

Retrieving History from Piro Preman's *Aik Sau Sath Kafian*: A Story of Survival and Resilience

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Abstract:

The complex story of the Punjabi poetess, Piro Preman (1832-1872), reveals an uncharted feminist struggle both within and outside of the conventional Bhakti and Sufi frames of devotion and rebellion. Belonging to premodern Punjab, Piro shirks her social position as a low caste prostitute, a *kanjari*. She rebels against her Muslim born identity to resurrect herself as a devotee of her guru Gulabdas, the pioneer of Gulabdasis, a religious sect that belongs to a broader Sikh cultural heritage. Her work titled *Aik Sau Sath Kafian*, called a "micro-narrative" in the tradition of Punjabi genre of Kafi, is an autobiographical treatise of her life. Set at the time when Emperor Raja Ranjit Singh reigned over the Punjab, the era is noted for an overall presence of a religiously tolerant secular ethos. However, the description in Piro's Kafis problematizes the historiographic details that portray "precolonial world as Utopia." *Aik Sau Sath Kafian* (160 Kafis) becomes a telling historical document; Piro's account of the traumatic episode of forced reversion corroborates records that have elsewhere pointed to the existence of intercommunal tensions in the pre-colonial Indian Punjab. In her oral vernacular tale, Piro records her defiance against the Muslim Turks and Hindu pundits by rhetorically resisting patriarchal representations of womanhood. She foresees herself as a woman choosing to live a life at the Gulabdasi *Dera* (temporary abode). Her narrative reveals that within the Gulabdas's *Dera*, Piro constructs a safe space for women, and builds a new definition of freedom, love, and radical struggle against patriarchal religious structures. In addition, the present discussion views the text as queer to argue for a review of both the textual terrain of the genre of the Kafi, and the history of precolonial Punjab, which has generally been silent about the presence of female poets.

The poetic medium of the Kafi can be defined as a folk song in the native language of the common people of the Punjab. Folk songs in the regional language of Punjabi were part and parcel of the cultural landscape of the region of Punjab. The Kafi is a short poem that is structurally arranged in two or more stanzas, in which each stanza comprises of four or six lines, and these consecutive stanzas are followed by a refrain. Anne Marie Shimmel describes the Kafis as “short songs composed by Sufis for their followers” (p.81, as cited in Malhotra, 217). The male poets from the Punjab, Baba Farid (1173), Shah Hussain (1538), and Bulleh Shah (1680), are known to have crafted the traditional Punjabi poetic form of the Kafi that is variously sung by bards and qawwals throughout South Asia. Piro Preman, born in 1832 in the pre-partitioned Indian Punjab, composed her work *Aik Sau Sath Kafian* (160 Kafis) in the tradition of the predecessor male poets.

Since this discussion weaves Piro Preman’s life and work in the context of precolonial Punjab, it is important to revisit the history of this region. Historically speaking, the British colonization of India had begun in the early nineteenth century, but the region of Punjab was one of the last areas to fall under British occupation. The state of Punjab was one of the most complex territories since its native population consisted of variegated people who belonged to different religious, social, and ethnic groups. Between 1832 and 1872, which is Piro Preman’s lifetime, Punjab was a stronghold of the Sikh Emperor Ranjit Singh (1798-1839). According to renowned historian Harjot Oberoi, the people of the region of the Punjab adhered to Hindu caste-based modes of social ordering (1994). Piro’s work is shaped amidst this fraught cultural landscape where disparities based on caste, class, and gender abound. This antagonism amongst the communities is mirrored in *Aik Sau Sath Kafian*.

Alongside in Piro Preman’s “autobiographical narrative,” a coalescence of Bhakti and Sufi-mystic philosophy can be deciphered. The two movements, Bhakti and Sufism, are known for initiating modes of rebellion against Muslim and Hindu religious orthodoxies. This is one of the ways through which the pioneers of the two philosophies largely identified as the Sufi-mystics and the Bhakti Saints made an impact on ordinary people of precolonial India. Both movements were similar in providing refuge to all those who over a long period of time had felt suffocated by the devastating effects of caste divisions, feudal customs, and religious orthodoxy. An overarching effect of the Sufi-mystics and the Bhakti saints can be felt in the presence of a dissenting spirit, one that stirs the socially marginalised to discard religious and social hierarchies, which is expressed in various forms throughout Indian literary and cultural history.

