The Creative Feminine

THE CONSTRUCTION OF GENDER THROUGH THE PLAY OF LOVE IN MEDIEVAL INDIA (XIII-XIV century).

A Study of Some Literary Texts.[1]

Within the patriarchal set-up of Medieval India the feminine agents have taken surprising and unexpected strategies of survival and resistance, whose traces are scattered along historical and literary sources. Although secular and religious (male) institutions have profusely used gender categories to legitimate themselves and hold control over society, the language of the feminine has managed to cut through the net, and to make its voices clearly audible. However, the potency of such a language did not - and could not - choose the direct speech of the dominant cultural system it was dealing with to express itself. Rather, the feminine spoke through symbols and metaphors, allusions and interferences, visions and epiphanies, engaging in a creative process that finds its roots and shares a continuity with the origin of existence.

A wide and eerie shadow hangs over knowledge. It is that of the largest ignored majority of humanity: the female one. Not only its voice had been silenced for ages, but its presence has been left out from any field of studies as not influential, not determining, not worthy of attention. History is not an exception to the rule. For centuries, traditional history has banned from its books and its research all the subalterns accounts, making itself merely a power-chronicle. Women's history was just one of those omissions.

It is only in the last fifty years that the historical debate has opened up to new approaches and methodologies, and historians have finally realized that their job had been so far incomplete and defective. In other words, they have started to grow up. It is not only a numeric or moral (paternalistic) obligation that urges historians towards the forgotten half of the world; rather it is the discovery of gender diversities as universal patterns of oppression applied to transversal realities (from past to present, form big to small, from far to close) to make the gender category a vital priority for historians. "Every theory of culture, every theory of society, the whole conglomeration of symbolic systems is all ordered around hierarchical oppositions that come back to man/woman opposition*"*[2]. Gender is a new way of interrogating history, so far deprived and mutilated in unforgivable ways for any serious approach to scholarship.

But what is the language gender uses, and how can we comprehend it? To decipher this language – or better yet these languages – we have to access the symbolic system. It is through symbols, in fact, that societies represent gender, and it is through symbols that gender speaks to us. Symbols stand there for hermeneutic: "Without meaning, there is no experience*",* says Joan Scott; and *"*without processes of signification, there is no meaning*"*[3].

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[1] Questo articolo e' l'elaborazione di un seminar paper redatto per il corso "*The Structure of Medieval Society*", presso la Jawaharlal Nerhu University di Nuova Delhi nel maggio 2011, nell'ambito del conseguimento di un MPhil (Master in Philosophy) in Storia Medievale.

[2] Joanne Meyerowitz, *A History of "Gender*, AHR, 2008, p. 1355

[3] Joan W. Scott, *Gender as a Useful Category of Historical Analysis*, in "The American Historical review", Vol. 91, n. 5. 1986, p. 1063

In this work I intend to analyse **the construction of gender during the Delhi Sultanate with relation to the experience of love, as it is represented by the symbolic languages of literature**. What I will try to demonstrate is that gender identification, although it always appears coherent and fixed, is, in fact, highly unstable. Differences are never just "differences", just as no border or boundary is ever complete or rigidly determined. Says Chandra Mohanty: "we are still working with a very imprecise and inadequate analytical language...Because in fact our language is imprecise, I hesitate to have any language become static*"*[4].In other words, there is not one language of gender, rather diverse usage of languages whose meaning must be searched without expecting a final and exhaustive result: "the questions about gender are never completely answered*"*[5].
Moreover, literary sources spread over a wide range of genres, each of them carving up the subject in a peculiar and specific manner. Each genre creates its own language, style and atmosphere, setting boundaries and rules of affiliation, resulting in literary identities. This implies that the same matter can be treated very differently, to the extent that even opposite and contrasting images arise, although each time presented as lyrically absolute. Hence, *"*within a literary system – which I understand as being the sum of all forms and genres available to a particular culture at a particular time – each genre develops a specific 'competence' and shape both form and meaning accordingly*"*[6].
Finally, the experience of love itself, being at one time individual and universal, overcomes any limit, bypassing coherence, logic and rules to establish its own realm of symbolic rituals and behaviours.
Thus, three oceans – gender, narrative and love – are going to merge in the following pages, to blend their waves and tides, their beds and surfaces, in order to shape a reflexion of the historical picture we are looking at: how did love and gender interact within the cultural system of Medieval India?

THE OCEAN OF LOVE

Sat samandar dil ke andar.
(Seven seas inside the heart)

There is nothing absolute about words, nothing soothingly complete. Like empty boxes, they do not exist without interpretation. In the illusion of the rational, they are expected to transcribe the chaos of the reality that surrenders us into a shared and intelligible code of communication, to define and give a structure to our thoughts and feelings, to set clear boundaries between what is and what is not.
Instead, they bear the shadows and the ambiguity of any mystery: no matter how deeply we penetrate their meanings, something remains still untold and in twilight. Words seem to keep a core of inviolable secret. Moreover, their significances are mutable both in time and geography, and are depending on the intentions, the tone and the circumstances in which they are spoken, or written.
If this is true for all the words, including more common ones like *bread* - which means and meant different things in different parts of the world and along the centuries, not to mention its symbolic and sacred uses – it becomes decisively relevant for those words that belong to the abstract realm of feelings. Among them, no doubt that *love* deserves primacy as the most discussed word of humanity, the subject of the majority of discourses of any culture, ever.
The etymology of love, both in English and in Persian (*ishq, mohabbat*), shares the meaning of

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[4] Chandra Talpade Mohanty, *Under Western Eyes" Revisited: Feminist Solidarity through Anticapitalist Struggle,* in "Journal of Women in Culture and Society", 2002, p. 506

[5] C. T. Mohanty, *Op. Cit.,* p. 1422

[6] Francesca Orsini, *Love in South Asia. A Cultural History*. Cambridge University Press, Cambridge 2006, p. 3

passion and desire. There is no gender specification, nor other conditions to limit its realization. On the contrary, no hint to sentiment is carried by the word *marriage,* strictly connected to gender definition, and implying an idea of legality. Love appears to be totally free from these restrains, at least on the paper, as a word.

But what were the symbols, the images and the ideas that have created the need for such a word?

In Greek mythology, *Aphrodite* is the goddess of love.[7] According to Hesiod, she was generated by the *foam* of the ocean under very dramatic circumstances: Uranus, one of the sons of Gea, first Mother of the Olympus, was engaged in a prolonged intercourse with his mother, refusing to emerge out of her body and so preventing her from giving birth to new sons. Furious about the infinite rape, Gea seeks the complicity of Cronus, one of her younger sons, and gives him a golden sickle to castrate his brother. Not only does Cronus do it, but he also throws the severed *phallus* into the sea. The *foam* of the last pleasure of Uranus fecundates the water, giving birth to Aphrodite.

After such a challenging beginning the goddess, married to an ugly and deformed god to whom she becomes very quickly unfaithful, spent the rest of her eternal life in search of true love, going up and down the underworld to follow her many lovers or to intercede for them and their families.

Aphrodite is not a unique mythological figure, on the contrary she is associated with numerous sister-deities: the Sumeric *Inanna*, the Semitic *Ishtar*, the Egyptian *Hathor*, the Armenian *Astghik*, the Etruscan *Turan*, the Roman *Venus*, as well as the pre-islamic *Allat* and *Al Uzza'*. The burst of the cult of the Virgin Mary that Europe witnessed from the XII century on, along with its parallel reflection in literature as *courtly-love* and *dolce-stil-novo*, also carries many resemblances with that mythical root.

Although I am aware this is not the place to deepen such an extensive and complex subject, I strongly agree with what Levi Strauss claims in his brilliant essay "*The Row and the Cooked*"[8]: myths cannot be understood in isolation, but only as parts of an entire mythical system. It is the relationship and transformation between myths, rather than the individual details, to give sense to them. Therefore, I hope further research will follow this direction. By now, I will limit myself to underline those shared features of the different myths related to these goddess' of love which find interesting continuity with the period my research is considering.

