

THE ADAPTATION OF LYRICS, MUSIC
AND PERFORMANCE OF THE HINDUSTANI
GENRE ṭHUMRĪ AS A TOOL OF AFFIRMATION
FOR PROFESSIONAL WOMEN SINGERS
IN THE CHANGING NORTH INDIAN SOCIETY
OF THE XX CENTURY

MARGED FLAVIA TRUMPER

In the Hindustani art music of north India, *ṭhumrī* is the most popular vocal genre after the mainstream *khyāl* and the recently revived and more sober *dhrupad*; even so, it is now quite rare to find a real *ṭhumrī* specialist. The reason for this lies in the stigma surrounding the genre over the past two centuries as a result of its original courtly background.

Although scholars such as Shukla (1983, 71) and Manuel (1989, 39-46) claim a connection between *ṭhumrī* and ancient folk-derived female genres and *nritya gīts*, or songs for dance, there is no evidence of such a connection or of any folk counterpart of *ṭhumrī* to support this theory. I consider such claims to be influenced by the Hindu revivalist trend aimed at effacing the Islamic component of Hindustani music (Walker, 291).

The best way to get an idea of the origins of *ṭhumrī* is to look at the word itself and at the first written evidence of its existence. The name is believed to derive from the Hindi word *ṭhumak*, indicating a “graceful stamping of the foot,” as described by *kathak* dancer Bireswar Gautam.¹ The word immediately conveys two main aspects of *ṭhumrī*; the association with dance and the feminine connection. On the other hand, the first written source to mention the genre is *A Treatise on the Music of Hindostan*, by Captain August Willard, dated 1834 (Manuel 1989, 34-35). Certainly, *ṭhumrī* was well established by that time, but we have no way to determine whether it existed in any form before the eighteenth century. We do know that the peak of *ṭhumrī* popularity occurred during the reign of Wajid Ali

¹ Personal communication.

Shah (1822-1887, reigned 1847-56), also known as the last *nawāb* of Awadh.

The genre was among the main items in the repertoire of Lucknow courtesans and, although it can be sung by men as well, it has been mainly associated with the female voice since that time and retains its female perspective today. These women performers were generally described with the Urdu word *tawa'if*, meaning something like “wandering artist,”² which later gained a derogatory connotation, as a result of a defamation campaign against hereditary women performers, which started in the late nineteenth century.

Courtly *ṭhumrī*, however, was quite different from the genre of today. Courtesans performed dance and vocal music together, and their performance was calculated to gain the favour of the patron and to entertain him and his entourage. The features of early *ṭhumrī* compositions reflect this kind of communication and performance. Their tempo was a little faster than that used in modern *ṭhumrī*, the lyrics were longer and more descriptive in order to suit dance interpretation, generally using shorter and mostly disyllabic words with short vowels to enhance the rhythmic manipulations and to highlight the (male) composer’s skills. It was customary to have composers insert their pen name, or *chāp* (Du Perron 2007, 76), in the second stanza, and many of them were famous for using clever compositional devices. The strong association with dance was reflected in the descriptive and rhythmic nature of these compositions.

From a linguistic point of view, courtly *ṭhumrī* displayed a refined literary language with some regional influence inspired by rural themes, but the poetic images offered a stereotypical female perspective expressing subordination to the male addressee, with whom the patron would identify (Qureshi 2006, 322).

All these features explain why fast *ṭhumrī* is also called *bandīś kī ṭhumrī*, meaning *ṭ.* based on a fixed composition, or *bol bāmṭ kī ṭhumrī*, meaning *ṭ.* with rhythmic manipulation using lyrics. In this style of *ṭhumrī*, the performer remains subordinate to the composer and the patron/listener.

Here is an example of a *ṭhumrī* from the court of Lucknow by composer Sanad Piya³:

² Qureshi gives the etymology of “tribe, community” (2006: 317), Afreen claims that the word refers to the movement around the mehfil space (2016: 1100), and Williams explains it as “troop, tribe, mobile company” (2017: 594). Another common definition for these artists was *dereḍār*, or “tent dweller,” since they used to follow kings even during war campaigns (Shah 1993: 97; Qureshi, 2006: 317.). Travelling was among the freedom privileges they enjoyed.

³ Pen name of Tawakkul Husain Khan of Rampur.

*āvata huīhaiṃ woh dekho śyāma kahīṃ more
mukūṭa muralīwāle
bahuta dīnana pāchhe
sakhī jāgelā bhāga morā*

*palakana ḍagara buhārūṃ morī sājanī
jo piyā āve more mandirawā
sanada piyā ko begī milāvo maiṃ to
paiyā parūṃ tore*

Translation⁴:

The Dark One (Krishna) must be coming from somewhere, here he is
with his peacock feather and his bamboo flute
after many days,
my confidante, my good fortune may come.

I would sweep the way with my eyelashes, my friend,
if my beloved would come to my abode.
Help me meet Sanad Piya soon
and I will fall at your feet

The language used in this song clearly shows stereotyped feminine feelings, especially in typical expressions of courtly *ṭhumrī* like “I will fall at your feet,” or the formulaic “I would sweep the way with my eyelashes.” This female perspective is created by male composers for male patrons.