Piro Preman taps into the “radical potentialities” of both Bhakti saint and Sufi-mystic philosophy (p.1522, Malhotra, 2012). Bhakti literature provided the most evocative language to poets, so Piro draws on the motifs of love, separation, and final union with the beloved from the earlier Bhakti poetry composed by the fifteenth century poet Kabir and the sixteenth century poetess Mira Bai. The Sufi-mystic thought provided her with modes in which discrimination based on caste and class could be interrogated.

In the poetic text *Aik Sau Sath Kafian*, the Punjabi poetess recalls an episode from her unconventional life. Scantly available biographical details reveal that Piro Preman belonged to a Muslim, low-caste family from Kasur and was originally named “Piranditti.” Her name translates approximately as gift from the saints. Since *Aik Sau Sath Kafian* is strongly indicative of her sound knowledge of religious and mythological texts, Piro appears to have been educated at some local *madrassa* (a place of study or an academy). As a young girl, she was then forced into working at a brothel in the city of Lahore, in the

center of Punjab. Crushed and exploited by her circumstances, Piro encounters the charismatic spiritual leader Gulbdas, “the maverick guru” (p.549, Malhotra, 2009), at a congregation in Lahore, whereupon she decides to change the course of her own life. She abandons both her profession and her religious identity, and concomitantly cuts ties with her past, vowing to spend her life at Gulabdas’s *Dera* (temporary abode) under his tutelage. She announces breaking off from her religious beliefs, which in the eyes of the Muslims is an unpardonable sin. In *Aik Sau Sath Kafian*, she recalls how they call her out:

A Musalman speaks (from among them), this churail, who is she?
Having revoked our religion, how can she leave? (p.112, stanza 41)¹

The closest synonym to the word churail in English is “witch.”² To be called a “witch” was a terrible accusation, as it alluded to a woman being the incarnation of evil, a female demon feared and reviled at the same time. In the poetic narrative, the Muslims referred to as “Turks” first feel annoyed and are subsequently infuriated by her resolve to embrace the new spiritual philosophy advocated by Gulabdas. She is not afraid and does not give into their demand that she rejoins the Muslim community through a reconversion of faith.

Piro Preman’s story resonates with stories of rebellious women across the world; Gloria Anzaldúa writes in *Borderlands*: “Most societies try to get rid of their deviants” (p.19). Piro, who stands out as a rebel and a deviant, pays a price for non-conformity. She is threatened, chased, kidnapped, and persecuted by the Turk Muslims. In this work, she reminisces about the traumatic episodes of her past life and finally, closes on her having found success in her quest to join the spiritual community led by Gulabdas.

Punjab had been the significant administrative and industrial center of the Indian subcontinent and was invaded by Turkish mamluks in the early thirteenth century. The work of the French Historian Amaury de Riencourt records the invasion, calling it “Muslim imperialism” that started, in his view, when the mamluks stepped into India (p.165). This is corroborated by Romila Thapar who writes that by the fifteenth century, the Turkish and Afghan rule had been established virtually in all parts of the subcontinent (p.435). Tanvir Anjum also points out to the missing links in Indian historiography which had ignored key events such as “Turkish militarism” in the charting of the beginning of Muslim rule in India (p.218).

The Turkish armies seizing control of forts in North India in 1206 is qualified as a “watershed” in the history of the Indian subcontinent by Cynthia Talbot: “They entrenched themselves in India and in the long run changed the political and cultural climate of the region” (p.25, Asher and Talbot). Rishi Singh further expands that the 19th century invasion of Punjab by “Turks, Mughals, Afghans, and Persians” resulted in the establishment of a socially dominant group comprising “an elite Muslim class” (p.14). Piro Preman’s poetic text gives a reminder that in her lifetime, precolonial Punjabi society was sharply divided between the religious categories of Muslim and non-Muslims. The strong presence of religious divide is surprising for narratives that romanticize the rule of the Sikh emperor Ranjit Singh, considered by some as one of the most peaceful and religiously tolerant periods in Indian historiography.