The first feature that emerges from even a broad vision of the pantheon of love is that all the divinities are female. There is a gender specificity that goes beyond culture and geography. Love seems to be a prerogative of the feminine. This of course can not mean that only women are able to experience it, or that they are any better in performing it. Rather, I see it linked to the world of archetypes, where primordial symbols stand as universal icons of humanity as a whole. In other words, the symbols of this realm somehow extend into eternity, as well as the archetype of the mother is preceding any gender specifications or attributions that different cultures in different ages have assigned to it. It is not the symbol itself, but the use of it to become gender oriented. The symbol stands somewhere before the gender. Under this perspective, a possible reading of the goddesses' pantheon indicates that, when love is acted, it is the female part of the psyche that is in charge: in both men and women. The impossibility of love, is the negation of the feminine inside individuals, no matter which gender they belong to. The universality of this message seems well represented by the "androgyny" of the sufi devotion of Medieval India: the saint as the bride of God, the lover as the bride of the beloved. (on this, of course, I will go back later). In other words: you can not speak of love with the archetypical male side of the heart.

Moreover, most of the goddesses of love have a strong link with death. They die more than once, they run up and down the underworld, and sometime they govern it. They are involved in wars, killings, violations. Eventually, they will come to an agreement with the infernal, and will accept spending fixed parts of their eternal existence in that realm. Or else, they will roam defeated, in rage and consternation, searching for vengeance. They do all this in the name of love. As to say: to love you must die and be reborn. You must fight, kill and be killed. You can not spare yourself. On the contrary, the path will be full of hindrances, terrible strains will be put on you. Hence, love becomes an initiatory journey, not only towards the fulfilment of desire, but for the supreme realisation of the self, the attainment of an enlighten state of consciousness. And again, this feature finds strong resonance with the idea of mystic love in the XIII century, both in South Asia and the West, where the experience is bound to lead the lover, by the clearing of many a hurdles, towards the supreme goal: the union with the divine. Love *is* the Path.

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[7] Roberto Calasso, *The Marriage of Cadmus and Harmony*, Adelphy, Milano, 1988

[8] C. Levi Strauss, *The Row and the Cooked*, University of Chicago Press, 1969

In the mythical world of goddesses, love is linked to happiness only as a temporary and fleeting stage. The prevailing emotion is that of longing, separation, absence. There is no happy ending, no easy picture of sugar-candy american style family life. On the contrary, suffering, hardship and distance are the main ingredients. It is impossible not to notice the impressive continuity with the period we are considering, both in the sacred and the profane realms: *courtly-love* of Medieval France is all centred on never ending waiting, rituals of resistance, proofs of restrain, unfulfilled desire, emblemed by the famous *assaig*, which consists of laying for an entire night next to the naked body of the beloved lady, without surrendering to the senses. Similarly, in contemporary Italy, Dante and Petrarca were building their masterpieces on the absence of their *angel-women*, whose pursuit becomes the motivation and the final aim of their art. Eventually, their human research interwove with the sacred, resembling closely the desperate moan of sufi lovers for the inaccessible Friend, as well as the heros' dramas of Indian courtly-epic as initiation journeys. Moreover, such a longing is the very soul of *ghazals* and *qawwalis*, where the theme of separation is the true *reison d'etre* of the lyric. From the ancient myths of distant places and times, to the Medieval centuries we are considering, love seems to remain an unrenounceable impossibility.

THE OCEAN OF NARRATIVE

It's raining, and I am separated from my Friend...
(Amir Khusrau)

Most of the discourses on love are to be found in literary sources. But to which extent are these sources really representative of reality? How can we use the information they give for a historical and sociological approach? In other words: what is the relationship between narrative and reality?

I believe narrative is always a product of the author's imagination and personal vision, but this very same statement can be applied to history as well: what changes is, perhaps, the degree of fantasy involved, which depends greatly on the historians' conscience; however, the process remains very much the same. The proof of this being the many opposite historical opinions on the same event.

On the other hand, narrative also belongs to reality as its primary root, its indispensable inspiration. We could say that reality is the eternal Muse of narrative. Any form of literature, and art in general, rises from a real experience and carries it into its expression, no matter how the author's imagination and elaboration is able to transform it. It has been said: it is impossible to write about something you have not personally gone through yourself. I agree, and I add: you might do it, but it won't be good literature. This doesn't mean that to describe a drowning body you must sink yourself to death in water, but definitely your soul must have straggled and descended to the bottom of some kind of experience, that being love, despair or unemployment.

A tempting mistake is to draw a sharp line between reality and imagination, separating what is true from what is not, thus creating a reassuring space of exclusive and reliable – that is to say “scientific” - knowledge. It is reassuring, but illusory. Rather, I believe that contemporary scholars – be them historians, sociologists or literates – should find themselves comfortable on the ambivalence of their task and renounce once and for all the presumption of holding the ultimate truth.

Having said that, and keeping it in mind as a guide, to cross and confront different sources from different angles can only contribute to making the picture clearer and casting light on the past we are looking at.

The Indo-Persian literary production of Medieval India is rich and diversified, going from *adab* (secular books of conduct), to *masnavi* (romances), *ghazals* (verses), sufi tales of love and collections of tales from oral tradition. Most of the stories of the masnavi were imported either from other Islamic countries or from local Indian legends, to be re-worked according to the author taste and style. This was a well established attitude among the writers of the age that, far from seeing it as a plagiarism, would rather consider their contribution as a celebration of the original talent. More interestingly, the remake of local legends gives us engrossing insights on the process of cultural integration and appropriation that was taking place. On the other hand, it suggest the universality of the themes that, despite the differences of faith and tradition, would hold the focus of both narratives. These poetic works, in fact, present a synthesis of stylistic and poetic features of both cultures: "they adopt the Persian model, the masnavi form, the stylistic features for the most part are from indigenous poetry, [...]the layout of the prologue, called stuti-khand, is in the fashion of Persian masnavi, the imagery and mystical idioms are typically of the Nath-yogis..."[9] In other words, the structure, the container, is Persian, but the art and rhetoric are indigenous; moreover, although the script is in Persian, there is an evident paucity of Persian words in the lyrics, proving the language contamination at work. Hence, they effectively represent the syncretism of cultures, traditions and faiths of the period we are considering and provide a riveting glance at the society of the time.

Chandayan

This is the case of the ancient Legend of Lorik and Chanda, belonging to the tradition of the *abhiras* or *ahirs* tribe. Of obscure and uncertain origins, this nomadic population is referred to both in the *Mahabharata* and *Ramayana*, as well as other classical texts of *Sangam* literature. The *ahirs* had a reputation of immorality and wild ways: addiction to liquor, illicit relationships disrespectful of caste belonging, developed talent in dance and music and unusual strength. The *ahir* women were famous for audacity and cleverness, and sexual freedom was prevalent among the tribe. "The sole and supreme deity of the ahirs [was] the goddess Durga Devi, also known as Bhavani or Parvati".[10] The tribe is also linked to the first popular culture of northern India, and to the development of *Braj*, its first literary language, in which songs have been sung all over India up until today. Many are the legends and stories originated by the *ahiri* tradition, but the most popular and well known in the subcontinent is that of Lorik and Chanda, of which many versions have circulated over the centuries.

The story begins with a clever and beautiful Chanda married to a crude and impotent husband. This leads the unhappy wife to elope with her neighbour Lorik, who will defeat the enraged husband who was running after them. However later, overwhelmed by passion, Lorik looses not only his rationality, but all his possessions, including his new wife, at a gambling table. Chanda, with a stratagem, convinces the winner to sit once more for the last challenge. Then, exposing her beauty to the latter, she makes him lose the game and saves her husband. After this climax, Lorik engages in many other adventures, defeating and killing enemies, conquering kingdoms, marrying other women, while Chanda is relatively left out of the scene, as if her narrative task was somehow concluded.

