

8. Female Voices and Gender Construction in North Indian Sant Poetry

Abstract. In spite of a pervasive mistrust of femininity in Hindu culture, the world of bhakti is conspicuously full of men speaking, singing, and sometimes dancing as women. While the ubiquitous *gopīs* are paradigmatic figures of Kṛṣṇa devotion, the presence of feminine discourse in Sant poetry, understood both as the (imaginary) gender of the speaker and as poetic themes and images, is still puzzling. The stature of Kabīr as the paramount *nirguṇa* bhakti voice and his public image as a visionary and a mystic has somewhat silenced the substantial part of his poetic oeuvre where he takes a female alter ego as his medium of choice in order to articulate emotional states. How femininity is imagined, constructed, and articulated by men, how and why it has been ascribed the cultural meaning it carries in this particular context, and how it relates to the rare and poorly preserved authentic female voices in it are some of the questions this paper tackles.

Keywords. Gender, Kabīr, Umā, Pārvatī (poetess), Dayābāi.

Kabīr as a woman

Nārī ki jhāi pare andhā hota bhujāṅga ('the snake goes blind when a woman's shadow falls upon it') says Kabīr in one popular *upadeśa*, following a long and well-documented tradition of blaming women not for what they do, but for what they are. For they are *kāminī*, generators of *kāma*, quintessential destroyers of spiritual discipline and the enemy of the Sant. Yet, in spite this terrible warning, among his compositions, we find this one, both popular and with a well-established manuscript pedigree:

वाल्हा आव हमारै ग्रेह रे | तुम्ह बिन दुष्यया देह रे || टेक ||
सब को कहै तुम्हारी नारी | मोकू इहै अंदेह रे |
ऐकमेक ह्वै सेज न सूवै | तब लग कैसा नेह रे ||
अनं न भावै नीद न आवै | ग्रिहं बिन धरे न धीर रे |
ज्यूं कांमी नै काम पियारौ | ज्यूं प्यासे कूं नीर रे ||

है कोई ऐसा उपगारी | हरि स्युं कहै सुनाइ रे |
ऐसै ह्वाल कबीर भये हैं | बिन देख्ये जीव जाइ रे || (MKV357)¹

Hey, lover, come to my house! Without you the body is full of sorrow.
(Refrain)

Everyone keeps teasing me that I'm your woman: so unfair!

Until we share the same bed how can love be fulfilled?

Food has no taste and sleep doesn't come. I can never keep still, in the house
or in the wild.

Like the lustful following his lust, like the thirsty after water!

Is there a charitable helper out there, who could explain to Hari

that such is the state of Kabīr: without a vision of him life is waning.

Among the *padas* in Callewaert's collection, this attitude is far from exceptional. In many of them, Kabīr speaks with the voice of a woman. In spite of the supposed lack of qualities of the Absolute, when it comes to voicing emotions, he seems to slip naturally into a female persona. Sometimes, in Kṛṣṇa *gopī* fashion, he/she turns to a *sakhī* as a confidante and a witness to his/her wretchedness. In other *padas* he/she is Hari's young bride, being brought in a carriage to his/her husband's home. Still elsewhere, he/she speaks of the new household, of the relations with her in-laws, and the emotional and symbolic value of these can be quite enigmatic. When speaking as a woman, Kabīr brings in as props elements of a married woman's world—objects, family members, and intimate scenes—and stages them to build a nuanced emotional atmosphere.

मेरी अंशियां जान सुजान भई |
देवर भरम सुसर संग तजि कै | हरि पीव तहां गईं || टेक ||
वालपनै के करम हंमारे | मेटे जानि दई |
वांह पकरि हरि किरपा कीन्हि | आप समीप लई ||
पांनी की वूंद स्यौं जिनि प्यंड रच्यौ है | ता संगि अधिक रई |
दास कवीर पल प्रेम न घटई | दिन दिन प्रीति नईं || राम || (MKV380)

My eyes turned out so clever . . .

Forgetting about the in-laws, brother and father, they stuck to my beloved
Hari! (Refrain)

All the karma amassed since childhood vanished the moment I recognized
him!