¹ All the quotes from *Aik Sau Sath Kafian* are my translation to English.

² Crapanzano (1980) compares “churail” with the “capricious and vindictive” female demon called “the jinniyya.”

It appears that the Muslim Turks had brought a version of Islam that was more fundamentalist and orthodox than the local Indian version of Islam, also called the folk Islam in the subcontinent. Atis Dasgupta suggests that the Muslim political and religious elite established a cultural hegemony: “The important Muslim groups, who accompanied the Turkish chieftains, consisted of long-distance traders, administrators, leaders of imperial corps, orthodox maulvis and literati” (p.31). As a result of the Turkish invasion, the orthodox maulvis took over as the *ashraf*, a term used for the religious and intellectual elite class amongst the Muslims, as opposed to the lower classes, the *ajraf*, who were treated with disdain and suspicion.³

Undoubtedly, underlying the text of *Aik Sau Sath Kafian* is a history of what appears to be a very polarized world of which Piro was a descendant. She voices anger against the foreign oppressors, and castigates the qazis and maulvis, or the learned religious men, whom she repeatedly calls “callow” for their self-righteousness, vanity, and hypocrisy. Piro’s reprimand is strikingly similar to that of Bulleh Shah, the eighteenth-century Sufi poet known for the oral poetry in the genre of the Kafi. Bulleh Shah condemns the *ulema*, the learned theologians, for their falseness and pretense. Piro also explicitly condemns all reigning religious ideologies of her time, including Hinduism, Sikhism, and Islam for having divided the common people into factions. However, her incisive questioning of the exclusion of women from the religious and the spiritual gives a rhetorical quality to the text. She says:

The Turks have confined us in codes of Quran, the Hindus too imprison,
 One follows the West, the other follows the South...
 Trapped they are in their differing ways,
 For the Hindus, significant is the braid,
 What to do with the women?
 they both do not know. (p.142-143)

Aik Sau Sath Kafian indicates various other ways in which Piro Preman employs her agency and asserts her choices. Riencourt states that the invading Turks (already Persianised themselves) imposed a more foreign culture on India through Persian language and literary influences (p.174). Consequently, Persian, Braj, and Sanskrit were the languages of use, in speech and writing, in the higher echelons (p.27, Singh). So Piro’s recounting of her tale in the Punjabi language, one that was most accessible to the common folk, can be read as implementation of her agency. In contrast to the literature in an elite language, a discourse in an indigenous language depicts “everyday life experiences” of the common people (p.34, Novetzke). *Aik Sau Sath Kafian* reveals the everyday life of Punjabi culture and of ordinary people. One instance of this is Piro’s description of the scene where people had gathered to listen and see Gulabdas:

He has arrived in Lahore, the one with a charming face
 The name of the bazar is Moti, where he takes his seat at the upper most level
 The sheet is spread on the bed, where he takes the place
 He sits straight, and is deemed by everyone as charming
 He wears a headgear one that looks like a plume
 All men and women from Lahore have come to visit him (p.115)

³ The terms “ashraf” and “ajraf” have been employed and explained by Asani (2022).

Alf Lüdtke introduced the idea of *Alltagsgeschichte* (the history of everyday life), which aims at exploring the “experiential and subjective dimensions” of the “lives of those who have remained largely anonymous in history” (p.x). In contrast to traditional historiography, this is an alternative approach to understanding history, one that relies less on grand structures, figures, and events, and instead focuses on an analysis of the representations of everyday interactions found in various texts.

