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Reclaiming the Elusive *Shadaj*: Female Vocalists' Search for a Room in the World of Hindustani Classical Music

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Abstract:
The paper tries to discuss the ingenious artistic imprints left by the two premier female Hindustani Classical vocalists- Begum Akhtar and Kishori Amonkar, who tried to create an ontological space of their own in the phallocentric musical discourse. The paper utilizes the concept of an alternative literary space for females expounded by Virginia Woolf in her essay *A Room of One's Own* (1929), to analyze the efforts made by these two songstresses to create a subjective space of their own in the world of Hindustani Classical Music. The musical techniques and politics used by Akhtaribabi and Amonkar have been discussed to show their struggle against the musical tradition, which is like an ever-observant paternal figure, and they tried to deviate from the tradition by paradoxically acknowledging its traces in their renditions. Besides using Woolf's ideas, the essay also tries to implement Hélène Cixous' idea of the *écriture féminine*, to underscore the female vocalists' search for a feminine musical language, which is divorced from patriarchal domination. Therefore, the paper uses literary tropes to understand musical mechanisms and politics of subjectivity.

Keywords: Hindustani Classical Music, khayal, ghazal, tradition, Virginia Woolf, patriarchy.

Introduction:

In this world dominated by patriarchal institutions, females have almost always occupied a secondary position; their sagas, voices, and achievements have been reduced to mere footnotes on the margins of history written with the phallic stylus. Female presence in the arts and cultural discourses has been considered pernicious, as if they are a redundant "excess" that plagues the system. Females have always tried to reclaim their lost homes within these discursive systems; feminist movements have shaken the planet, under the leadership of eminent female activists, from Mary Wollstonecraft to Simone de Beauvoir. But the struggle continues, as women are continuously trying to combat patriarchal hegemony, and establish a metaphorical room of their own, that resembles the elusive *shadaj* or the fleeting and sequestered tonic of the Hindustani Classical Raga Marwa. This paper tries to explore the ingenious imprints left by two eminent female vocalists of Hindustani Classical Music, Begum Akhtar and

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RESEARCH ARTICLE

Kishori Amonkar, who have successfully established their identity in a patriarchal musical atmosphere, through the lens of Virginia Woolf's influential feminist essay *A Room of One's Own* (1929). Like Virginia's quest for a room in the phallocentric literary space, Akhtaribai and Amonkar have also searched for an ontological space of their own in the musical ecosystem.

Virginia's Room: An Exposition:

Two lectures by the celebrated modernist writer Virginia Woolf, delivered at the University of Cambridge's Newnham College and the Girton College in October 1928 constitute the kernel of *A Room of One's Own.* This text argues for the establishment of a literal as well as a figurative space for the female writers in a literary world colonized by men. Woolf creates her fictional alter-ego- "Call me Mary Beton, Mary Seton, Mary Carmichael or by any name you please" (Woolf 5), to address the question of women writing fiction. She analyzes women's secondary position in society, how men's colleges have always invited wealthy sponsors, while women's colleges struggled to raise funds; how the impoverished females are unable to leave behind wealth for their daughters, since entrepreneurship, which is required for amassing wealth, is at loggerheads with the child-rearing duty. Despite the Married Women's Property Act of 1882, which granted married women to own and control property, their financial position remained deplorable, as they had been regarded as objects of child-bearing and ignorance; they were the quintessential models of inferiority who inflated masculine superiority. She, therefore, advances her thesis, "All I could do was to offer you an opinion upon one minor point- a woman must have money and a room of her own if she is to write fiction" (Woolf 4). The names of the four Marys become universal signifiers for the feminine condition, and Woolf reflects on the misogynistic, patriarchal representations of women. The absence of notable female writers in the fecund literary climate of the Elizabethan Period, and the scarcity of information regarding the middle-class women of that epoch, instigate her to construct the hypothetical character of Judith Shakespeare, who is the antithesis of the literary giant William Shakespeare, and she narrates her fictional heart-wrenching saga. Judith had literary potential, which was prevented from blossoming by the male establishment.

Aphra Behn, however, had been able to decolonize her mind from the patriarchal specter. As a widowed middle-class woman trying to make ends meet, she could produce impeccable literary works. Woolf discusses the women novelists' rise in the nineteenth century; George Eliot, Emily and Charlotte Brontë, and Jane Austen used the novel, a new literary form,

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RESEARCH ARTICLE

to express themselves and their subjective utterances. Woolf aspires to rekindle the Judith resting inside all women, by providing women with a space crafted by economic independence and privacy-

> "For Woolf, the professional woman writer was the one who could be independent of men, who earned her keep by means other than menial labor or being a dependent wife. The literary profession for a woman has come to represent in our current formation of the canon an escape from social roles and norms, whether the escape is complete, as in the case of Behn, or partial, in the simple attainment of a quiet room" (Ezell 586).