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[9] Madhu Trivedi, *Images of Women from the Fourteenth to the Sixteenth Century: a Study of Sufi Premakhyans,* in "Rethinking the Millenium. Perspectives on Indian History from the Eighth to the Eighteenth Century", ed. By Rajat Datta, AAKAR BOOKS, New Delhi, 2008", p. 200

[10] Charlotte Vaudeville, *Myths, Saints and Legends in Medieval India*, Oxford University Press, 1996, p. 267

The Persian version of the legend was written by a sufi poet, Maulana Daud in 1379, during the reign of Sultan Firuz Shah. Daud's Chandayan falls within an old and popular Indian genre of oral narrative, called *katha,* that was performed by a class of wandering musicians. Chandayan itself was meant for musical performance, as it is clearly mentioned by its author, and we know that the work enjoyed immense popularity at the time. We are told that, just as the best *kathas* were suppose to do, "it created tumult in the hearts of the listener"[11]. We also know from Badauni's chronicles that parts of the poem used to be read from the pulpit in the mosque, "and the people used to be strangely influenced by hearing them"[12]. This is quite a bewildering information, that casts an interestingly light on the society of the age. In fact, not only does the subject of the Chandayan seem unfit to the pulpit, but also the way in which Maulana Daud treats the story deserves consideration. In fact, "he describes mundane matters, which brings out graphic images of women in all shades and hue: the carefree life and youthful passion of the young girls; the ideals of wedded women and the real life situations faced by them in a society given to polygamy; the allurements and the love affairs of a parkiya [and] the sex-scenes in great detail..."[13]. Although we know that the the sufi poem interprets the legend of Lokri and Chanda as a mystical allegory, the fluidity of his narrative language it is still surprising. Maulana seems apparently at ease with the reality he's dealing with. The image of women he offers is quite far from that of the secluded Muslim wife, shy and silenced. On the contrary, she is a willing creature, who escape from an unsatisfying marriage, declares her love and desire for another man, elopes with him, evades her duty and moral restrictions, uses her seductive skills in order to save him from ruin, and later fights tooth and nail against her rivals. How could such a lady become the subject of a pulpit sermon? Badauni himself, aware of the anachronism of his statement, gives the following explanation: "the whole of [this poem] is divine and pleasing in subject, worthy of ecstatic contemplation of devout lovers, and conformable to the interpretation of some of the Ayats of Quran, and the sweet singers of Hindustan. Moreover by its public recitation, human hearts are taken captive..."[14]. His effort to rationalize the matter and legitimate the presence of such a poem on a mosque's pulpit sounds, at least today, pretty weak and leaves the matter to that mysterious captivity of human hearts that closes his statement.

I believe two considerations are to be made here, in order to use the above information for our purpose. First of all, in the sufi metaphysic of love, the woman is the symbol of divine love, a metaphor dismantling the story completely: the power of divine love can break all the rules, clear all the hurdles, use all the tricks and fight with all means to get to the heart of the lover. Thus, in the Maulana's version, the whole legend of Lokri and Chanda moves inward, to take place inside the human heart. Impotence and betrayal, flight and challenge, gambling and seduction, is all played on the inner theatre of the self. The passion and despair it evokes then perfectly fit pulpits and mosques. What is, however, noteworthy is the choice of a woman to represent that symbol. Apparently this is very much in line with the female archetype of love, while the male is associated with the seeker, the sinner and, to some extent, even the fool.

Secondly, I also believe it is possible to make a secular reading of this poem as a reflection of a reality *de facto* which was quite different from the one prescribed and desired by the official institutions of the time. Since the intentions of Maulana were expressly spiritual, we have no reason to doubt that if he had to censure his inspiration he would have done it according to the prevailing mentality of the religious community he belonged to. If he did not, it means that he did not have to. The society he was describing was probably overall accepted by his environment, and it did not sound either too strange or too immoral. Women like Chanda, or the other female characters of the poems, must have been common figures of the society he lived in, so much so that the story was read without embarrassment from the pulpit.

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[11] Madhu Trivedi, *Op. Cit.* p. 199

[12] *Ibidem*, p. 201

[13] *Ibidem*, p. 204-205/210

[14] *Ibidem*, p. 201

Aa we will see hereafter, the early Medieval society of Northern India was extremely heterogeneous and diversified, full of contradictions and paradoxes, lights and shadows. Brutal restrictions probably coexisted with unexpected freedom. It is undeniable that women could be killed if only suspected of betrayal, "as little as an innocent, perhaps even involuntary exchange of glances"[15]. As Annemarie Schimmel sharply observes, "the 'dying from love' which is such a central theme in Persian poetry had a very real background"[16]. However, it was also probable that women like Chanda existed, and despite all the oppression, found their creative way to existence.

Tuti-namah

A validation to this hypothesis is given by the examination of another literary work of the period, known as "*The tales of the parrot*". *Tuti-namah* is the Persian version of a very popular collection of stories of the Indian oral tradition, known under the title of *Sukasaptati*. Its original structure consists of seventy stories on love and social subjects serving as *exempla* for the protagonist of the narrative frame, Prabhavati, a young wife who is ready to betray her husband since he abandoned her to follow his trade business. A parrot, left in charge to control the lady, keeps her from carrying out her purpose, telling her a new story every night, until the husband comes back home. The pattern has well known literary precedents, to begin with the "*One thousand and one nights"*, and falls with good reason within the category of universal stories, like Panchatantra, Esopo, Fedro, etc. Although we find a first mention of a parrot eaten by a cat after having told seventy stories in a XII century source[17], it is almost impossible to date exactly the original compilation, as well as to establish a primary source, being the *Sukasaptati* the result of several centuries of oral transmission, which gave rise to a large freedom of narration. Indeed we find countless different versions of the tales from South India to Rajashtan, from Malasya to Persia. However, what remains fixed is the major frame, namely that of the parrot, and its clever expedients to distract the young lady from her sinful intentions.

Numerous are also the translations into foreign language, of which the most notable is the Persian *Tuti-namah*, composed by Ziyauddin Nakshabi (d. 1350) a sufi poet of Badaun, a city south-east of Delhi.[18]

The social interest of these two compilations lies in the extremely lively portrait they both give of human relations and interactions during the early Indian Middle Age, although perceived and described from two different angles. In both cases, we cannot talk of a realistic geography, rather we find a generic urban setting: most of the city names are invented, or not mentioned at all, apart from few exceptions as Benares and Hastinapura for the Sanskrit version, and Kabul and Babilon for the Persian one.

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[15] Annemarie Schimmel, *A Two-Colored Brocade. The Imagery of Persian Poetry*, University of North Carolina Press, Chapel Hill & London, 1992, p.11

[16] *Ibidem*.

[17] The mention is given in the commentary of Yogasastra edited by Hemacandra after 1160. Francesca Orsini, *Le storie del pappagallo*, Marsilo, Venezia, 1992, p. 17

[18] For the present comparison we are referring to a version of Naqshabi's Tuti-namah written sometime later by Mohammed Kadery, and available in english language thanks to a translation of XIX century. Since the intent of this paper is not literary but sociological, we are considering the structure of the 35 tales of Kadery's version, out of the 52 of the original, worthy of attention as the author himself declares his intervention aimed to render Naqshabi's "difficult and abstruse style […] intelligible to all" and therefore he "translate" it into "a familiar and easy language". Being this the case, we doubt that he had modified the framework in its substantial asset, but even if some minor changes had been made, the correspondences with the Sanskrit version remains so relevant to justify the attention, since it is highly improbable that Kadery had had any knowledge of the original Sukasaptati. - Mohammed Kadery, *Tooti Nameh, Tales of the Parrot in the Persian language with an English translation*, Calcutta printed, London, reprinted for J.Debrett, Piccadilly, July, 1801

Then, the variety of the humanity involved covers almost all kinds of people of the age: from kings, visirs, brahamins, dervishes, qazi, to merchants, carpenters, potters, goldsmiths, woodcutters, grocers, tailors, peasants, servants, cooks, magicians, soldiers, thieves, bandits, courtesans and procuresses, including animals like frogs, snakes, lions, jackals, asses, and elephants, evident projections of the corresponding human typology. And among them, a woman as the central figure to bring about the plot.