The above cited scene from *Aik Sau Sath Kafian* is yet another reminder of a precolonial Punjabi society that was broadly divided into castes, sects, and ethnicities. Gulabdas (1809-1873) who took inspiration from “diverse sources that included Bhakti and marginal Sufi ideas” was the founder of a more inclusive and all-embracing monistic spiritual sect (p.549, Malhotra, 2009). It is hardly surprising that Piro would choose Gulabdas as her spiritual leader since in the text she refers to herself as a “Sudar,”⁴ a person of lower caste. It appears that the Gulabdas’ sect was one of the many spiritual sects in Punjab that provided refuge to the socially ostracized lower caste communities. Michel Boivin records that it was at this time precisely that “India was vulnerable to any new philosophy of life that would do away with the fantastically unjust social structure imposed by the caste system” (p.177). Boivin’s study mentions various “spiritual paths,” such as “Daryapanth or the Nanakpanth,” with flexible spiritual frameworks that had emerged in colonial Sindh. However, Gulabdas’ readiness to include Piro in his community is an evidence of the broader range of inclusivity he extended towards the oppressed, one that did not exclude sex workers.

Specific incidents depicted in the poem give further insight into the larger socio-political milieu, especially when Piro in an evocative tone conjures the most traumatic events of her past life. Her presentation of the scene of confrontation with the mullahs and the qazis needs to be understood in a broader context. The qazis and the mullahs show up to claim Piro Preman as part of their own community; they insist that she reads the Kalima to revert to Islam. In a vivid scene, she is seated in the middle of a group of people, and as the qazis enter the room she refuses to follow the customary greetings by not standing up. Queried for her lack of respect for the custom, Piro confronts the opponent group comprised of both men and women. This scene bears a stark resemblance with an incident from Waris Shah’s folktale *Heer-Ranjha*, in which the village cleric questions Heer (the leading female character) on her indiscretions, including her refusal of an arranged marriage proposal. Heer counter-argues with the religious authority figures, as she “reinterprets qazis interpretation of Islam” (p.6, Kazmi). In a recent study, the South Asian scholar Sara Kazmi analyzed Heer’s rhetorical arguments closely which in Kazmi’s view signify the voice of a female iconoclast. However, in comparison to Waris Shah’s fictional character, Piro’s arguments and brazenness are much more assertive and forthright.

Anshu Malhotra (p.1507, 2012) contends that Piro, “the Muslim Prostitute,” chooses a spiritual path that offered spiritual salvation to socially and culturally marginalized individuals. She refuses to take refuge in any religious ideology, as she considers that religions fail to provide her with the path to finding salvation and truth. She tells her friends, her female companions, that the “Turks and Hindus can’t help us cross the path” (p.126). Thus, the Turks’ reaction to Piro’s deviance – her outright rejection of the religious orthodox ideologies – provokes the tribe’s fear of the deviant who is “different, being other, therefore

⁴ Piro was a born Muslim, and the precepts of Islam did not permit any social distinction based on caste. However, in the subcontinent, the caste division remained an inseparable feature of all communities.

lesser, therefore sub-human, in-human, non-human.” (p.19, Anzaldúa). At first, she is offered consolations and rewards and is cajoled by her female friends, the sahalian, to come back to her tribe: “You are so beautiful; you should eat the best and decorate yourself...we are there to protect you.” (p.120, Preman). This is a reminder of the general claim that “culture (read males) professes to protect women” (p.19, Anzaldúa). What is obvious to Piro is that the promises are fickle and frivolous, and she did not care about the material life anymore.

Malhotra’s impressive research on Piro Preman’s life and work reminds the readers that Piro was a courtesan who was trained in a brothel to sing and perform, and she made use of these skills in her writing and narration. This is corroborated by Gurpreet Bal who states that as a much sought-after courtesan, she (Piro) was visited by the powerful general of Ranjeet Singh’s army (p.95). Thus, her writing bears similarity to a performance on stage. Piro almost seems to perform to an audience as she speaks for herself and ventriloquizes other characters. Piro’s voice as the narrator of her own story alternates between the first-person pronoun (I) and the third person plural pronoun (they) throughout the poetic text. But the most dramatic parts of the story bring out details of her being harassed and persecuted by the Turk Muslims. In one scene, the Turk Muslims say aloud:

Bring whiplashes to flog her body,
Frightened, will bring the kalma back to her mouth instantly
When flogged with lashes, she will say the kalma outrightly... (p.125)