Woolf's thesis about the literary room for women would be used as a trope in the following sections, to discuss the search for a space for the females in the world of Hindustani Classical Music.

Women and Hindustani Classical Music:

Hindustani Classical Music or *Shastriya Sangeet* is the art music prevalent in the Northern parts of India, in the states adorning the Indo-Gangetic Valley, like Uttar Pradesh, Rajasthan, Bihar, Madhya Pradesh, etc. This eclectic musical tradition, which is distinct from its southern counterpart, Carnatic Classical Music, dates back to the twelfth century BCE, and it revolves around the axis called the "Raga" (a melodic musical mode, somewhat similar to the Western modal melodic system). This vibrant musical tradition (which manifests itself in different classical forms like *khayal* and *dhrupad*, and semi-classical forms like *thumri*, *dadra*, *chaiti*, *kajri*, and *tappa*) claims its origin in the ancient scriptures or the *shastras*, and its basic principles were earmarked in treatises like Bharata's *Natyashastra* (second-third century BCE) and Dattila's *Dattilam* (around third-fourth century BCE). In a religious and spiritually minded country like India, the female deity Saraswati is believed to have been presiding over the faculties of knowledge, art, wisdom, and especially music. Thus, Indian music has a feminine Symbolic Other governing its dynamics. She is the consort of Lord Brahma, "the celestial creative symphony when Brahma created the universe" (Wikipedia). With a lute-like instrument *veena*, she sits on her magnificent lotus bed, and the music practitioners pay homage to her occasionally. However, despite this feminine antecedent, Indian musical tradition has been overtly phallocentric, as innumerable constraints have been imposed upon women regarding learning and performance of classical music. One example can be cited in this regard; Ustad Bande Ali Khan, the celebrated *beenkar* (player of lute-like instrument *veena*) of the prolific Kirana Gharana in the nineteenth century, trained his two daughters in playing the *rudra veena*, and they had been married off to two *beenkars*- Ustad

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RESEARCH ARTICLE

Zakiruddin Khan and Ustad Allabande Khan, so that they could perform alongside their illustrious husbands. But the prejudiced husbands forbade their wives to touch the instrument, as the very notion of women hailing from a respectable Muslim family performing music was obnoxious; "frustrated at this restriction, the women took the opportunity to play while husbands were absent. On returning and discovering their disobedience, the husbands forbade them forever to touch the instruments. Their wives in retaliation cursed the family, saying that one-day; a woman would save it from destruction" (Rao 5). This incident depicts women as threats to the phallocentric musical discourse; they have been represented as non-musical. Despite some amount of liberal attitude shown towards women in the past, their position was perhaps redefined to separate them from the "lowly" *dharhis* and the *mirasis*, who were associated with the courtesan culture.

Nearly two thousand years occupy the temporal gulf between Amrapali (the celebrated royal courtesan of Vaishali in 500 BCE) and Gauhar Jaan (one of the first Indian musicians to record her songs on seventy-eight rpm shellac records), and they have witnessed a reconfiguration in the attitude towards the courtesans, who were proficient in singing and dancing. They were the predecessors of the professional female entertainers, who marked the point of "separation of domesticity and childbearing from finer skills of influencing outcomes of significance" (Sengupta 124). In ancient India, the courtesans (the *devadasis* and the *kothewalis*) were freed from domestic regulations; they were the nodes of pleasure and cultural refinement, who attracted the wealthy citizens. They instructed the native Indian rulers' sons in matters of culture and etiquette. They embodied sublimity, elegance, impeccable manners, and graciousness, as Mekhala Sengupta observes,

> "Courtesans, freed from domestic conventions, were unarguably the first specialists in the art of winning friends and influencing people. It was not just charm, but entertainment and persuasion. They had an opportunity to train in the literary and the performing arts (but in a commercial way), and to be independent and free-thinking. They applied these principles to all matters of the state and diplomacy, with considerable impact" (125).