Hari seized my blessed hands and drew me to himself!

He, who built the human body out of a drop of water, that One I'm so in
love with!

Kabīr [says]: 'Never for an instant does my love ever wither, each day it
blooms anew.'

1 MKV for *The Millennium Kabīr Vānī* by Callewaert, Sharma and Tallieu (2000), also included in the Lausanne platform for early new Indo-Aryan digitized texts ENIAT <<http://wp.unil.ch/eniat/tag/kabira/>>. (Accessed 9 February 2017).

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Kabīr speaks here in the voice of an adulteress, a married woman, obsessed with her illicit love. The reference to the in-laws clearly stands for the duties and conventions of this world. Like the *gopī* in Kṛṣṇa bhakti poetry, while appearances are kept, her inner world is completely swept away by the overwhelming experience of love, at once mystic and mundane. Only her eyes betray her secret, for they are out of her control and mirror directly the state of her soul.

Interestingly, Kabīr does not need any mythological support to use this kind of imagery. It seems to be part of the literary conventions of his time and its meaning would have been easily recognized and understood by the audience in the specific context of devotional poetry. Carla Petievich confirms the presence of such conventional sets of images, or attitudes, linked to a female narrator, across the Hindu–Muslim divide, in early Urdu and Punjabi lyrical traditions.² While exploring the different aspects of this ‘masquerade,’ she argues repeatedly that the assuming of a female persona by a male author is the most conspicuously Indic element in Indo-Muslim poetry. Later Muslim elites have seen in this ‘effeminacy’ a proof of the decline of poetry (and of Muslim culture in general) and have strived to excise the female narrator from Urdu ghazal. The tensions relative to the search for a distinctive cultural identity after the separation of India and Pakistan, combined with social constructions of gender, have resolved, according to Petievich, into a yearning for the lost purity of a genre where the *‘āshiq* can and should only be male.

Unlike the situation with the paradigmatic *gopī* of Kṛṣṇa bhakti, the relation to the divine here is free from mythological constraints and does not necessarily involve illicitness. This pada has usually been interpreted as expressing mystic love through the attachment of a wife:

इब तोहि जान न देहं राम प्यारे | ज्युं भावै त्युं होहु हंमारे ॥ टेक ॥
बहुत दिनन के बिछूरे हरि पाए | भाग बडे घरि बैठो आए ॥
चरणनि लागि करौ बरियाई | प्रेम प्रीति राषौ उझाई ॥
इत मनि मंदिर रहौ नित चोषै | कहै कबीर परौ जिनि धोषै ॥ (MKV3)

I won't let you go, my love. Be mine however it pleases you.
Hari came to me, after so many days! So lucky: I was just sitting home and there he came!
I will apply all my all the strength of my limbs to detain him, confound him with sweet cajoling.
'Stay pure forever in the home of my mind,' says Kabīr, 'it's full of crooks out there.'

A significant amount of padas brings in a newly-wed bride as the narrator:

² Petievich (2007), pp. 4–24.

दुलहंनी गावळ मंगलचार | हंम घरि आए रांम भतार || टेक ||
तन रत करि मैं मन रत करिहूं | पंच तत बरियाती |
रांम देव मोरे पहुंचें आयेहैं | मैं जोबनि मैंमाती ||
सरीर सरोवर बेदी करिहूं | ब्रह्मा बेद उचार |
रांम देव संगि भावरि लेहूं | धनि बडभाग हंमारे ||
सूर तेतीसौं कौतिग आए | मुनियर कोटि अट्यासी |
कहै कबीर हम ब्याहि चले हैं | पुरिष ऐक अबिनासी || (MKV1)

Oh bride, strike an auspicious tune! Lord Rām has come to my house!
(Refrain)

I will give myself body and soul to him! The five elements will be the wedding party.

Lord Rām is present my home! My young blood is vigorously boiling.

My body is a lake, I will light a sacrificial fire on its shore and Brahma will recite the mantras,

While I and Rām together walk around it. How blessed can I be!

Thirty-three gods will attend the celebration with eighty-four saints.

Kabīr says: ‘I am getting married to an indestructible man!’