A. K. Ramanujan’s work comments on the medieval Indian texts for demonstrating “reflexivity.” In many ways, this conceptual experience features in Piro’s *Aik Sau Sath Kafian*. According to Ramanujan, “reflexivity” is an essential trait in writing that helps bring about the possibility of subverting the conventional norms. Ramanujan further notes that “reflexivity takes many forms: awareness of the self and the others, mirroring, distorting, parody, family resemblances and rebels...” (p.189). Reflexivity in *Aik Sau Sath Kafian* can be read in many ways, an instance of which is Piro’s cross-questioning of the qazis that signifies a “language of dissent” (p.190, Ramanujan). Another example of this reflexivity is the way Piro exhibits a keen self-awareness as she describes herself as generous, courageous, and wise; these qualities help her turn enemies into friends:

Together with Guru’s invocation Piro has three abilities
She is generous, brave and afraid of nothing
This earns Piro some female friends
They cry their hearts out seeing Piro’s situation. (p.132)

Piro’s sharpened awareness of her circumstances exposes what Sandra Gilbert calls the “many legged tarantulla of patriarchal law” (p.xii). Piro Preman’s knowledge of the cultural and religious traditions is another remarkable feature that enhances the work. She confronts men by brazenly questioning the Muslim tradition of circumcision. In another instance, she admonishes the Muslim Turks for the long-held tradition of female infanticide. Refusing to give up on her ideal chosen spiritual path, Piro becomes “the shadow beast that sends men into a frenzy of anger and fear” (p.18, Anzaldúa). She is aware that dissenting from religion would attract exemplary punishment. Schooled in the history of former poet-rebels, she situates herself as belonging to the lineage of Kabir and Mansur Hallaj, who was cruelly

executed in 922 A.D for proclaiming “Ana Al-Haq” (“I am the truth”). Piro herself is a mystic and a truth seeker, and the nature of mysticism implies a personal experience of the divine, a belief understood as “Ana Al- Haq.” According to Ali Asani, this provocative debatable mystic philosophy of “Ana Al- Haq” is considered dangerous since it blurs the lines between the creator and the created. This astonishing contemplation on the nature of truth is instilled in *Aik Sau Sath Kafian*. Anshu Malhotra comments that the poetic text is immersed in the Hindu mystical philosophy of *adaivata* (p.1506, 2012). In addition, Piro Preman’s text echoes the politics of resistance that is like “malamati” Sufis: the Sufi-mystics who drew blame upon themselves by appearing to be impious to the public. However, Piro’s virtuosity lies in bestriding the two mystic strains, Hindu Vedanta and Sufi-mysticism, without blindly following either of the two traditions.

Piro Preman shows ingenuity in the ways she transformed the genre of the Kafi. Despite situating her text in the traditional Punjabi genre of Kafi rendered by Shah Hussain and Bulleh Shah, she did not simply mimic the form and structure as employed by the male writers. Rather, her writing interweaves different discursive styles. Her text, both in content and form, hints at a queerness of form. Vast and wide in usage, the term “queer” has come to embrace different meanings. Medieval art history employs the term to define works that “defy most scholarly classifications” (p.159, Whittington).

In Karl Whittington’s analysis, queer is defined as breaking “historical and academic boundaries” (p.165). Sandra Gilbert uses the term “queer” for texts that are “edgy, daring, playful and transgressive” (p.xxv, Gilbert). Anshu Malhotra observes that Piro liberates the Kafi from a prosodic structure i.e., the repetition of lines (p.57, 2017). In Karma Lochrie’s view a queer reading of a text “seeks out dissonances, gaps and excesses of meaning” (p.180).