Both the Hindus and the Muslims accepted them; they later shined as musical virtuosos, eminent danseuses, and erudite scholars. It would not be outrageous to conclude, that their elevated stature challenged the patriarchal dominance. Musical forms like *thumri* and *ghazal* germinated from these artists, who had mastered the sixty-four arts, described in Vatsyayana's *Kamasutra.* But the situation

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RESEARCH ARTICLE

hit the reverse gear, with the 1856 British annexation of the Kingdom of Awadh, which was the cultural hotspot of North India, and home to innumerable courtesans. The decline of the royal patronage, along with the imposition of the Contagious Diseases Act and heavy penalties because of the courtesan's alleged involvement in the Great Revolt of 1857, transformed the esteemed institution into a system of prostitution.

The following sections will try to explore the attempts made by the two prominent female classical vocalists of the twentieth century-Begum Akhtar and Kishori Amonkar, to sculpt a space of their own and reinstate the lost feminine glory in the phallocentric musical discourse. They tried to create their own musical and subjective idioms from the inside of the robust tradition, which is like an ever-observant paternal figure; they tried to transgress its limits, yet paradoxically acknowledged its traces in their works. Following Harold Bloom's thesis expounded in *The Anxiety of Influence*, it can be said, their idioms germinated from their musical predecessors, yet they suffered from an Oedipal tension with the tradition. To achieve their space, they effaced the paternal specter of the past, and created their own musical registers, through the dual processes of entombment and enshrinement. They entombed the radioactive influences of the tradition, and simultaneously created their musical edifices on the remains of that tradition.

Begum Akhtar:

Begum Akhtar or Akhtaribai Faizabadi was one of the most prominent exponents of Hindustani semi-classical music of the twentieth century. This prolific songstress, dubbed *Mallika-e-Ghazal* (Queen of Ghazal), remembered for her mellifluous renditions of *ghazal*, *thumri*, and *dadra*, was the uncrowned musical queen of Lucknow. Her triumphant presence under court patronage, in films, theatre, and radio, as the national icon of courtly culture, perhaps made the celebrated poet Faiz Ahmed Faiz utter, "Her personal charm, her great generosity of heart and sympathy for good causes made her acquaintance as rewarding as her art" (qtd. in Qureshi 97).

Born to a poor professional singer Mushtari in Faizabad, in a matrilineal household, Begum Akhtar's musical training began under the tutelage of Imdad Khan, Ghulam Muhammad Khan, and Ata Muhammad Khan. Her sonorous voice and incredible capacity to absorb music were fine-tuned by the training pattern designed for the male classical singers. Her career blossomed from the 1930s; her seventy-eight rpm recordings gained massive popularity and her name became a household word, "which was reinforced by her signature at the end of the three-minute records" (Qureshi 113). Invitations from the royal courts, a brief stint in acting at the

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RESEARCH ARTICLE

Bombay film industry, and the popularity of her records established her as a highly sought-after artist amid Lucknow's courtly culture. She bought a house in a prosperous neighbourhood and named it "Villa Akhtar." Following Woolf's thesis, this could be described as her moment of acquiring a room of her own, which was governed by her subjectivity and economic independence. This might have prompted her to invert the established conventions, and suggest marriage to Ishtiaq Abbasi, a Lucknow barrister. However, she used her independence to enter the patriarchal discourse of marriage, which halted her performances and singing; her habits were also curtailed and she was put on the radar of her strict sister-in-law. Though her desire to be the wife of his beloved was stated as the motive behind her marriage, the threat of a ban on professional women singers might have prompted her to select this suicidal path. After his mother's death, the shattered Mr. Abbasi allowed Akhtaribai to relaunch her performative career.

Her radical approach elevated the status of *ghazal*, and consolidated its place in the rubric of classical music. Her rigorous training and flexibility to respond to different patterns of listeners proved to be instrumental: "This contextual sensitivity served her to develop a classicized adaptation of the intense, yet volatile emotionality of the intimate salon performance, now distilled into a self-contained musical enactment: a concert style of light music" (Qureshi 120). Poetry, which was central to her music, underwent the process of resignification through her *ghazal* performances, after it had degenerated because of the demise of the feudal culture. Her musical politics made her gain access to the cultural sphere of the elite urban bourgeois class. From being a lowly *tawaif*, she rose to become the national treasure, posthumously receiving the Padma Vibhushan award from the Government of India.

