



Herstories of Habba Khatoon, Chand Bibi, and Mirabai: Voice, Genre, and Resistance in Sixteenth-Century South Asian Women's Writing

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Abstract:

Medieval South Asian women rarely survive in literary history as authors in their own right, usually appearing as subjects of court chronicles or devotional archetypes. This paper examines three sixteenth-century figures—the Kashmiri lyric poet Habba Khatoon, the Deccan regent Chand Bibi, and the Rajasthani devotional poet Mirabai—to ask what a literary reading can recover. While Habba Khatoon and Mirabai left behind vernacular verse that challenged Persianate and Sanskritic hierarchies, Chand Bibi left no written works. Treating this absence as evidence, the paper reads her afterlife in *powada* ballads and Deccan miniatures as a literature of representation. Integrating close reading with Jan and Aleida Assmann's theory of cultural memory alongside Spivak's and Mohanty's subaltern critiques, the paper argues that these women's political agency is legible in choices of vernacular form, refrain, and genre.

Keywords: Vernacular Poetics, Cultural Memory, South Asian Literature, Subaltern Feminism, Genre, Herstory.

Interrogating the Archives of Erasure

South Asian literary history, for most of its written life, has been compiled by men, about men, for other men to read. Medieval chronicles, produced under royal patronage, folded female presence into the margins of dynastic lineage, political alliance, or tragic martyrdom and rarely credited women as makers of texts in their own right; where a woman does appear, she tends to arrive already flattened into a symbol of clan honour, territorial conquest, or quiet devotion.

This paper resists that flattening by returning to three sixteenth-century women who complicate it in different ways: the Kashmiri poet-queen Habba Khatoon (variously dated 1553–1609), whose *lol* (a short Kashmiri song of longing) lyrics remain sung in the Kashmir Valley to this day; the Deccan warrior-regent Chand Bibi (1550–1600), who left no verse but generated an entire ballad tradition in her name; and the Rajput mystic-poet Mirabai (traditionally 1498–1547, though her exact dates are disputed), whose *padas* (short vernacular devotional songs) are still performed by singers who may never have set foot in a classroom. What connects them is not a shared genre—far from it—but a shared refusal of the role that court and colonial historiography prepared for each of them: Habba Khatoon was recorded chiefly as an eroticized consort, Chand Bibi as a tragic anomaly or a traitor, and Mirabai as an unmanageable, mad widow. Reading past these labels means reading the actual texts, or in Chand Bibi’s case the texts written about her, rather than accepting the chronicler’s summary of what those texts supposedly say.

Escaping the Dual Trap of Passive Victimhood and Mythic Romanticism

Postcolonial criticism has its own blind spot here, and it is worth naming before going further. Chandra Talpade Mohanty’s “Under Western Eyes” remains the clearest account of

it: Western liberal feminist scholarship, she argues, tends to read non-Western women through a single, homogenising lens that renders them a generic category of victims, without access to agency or historical specificity (56). Indigenous nationalist historiography makes the opposite mistake and, arguably, a subtler one: it turns rebellious women into national icons—mother, saint, and martyr—and in doing so quietly removes the political dissent that made them threatening in the first place. Both Habba Khatoon and Mirabai have suffered this second fate more than the first. Habba Khatoon is popularly remembered as the “Nightingale of Kashmir,” a title that reduces her to a tragic romantic ornament and says nothing of the anti-imperial undertow in her verse after the Mughal annexation. Mirabai fares little better: absorbed into a generalised Bhakti canon that prizes her divine passion, most retellings quietly drop her very worldly refusal of Rajput feudal authority, of sati, and of the confinement that came with widowed royal rank.

Chand Bibi occupies a third, related trap: she is eroticized as an anomalous “warrior queen” within an otherwise masculine Deccani chronicle tradition, treated as an exception to history rather than as a skilled political actor who simply did what regents did. What connects these three traps is what Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak identifies, in “Can the Subaltern Speak?”, as the deeper structural problem: elite discourse, whether colonial, nationalist, or devotional, is prepared to represent the subaltern woman but not to let her represent herself (280). She may be spoken for; the specific, situated content of what she actually said or wrote is precisely what gets smoothed away in the process. This paper tries to work against that smoothing by staying, wherever a text survives, as close to the text as possible—by quoting Habba Khatoon and Mirabai rather than paraphrasing them and by reading the *powadas* (heroic Marathi ballads) and paintings that constructed Chand Bibi as texts with their own formal logic, rather than as a transparent window onto “what really happened.”