By transgressing the modes of the genre, Piro provides alternative ways of writing or modes that embody queerness. Pasha Khan analyses the Punjabi Genre, the Qissa, and argues for its heterogeneous essence. Dismissing western humanist notions regarding the “purity of genres,” he writes that the very notion that genres can be pure does not stand up to scrutiny (p.206). Piro’s breaking with the traditional poetic tradition can be termed as queer, as she destabilizes the genre by incorporating her own story in the structure of the Kafi. This notion can be extended to the ways in which Piro juxtaposes Hindu romantic mythological characters, such as Sita and Rama, with Sufi saints such as Kabir, and Mansur Hallaj in the text. At other instances, Piro inscribes the text with what can be read as spiritual and erotic elements. Neeti Singh, one of the earliest translators of Piro Preman’s works, points out to how Piro weaves “the spirit and sensuality of the mystic-tawaif’s brashness and sincerity” (p.38). Singh states that “[t]here is dissolution of boundaries” in Piro’s poetry, especially in the way she melds “spiritual and carnal” in her works (p.39). Lochrie points that in the context of interpreting medieval texts the “queer” must be understood as surpassing limitations of the categories “homosexual or homoerotic” (p.181). Drawing from Lochrie’s view, queer in Piro occurs “in the reversal of mystical and secular love conventions” (p.181). Scott Kugle points to the mingling of sexual and spiritual aspects in the sixteenth century poet Shah Hussain’s real-life romantic affiliation with his Hindu-Brahman beloved Madho Laal. Kugle calls this phenomenon “Spirituality’s Queer Connection to sexuality” (p.194, 2007). The carnal connection to the spiritual is illustrated through the sharing of bodily fluids: “It is a persistent theme in the Islamic tradition that mystical insight can be passed on through bodily contact, especially through a shared drink or saliva”

(p.195). Unsurprisingly, in *Aik Sau Sath Kafian*, the inexplicable link between eroticism and spirituality is conveyed in through imagery of indulgence in food:⁵

I have satiated myself with sweet berries
I have tasted the sweet berries of your love (p.102)

Her song, *Aik Sau Sath Kafian*, is personal and historic. The details serve to provide a glimpse into Piro's life, and the history of places and people significant to her. This resonates with Gloria Anzaldúa's remarks that a woman's act of writing cannot be separated from her life. It is fascinating how Piro's text allows the reader a closer access to the spaces in her immediate surroundings. As she is forcibly moved to another place and locked in a four-story building, Piro expresses a deep emotional longing for the city of Lahore, the place of her first encounter with Gulabdas:

I am harassed and oppressed
Made to leave prosperous city of Lahore, I am sent to be cooped up
No sisters/female friends with me, I am sent all alone. (p.144)

To convey her emotional angst as a lonely woman, she conjures the symbolic bird kunj, the Indian Punjabi "long-legged, long-necked crane," a bird that features in the epic poem *Ramayana*. Julia Leslie talks about the significance of the crane in the *Ramayana*, whose cry represents Sita's anguish and pain of separation from her beloved Rama (p.470). The crane in *Aik Sau Sath Kafian* symbolizes Piro's existential loneliness that instills an overall sense of meditative contemplation which is carried throughout the text. Later, she refers to Sita and Rama as the mythological love tale and provokes her guru to do his part in rescuing her. At this point, the text is replete with oddly erotic undertones. She calls her guru "jani," which can mean a fortune teller, a conjurer, and a beloved. Piro embodies the queer outlook of the Sufi poets Shah Hussain and Bulleh Shah, especially to be found in tropes that express her intense devotion and love for the guru. Ruth Vanita and Saleem Kidwai highlight the presence of nonessentialist and untraditional homoerotic desire in Shah Hussain and Bulleh Shah's poetry, which in their view is an essential part of Indic queer historiography (p.183). Scott Kugle chart the transgressive aspects of the Sufi-Saint Shah Hussain's life in his rendition of the Sufi-Saint's hagiography entitled *Haqiqat al Faqara* (The Truth of Those Impoverished by Love). The sixteenth century Sufi-Saint and poet Shah Hussain "never married, raised children, became a patriarchal leader of a household and had a primary erotic attachment to a man who was also never married" (p.184, 2000). Kugle declares that this was Shah Hussain's way of "inverting gender expectations;" unsurprisingly then, the Sufi way of life is often deemed transgressive (p.185, 2000). Similarly, Piro Preman led a life outside the traditional norms and ways. She resisted being labelled as a wife or a mother and had no legitimate male affiliations to her name. As predecessor Bhakti women poets, Meera, Laa Ded, or Aka Mahdevi, she too moves away from the husband towards a figure who resembles a divine entity or God.