Interestingly, both the collections look at the society they are describing with disenchanted eyes, quite free from moral and religion restrictions. The Sanskrit version is very derisory and daring, and the aim of narrating seems often to be an end in itself, an amusement, just for the pleasure of paradox. When a moral is given, it is often ambivalent and contradictory, or it is there just to be cancelled by the next action. On the other hand, the Persian version is more reasoned and serious in its intent, less crude in analysing psychological motivations, and attentive to the coherence of its characters.

However, both of them describe a society far from the rigidity we are used to attributing to the age. Men and women are encountering each other freely, thanks to hundred of stratagems and tricks, occasions are there at every corners, as easy as to go to the grocer to buy salt, or to sit on the terrace to feel the breeze. Very few stories speak about happy and faithful institutional relationships. The majority of situations depict marriage as a trap from which it is mandatory to escape. The judgment is not on betrayal, which is almost accepted as inevitable, rather it is on how the illicit affair is conducted. The patterns are recurrent: most men are leaving for distant places because of their job, which is a very possible feature of Indian Middle Age urban society. Wives are left alone and inconsolable. It is natural for them to look for fulfilment in some other's arms. Otherwise, if the husband is there, often he is stupid, or evil, and not caring for the wife at all. And this gives reason enough for the wife to betray. The same relationship patterns can be applied to friends, where one plays the part of the smart wife and the other that of the silly or dishonest man; or to animals as well. But in all cases, the hero, the winner, is the smarter one, the one who is able to improvise in front of adversity and perils, and transform the disadvantage into victory. And this role is mainly associated to the female gender.

What collapses is the image of a barren society made up of isolated religious communities, trapped into their respective prohibitions. Rules are there to be broken. Appearance is there to covert reality. Roles are often inverted and depleted of their stereotyped significances, to uncover a wider variety of human features: so we'll find crooked and avid brahamins, thieves who are wise philosophers, lustful ascetics, coward and fearful lions, generous and compassionate jackals, and so on. Nothing is what it seems or what is suppose to be. And even if we do not take it to the letter, it still opens a different window on the society of the time. At least it suggests the existence of a gap between duty and action, filled with audacity and imagination, irony and creativity, enriching and complicating the picture of Middle Age are used to deal with. No moral judgment is there, no effort to depict a better society, forged by *shari'a*, or any other law or regulation. The only admitted and recognized low is that of shrewdness, the ability of men and women to improvise their salvation in front of adversity. An ability that in the *Toti-nameh*'s tales is clearly identified with the female gender.

This despite the uncontested patriarchal set-up in which both of the narratives evolve, well in line with all the works of the age, as well as of the centuries to come, up until the present day. To look for gender equality in the XIV century would be too naïve a illusion and, above all, a waste of time. However, I argue that within the given boundaries of the patriarchal structure of Medieval Indian society, women were exerting strategies of resistance and carving creative agencies to pursue their freedom of movement and choice, and above all, of love. At least, as far as the considered texts are concerned. The hard task would be to establish a primacy between the two versions for the most oppressive or open-minded of the two, since they both share a clear and evident patriarchal structure within which, though, women and men move relatively freely and where the female gender – be that attributed to a betraying wife, a male ascetic, or a wise jackal – is the absolute winner. What is gendered here is an attitude, a talent, a skill which rises above every rule and order to find reason in its own cleverness. As one betrayed husband of the *Sukasaptati* finally declares to his unfaithful wife: "I forgive you and it gladdens my heart to see all the genius sparkling in this cunning of yours, oh my lady*!*"[19]

Notwithstanding differences of style and of some details of the stories, what remains surprisingly identical is the description of such a social reality, taken so much for granted that it does not need any sort of explanation or moral consideration. It is a matter of fact, an accustomed picture, so ordinary and typical it does not raise anybody's eyebrow. Can such confidence only be a literary device, moreover recurrent in two different works, belonging to distant cultures and faiths? Or do they show a perception of reality somehow removed by official sources? Is there a resistance in humanity facing oppression which tends to remain unveiled? And does this deletion have to do with the female gender specification of such a resistance? I leave a tentative answer to these questions for the conclusion of this paper. It will be sufficient to say now that the social picture provided by the above considered works suggests for the Indian early Middle Age a gender construction following a variety of routes, some of them unpredictable and unexpected.

Ghazals and Qawwali

Love is the core of the "two-line universe" of the ghazal verse. The etymology of the word comes from the root *gh-z-l*, meaning to spin, to create, to beautify, and it is true that has become one of the most powerful means of love-comunication in South Asia. "Poetry was […] a most important part of cultural life in the East; it was not something for specialist but rather a form of expression that was loved, and to a certain degree practiced, by nobles and villagers alike".[20]The ghazal form consists of couplets called *bayt,* meaning 'house', giving the chance to Rumi[21] to write that his beloved would not fit into any 'house' – nor 'verse'. Each *bayt* is complete in form and meaning and the mood of one couplet can vary, or even be opposed, to that of the other. In two lines, the ghazal is suppose to transport the listener into an emotional state, made of desire, sensuality and despair. The motif of sufferance is central and pervading. "At the centre of poetry stands someone who can never be reached, and should never be reached".[22] That Absolute Beloved is one with God. The ghazal is meant to provoke pain, to make the scars bleed. It has to sank the reader into longing and melancholy. The burning of separation is the soul of the ghazal, its life blood. The absence of God is unbearable, still that absence itself becomes the sweetest of the sorrows, because is led by, and directed to the Friend.

This sufi metaphysic of love is not unique to the ghazal, rather is a recurrent theme of Islamic mysticism, to begin with Ibn Arabi's idea of divine Union, that spread, with different degrees of intensity, in the Muslim world since the XIII century. The ghazal and the qawwali, although with different lyrical solutions, embody this message and bring it to its highest achievement. It is the very reason for their being.

To express this mystic love the ghazal use a language of symbols and metaphors, and transports the Union into a geography of rhetorical images and situations: desolate gardens, raining evenings, lonely nights, dusty paths, unreachable moon.

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[19] Francesca Orsini, *Op. Cit.* p. 137

[20] Annemarie Schimmel, *Op. Cit.*, p. 3

[21] Jalal al-din Rumi (1207-1273), one of the greatest mystic poets of Islam.

[22] Annemarie Schimmel, *Op. Cit.* p. 10

For my night your thought is enough, what have I to do with the moon?
My night so inaccessible, what have I to do with the dawn?

I kiss your threshold, I don't follow the tradition of lip-kissing.
Since I am happy with the dust, what have I to do with sweetness?[23]

The green is the same, and the flower and the desert are the same.
The garden is the same, also the shadow here is the same.

That name doesn't stay in my heart and my soul, still
love is the same, desire is the same.

In contrast, the Beloved – the unreachable Friend – is made of flesh and bones, alluring glances, and carnal desires. The sensuality of the ghazal is pervading from the very first words.

When that curl becomes seductive
what habitation is left for the life of my heart ?

Because of the heart I became foolish and crazy:
all night I was lost in incantation and romance.

Sensuality is intended, not an accident on the course, nor a diversion from the the route. The nature of the metaphor allows the breaking of all the rules, the limits, the conventions. Since the Beloved is immense, immense will be the possibilities of love. Only the Absolute can bear the embarrassment of humanity. No fear of offence, no need for restrain, if you are stretching towards the feet of the Beloved, you can dare. There is no urge to protect your love from ambiguity. On the contrary, the ghazal uses ambiguity to say what is impossible to say. To expect a straight message on such an ultimate subject would be naively presumptuous. The language is an imperfect tool for such a matter. Emotions will do a better job. The ghazal veils its meaning, just as the Beloved veils its beauty. And, for more than one reason, it veils also the gender of its lovers. First of all, it is because both Turkish and Persian languages don't make a difference from feminine/masculine adjectives and declinations.

But also because ambiguity is part and parcel of the ghazal. With the ghazal we enter a lyrical and mystical space where genders blend and melt into each other. The Lover cannot be but submissive, loser, captive, either as a jealous boy or as a lonely girl. The Beloved is always distant, cruel and inaccessible, either with long and curly hair, or the first traces of a beard on the cheeks. No matter who is the evoker, is love that counts.