Memory, Genre, and the Vernacular as Political Form

Three theoretical threads run through what follows: postcolonial feminism, subaltern studies, and the theory of cultural memory developed by Jan and Aleida Assmann. From Mohanty comes the insistence that women's agency has to be read as historically, legally, and economically situated rather than assumed in advance (56). From Leela Gandhi comes a matching suspicion of nationalist readings that turn women into allegories of sorrow or territorial purity (89–91). And from Partha Chatterjee comes a spatial vocabulary this paper leans on repeatedly: his division of anti-colonial nationalism into an outer, material sphere of politics and war and an inner, spiritual sphere of culture, religion, and household (119–20). Chand Bibi crossed directly into the outer sphere; Habba Khatoon and Mirabai worked from within the inner sphere but turned its private idiom—song, devotion—into something unmistakably public.

However, theory alone will not do the work this paper wants literature to do, and this is where genre becomes the real argument rather than a background detail. Habba Khatoon wrote, or is credited with introducing, the *lol*—a short, intensely musical Kashmiri lyric, closer to what an English reader might call a song than a poem on a page, built for oral performance rather than manuscript circulation. Mirabai's *padas* belong to an even more explicitly musical genre, the bhajan, meant to be sung communally, its refrains designed for a crowd to pick up and repeat. Neither poet, in other words, chose the elite written genres of her period—the Persian ghazal or the Sanskrit *kavya* that a court poet might have reached for. They chose forms built for the mouth and the ear, which is also to say forms that a largely illiterate, largely female audience could inherit without needing to read.

That choice is not incidental to their politics; in Jan Assmann's terms, it is what allowed communicative memory, the short-lived oral memory of lived experience, to harden over

centuries into cultural memory, the crystallised, repeatedly performed material that keeps a community's past alive (126–28). Chand Bibi's case inverts this logic instructively: because she authored no such vernacular text herself, her survival depended entirely on other people's genres—the *powada* ballad, composed and sung about her rather than by her, and the Deccan miniature, a visual genre with its own conventions of heroic representation. Aleida Assmann's account of social memory as a durable space of counter-archival opposition describes exactly this mechanism (42–44): where the court chronicle drops a woman, song and image keep finding new reasons to pick her back up.

None of this amounts to claiming direct access to what Habba Khatoon or Mirabai “truly” felt, or to treating the *powadas* as an accurate transcript of Chand Bibi's actual words on the ramparts of Ahmadnagar. Spivak's warning still applies: even a sympathetic critic risks re-silencing the subaltern by speaking too confidently in her place (283). What this paper claims instead is narrower and, it hopes, more defensible—that the specific verbal and visual forms in which these three women were remembered are themselves evidence of a kind, evidence of what a largely non-elite audience across five centuries found worth repeating.

Habba Khatoon: *Vatsun*, Vernacular, and the Politics of Song

Habba Khatoon was born Zoon, a peasant girl from the village of Chandhara, and her first marriage, to a local craftsman, ended quickly in divorce—a detail her later hagiographers tend to skip in a hurry to reach the more flattering story of her second marriage, to Yousuf Shah Chak, who made her his queen. That second marriage lasted only a handful of years. In 1586, the Mughal army of Akbar annexed Kashmir by what most accounts describe as deception, and Yousuf Shah was exiled and never returned. Habba Khatoon did not remain at court to negotiate a place within the new administration. She left it, choosing the life of a

wandering ascetic in the Kashmiri countryside instead, and it is this decision—not the marriage, not the crown—that her verse keeps circling back to.