संईयां मेरे साजि दई ऐक डोली | हस्त लोक अरु मैं तैं बोली || टेक ||
ऐक झंझर सम सूत षटोला | त्रिश्रां बाव चहूं दिसि डोला ||
पंच कहार का मरम जानां | ऐकैं कह्या ऐक नहीं मांनां ||
भूभर घांम अवाहर छाया | नैहर जात बहुत दुष पावा ||
कहै कबीर बर बहु दुष सहिये | प्रेम प्रीति पिय कै संगि रहियै || (MKV153)

The Lord has placed me in a litter.³ He who holds the world in his hand has talked to me! (Refrain)

The thread of the bedstead is punctured, the wind of greed blows from all sides. I caught the essence of the five porters. They are said to be one, though no one understands.

The curtain shades me from sun and dust. The agony of leaving my father’s house!

Kabīr says: ‘The worthy bride must endure many pains to remain lovingly with her husband.’

This last poem (and even, up to a point, the previous one) shows a slightly different treatment of femininity. Within the first-person discourse of the bride-to-be a symbolic level of meaning appears (for example, the five porters, standing clearly for the five elements). Though the audience is still invited to imbibe the emotion of the female narrator, a second-degree reading is made possible through which the whole scene (the bride being taken away from her parents’ house by her husband) is decoded as a metaphor for the soul on the verge of experiencing mystic union with the divine. Thus, a kind of distance is introduced in the experience of the audience; a cognitive element interferes with the purely emotional level.

3 The one used to carry the bride to the home of her in-laws.

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Here is another example in which 'being with the beloved' in marriage is rejected as unattained/unattainable while the ultimate experience of the sati is upheld as the one leading to eternal union:

मै सासुरि पीव गुंहुनै आई |
साई सँगि साध नहीं पूगी | गयौ जोबन सुपिनै की नाई || टेक ||
पंच जनां मिलि मंडप छायाँ | तीनि जनां मिलि लगन गिनाई |
सषी सहेली मंगल गावै | दुष सुष माथै हलद चढाई ||
नानां रंगै भांवरि फेरी | गांठि जोरि बाबै पतिताई |
पूरि सुहाग भयौ बिन दुलह | चौक कै रंगि धर्यौ सगौ भाई ||
आपनौ पुरिष मुंष कबहू न देख्यौ | सती होत संमझी समाझाई |
कहै कबीर मै सल रचि मरिहूं | तिरूं ले कंले तूर बजाई || (MKV203)

For the sake of my beloved I moved to the house of my in-laws,
But my desire to be with him was never fulfilled. My youth has withered
like a dream. (Refrain)

Five men built the wedding canopy, three others calculated the auspicious
moment.

My friends sung the wedding songs and rub turmeric on my forehead, for
better or worse.

We did all sorts of circumambulations. My father tied me to my husband
with a knot.

But the whole ceremony went without a groom. Unsettled in the wedding
square, I held my brother's hand.

I never saw my man's face. When came the time to become a sati, then ev-
erything became clear.

Kabīr says: 'I will make my funeral pyre and I'll die on it. Then, to the sound
of trumpets, I will cross over with my lover.'

Merging with the (divine) beloved through fire is an abundantly attested image throughout the history of Indian poetry. Whether it would be in the shape of the moth irresistibly attracted by the flame of the lamp or Mīrābāī appealing to her yogi lover to rub her ashes on his skin, death by fire stands for the definitive annihilation of the ego, the falling of the ultimate barrier between subject and object, of the last obstacle to unbounded, eternal, absolute love. While the assuming of a female voice seems a necessity in order to speak without constraint about emotions, the last line, containing Kabīr's name, signals the end of the masquerade and gives a soteriological clue to how the content should be interpreted.⁴

4 Carla Petievich interprets the insertion of the *takhallus* in the ghazal tradition as 'a formal unmasking,' 'the poet's resumption of a "waking self"' (Petievitch (2007), p. 15). I would argue that the appearance of Kabīr's name in the last line of padas in which he assumes a female persona resonates in much the same way. It is worth noting that the gender transformation is also reflected grammatically: in the last line, wherever grammatical gender is marked, all forms are masculine.