Why does my heart again go after that cruel-natured beloved?
Why does this bleeding heart go out again into his/her street?

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[23] All the lyrics quoted are from Amir Khusraw ghazals collection. See *Amir Khusraw – Memorial Volume*, Government of India Publication Divisio, New Delhi, 1975 – M.W.Mirza, *Life and Works of Amir Khusraw*, Idarah-i Adabiyat-i Delli, New Delhi, 1935 – Sufi Tabassum, *Do Goneh*, Kitabi Duniya, New Delhi, 2005.

That rose-like has been with me all night, intoxicated only at the night end:
let rise our tulip-red cup then!

The innocent early down on the cheeks, the chastely simple lips.
How to define this beauty?This is a matter that goes better
without a title!

The language of my beloved is Turkish and Turkish I do not know.
Wouldn't be wonderful if his/her tongue were in my mouth?

Don't tie a band around your waist,
let me wrap my hand around instead.

Gender swings from body to emotion and moves to another level, where sentiments take the male and female parts, leaving the flesh, the material and the rational to their vain ambiguity. Within the mystical ghazal circle, love can't be but feminine, both in men and women. The mythical archetype finds here a resonance once again.

The proof, if ever needed, that this ambiguity is not casual but mystically intended, comes from the qawwali lyrics in Urdu language, that started to spread in North India around the XV/XVI centuries. Since Urdu specifies the gender in verbs and nouns, the singers – rigorously males, according to the patriarchal standard of the time – however maintain female declinations in expressing their love and longing.

The qawwali musical genre descend from "*sama*" (literally 'listening'), the sacred ritual of listening to music as a practice of closeness to God, which has been widespread and controversial in the mystic Islamic world. Today qawwali is still performed not only by the greatest artists of Indo-Muslim countries, but also at most of the shrines of the sufi saints, the *dargah,* all over the subcontinent. The strongly iterative quality of the music and the lyrics is lead by a vocalist, who sings a couplet, repeated by the backing group; the semiotics of the performance, the rhythmic accompaniment of the *tabla* percussionist as well as the hand-clapping of the surrounding audience "binds performers and listeners into an organic whole, charging the space with a sacred aura encouraging members […] to lose themselves in trance-like states".[24]

Like in the ghazal, Divine love is central and all pervading the qawwali lyrics, however mediated by the figure of the saint who is qualified as a privileged intermediary to God, as well as an extraordinary dispenser of love himself. The exchange of this love-devotion between the saint and the worshippers finds ideal expression in the qawwali, creating a unique space of possibilities and experiences otherwise unaccessible. As the ghazal, qawwali, due to the oneness of its evoker, can bypass rules and conventions and move easily towards transgression. Indeed, qawwali seems to create the "space par excellence of emotion and unrestraint, […] of liminality and wilderness, […] of nomadism and vagrancy, […] of a gamut of divinely inspired madnesses",[25]which otherwise would remain submerged and repressed. In the history of Islam, Sufism appears to offer the evidence of an insuppressible shadow - the "*other within*" - the missing part: an otherness which however has no will to be competitive, rather it is aiming for completeness and harmonic integration of opposites. And in this realm of ambivalence, the female gender plays a key role. What happen within the sacred geography of the dargah is in fact a constant shifting, a kind of gender metamorphosis, in which the feminine is the main protagonist. To begin with the saint, transformed through death into the bride of God: indeed, he lies in what "is no less then a very ornate bridal chamber, at the centre of which is the grave, literalized as a four-poster bed in solid silver".[26] Then, the rite of the *chadar chadana,* consisting in covering the grave with a cloth *(chadar).* It also symbolizes the veil worn by women, especially brides: through the iteration of the ritual the saint is constantly reaffirmed as "the eternal bride". "It is this status of the saint as bride-in-perpetuity that is celebrated, in fact, at the urs – which is nothing less then the equivalent of a marriage ceremony between the saint and God".[27] But the feminized saint is only the first of a series of gendered twisters that are associated with the dargah: indeed, also the devotee assumes a position of "*idealized femininity*" towards the saint; the posture, the supplications, the kissing and the longing, all are in name of a female-love semiotic. And of course, qawwali takes an active part in the transformation, as said previously, having male singers using female ending in their songs.

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[24] Ananya Jahanara Kabir, *The Feminine, the Sacred and the Shared: the Ecumenical Space of a Sufi Dargah*, in "The Sacred and the Feminine", ed. By G. Pollock and V. T. Sauron, St. Martin's Press, New York 2007, p. 79

[25] *Ibidem*, p. 80

In one very popular qawwali a girl is talking to her female friend (*eri sakhi*) about the absent beloved she is longing for. She says: "*Main to khadi thi as lagaye, Mendhi kajra mang sajaye*"[28] (I stood there, expecting, with henna, khol and braided hair).

The image of the supplicant devotee is another rhetoric figure of qawwali, evoked by the female ascetic (*jogan*), combining abjection, self-surrendering and eternal longing: "*Ghar se chali ek jogan kafni gale mein dale. Paon mein pad gaye hain ab chalte chalte chhale. Girne ko hai zamin par hai kaun jo sambhale. Jab tum na karoge to karam kaun karega*?" (The ascetic sets out for her pilgrimage, a shroud on her neck, walking so long, her feet have grown blistered. She is about to collapse now, who can rescue her, if not you?). Or else, the mad woman (*deewani*), who claims her madness to be legitimate by love: "*Meri divangi par aql wale ghor famaen. Magar pehele unhe divana banne ki zarurat hai"*. (Let the wise reflect upon my madness. Though they first need to go mad themselves).

This feminine love-devotion speaks a language of great intimacy, almost child-like in its irreverence: "*Yeh tum ne kya kaha apni jabin main ne kahan rakhdi. Yeh meri chiz thi, main jahan chahi wahan rakhdi*" (Why did you say where have I placed my forehead? It's mine, I would place it whenever I wish); "*Udhar tu dar na kholega, idhar daman na chhorunga. Hakumat apni apni hai: wahan teri yahan meri*" (There, you won't open the door, here I won't leave your shirt. These are our respective kingdom: yours is there, mine is here).

Elsewhere, the lover is almost flirting with God, with sensual allusion, demanding what is impossible to obtain: "*Ada se dekhlo, qissa taman ho jaye*" (Give me one alluring glance, and the whole story will be over); "*Ke tab-e hijiran nadaram ay jan, na leho kahe lagaye chhatiyan*" (My patience has over-brimmed, why don't you take me to your bosom?)

This constant transmigration of gender – the saint is feminine to God and masculine to the devotee; the devotee is feminine to the saint, and masculine as a singer – the multiplicity of roles, the interchangeable possibilities of role reversal, "all point to the fluidity with which the feminine operates within this hermeneutics".[29] With the qawwali we see the feminine as a source of devotion, capable of including and accommodating both male and female, with an inexhaustible capacity of regeneration and an incessant creativity to move along the spiral of life/death/life. The feminine doesn't fear the changing, it is ready to die as a man to be reborn as a woman, and to do the contrary as well, without getting lost in itself. The feminine of the qawwali closely reminds many of those goddesses of love walking up and down the underworld, spending part of their life in the darkness and part in the daylight. With the same agility, the qawwali feminine moves from one gender to the other, sliding from roles without embarrassment, or fears, rather with the enlightened conscience of the eternal alternation of the opposites, the eternal dance of the universe.

"The feminine is a screen on which men and women project their longing. […] But it is acknowledgement, not emulation. The longing is not aspirational, tending towards closure; rather, it stands outside of narrative in a space of the irrational, anti-teleological and emotional excess".[30]

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[26] *Ibidem*, p. 81

[27] *Ibidem*, p. 82

[28] The lyrics are from "*Apni Masti*", by Hamsar Hayat and Friends, Ektara Music, New Delhi, 2002.

