvān-i Imtiyāz*, pp. 146–147, verses 50–53; Shakīl, *Kulliyāt-i Imtiyāz*, p. 153, verses 50–53.

The first couplet marvellously incorporates the busy and boisterous imagery of a *mehfil* and a *shehr*, which are normally filled with people and things. She juxtaposes this lively imagery with terms like *virān* (desolate or deserted) and its synonym *ujār*. There is also a desperate agitation and movement that transfers from the speaker to the listener with the repeated imperative phrase, 'quickly come'. Despite her physical loneliness, perhaps an embodied agitation compels Imtiyāz to solicit respite from the listener. Therefore, the bustling gathering or city can metonymically stand in for the internal agitation and commotion of the heart. Alternatively, one can read these two lines from a metaphysical perspective, for in Sufism the quest for self-discovery and knowledge is often described in terms of solitude and desolation, specifically with terminology used to describe the desert. This interpretation ties nicely with the journey mentioned in the following couplet. Her physical condition is described like an illness, while the reader possesses a heart of stone. The stone of this couplet plays on the term *yār-e-ghār* (intimate friend or companion of the cave) of the next couplet.⁷⁰

The motif of journeying/the journey seamlessly intertwines with the motif of loneliness, casting a spotlight on the poignant isolation and despondency born from this alliance. As previously indicated, the initial instance underscores this theme, and subsequently, she commences and concludes a lamentation of solitude, each encapsulated within the evocative framework of the journey motif. Imtiyāz writes:

In this journey, first I have this sorrow
That I am alone, this is a great injustice...⁷¹

Nobody asks of my condition now
All these nights were spent in lamentations
For nights were spent awake in prayer
As such were my lamentations
Nor does any friend show me their face
Nor does anyone ask why I am without peace
What does anyone care of my lamentations
What does anyone care of the tears I shed
If there was a friend, might their heart grieve
Upon seeing my state, they would beat their own head...⁷²

All who would pay me favours are far
That's why the sea of sadness is so loud
What can I tell of that journey
Why should I write of every moment's affliction.⁷³

This segment of the *maṣnavī* evokes the emotional separation or distance often depicted in Sufi poetry, where the ardent lover grapples with earthly tribulations, yearning to reunite with the divine in the celestial realm. The nuanced interplay between '*ishq-e ḥaqīqī*' (love of the ultimate truth) and '*ishq-e majāzī*' (earthly love) renders the beloved a dual metaphor, symbolising both Allah and Tamannā, her worldly spouse. The metaphorical

⁷⁰ Qur'an (18:9–26). According to Surah al-Kahf of the Qur'an, this refers to the 'Seven Sleepers or Companions of the Cave' who slept 300 years in a cave to avoid persecution. In other accounts, this is an epithet for Abu-Bakr, a companion of the Prophet Muhammad.

⁷¹ Imtiyāz, *Dīvān-i Imtiyāz*, p. 147, verse 61; Shakil, *Kulliyāt-i Imtiyāz*, p. 154, verse 61.

⁷² Imtiyāz, *Dīvān-i Imtiyāz*, pp. 147–148, verses 63–67; Shakil, *Kulliyāt-i Imtiyāz*, p. 154, verses 63–67.

⁷³ Imtiyāz, *Dīvān-i Imtiyāz*, p. 148, verses 69–70; Shakil, *Kulliyāt-i Imtiyāz*, p. 154, verses 69–70.

journey, encapsulated by the term *safar*, serves as a frame for her expression of loneliness. While the exact nature of this journey remains undefined, it seems an allegory for the voyage of life. Imtiyāz's odyssey unfolds as a quest for profound knowledge, evident in her affinity for poetry, her lament over the absence of a corrective influence, and her plea for grace amid inevitable errors. This expedition emerges as a journey of self-discovery, where she meticulously recalls the tapestry of her past to refine her future. It may also represent a pilgrimage towards divine connection, signified by her invocation of 'Alī at the narrative's inception and her concluding entreaty for intercession from the Fourteen Infallibles. Despite the inherent anguish embedded in this journey, Imtiyāz assumes authorship of her narrative, crafting it as a trajectory towards a more enriching destination. Once again, the pen becomes her conduit not merely for corporeal mobility but for an ethereal transcendence.