In other words, there seems to be two different dimensions of the kind of femininity assumed and articulated by Kabīr in this category of poems: one in which the author, following a popular poetic convention of his time, fully endorses the emotions of a female lover as an expression of his longing for the absolute; and another, a symbolic one, in which elements of a female narrator's world can be interpreted in the light of the doctrines and world view of the Sant. To put it differently: there is a persistent ambiguity here between Kabīr speaking directly as a woman, empathizing with the emotions of a *virahinī*, and his use of femininity as an arsenal of images or symbols in order to express a level of reality that is, by definition, ineffable. These two dimensions are never clearly separated and it is, indeed, their fusion which makes for much of the poetic impact and appeal of the songs. Indeed, the padas in this special collection could be arranged along a scale in which femininity is assessed from 'real' to 'symbolic.' Here is an example that leans towards the 'symbolic' end of the spectrum:

मन मेरौ रहंटा रसन पुवरिया | हरि कौ नाव ले ले काति बहुरिया || टेक ||
चारि षूटी दोइ चमरष लाई | सहजि रहटवा दीया चलाई ||
सासू कहै काति बहू ऐसैं | बिन कातें निस्तरिबौ कैसें ||
कहै कबीर सूत भल काता | रहंटौ नही परंम पद दाता || (MKV256)

My soul is my spinning wheel, the tongue is my spindle. It spins the yarn of Hari's name. (Refrain)

My wheel has four pillars and two leather bearings; it turns on and on spontaneously.

My mother-in-law says: 'Keep spinning, daughter! Without spinning how shall you be saved?'

Kabīr says: 'I spun a good amount of yarn. This is not a wheel, it has given me a throne.'

The wheel and the 'spinning of the name' is a recurrent image in Sufi and folk poetry from Sind and Punjab.⁵ It has notoriously inspired Shah Hussain and Bulleh Shah, and the latter has also developed in a Sufi perspective the theme of the bride-to-be, leaving her parents' home,⁶ as a symbol for the soul on the verge of a fundamental transformation. It is clear then that, in this context, Kabīr's evocations are, at least to some extent, both conventional (widely familiar, liked and expected by contemporary audiences) and symbolic (referring to an ideological framework beyond their direct meaning). The drive which makes the perception of

5 For a comparative approach to spinning and weaving in poetry, see Sharma (1970).

6 See, for instance, an insightful essay by the writer Najm Hosain Syed, regretfully lacking any bibliographical references: *Recurrent Patterns in Punjabi Poetry*, <<http://www.wichar.com/news/176/ARTICLE/3421/2008-03-11.html>>. (Accessed 20 February 2017). It is apparently included in a collection bearing the same title, Lahore: Majlis Shah Hussain, 1968 (?).

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this second level of interpretation ‘organic’ or ‘natural,’ which lends the poetry its suggestive power and, ultimately, its beauty, is rendered possible by the emotional adherence to a certain shared social experience of what constitutes a woman’s world. The symbolic and the conventional aspects of the images do not undermine the importance of the fact that there seems to be a consensus, whenever a certain range of emotions are at stake, to express them exclusively by assuming a female identity. The nature of this female identity is, by definition, also (at least to some extent) conventional and corresponds to a predominantly male perception of what constitutes femininity.

In Kabīr the symbolic value of the elements of this world of familiar womanhood can be self-evident or more ambiguous. If the meaning of the spinning wheel or the litter and its carriers is relatively easy to grasp, the in-laws involved (mother, father, brother, sister) seem to stand for different things in different contexts. Sometimes, as in pada 380, they are the duties, worries, and conventions of this world, from which the heroine has gained an inner freedom, absorbed in the exclusivity of her new illicit love. Elsewhere they participate in the new reality where her divine bridegroom is taking her. In any case, the kind of woman Kabīr chooses to inhabit is easier to delineate. Her modes of expression, her character and emotions are informed by folk songs. She has nothing of the sophistication of a *nāyikā*, she speaks very directly of her joys and sorrows and has no use for complex metaphors, poetic images, or alliterations. In the most poignant padas, when she depicts her inner world, revolving exclusively around the presence or absence of her lover, the female alter ego of Kabīr often puts it in contrast with her immediate environment, her inadequacy at being a proper married woman, daughter-in-law, or sister-in-law. The immersion into womanhood takes the shape of a psychological regression, a leap into the world of unbridled passion, unmitigated and compact, a longing so fundamental to the subject’s being that it could almost be called animal. Or, for that matter, mystical.