[29] A. J. Kabir, *Op. Cit.* p. 84

The cultural setting

The cultural system of a society is an entangled and multi-faced phenomenon. Like an orchestra, it shows its outcome only by the sum of its melodies, all included, even the most feeble one. Usually, however, we witness the emergence of a governing principle, or a group of principles, which tend to dominate the stage. From time to time, this predominance assumes the identity of the culture it expresses, rejecting the dissident forms of it as subversive. The *kingship* of culture functions very similarly to any court or reign on earth, working, in fact, in tight alliance with the power on the throne. In the kingdom as in the mind, subversion is persecuted, yet rarely definitely eradicated. More often, it retreats into the shadow, from where it keeps sending its coded messages. One of the most common cultural predominances, transversal to time and location, is the patriarchal set-up, and the consequent manipulation of gender to its interests. The Delhi Sultanate of XIII and XIV centuries was no exception to the rule. However, what is relevant here is to find out the ways in which this scheme of domination was carried out, and how the subversive forces opposed it.

The Islamic invaders of Northen India were not themselves a community, rather "'Muslims' from diverse ethnic, class and regional background, groups of dissociated people sharing few, if any, social ties with each other"[31]. Following the Mongol invasion of Central Asia in 1221, for decades the cities of Norther India received a constant flood of immigrants from eastern Iran, Khurasan, Transoxiana, Afghanistan, and the rest of Central Asia. Moreover, after Baghdad had become the seat of the Caliph, a strong Persian influence had flown into the Arab world, changing definitely the face of Islam. The Indian Muslims embraced the tradition of ancient Persia and applied it to their idea of state and society. Persian was the language spoken, Turks were the slaves and commanders, Iranian the traditions and rituals adopted and often woven with per-Muslim customs, and Turkish was the military organisation. Although the primary activity of the Muslim conquerors was, clearly enough, played on the battlefields, the theme of love was not irrelevant to their cultural system. Indeed, from the court to the bazaar, from the mosques to the monasteries, the language of love was utilized for many purposes: to legitimate policy, to serve interests and desires, to control behaviours and mentalities, and to worship God.

The kingship was doubly involved: on a personal level, given the strong repercussions of Sultans' love-affairs on the State policy; and as an institution, for it based its legitimacy on the love of its subjects. The Persian theory of the divine right of the king was promptly assimilated by Indian Muslims: the sultan was surrendered by a halo of divinity, which will find emblematic expression in the following Mughal iconography. The elaborate ritualisation of attitude and behaviour towards the king utilized a language of absolute-love: prostration, kissing of hands and feet or, in absence, of sandal and quiver, total obedience and, above all, complete submission and accepted inferiority. In other words, the sultanate kingship used a semiotic of gender to fix the rules, and to enforce them. In exchange, the sultan undertook the task to protect his subjects, to guarantee prosperity and stability, and to exercise justice. These "paternal features of the Sultanate"[32] find impressive correspondence with the organisation of society based, for its stability, on the bipolarity of male and female. Just as the subject to the king, the woman of Medieval India was kept in an inferior position. Obedience, humbleness and submission were her requested duties. She was at the service of the male and depended upon him in every stage of life. "Her life was a state of perpetual wardship, and the social laws and customs stamped her with a sort of mental deficiency"[33]. Emphasis was put on her spotless moral character, and above all, her public reputation for chastity. "This [chastity] was identified, on the long run, with living in seclusion, inside a harem".[34] Amir Khusraw, the great poet of the period, was convinced that "chastity can only exist with a total absence of relation"[35] to the outer world. However, *pardha* (seclusion) was a measure of respectability especially among the upper classes, so that the higher the rank, "the smaller the windows, the more secluded the women".[36] The vast masses of women did not wear any shroud or veil and did not live in seclusion. Actually, "the poor people went about almost naked".[37] The same happened with *sati*, the Hindu practice of immolation of the widow on the pyre of the deceased husband. Poor women did not even accompany their husband's bodies to the crematory ground. This is not to say that they were more or less oppressed, rather it just underlines that the cultural setting was the result of different applications and interpretations of the same predominance. And I argue that this variety of outcomes typifies the culture itself that we are looking at. Some more examples to illustrate the point.

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[30] *Ibidem*, p. 85

[31] Sunil Kumar, *Politics, the Muslim Community and Hindu-Muslim Relations Reconsidered: North-India in the Early Thirteenth Century*, in "Rethinking a Millenium", Op. Cit., p. 148

[32] Kunwar Mohammed Ashraf, *Life and Conditions of the People of Hindustan*, Munshiram Manoharlal Publishers, New Delhi, 1988, p. 39

Education was not meant for women during Medieval India and, apart from a few exceptions, women were not allowed to attend *madrassas* (Islamic schools), or to receive any education at all. This rule, however, was applied only to the so called, with a dose of cynical irony, "*free women*". The others – the professional prostitutes, the courtesans, the dancers and the musicians, were often well versed in several arts and knowledge. Prostitution was a recognized and accepted institution in Medieval India. The attitude of the State towards this profession was free by moral or religious considerations. Prostitutes lived in specific districts (*mohallas*) or areas of the city, in private houses or in brothels (*kothas*). To work, they needed an imperial permit, and during Alauddin's campaign of controlling the prices, their rates were fixed by the Sultan, together with the value of horses, cattle and slaves. Some of these women were acculturated and trained in several arts. Often their houses became meeting places for scholars and notable men to discuss freely on several subjects or, in times of prohibitions, to drink wine.

Of course, it was the urban society to better portrait the specificity and contradictions of XIII/XIV century Medieval India, and a cosmopolitan vibrant metropolis like Delhi must have produced a multi faced and intricate cultural setting, rich of challenges as well as opportunities.

Since the beginning of the XIII century a constant flood of migrants was overflowing into the capital from the Islamic countries devastated by the Mongol terror. If many were escaping from ruin, others were just searching fortunes. Indeed, in course of time, the city started to attract people also from all over India: "*Delhi became the home of all arts, fine and coarse, and opened a door to clever and talented men. In the suburbs and slums of the great capital the pimps, prostitutes and gamblers of Hindustan collected together to play their abominable trades (sic!); and along with them, as a Heaven-sent antidote, came innumerable mystics and preachers...*"[38] Moreover, after their conversion to Islam, also several thousands Mongols migrated to Delhi, "their settlements being known as Mughulpur"[39]. All of these migrations must have given the city the character of an agglomerate of people and cultures quite unique and unusual for the time.

Another constant of the urban settlement of the capital was indeed the defence from the north-west invaders. When the envoys of the Mongol prince Hulegu visited Delhi in 1260, the future Sultan

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[33] K. M. Ashraf, *Op. Cit.*, p. 166

[34] *Ibidem*, p. 175

[35] *Ibidem.*

[36] *Ibidem*, p. 171

[37] *Ibidem*, p. 214

[38] H.C. Verma, *Dynamics of Urban Life in Pre-Mughal India*, Munshiram Manoharlal Publisher Pvt. Ltd., Delhi, 1986, p. 218

[39] M. Athar Ali, *Capital of the Sultans. Delhi during the Thirteen and Fourtheen Centuries*, in "Delhi through the Ages", Op. Cit., p. 36

Balban "took pains to overawe them by staging a review of some 200,000 foots and 50,000 horses" [40]. Seventy years later we read that the military forces allocated in the capital were reputed to be above 600,000. Although some of them probably did not reside within the city, a vast number of soldiers and officers must still have been allocated there, pouring into the local culture their mentality and customs.

Then, there was the court, that also implied an enormous concentration of different people. Starting from the ladies of the Sultan's harem, who could reach into the several thousands, including wives, concubines, and female relatives; to continue with the slaves, that were 50,000 under Alauddin, and more than 200,000 under Firuz Shah;[41] to end with a huge number of other salary-earners: according to the "*Masalik-ul-absar*"[42], at the court of Muhammad Tughluq were employed 1,200 physicians, 10,000 falconers, 3,000 attenders of hunting, 2,200 musicians, and 1,000 "poets of the three languages, Arabic, Persian and Indian".[43] To these we must add the courtiers (*nadim*), or so called '*boon companions*', theologians, scholars, artists, astrologers, dancers, jugglers, acrobats and any kinds of entertainers; and finally the household staff to take care of all of them.