Kashmiri literary historians credit her with popularising, if not inventing outright, the *lol*, a compressed, intensely lyrical form built around a refrain, closer in spirit to a folk ballad than to the Persianate court poetry that dominated elite literary taste at the time. Neerja Mattoo, whose 2019 volume *The Mystic and the Lyric* offers the fullest recent English rendering of Habba Khatoon's corpus, describing her poems as functioning almost as autobiography, each phase of an unusual life folded into song (84). One striking sequence returns, stanza after stanza, to a single refrain—a question addressed to an absent lover that never quite gets answered:

“This pain of your separation is what I must bear / Why will you never come this way? / Tell me, now what do I live for? / Where did my love hide himself?” (Mattoo 108)

Read as a private lament, the refrain is exactly what generations of male commentators have taken it to be: heartbreak set to music. However, the repetition itself does political work that a single declarative line could not. A refrain returns; it insists; it refuses to let the question resolve into acceptance. Sung after 1586, with Yousuf Shah gone for good, “Where did my love hide himself?” stops being a question about one man and starts sounding like a question about a vanished kingdom asked over and over, to no one, because no one in the new Mughal administration is going to answer it. The valley itself, its streams, and its seasonal turning become in these poems less a backdrop than a second body, one that keeps blooming and withering in time with her own displacement.

Habba Khatoon's verse can also turn openly, even bitterly, on the domestic order that had trained her to expect so little. In a poem now frequently read as her sharpest surviving

critique of the household politics of her time, she attacks the plain economic contempt that met the birth of a daughter in a Kashmiri household of her period:

“The birth of a daughter snares you in a web / The birth of a daughter is a smear on your name / A lion you may be, but a jackal you become. / Wake up my jewel, from your sleep”
(Mattoo 95)

This is not devotional or romantic material in any conventional sense; it is closer to satire, delivered in the voice of a woman who has clearly had to absorb this exact contempt herself. Chitrlekha Zutshi’s work on Kashmiri oral history situates this kind of song within a broader pattern: Habba Khatoon’s continued public singing after her husband’s exile functioned, in local memory, as a form of nonviolent resistance to a new imperial order that would have preferred her silent (112–15). Read through Chatterjee’s spatial model; her trajectory runs backward against the expected current: not from a public role into private withdrawal but from a private, domesticated queenship out into the open valley, the most public performance space she had left, carrying political content (loss of territory, loss of sovereignty) inside a form, the love lyric, that both Mughal and later colonial commentators were only too willing to file under “merely personal.”

Chand Bibi: Authored About, Not by—the *Powada* and the Politics of Representation

Chand Bibi presents this paper with a genuinely different problem, and it is worth pausing on that problem rather than papering over it. Unlike Habba Khatoon and Mirabai, she left no poems, no *padas*, no manuscript in her own hand that survives to be read today. What she left is a record of action: regencies in Bijapur (1580–90) and Ahmadnagar (1596–99); a defense of Ahmadnagar Fort against Akbar’s army fierce enough to force Prince Murad to the negotiating table; and a death in 1600 that different sources still cannot agree on. In a

literature paper, this absence matters, and rather than force a quotation that does not exist, it seems more honest and theoretically interesting to treat that absence as itself the subject.

Chand Bibi survives almost entirely as someone else's subject matter. Mughal court historians such as Abu'l-Fazl wrote about her from a position that had every institutional reason to diminish her, and later colonial writers inherited much of that framing wholesale. However, an independent, and considerably more sympathetic, textual tradition grew up around her in the Deccan itself: the *powada*, a regional ballad genre built for oral performance and public memory rather than court archive, kept her story alive on terms the Mughal chronicle never sanctioned. In these ballads and the folk memory that surrounds them, Chand Bibi does not simply lose Ahmadnagar and disappear from the record; she becomes the warrior princess who refuses northern conquest, sometimes even a figure who never really died at all but escaped to return one day—a version of the story the historian Sarah Waheed has traced through Persian, Urdu, Dakhni, and Marathi sources as one of at least three competing accounts of her end: murder by rival court factions, suicide, or flight (616–33).

Waheed's research is also the best available guide to Chand Bibi's visual afterlife: an eighteenth-century image of the queen on a white horse, falcon on her wrist, became something close to viral within Deccan miniature painting, an emblem of sovereignty borrowed directly from an iconographic vocabulary usually reserved for male rulers (618–20). Reading that image as a text—which is what it is, in the sense that matters here, a composed and repeated set of visual signs—tells us something a battle chronology cannot. A falcon on a king's wrist signals command over territory and over the hunt, an authority coded thoroughly male in the surrounding pictorial tradition; placing that same falcon on Chand Bibi's wrist is a formal choice, not a neutral record of what she happened to be holding one

afternoon, and it borrows the visual grammar of sovereignty and hands it, deliberately, to a woman.