Her disciples addressed her as "Ammi" ("Mother"), which projected her as a loving maternal figure than a master; she developed "a relationship of nurturing and kinship solidarity rather than of dominance accepting submission" (Qureshi 123). The profession of a music teacher had been largely phallocentric; though gender-neutral term likes guruexists, she eschewed such nomenclatures and estranged herself from the implied status of such addresses. She treated her disciples, like Shanti Hiranand and Rita Ganguly, as daughters, and never demanded a cent. As Regula B. Qureshi writes,

> "One can see in Begum Akhtar's circle of female students and admirers an alternative nucleus of mutual support in which power relationships are absent. Invoked by kin terms of address, the kinship model of interaction between a mother and her daughters suggests solidarity and intimacy, informality

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RESEARCH ARTICLE

> and mutual care that are practiced in traditional households where women are essentially autonomous in managing and inhabiting the "domestic sphere" " (123).

Her birth in a matrilineal family, where a girl is identified by her mother's name (Mushtari was known as *Bada Sahib* or "His Highness"), triggered spontaneous inter subjective relationships that allowed self-expression in verbal and musical domains, and her effervescent, expressive, romantic, and spontaneous singing style reflects this fact; it marked a departure from the subdued and less expressive feminine style prevalent during her time. Her voice continues to live amid her disciples, like Hiranand and Ganguly, who cultivate their guru's intricate and traditional repertoire. She became a model for numerous women performers, most notably Shobha Gurtu, who tried to recreate Akhtaribai's expressive performance style. Pakistani female vocalists like Iqbal Bano and Farida Khanum have reinterpreted her *ghazals*, thereby creating a female musicians' sorority that transgresses the international boundaries. She would not have comprehended the meaning of the term "feminist," historian Salim Kidwai observes:"He suspects that Begum Akhtar would have broken into helpless giggles and thought it a great joke to be called a feminist, despite the fact that she had so smartly stepped away from the crippling circumstances of her birth and daredto be different" (Jaffer). She remains a colossus, who dared to design her own space in the patriarchal musical discourse.

Kishori Amonkar:

The *prima donna* of Hindustani Classical Music, Kishori Amonkar will always be remembered for her unconventional and rebellious approach to the *khayal* genre. With a musical repertoire charged with contradictions and ambivalence, she was constantly trying to bridge the gulf between monolithic tradition and classicism on the one hand (for which she had immense respect), and her subjectivity and originality on the other. Her performances were the eruptions of her robust subjectivity in the larger discourse of the *shastriya* tradition, which was essentially masculine and threatened to curtail subjectivity. Musicologist Mohan Nadkarni describes Amonkar, along with Kumar Gandharva, as the singer, "who pioneered the avant garde movement in Hindustani Classical Music" (Vajpeyi). The disciple of her mother Moghubai Kurdikar (the premier vocalist of the Jaipur-Atrauli *Gharana* established by the phenomenal Alladiya Khan), Kishori's marriage to her husband Ravindra Amonkar, could not deter her from pursuing a vibrant musical career, as her mother raised her two sons.

Her music could be described as bordering on the "unexpected"; she would play with improbability and titillate the audience to move beyond the territory of expectations. A romanticist in her approach,

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RESEARCH ARTICLE

the eclectic Amonkar reconfigured her singing style by borrowing elements from other *gharanas*, thereby revolutionizing the original Jaipur- Atrauli approach. By departing from her tradition, she incorporated *alapchari* (long wordless or rhythmless exposition of a raga) into her performance, and relaxed the knot combining note and rhythm, so that her rendition assumed a jelly-like structure, floating on the superstructure of rhythm. She tried to reestablish the attention towards the verbal meaning of the compositions, which was grossly neglected by other illustrious vocalists. She emphasized the semantic value of the musical notes; with her focus on the "pure language of notes," she attempted to transcend the mere musical technicalities. As a fierce critic of the constraints enshrined in the *gharana* system, she said, "There is nothing called a *gharana*. There is only music. It has been bound in these *gharanas* and that is like dividing music into specific castes. One should not teach the students the limits of this art. There are none" (Wikipedia). As a temperamental and spiritual singer, she loathed genuflecting before the influential musical superstars or the capitalist forces, and boldly declared that she performed not for the sake of money, but for communicating with the transcendental signified. Her iconoclastic turn is observable in her rendition of the Raga Yaman, where she redesigns the rhythmic structure of the famous composition *Eri Ali Piya Bina*, and translates the *tritaal* (sixteen beats) pattern into *sitarkhani taal* (sixteen beats with different metrical structure from that of*tritaal*), that led to the creation of a new architecture of sounds, which, despite being sublime, was considered to be a blasphemous experiment by the traditionalists. Musicologist Kumar Prasad Mukherjee observes,

> "She is an enigma to me. When I listened to her for the first time nearly twenty years ago at the house of Jagdish Goenka, I had told one of my non-Bengali friends, 'Where has she been all my life?' I have heard her wonderful renditions of Bhupali, Bhoop Nat, and Shuddha Nat...but after listening to her renditions of Khem Kalyan, Bageshree, etc., I wondered whether I had received erroneous training in these ragas all my life." (Mukherjee 65, translation mine).