Beside the court, the whole population also needed daily provisions of an unlimited quantity of items. Most of them were coming from the Doab regions, but some luxury products could also arrive from very far. The transportation and distribution of goods were difficult, expensive and dangerous; therefore they involved a large number of people who were constantly moving back and forth from the city, and many others who were selling the items themselves. "10,000 to 20,000 load-cattle"[44]supplied the provisions to the capital under the control of the Hindus *naiks*. That the dependence of Delhi and its suburbs on the Doab and other contiguous areas was problematic can be traced by the several famines that infested the city in the XIII and XIV centuries, causing the death by starvation of many of its inhabitants. However, during times of abundance, commerce and trade was a source of well-being for a large section of the population. "The bazars were thickly congested; and the congestion was only made bearable by the absence or rarity of wheeled traffic in the street, the better mode of locomotion for those who could afford it being horses and litters".[45] The cloth market was open from early morning till late at night and was crowded with people at all times. The slave market of Delhi was the biggest of the Sultanate and was famous in all of Asia. There were also markets for cattle and horses, for sweets, spices, fruits, weapons, shoes and many other kind of supplies. "The class of merchants as a whole was literate and prosperous".[46] This is the cultural milieu that, according to the *Tuti-nameh* of Naqshabi, provided many unusual liberties to its people, free, as we have seen, to encounter each other at every occasion and, above all, without moral considerations.

The frequent shift of the court, the damaging of the previous settlements, the constant need for fortifications, the necessity of new water supplies and, last but not least, the importance of architecture as a media of prestige and grandness, created another peculiarity of the city: an incessant building activity, which involved skilled and trained workers in great numbers. Masons, architects, stone-cutters, wood-carvers, ironsmiths, carpenters were all employed night and day in every part of Delhi, contributing, with their temporary presence, to the mobility of the social setting that, like a sponge, was constantly absorbing and releasing some of its components. Such a fluidity was invitingly suitable to create unexpected combinations, and to request creative solutions, which were probably not so distant to those described by Naqshabi.

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[40] P. Jackson, *The problem of a Vast Military Encampment*, in "Delhi through the Ages", Op. Cit., p. 20

[41] Amir Kusraw maternal grandfather is said to have had 60 slaves for bringing betel-leaf to his assemblies, and 200 Turkish and 2000 Indian slaves and servant for attending to his person. M. Mujeeb, "*The Indian Muslim*" Munshiram Manoharlal Publisher Pvt. Ltd., Delhi 1985, p. 209

[42] "*Masalik-ul-absar*", written by Sihab al-Din b. Fadl Allah al-'Umari in the XIV century, cit.in Ashraf, Op. Cit., p. 65

[43] Ashraf, *Op. Cit.* p. 65

[44] *Ibidem*, p. 194

[45] *Ibidem*, p. 205

[46] *Ibidem,* p. 157

The high standard of living of the ruling classes, who were perpetually trying to emulate the court-style and competing among each other for luxury and extravagance, created the opportunity for other social figures to gain a crucial position in the society: money-lenders, middle-men and traffickers became indispensable to the organisation of the city life. The aristocracy, relying on the land revenues of the *iqtas* assigned to its nobles, was always in the need of current money to organize its parties, to lavish its donations, to boast its opulence. It was a class in perpetual debt, to the advantage of the usury[47]. Spies were everywhere, from the Sultan down to the merchant, justified by the highly suspicious atmosphere of the time, whereby the most common means to gain power or settle businesses were to blind or poison all the rivals. Assassins, robbers and thieves were along each route and around every corner. In such a condition, prompt sagacity and brilliant improvisation must have been indispensable tools.

There were sinners, but there were also saints. People of the times felt very attracted to magic and superstitions, and the city bursted with every kind of yogis and fakirs. But also true devotion played an important part in the life of Delhi. During Friday prayer, mosques were crowded and some particularly intense sermons – as we have seen with the verses of Maulana Daud – could lead people to tears and ecstasy. "Sufism exercised a profound levelling influence"[48] on the society of the time. To give an idea of the tight engagement between sufi saints and the population of Delhi will be enough to recall that, when the *Chisthi* saint Qutubuddin Bakhtiyar Kaki was forced to leave the city under pressure and criticism from the *Shaykh-al-Islam*, the majority of the population, included Sultan Iltutmish, followed him in procession in the hope of convincing the saint to change his mind and to remain in the capital. And actually, they succeeded.

The most outstanding sufi saint of Medieval Northern India was Hazrat Nizamuddin Awlya. In the second half of XIII century, he established his monastery (*khanqah*) on the banks of the river Yamuna, at Ghyaspur, which later became part of the Imperial city when Muizuddin Kaiqubad moved the capital to Kilokari. The khankah of the saint was visited daily by thousands of people, for more than forty years. We are informed by Barani that "from early morning till late into the night, nobles and plebeians, rich and poor, learned and illiterate, citizens and villagers, soldiers and warriors, free-men and slaves […] men and women, young and old, shopkeepers and servants, children and slaves*"*[49] were visiting the saint's monastery. The khanqah served as a welfare centre for the entire community, helping and supporting people living in the neighbourhood, as well as travellers coming from other districts or from abroad. If a house caught fire, money was sent to the family who was left without shelter, if some widow was starving, the saint would provide for her sustenance, and on his rout to Qutub Delhi, the Shaikh would distribute money to the prostitutes living on the site. His presence in Delhi was a fundamental element in the process of social identity of the capital city, creating a bridge among different social and religious groups of people, and holding them together within a moral frame that the State was not capable to offer.

However, not even the sufi frame was large enough to let women enter. "There is no doubt that the Chishti Shaikhs admitted women as their disciples, including slave girls, probably with the consent of their husbands or masters".[50] But women could not be incorporated into khanqahs and *silsilas* (order), and could not be appointed the successor. "They could be saints in a personal capacity but they could not be authorized to guide others".[51] We have seen how the feminine managed to re-enter the sacred space of mysticism.

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[47] M. Mujeeb, *Op. Cit. p.* 209

[48] *Ibidem*, p. 212

[49] Bruce Lawrence, *Morals for the Heart,* Paulist Press, New York, 1992 p. 3

[50] Indu Banga, *Gender Relations in Medieval India* in *"*State and Society in Medieval India*"* (Vol. 1), ed. By Grewal JS, Oxford University Press India, 2005*,* p. 456

[51] *Ibidem,* p. 455

What is important to notice is that, whenever the symbolic language of the feminine emerged, it did not do so in frontal opposition to the predominant culture setting, rather it climbed over it, and filled its symbology with new and unexpected meanings. Within the patriarchal culture of Medieval India the feminine could not find the space to express itself openly. Sultan Raziya tried it, and lasted only three years. A part from Raziya, who remains the only female monarch of the Delhi Sultanate, other women appeared here and there to show not only their faces, but also their minds and hearts. Ladies like Gulbadan, Nur Jahan or Hamida Banu stand hight on the Medieval horizon, and give us the right to suspect that the existence of many others might have remained unknown. We learn from Ibn Batutta that women living in the Qipchak territory enjoyed unusual liberty and respect, and from Mughal paintings that ladies and gentlemen used to sit and interact together during social gatherings. In Gujarat, the use of *pardah* was unknown. Amir Khusraw informs us that, thanks to his intercession, a woman was admitted to the royal court "in charge of all the Persian and Indian musicians",[52]and that women singers and dancers could obtain incredible popularity and appreciation. The fact that Firuz Shah enacted a law forbidding Muslim women to visit mausoleums outside the city of Delhi, offers us three different conclusions. First of all, the anxiety of control and dominion of the predominant culture was still very strong at the time. Secondly, within the city the restriction was not applied, so supposedly women were free to move around. And thirdly, the female mobility from town to town must have been consistent enough to justify a legislation. Indeed, festivities, celebrations and processions – the main social events for the masses – were always occasions of transgressing the rules. And a few centuries later, thanks to the brilliant essay of Farhat Hasan[53], we see women appealing to the *shari'a* to protect their social rights in Cambay.