In *Akath kahānī prem kī*, Purushottam Agrawal calls Kabīr’s adoption of a female voice conspicuous yet paradoxical.⁷ He underlines the ‘spontaneity’ with which Kabīr takes on a woman’s voice every time emotions are at stake and he asks whether he does this in search of a suitable expression of the angst of mystic love or because the pain of these emotions awakens a sort of feminine consciousness inside him. In other words, is the need for a female alter ego born out of the nature of the experience itself or is it a poetic necessity?

The question is very relevant since the world of bhakti seems full of men involved in this kind of cross-gender rhetoric, apparently unaware of any contradiction with the *upadeśa* attitude towards femininity. This situation seems to be pervasive across the *saguna/nirguna* divide. In Kṛṣṇa bhakti, where *upadeśa* are not a popular genre,

7 Agrawal (2009), p. 358.

and in spite of the paradigmatic *gopī*, femininity is treated in the world of practical devotion with circumspection, if not with downright mistrust.⁸ Women are prohibited from serving temple deities and many dedicated Kṛṣṇa ascetics will refuse to have any contact at all with them. Nevertheless, the emulation of female attitudes has always been a part of devotional life, both in theory and in practice. Theologians have worked hard to rationalize the integration of a female perspective by postulating different levels of reality, *laukika* and *alaukika*. Male devotees are invited to cultivate within themselves a kind of sublimated femininity, corresponding to their true nature in the metaphysical realm. Invitations to identify with female mythical characters is a distinct feature of devotional poetry, and in practical devotion, it is not uncommon to see in Braj temples, during intense celebrations, male devotees dancing like *gopī*, their faces hidden behind the ends of a sari.

Among the non-theological explanations, the influence of tantrism has often been pointed out, as a yearning towards a fundamental androgyny that would restore to human existence a dimension of completeness. In a much-quoted formulation, A.K. Ramanujan has called the Sant ‘the third gender.’⁹ However, other questions remain, which may throw light not only on the devotional mechanisms of bhakti, but, in more general terms, on some aspects of Hindu anthropology. The instinctive adherence to a woman’s persona as soon as emotions (or at least, a certain type of emotions) are in focus is intriguing, especially regarding the unanimously low esteem in which women are more generally held. This blatant contradiction is the proverbial elephant in the room: an obvious truth no one seems to notice. P. Agrawal rightly observes that Kabīr, so vocal about his disapproval of caste and religious discrimination, never goes so far in his social critique to tackle gender inequality.

Gender and the social construction of emotions

So, is womanhood a good or a bad thing? If sublimated femininity is a necessary element of the path to salvation, access to it seems to be granted only to males. Actual belonging to the female gender is never viewed as a facilitator on the spiritual path, quite the opposite.

Thus, we have two kinds of femininity in Sant poetry. The first one, actual womanhood, is hardly elaborated upon, only referred to in unflattering metaphors or comments, reflecting the pervasive view about women’s inaptitude for spiritual life and general depravity. The second one is an entirely male construction: an imaginary version of the female gender, informed by folk songs and, thus, most probably, originally inclusive of some authentic female experience, but purified,

⁸ On the role of femininity in Kṛṣṇa bhakti, see Entwistle (1987), pp. 91–95.

⁹ Ramanujan (1976), p. 291.

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sublimated, and transformed into a suitable recipient for the Sant's emotional life. What this idea of femininity includes and how it is constructed and articulated makes for an interesting subject of inquiry. How gender correlates with emotions (since capacity for emotions is what gives intrinsic value to the female gender in this context) must be a particular focus in it.