Her intense devotion to her guru, Gulabdas, requires us to take a fresh perspective on the meanings of desire and sexual love. To borrow from Hélène Cixous and Catherine Clément, Piro's relationship with

⁵ According to Karma Lochrie the late medieval Christian mystical texts incorporated "images of hunger and voraciousness" which symbolize eroticism and sex (p.184).

her “libido,” her sexual prowess, “is cosmic” (p.88). While she talks of the marvelous guru and his miracles, she participates in writing history differently from the privileged world of historians that is dominated by men. Piro spent the remainder of her life at the Gulabdas’ *Dera*. Unsurprisingly, Piro and Gulabdas are buried together almost in the same tradition as Shah Hussain and Madho Laal are interred in one grave.⁶

A former prostitute’s decision to live the rest of her life in search of spiritual salvation was “scandalous;” the actual move was even more “transgressive” (p.546, Malhotra, 2009). That the two, Piro and Gulabdas, shared “intimate relations” without any legal status conveys the subversive nature of their relationship (p.548). Malhotra delineates on Piro’s attempt to move from the situation of a prostitute to living as a partner with her Guru as characteristically “paradoxical” (p.1515, 2012). Her choice to live the rest of her life as an unmarried woman at the Guladas *Dera* put her in a “liminal space” (p.1517). It was a place fraught with possibilities of a scandal, especially for a woman who had formerly been a prostitute. Thus, in Malhotra’s view, like other female Bhakti figures such as Mira Bai, Piro does not become “the paragon of feminine virtue” (p.1521). In Sharada Chatterjee’s view, “Queer has become a repository of many things over time” (p.1). For Chatterjee if queer marks a difference from heterosexuality, it can also be understood as breaking away from heteronormativity (p.2). Likewise, Sara Ahmed considers that queer politics has now extended to embrace “antinormativity” as resistance to all norms: given the paucity of choices, queer lives may “avoid assimilation” or “learn to live with the available scripts for living and loving” (p.155). Thus, in a lot of ways, Piro embodies a queer life. Malhotra records in her study that the present followers of Gulabdas, the Gulbdasi community, refer to Piro Preman as a mother figure known as *mata Piro* (mother Piro), which is certainly a way of desexualizing a woman’s heritage. Moreover, it is indicative of the spiritual followers’ attempt to evade the former prostitute turned consort’s queer legacy.

The semantic fluidity embraced by the word “Queer” has provided opportunities for scholars to expand the range of meanings associated with the term. It allows for immersion in varied identities and descriptions that fall out of line with the traditional. According to Tison Pugh, the process of queering genres involves “destabilizing the audience’s typical expectations with the specific position of subverting subject position” (p.119). *Aik Sau Sath Kafian* destabilizes antecedent notions of the Kafi since the medium of the Kafi was marked by the male poets as short mystical songs. The evolution of the Kafi from a short song into a narrative verse form offers scholars a chance to reflect on the ambivalences engendered in Piro Preman’s text. In *Aik Sau Sath Kafian*, Piro validates her experiences as an oppressed lower caste Muslim woman from medieval India, but alongside she “reconfigures the parameters of subject and object” by taking the subject position (p.121). The genre’s terrain becomes more fraught especially when Piro incapacitates the Muslim Turks by using abusive language. She exploits the lability of the genre of the Kafi to express her emotions and thus, elicits a queering potential (p.117). Piro curses the Muslim Turks, calling them “majban ke kukre” (dogs of religion); at one instance, she indicts them with an expletive, “dhi ke laure” (those who rape daughters) (p.89, Malhotra, 2017). Her daring use of expletives in *Aik Sau Sath Kafian* both shocks and thrills, and her shifting of voice and contexts in the poetic narrative adds complexity to the text.

⁶ See Khalid, 2018.

In her ditty, Piro appears as a doting lover, a caring friend, a passionate believer, while also being a feisty character, a social outcast, and an angry dissident. On one hand, in the very act of writing, Piro's text becomes witness to a time lost to the present readers, and on the other, Piro constructs a space for female authorship. More importantly, by narrating her personal history in the medium of the Kafi, Piro carves a queer text, one that ruptures the male tradition of writing in the Kafi form.

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