Imtiyāz employs various other space and place metaphors in the *maṣnavī*, but none are more important than her travels and descriptions of the sky and heavens. The first instance of this occurs early in the *maṣnavī* when Imtiyāz travels to the sky in search of her beloved and encounters the angels. She writes:

Look how a weight of sorrow stays on the heart
Even the sky is humpbacked from my grief
The sky which has two eyes, the sun and moon
It is dishevelled with the sighs of the crying stars
The angels have asked astonished from crying
O Sky, tell the truth, what is the matter.⁷⁴

Imtiyāz carefully personifies the sky by giving it features like a back and eyes while anthropomorphising the stars who cry. The starlit sky is seen anew as it seems dishevelled like an unkempt mournful lover who wept all night long. The angels even participate in this scene by conversing back to the sky, as if it can tell the story of how it came to be so. In her profound desperation, she reveals a *sarāpā* (comprehensive head-to-toe description) of her husband and his distinctive attributes to the celestial angels in the sky. After this, she arrives at the abode of 'Alī to beseech him for help. She states:

O 'Alī, to whom can I say this pain and sorrow
All the injustice that adversarial sky has shown me
I arrive thus in seek of your help
So the strength of my affliction will remain steadfast.⁷⁵

The *charkh-e kaj-rau* (adversarial sky) is made up of the *charkh* (sphere of the heavens), which moves in a *kaj-rau* (crooked) manner. One can think of this as poor luck, but the fact that she travels to the heavens to make this complaint directly to 'Alī, makes the metaphor of the sky much more profound. She has travelled all this way to seek the assistance of the exalted 'Alī, despite the zig-zag path she had to endure from the adversarial sky.

Later she addresses this very adversarial sky when describing the difficult start to her life. She says:

Every moment would be like the Day of Judgement
O, adversarial sky, what should I say to you
Look what came from your own hands at that juncture

⁷⁴ Imtiyāz, *Dīvān-i Imtiyāz*, p. 147, verses 85–87; Shakīl, *Kulliyāt-i Imtiyāz*, p. 155, verses 85–87.

⁷⁵ Imtiyāz, *Dīvān-i Imtiyāz*, p. 152, verses 129–130; Shakīl, *Kulliyāt-i Imtiyāz*, p. 157, verses 129–130.

Care a little, reflect inside your heart.⁷⁶

And again, later:

Why should I speak to the tyranny of the sky
It was they who stole my land and possession.⁷⁷

Once again, she anthropomorphises the sky by giving it hands through which it does evil deeds and a heart in which it should find compassion. She speaks to the sky perhaps to speak back to destiny to demand answers. In such a manner, her movement to the sky and her conversations with the sky are a form of agency and an intervention within her life.

In a final section, Imtiyāz recounts her descent into a state of profound helplessness following her husband's demise, where each entreaty, prayer, and lament ascended skyward in fervent supplication. She describes:

However, these efforts were wasted
When the complaints reached the throne of God.⁷⁸

Yet, at this juncture, the *maṣnavī* undergoes a transformative shift towards optimism. Imtiyāz narrates how, amidst an extended period of mourning with none to offer solace, she seized the *khāma* (pen) to compose her *divan*. She delineates the urgency with which she penned her verses, acknowledging the absence of a revising hand and extending a plea for leniency to potential critics. Despite this, she articulates her achievements with an undercurrent of pride, meticulously enumerating the myriad ghazals, lyric poems, and diverse poetic genres enshrined within her literary opus.

To summarise, Imtiyāz's *maṣnavī* exemplifies innovation filtered through convention, intertwining established poetic forms with a deeply personal and spiritual narrative. Imtiyāz employs vivid tropes through space and place metaphors to navigate through her personal and spiritual journey. The two most significant motifs are the profound sense of loss and loneliness associated with the homeland and the repeated theme of travelling to and conversing with the sky. Together, these metaphors symbolise Imtiyāz's transcendence beyond physical space into a spiritual realm, reflecting both continuity with existing poetic traditions and her unique intervention within them. Framed this way, loss of homeland is not only a devotional trope. It is keyed to a historical shift towards Hyderabad under the Nizam, which provides the courtly horizon against which her *performerly* voice petitions, praises, and seeks reception. The comparison with Mah Laqa clarifies the spectrum between embodied circulation and textual staging.