The last ten years have seen an increased number of studies in the nature and cultural anthropology of emotions. The social science interest in emotions has arisen out of a dissatisfaction with the dominant cognitive view of humans as 'mechanical' information processors.¹⁰ Recent research has brought forward the view that emotions may be construed as ideas as much as or more than psychobiological facts. Emotions are private feelings, but they can be socially articulated; they can be treated as aspects of cultural meaning. When private, supposedly irrational emotional experience is voiced in certain contexts and cultural meaning is imposed upon it, transforming it into an interface between personal and social worlds. Emotional judgements are seen to require social validation, thereby linking emotion with power and social structure. Therefore, emotion is both socially shaped and socially shaping. The study of the social construction of emotions can prove to be no less insightful in cultural anthropology than that of gender.

In-depth studies on the relation of emotions, gender, and culture are scarce. Recent studies, based on the extensive cross-cultural database of the International Study of Emotional Antecedents and Reactions (ISEAR), have shown that the modern stereotype, according to which women are more emotional than men, is pervasive across many cultures. Emotions are seen as gender-specific—there are 'rather' male emotions (anger, contempt, pride) and 'rather' female emotions (happiness, sadness, embarrassment, fear, shame, guilt, etc.). It should be noted that these studies never treat love as one emotion among others, considering it too complex to be treated as a singular entity.¹¹ The theories concerning, for instance, the impact of one culture's sex-specific division of labour or the social status of sex-related roles on emotional experience have yet to be taken to consideration.¹²

A modern study across thirty-seven countries seems to confirm the widespread assumption that when it comes to emotions women are considered more competent: they are better at understanding, articulating, and expressing emotions. However, whether that element alone is sufficient to explain the preference for a female medium in the voicing of devotional feelings is altogether a different question. Perhaps the answer is hidden within a combination of factors, related to the specificity of the 'female situation' in India: under the outer control of patriarchal rules and values, their presumed boundless emotionality is imagined to create a

10 Lutz and White (1986).

11 Fischer et al. (2004).

12 Fischer (2000), p. 71.

space for itself in their inner world. One of the common motives throughout female-voiced bhakti poetry is the almost unbearable tension of the constant effort to maintain social roles and appearances while living absorbed in the immensity of a secret world of love. This specific discrepancy between inner and outer reality is, perhaps, what bhakti poets would have found particularly appropriate for the expression of the otherwise ineffable.

The experience of women Sant poets

Getting back to the Sant tradition, this is the context in which the rare, poorly documented, and altogether feeble voices of women Sant poets are to be appreciated. The extent to which they have identified with the sublimated femininity imposed by their male peers or added new features to the articulation of emotion has been a guiding line throughout a research area which is far from being finished.

Most of the women Sant's poetry is still available only in manuscripts. A few compositions have been included in various printed anthologies. Some rare poets, like Dayābāī, have been honoured with their own printed booklet. A very helpful publication is that of Savitri Singh's *Madhyakālīn kavyitriyām*.¹³

As little as we know about the biographies of medieval women Sant poets, there seems to be a recurrent pattern that sets them somewhat apart from their male counterparts: not only do they typically belong to some religious community (a fact for which we should probably be grateful since it helped preserve their compositions), they often double as sisters/daughters/cousins of the founder (one of them, Bāvalī Sāhibā, even founded her own community). Also, unlike men Sant, most seem to come from wealthy or well-established households.

Umā is the name of one such poet about whom we know practically nothing. Savitri Singh has discovered her in the research reports of the Nāgarī Pracāriṇī Sabhā and quotes a few compositions from a small unpublished manuscript held in the library. Their language is simple with some Rajasthani features, their style is direct and unsophisticated, close to popular tradition:

ऐसे फाग खेले राम राय
सूरत सुहागन सम्मुख आय
पच तत को बनयो है बाग
जामें सामंत सहेली रमत फाग
जहाँ राम झरोखे बैठे आय
प्रेम पसारी प्यारी लगाय
जहाँ सब जननकोबन्द्यो है ज्ञान-गुलाल लियो हाथ
केसर गारोजाया (Singh (1953), p. 47)

13 Singh (1953).

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Playing Holi in such a way, King Rām
the memory of married bliss comes forth . . .
In the garden of five elements
where the noble ladies enjoy the celebration;
where Rām is sitting at the lattice window
spreading sweet love;
where all the souls are established with knowledge-*gulāl* in hands
and saffron is flowing.