This enigmatic quality of Amonkar can be interpreted as the manifestation of her musical politics; through her ambivalent attitude towards tradition, which encompassed both innovation and allegiance to the past, she tried to create her own space in the phallocentric musical discourse: "Her music encompassed a complexity of emotions—separation, longing, waiting, eagerness, anxiety and

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RESEARCH ARTICLE

tension. But beyond all this, there was a yearning, irrepressible and none too concealed, to identity with nature. Amonkar's music reached out to the primeval elements of nature: nature giving birth, generating a million different things" (Vajpayi). She wanted to explore the feminine side of the arts and nature, an endeavor that had been suppressed by the patriarchal approach to music. Her music reeked of sheer loneliness amid a crowd. Her politics of subjectivity is observable in her rendition of the Raga Bhoop, *Sahela Re Aa Mil Gaayein*, where she replaces the raga's masculine regality with a feminine lonesomeness, that attempts to create a spiritual nexus with the almighty, by disregarding the earthly constraints.

Conclusion:

The discourse of language has always been colonized by patriarchy; masculine notions have gained the upper hand in the construction of meaning, where women have existed as floating signifiers. Jacques Derrida defines this phenomenon as *phallologocentrism*, "'the system of metaphysical oppositions' predominant in Western philosophy that has until recently been written by men" (Addicott). Women's absence in the signifying system prompted the French feminist and literary theorist Hélène Cixous to formulate *écriture féminine*(in her essay "The Laugh of the Medusa")- a literary writing, that departs from the traditional phallocentric writing discourse. It attempts to reorient the feminine position in the signifying system, through the use of literary techniques like metaphors and stream-of-consciousness. The musical domain is similarly plagued with phallocentric powers, and this paper has tried to highlight the eruption of female voices and the construction of their musical idiosyncrasies, that inaugurated a separate feminine domain in Hindustani Classical Music. This domain, epitomizing these female vocalists' attempts to spearhead a reverse colonization of the musical signifying system and discourse, can be identified as *musique féminine*, or "women's music." Derrida's formulation of the nexus between the paternal figure and *logos* (speech, word, or reason) is important in this context,

> "…*Logos* also requires the attendance and presence of its father. Without the father (the paternal presence), as Socrates and Derrida both note, *logos* would share the features of writing (a son, anorphan, without being able to defend himself or attend to his own needs). Such an orphan-son is not however only regarded with pity; he is also accused for achieving emancipation and self-sufficiency" (de Ville 8).

If vocal music could be interpreted as a form of non-verbal speech, i.e-*logos*, or a form of speech that navigates the gap between the concrete and the abstract, it can be said, that the *musique féminine* attempts

RESEARCH ARTICLE

to expunge this pernicious paternal presence, and it paradoxically brings music closer to writing, which, in Derridean nomenclature, is a *pharmakon* (a word signifying the interplay of "poison" and "potion"). It is simultaneously threatening the patriarchal discourse, yet sculpting a feminine musical space. The French critical theorists portray the feminine as the one evading representation in the patriarchal symbolic structure, and remaining as an "excess." But, these female vocalists have subverted this claim by moving from the position of the signified to the signifier. In the Derridean universe, speech already is *arche-writing*, a language that precedes both speech and writing: "Writing refers not only to inscription, but to the possibility of inscription. In this sense, writing is not a graphical derivation, a result from speech, but the possibility of articulation between speech and writing" (Andrade). Music, a non-verbal mode of communication with larger semantic bandwidth, that transcends linguistic barriers, refers to that possibility of articulation between speech and writing. Vocal music thus belongs to that rubric of *arche-writing*. By restructuring their approach to classical vocal, and by designing a new feminist musical discourse, Begum Akhtar and Kishori Amonkar have introduced a musical *écriture féminine*in Hindustani Classical Music. This gynocentric domain is comparable to that elusive tonic of Raga Marwa, that shadowy room of females envisioned by Virginia Woolf. The female musicians are writing their own sagas with their vocal gynostyluses or "voice pens".

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RESEARCH ARTICLE

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