The *maṣnavī* unfolds as a deeply spiritual odyssey, starting with the season of love, evolving into a grief-stricken state, solitude in a foreign land, moving to the heavens, and back down to a grounded state of acceptance. During her sojourn in isolation, Imtiyāz skillfully uses the metaphor of a journey; the term *musāfir* conveys not only physical transience but also a sense of being a stranger or temporary in one's own existence. A motif of desolation permeates Imtiyāz's verses, depicting her plea for companionship and solace. The juxtaposition of vivid imagery like the busy city with the desolate heart reveal the irony of Imtiyāz's internal condition. The anxiety caused by such loneliness is palpable to the reader, and the despair that arises from the combination of the two motifs magnify one another.

⁷⁶ Imtiyāz, *Divān-i Imtiyāz*, p. 153, verses 150–151; Shakīl, *Kulliyāt-i Imtiyāz*, p. 158, verses 150–151.

⁷⁷ Imtiyāz, *Divān-i Imtiyāz*, p. 155, verse 175; Shakīl, *Kulliyāt-i Imtiyāz*, p. 159, verse 175.

⁷⁸ Imtiyāz, *Divān-i Imtiyāz*, p. 156, verse 190; Shakīl, *Kulliyāt-i Imtiyāz*, p. 160, verse 190.

At the same time, Imtiyāz's celestial travels and dialogue with the sky reflect agency and intervention within her own life, as she confronts a humanised destiny to demand answers. Whereas she initially seeks intervention and intercession from 'Alī and the other *chahārdah* (Fourteen Infallibles), by denouement, Imtiyāz describes her transition from a state of helplessness to empowerment after her husband's death. She picks up the pen, a symbol of agency, to compile her anthology. This positive turn highlights Imtiyāz's resilience and pride in her accomplishments, symbolising a journey from despair to creative self-expression.

Ultimately, Imtiyāz's *maṣnavī* is both an innovation and a continuation of literary tradition. Her use of space and place metaphors forms a rich tapestry that weaves together spiritual, emotional, and artistic dimensions. These metaphors contribute to her mobility and agency, enabling her to transcend physical and emotional constraints, confront adversity, and assert her voice through the transformative power of poetry.

Conclusion

This examination of Imtiyāz's *maṣnavī* shows how a woman poet mobilises space, time, and address to script an authored self. Reading the poem as autobiography clarifies the genre's affordances: the *maṣnavī*'s scale sustains a sequenced life narrative, its paratexts license apostrophe and petition, and its episode structure turns heavenly ascent, oath, and return into organised set pieces. In this sense, the poem offers a distinctive way of reading genre in early Urdu, where autobiographical cues are carried by narrative form rather than by external memoir.

The analysis also foregrounds 'courtesanly' and 'courtly' clues as modes of voice and posture rather than biographical proof. Terms like *kanīz* operate as self-effacing rhetorical markers that manage audience and reception. The *saugandh*, the apostrophes to the cup-bearer and to 'Alī, and the closing appeal to future readers reproduce court-adjacent protocols on the page, making the poem 'performerly' even when the poet is geographically still. Within this frame, *be-waṭan* registers a double displacement. It names a metaphysical exile resolved through supplication, and it resonates with a probable relocation from Aurangabad to Hyderabad under the Nizamat, situating the poem within a courtly ecology in which women's literary labour circulated through households, salons, and shrines.

Placing Imtiyāz alongside Mah Laqa Bai 'Chāñda' sharpens both common ground and difference. Both wrote within a Shī'i, Deccani court world and addressed the Nizam; yet Mah Laqa's extant corpus is a *divan* of ghazals optimised for salon circulation, while Imtiyāz turns to the *maṣnavī* to braid devotion, memory, and petition into an extended first-person arc. That divergence is not a measure of lesser or greater agency; it marks distinct strategies of subject formation and patronage within the same polity. Imtiyāz's broader oeuvre—her *qasidas* and *qit'as* of praise—confirms her participation in a courtly literary economy even as the *maṣnavī* makes that participation legible as authored self-narration.

Taken together, these readings reclaim Imtiyāz as both first woman *ṣāhib-e dīvān* in Urdu and a still-overlooked architect of genre, voice, and mobility. Her *maṣnavī* preserves a woman's presence at court not only by describing it but by performing its protocols in writing, leaving a textual memorial that travels beyond the limits of place and time.

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