On the one hand, this pada is close in style and spirit to popular Holi songs. On the other, it evokes the countless padas included in the Holi sections of *varṣotsava* type of Kṛṣṇa bhakti anthologies, where the effervescence of the celebration is often used as a background for some openly erotic plays of Kṛṣṇa with his female counterparts.¹⁴ Here we have a subtly 'sanctified' version of Holi: to some of its elements a symbolic value is added (the five elements of the garden, the knowledge-*gulāl*) while a divine presence, peeking through the window, spreads colours and love in the atmosphere.

In general, though, women Sant rarely speak in the first person. They even sometimes express the same cautiousness towards the female gender evident in Kabīr's poems. As is the case in these lines by Pārvatī, possibly the follower of a Nāthpanthī guru:

धन जोबन की करे न आस
चित्त न राखे कामिनी पास (Singh (1953), p. 50)

Don't put your faith in wealth and youth
And keep your spirit away from lustful women.

The most conspicuous among the women Sant, present in all the compiled anthologies, are Dayābāī and Sahajobāī,¹⁵ each credited with an independent work, respectively *Dayābodh* and *Sahaj prakāś*. They were disciples of Carandās and, perhaps, his sisters or cousins. Dayābāī's poetry seems more personal both in terms of the quality of her voice and the God she is addressing. Here she is speaking as a *virāhiṇī*:

कहुं धरत पग परत कहुं, डगमगात सब देह
दया मग्न हरी रूप में, दिनदिनअधिक स्नेह
प्रेम मग्न गद्गद वचन, पुलकी रोम सब अंग
पुलकी रह्यो मन रूप में, दया न हवाई चित भंग (Singh (1953), p. 70)

How should I hold on, how should I move my feet,
when my whole body is shaking!

14 Rousseva-Sokolova (2000).

15 See also McGregor (1984), p. 47.

Dayā has drowned in Hari's splendour, love grows day by day.
Drowned in love my speech is stammering,
the hair on my body stands erect in delight,
and so does my soul, frozen in his splendour.
Dayā is no more, her mind is destroyed!

And also:

बौरी हूँ चितवत फिरूँ, हरी आवे कही ओर
छिन्हि उठूँ, छिन्हि गिरि पऊँ, राम दुखी मन मोर (Singh (1953), p. 70)

Out of my mind, I keep roaming and wondering from which side Hari
will arrive.

One second I'm standing, the next I have fallen; O Rām, my soul is so sad!

While what we have seen here is just a sample, or very preliminary remarks, of what one may find across women Sant compositions, it seems clear that women Sant's writing does not contribute significantly to the sublimated femininity evoked by its male counterpart. Women Sant poets appear to build on the same range of conventional images. They seem to share the commonplace mistrust of women and are inclined to speak from the first person even more rarely than their male colleagues. It makes sense to think that identification with the longing heroine was to be avoided for much the same reasons that sublimated femininity had to be protected from its real-life version: the risk of contamination was probably conceived as even greater by Sant women poets than by their fellow ascetics. Either way, they appear to have fully embraced the socially constructed version of their own gender. As a whole, their compositions are more social than personal, more symbolic than authentic. In any case, women Sant poetry has not informed or inspired male compositions on the same theme.

Ultimately, their careful reliance on conventional images, their attentiveness (imposed or self-imposed) to stay within the limits of the well-established has, in general, produced less interesting artistic achievements. Paradoxically, as a woman, Kabīr is far more compelling. Although he works within the expectations of his audience with familiar images and established conventions, ultimately, he transcends them. Beyond the personal or social aspects of the expression of womanhood, his female alter ego succeeds in tapping into a transpersonal emotion, a sea of love flowing just beneath the surface of ordinary perception, which is the emotional version of ultimate reality. This is what he is best remembered for and is what the modern day oral tradition associates with him as a living testimony.

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