To sum up, the urban cultural setting of Medieval India during the XIII and XIV centuries was anything but a static system, rather it was an evolving process including different agents and different languages. Although some of them were prevailing and dominating, others resisted and managed to find alternative ways of expression. Without openly contesting the setting, they entered the patriarchal symbolism, filling it with their own images and meanings. I argue that these meanings can not be read with a male alphabet, since they use different codes of communication. When the feminine speaks it does not use male language, and can not be analysed through male categories. The study of the previous literary texts was an attempt to suggest some possible keys of interpretation.

THE OCEAN OF GENDER

> *...gender offers opportunity for analysis*
> *even when there are no women present...*
> (Joan W. Scott)

Conclusion

The specification of gender does not occur on a neutral field, rather it has been carried on, for at least the last several thousands years, in a strongly determined and rigidly maintained patriarchal set-up. This is why we encounter a recurrent trend of disadvantaged roles attributed to the feminine, transversal to geography and time. Many studies have been done in the last few decades, and many others, I am sure, are to come, in order to explore how did the patriarchal system manipulate genders to structure and exercise its power. But so far, not as much attention has been given to how the feminine resisted and opposed this manipulation, which tools and strategies were employed for this purpose and, above all, what the results were.

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[52] M. W. Mirza, *Op. Cit.,* p. 218

[53] Farhat Hasan,*State and Locality in Mughal India. Power Relations in Western India,* Cambridge Un. Press, 2004

In this paper I have been looking from this angle to some literary sources of early Medieval India, a historical time sadly famous for its darkness on gender issues, and I am not going to call the patriarchal oppression of the age into any question. But I have found much more fascination in focusing on the resistance of the oppressed and their response to persecution.

I believe the two lenses – the oppression and the resistance – could fit on the same pair of glasses. Actually, I believe history should employ as many lenses as possible to look at the past, and certainly we should be prepared for contradictions. Reality it is not a flat horizon, rather a mosaic of irregularity; this is true for the present, as well as for the past. Women have always taken their choices at their own risk, not only in the Middle Age, but they are still doing it after seven hundred years. In 2010 the first cause of mortality among women in the world has still been the family – which means honour-killings. More than cancer, accidents or any other disease, women are killed for the choices they take – by fathers, brothers, husbands. Love still kills, and it is the woman to die. The "*dying for love*" of Persian poetry is not so far from our present, but we prefer to confine it to seven centuries in the past. And this is, I argue, the first myopia of the historical glasses. Many things have changed, no doubt, from those dark days, but others are not so quite different.

One fault of evolution is to look back always with superior eyes. We need a bad past to see a better present. The continuity of human limits is an uneasy matter. We prefer to segment this continuity into more handy ages, and project over them the unresolved uneasiness of our own time. This is why we built "*the other*", an otherness that can be cultural, racial or historical, but in any way carries out the mission of lightening our anxiety. We need to set a distance between "*us*" and "*them*", but by doing so we also miss the opportunity to get a taste of the humanity we are studying.

The story of Chanda is similar to that of many women around the world who leave their husband, escape his vengeance, use their seduction to avoid ruin, and fight against their rivals. But what is more interesting is that the strategies, the resources that Chanda resorts to are something every woman on earth knows well. But strangely enough, these are skills rarely attributed to the feminine, if not debased and trivialized as female seduction tricks. And this is the second short-sightedness to avoid.

The patriarchal structure of the history of humanity is very coercive and terribly stubborn. I argue that what has not been sufficiently recognized so far is that the resistance and heroic decision of women to nevertheless live their life and desires is equally as hard. And above all, what is still waiting for a recognition is the tremendous creativity women have employed in all ages to avoid the oppression, to manipulate the adversity to their advantage, to cut through the net escape routes. The women characters of Chandayan and Tuti-nameh, as the feminine of the mystic devotion expressed in the ghazal and in the qawwali, bring us sparkles of such talent, which need to be located side by side with persecution. Indeed, it does not make the oppression lesser, it just makes the oppressed greater. Resistance and oppression simply coexisted, as they are doing right now. Only by this confrontation, we will be able to give a value and take a measure of both of them. My doubt is that this lack of recognition is not casual or accidental, rather is one of the many attempts to disown and discredit the power of the feminine, perceived as a subversive force by the patriarchal structure within which it develops.

The symbol par excellence of this feminine is love, not surprisingly exiled as well among the dangerous enemies of the social organisation of power. It is through love that feminine can be perceived, in women as in men. They both suffer alike from its negation. The symbolic language of love is the voice of the feminine within. No matter how hard it is silenced, it rises loudly at unexpected places and times. I argue it is pre-gendered, archetypical and eternal. Is the principle of Creation, it slides down from the very beginning through mythology and ages up until today. It moves in the sacred, as well in the profane sphere. It is fluid, unpredictable, transformable, mostly irrational but instinctively conscious. It is the missing part of entirety.

“The adoption of the 'feminine', both in the language of speech and the language of the body [is the voice] of a moment of permissive transgression, when the boundaries between the exoteric and the esoteric worlds are breached to irradiate the former with the lucent charge of the sacred. In and for an instant, the boxing of our lived experiences into 'gender' categories is used to overcome the limitations of such 'gender', and also of other hierarchies and boxes. […] These alternative, older, always-existing world orders pull us towards them, inviting us to defy the quotidian constrictions of gender, nation, geography, history, and identity itself, releasing our universal potential to become something other than ourselves”.[54]

I argue that the exile of the feminine, whenever is practiced, reiterates the primordial oppression exercised by the patriarchal system, the very first act of gender manipulation: the deletion of the female half of God. With the masculinization of Divinities – any kind of divinities – begins the exile of the feminine. However, from the underworld where it has been consigned, the feminine manages to periodically emerge and make its presence felt. Suddenly it materialize in an elopement, in the audacity of an answer, in the verse of a qawwali, to remind us that unless we become aware of its existence, we will never be complete.

To conclude, can we take the the literary text we have examined as an expression of the feminine or just as the male authors' interpretation of it? This is a recurrent polemic which arises whenever we consider male works talking about women. I hope to provide an answer that extends beyond the present study.

Merely for a woman to write is not enough for the feminine to speak, and a man's writing is not enough to exclude it. Art can not be gender specified, unless it remains at a very low level. Literature can be divide between good and bad, not male and female. The fact that for thousands of years women around the world have been systematically deprived of access to culture is an undeniable historical fact. But it can not interfere with the question of talent. A good poem is a good poem, no matter whose gender its author is. An artist is supposed to be capable of expressing both the genders, otherwise we would have only women writing good books about women, and men writing good books about men. But this is not the case. Today, we have masterpieces, as well as terrible books, written by both of them.

This is to say that to judge *a priori* the work of Daud and Naqshabi as exclusively male visions and representations could be, I believe, an error. In both cases the quality seems high enough to let us hope for the contrary. But this is not the only reason.

Indeed, I would like to insist once more on the modality of expression of the feminine. To decipher its message we must abandon the (patriarchal) primer we are used to, and access a different hermeneutics. But different does not mean opposite, just diverse. The resistance of the feminine it is not linear/male oriented. On the contrary, it moves more like a wave, a flurry, a drench. It does not choose the head-on collision, the male and heroic challenge of the enemy. Rather, it moves to get around, to distract, to enchant. During this feminine dance, the frame remains intact, giving the illusion of a stable and enduring *staus-quo*. Instead, behind the curtain, lots of things are going on.

The literary sources we have considered in this study are not, and can not be considered, women's voices. It would be offensive to all those women who, during the past centuries, were not allowed to write their own stories. However, I argue that these texts, out of any conscious intention of their authors, and each in different ways and to different degree, carry many traces of the forcibly mute language of the feminine, of its codified communication and of its creative and subversive use of symbolism. The power of this expression greatly depends on our capacity to abandon the predominant scheme of interpretation, and to let the feminine within ourselves listen to the feminine without.

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[54] *Ibidem*, p. 87

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