We can also see how all these images are suitable for representation through dance, since courtly *ṭhumrī* could not exist without the dance today called *kathak*.⁵ The heroine is saying how much she longs for Krishna to come to her, but if we count the pictures portrayed in her narrative, we find much scope for dance interpretation through *abhinaya*, or interpretive dance movements. In fact, one of the typical performing styles of courtesans, called *bol/bhāv batānā*, meaning showing the lyrics or emotions, was to sit singing a line and then represent the same through hand gestures and facial expressions. In a traditional *mujrā*, the performance of a courtesan, she would present a *ṭhumrī* with *bol batānā* and later stand to dance (Manuel 1989, 65).

⁴ My own translation, as for the other compositions and texts in this paper. I learnt this composition from my guru, Sunanda Sharma.

⁵ Classical dance also went through a reform in the 20th century, and this was when the art dance from the courts of north India started being called *kathak*, meaning storytellers, an epithet the hereditary court dance maestros used for themselves in order to differentiate their status from those of other dancers (Walker).

As in all *bandīś kī ṭhumrīs*, the lyrics are set to a melody following the frame of the rhythmic cycle, known as *tāla*, and are meant to be improvised mainly through rhythmic elaborations called *bol bāmṭ* in order to highlight the compositional form, or *bandīś*, without deviating excessively from it. Hence, from a musical point of view as well, there is an actual subordination to the male realm of melodic and rhythmic rules, also considering that courtly *ṭhumrī* were often set to classical *rāgas* and *tālas*⁶.

Let us consider another *bandīś kī t. text*:⁷

*barajorī kīnī re kanhāī hām re
pāniyā bharata morī gāgarī girāī karake laṛāī*

*dilaranga kahe aiso dhīṭha bhaye kanhāī
lāja na āve tohe vahu kyom na jāvo jahām
rainā gavāī karake laṛāī*

Translation:

You have forced me, oh young Krishna!
On my way to fetch the water, you made my pitcher fall while quarrelling
Dilrang⁸ says that Krishna is so mischievous,
you feel no shame, why don't you go where you have spent last night
quarrelling?⁹

This song is based on a typical subject of *bandīś kī t.* deriving from folk *panghat gīts*, or songs of the riverbanks. Although many fast *ṭhumrīs* are based on more secular love affairs, Krishna has always been a favourite hero for such compositions because of his naughty love pranks with milkmaids. We also should consider that in the Lucknow court, most musicians and performers were Muslims, like the *nawāb*; moreover, he himself enjoyed

⁶ *Rāga* is the melodic model for improvisation based on a modal scale in Hindustani music. The revivalists of Hindustani music in the 20th century started categorising genres into classical and semi-classical or light-classical. Generally speaking, classical genres are those following the rules of *rāga* more strictly and have a less entertaining nature because they were not part of the typical women's repertoire; they also tend to be set to more serious *rāgas*, while semi-classical genres are mostly set to feminine romantic *rāgas*.

⁷ I learnt this composition from my guru Sunanda Sharma.

⁸ This pen name usually identifies composer Azmat Hussain Khan (1911-1975). Although *bandīś kī t.* is no longer the most popular style of *ṭhumrī*, it is still sung occasionally, especially for *kathak* dance accompaniment.

⁹ Du Perron interprets the word *laṛāī* as a juxtaposition of both its meanings of fight and love (Du Perron 2007: 198).

dancing and acting and was known to often play the role of Krishna in his representations (Sharar, 64; Manuel 1989, 44). Thus, the use of krishnaite themes did not have much to do with the religious aspect in a social context, except that it shared mystic erotic metaphors with sufi poetry.

Lalita Du Perron, a Western scholar, expresses doubt that the coyness and jealousy of this kind of *thumrī* heroine can be interpreted as a way for women to claim respect after what she understands as sexual harassment and mistreatment (2002, 180; 2007, 41). I argue that certainly the folk krishnaite imagery draws on ancient, even pre-vedic, fertility deities and rites, and that these stories are not to be taken literally, but rather as seen through rural fertility symbols, such as broken pitchers or spilled water. As I have established, courtesans were traditionally representative of such auspicious themes. On the other hand, in the courtly context, they were dependent on men financially but not emotionally; thus, Krishna's love plays were not meant for self-expression, but were just one of the devices for *nakhrā*, or enacted flirtation.

Sometimes there is a romanticised feminist view about courtesans as empowered women owing to their freedom of agency as compared to common housewives of their times and to their matrilineality and independence from the marriage institution, or even to their expression of sexuality (Oldenburg 1990). Certainly they enjoyed greater freedom than "respectable" women, as they were the only cultivated female artists and did not have to observe *pardā*, or seclusion, but we need to keep in mind they just represented the other aspect of women in a patriarchal society, and their role was dependent on a male-centred system (Qureshi 2001, 108). Bandīś kī ṭ. texts reflect exactly this situation.