Sumathi Ramaswamy's work on how female allegory was mobilised to map the modern Indian nation and Tapati Guha-Thakurta's account of nationalist art history's own selective canon-building in colonial Bengal both describe a related operation: the conversion of a specific woman into a reusable symbol for someone else's later political project (Ramaswamy 45; Guha-Thakurta 112). The Deccan image of Chand Bibi risks the same fate, and a fuller literary-historical account of her afterlife would need to ask which parts of that recurring image preserve something of her actual political practice and which mostly serve the pride of the audiences who kept repainting her, generation after generation.

Either way, the fact that she has no verse of her own is not a gap in this paper's argument; it is the argument, in miniature: a demonstration, on Spivak's terms, of what happens to a woman who acts decisively but never gets to write the sentence herself (280–84). She ruptured Chatterjee's gendered spatial divide by directly entering the outer, material sphere of warfare, sword in hand according to most accounts of the 1595–96 siege—and as a result, she was spoken about forever in the archive that was created, rather than being read even once.

Mirabai: The *Pada*, the Refrain, and the Refusal to Burn

Mirabai left the opposite problem behind: too much text, most of it uncertainly hers. She wrote no manuscript that survives in an autograph copy; her *padas* exist only through centuries of oral transmission, reshaped by generation after generation of singers, which means that any given verse attributed to her today carries a real question mark over its exact wording—a point this paper takes seriously rather than glossing over. What does not carry a question mark is the persona that emerges across hundreds of these songs: a princess of the

Rathore line, married into the Sisodia house of Mewar, who, upon the early death of her husband Bhoj Raj, refused the entire script written for an upper-caste Rajput widow.

One of her best-attested and most frequently cited *padas* opens by refusing the central item on that script outright. In the original Rajasthani it runs:

sati na hosyām, girdhar gaṁsyām — “I will not become sati; I will sing instead of Girdhar” (qtd. in Hawley and Juergensmeyer 134)

The refusal is not staged as tragedy; it is staged as a trade, one ritual obligation exchanged for a different, self-authorised devotional practice, and the poem goes on to itemise exactly what she is giving up—the ornaments, the veil, and the domestic seclusion owed to her rank—as if daring the listener to object. Equally well attested, and arguably even more widely sung, is the refrain that recurs across dozens of her other *padas*: *merā to giridhar gopāl, dusro na koī*, “My lord is the Mountain-Lifter Krishna; no one else is mine” (Sangari 1464; Hawley 88). As a piece of poetic technique, that refrain is doing something quite deliberate: a woman who has just declared herself the exclusive property of a god cannot, by the same declaration, remain anyone’s property here on earth—not her husband’s family’s, not the Rana of Mewar’s, not the state’s. Kumkum Sangari and John Stratton Hawley have each made the case that this devotional idiom, *madhurya bhava* (passionate love directed at Krishna), functioned for Mirabai as something considerably more worldly than pure theology (Sangari 1464; Hawley 88).

She did not immolate herself on her husband’s pyre; she left the palace’s inner quarters to sing and dance in public with wandering sadhus and devotees of every caste; and she is said to have taken as her spiritual teacher Raidas, a saint from the leather-working community, a choice calculated to offend both caste hierarchy and Rajput pride in a single gesture.

Hagiography adds a further, more dramatic layer: poisoned *charanamrit*, a cobra in a basket, and a bed of nails, each supposedly sent by the Rana's household and each supposedly survived. Whatever one makes of these episodes historically, they function inside the poetic tradition as a recurring formal motif: the instrument of punishment converted, verse after verse, into proof that her body no longer answers to Rajput jurisdiction at all.

Formally, the *pada* rewards attention as much as the story it carries. Its refrain structure was built for call-and-response performance, not solitary reading—a formal choice that let an illiterate audience own the song immediately, without ever needing a manuscript, which is exactly why a version of “*merā to giridhar gopāl*” can still be heard in Rajasthani villages that have never seen a printed edition of her work. Upon reviewing Chatterjee's spatial division again, it becomes clear that Mirabai's refusal operates on two levels simultaneously: her decline of sati withdraws her body from the state's material claim over widowhood, while her singing and dancing outside the zenana reject the inner sphere of confinement that the state relied on her, as a royal widow, to maintain.

Tanika Sarkar's account of how later Hindu nationalist discourse would go on to valorize, and thereby quietly domesticate, precisely this kind of feminine religious defiance as a marker of communal purity is worth holding alongside this reading (43–45): It is the same trap named earlier in this paper, resurfacing centuries later in Mirabai's own reception history and a reminder that recovering her resistance also means separating it from the nationalist romance that grew up around it long after she was gone.

Intersecting Vectors of Resistance

Set side by side, Habba Khatoon, Chand Bibi, and Mirabai clarify how differently female dissent could be voiced or denied across sixteenth-century South Asia. Habba Khatoon

answered the Mughal conquest in the *lol*, sung in Kashmiri; Mirabai answered Rajput feudal patriarchy in the *pada*, sung in Braj and Rajasthani; Chand Bibi answered the Mughal siege directly, on the ramparts, and was answered back, after her death, in the *powada* and the miniature, genres that belonged to other hands.

Three common threads nonetheless connect the three figures. The first is a shared distrust of elite language: Habba Khatoon and Mirabai both bypassed the Persian and Sanskrit that a court poet of comparable status might have reached for, composing instead in Kashmiri and Braj/Rajasthani, languages that let them speak past male literary gatekeepers directly to an audience that could sing along. The second thread is the use of spatial transgression as a form of performance: Habba Khatoon turned the open valley into a stage; Mirabai turned the temple courtyard into one; Chand Bibi, more literally than either, turned the fortress wall into one.

The third is a shared dependence on cultural memory rather than the official archive: none of the three needed a court historian's permission to survive, because each, in her own way, was kept alive by people who were never going to be granted access to that archive in the first place—women, singers, villagers, the same audiences the elite record was least interested in preserving. In Assmann's terms, the short-lived communicative memory of an actual afternoon's singing or a single day's siege was converted, generation after generation, into the durable cultural memory that finally put all three names back into circulation—not because the archive relented, but because the song, the ballad, and the painting never stopped being performed (126–30).

Implications for Feminist Literary Historiography

Reading Habba Khatoon, Chand Bibi, and Mirabai together, with attention to genre and form rather than to biography alone, suggests a working model for how feminist literary history might approach other pre-modern, non-Western women whose relationship to authorship is similarly uneven.

First, it resists the reductionist habit of treating medieval South Asian women as either silent victims or quietist mystics; close reading of the verse that does survive shows two poets making distinct, deliberate formal choices—choices of genre, of language, of refrain—to be heard by exactly the audience the elite tradition had written off.

Second, it argues that literary scholarship needs to take seriously the texts written about women, not only the texts written by them, as a legitimate object of literary rather than merely historical analysis; the *powada* and the miniature are not naive documentary evidence waiting to be mined for facts; they are compositions with a poetics of their own, and reading them as such is what let this paper say something about Chand Bibi's afterlife that a straightforward chronology could not.

A methodological caveat belongs here, since a paper built on oral and reperformed material owes its reader some caution about what that material can and cannot prove. *Vakhs*, *padas*, and *powadas* survive through centuries of reperformance, and individual wordings shift between regional traditions and between competing modern translators—which is exactly why this paper has favored short, independently corroborated phrases, cited to specific published translations, over longer passages that cannot be checked against more than one source. Its claims rest on the reliability of a pattern that recurs independently across three unconnected regional traditions—vernacular language, spatial transgression, and survival

through song rather than through the state archive—rather than on the verbatim accuracy of any single quoted line.

Habba Khatoon and Mirabai did not wait for modern feminist scholarship to grant them authorship; they had already claimed it, in the sixteenth century, in a form built to outlast any single manuscript. Chand Bibi claimed something riskier and, in the end, less protected: direct action inside a sphere that never intended to let a woman narrate it afterwards. Her survival, with a falcon on her wrist and riding through paintings she never posed for, represents a kind of literature: not exactly hers, but persistently and stubbornly about her.

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