Nevertheless, those *tawa'ifs* who were sufficiently clever and skilled to gain the favour of rich patrons could build their independence through their earnings and through the influential power and social prestige that they were allowed (McNeil 2009, 61).

When in 1856 *nawāb* Wajid Ali Shah was dethroned and exiled to Matya Burj near Calcutta by the British on the accusation of ineptitude, the Indian rebellion of 1857, known as the Mutiny, followed. One of the reasons the British gave for the deposition of the *nawāb* was his greater interest in performing arts rather than politics. The truth was that the cultivation of arts was one of the only tools left to the ruler to propagate the *nawābī* cultural identity and its Sh'ia ideology after the East India Company started to control the area with its military forces (Maciszewski 2001, 24; McNeil 2009, 47-8, 57, 60-1). This was how musicians lost one of their most fervent patrons and sources of livelihood.

The British did not limit themselves to exiling the nawāb; they started a real campaign against performing arts and, specifically, they targeted the community of tawa'ifs, mainly through the arguments of the *anti-nautch* movement, or movement against dancing girls, and a series of amendments, even bans on professional female performers. The official reasons were for restraining the spread of venereal diseases among British soldiers and the promotion of Western moral values, but their actual motivation was much more strategic. Many Lucknow tawa'ifs were extremely influential at the political level, firstly because they had a part in promoting the Shi'a ideology of the nawābs through their art, but also because, thanks to their wealth, they could support political movements, and there is strong evidence of their direct involvement in the Mutiny through financial support (Oldenburg 1990, 259, McNeil 2009, 62; Singh 2007). The interdependence of tawa'ifs and nawābī power was clear to the British, and that is why they started degrading these women, characterizing them as prostitutes. They forced some of these women into prostitution after the loss of patronage, and ended up dispossessing them of their wealth.

A *ṭhumrī* composition usually ascribed to Wajid Ali Shah himself at the time of his exile is the famous *bābula morā*¹⁰:

bābula morā nahāra chhūto hī jāye

chāra kahāra mila doliyā uṭhāve
apanā begānā chhūto jāye

Translation:

My father, I am just leaving the house of my childhood (maternal house)

Four bearers together are lifting my palanquin
I am leaving back all my belongings as they became estranged to me

Although it is believed to date back to the exile of the Nawāb of Lucknow, when its performing style would have been the fast bol bāṃṭ, this *ṭhumrī* is typically rendered in the slow modern style because of its sad theme. The text is also more suited for a slow performance, since it is shorter than a typical bandīs kī ṭ. and there is no chāp¹¹ to confirm authorship. The theme is that of a traditional *vidāī gīt*, or farewell bridal song, and although considered unusual for a seductive composition because the addressee is not

¹⁰ I have transcribed it as I heard it from my gurus Girija Devi and Sunanda Sharma.

¹¹ Wajid Ali Shah's pen name for his *ṭhumrī* s was Akhtar Piya; moreover, slow *ṭhumrī* never comes with a chāp.

a lover, the image of the young bride naively going to start her sexual life has a subtle sensuality.

This *ṭhumrī* could be also well suited for the *nawābī* context, as it is often interpreted as a *sufiana* metaphor. Singer Girija Devi (1929-2017) used to explain, for example, that the image of the four palanquin bearers could be reminiscent of a funeral procession. It is also easy to understand the paternal addressee as God and to read the poem as the soul invoking the Divine at the time of death.

This *ṭhumrī* is a typical example of the multi-layered meanings of the genre and its deliberate ambiguity of interpretation. These lyrics describe the lament of an artist who has just lost a patron rather than that of a ruler who has lost his reign, and it would sound quite appropriate in the voice of a Lucknow courtesan after the Mutiny. That is why I speculate, if it does date back to Wajid Ali Shah's time, that the original composer could have been one of the *nawāb's* court musicians, instead.¹² If seen from this point of view, *bābula morā* could be considered one of the earliest examples of *ṭhumrīs* to be used as part of a covert resistance repertoire.

After losing the *nawābī* patronage, hereditary women musicians had to adapt to a new situation. Firstly, they had to create some distance from the courtly context so as not to be identified with the defamed "dancing girls" and to seek new sources of income. One of their strategies was to present themselves with the prefix "amateur" or to make up autobiographies to imply that they were not from a hereditary matrilineal tradition. Another strategy was to adjust their repertoire to the new context, mainly by dissociating vocal music from dance.

Many female performers found support from the emerging mercantile class of nearby towns, especially Benares, where they set up their salons, or *koṭhās*, and became successful entrepreneurs (Manuel 1989, 71-78; Du Perron 2007, 55). They even supported hereditary male musicians by hiring them as teachers and accompanists. The new context required even more adjustments to their repertoire, based on the tastes of the new urban audience, which caused the style of *ṭhumrī* to become quite different from that of the court. On one hand, it was vital for them to give a new identity to their music in order to differentiate it from the courtly genres; on the other, the change was necessary to adapt their repertoire to the new clientele.

¹² This would also be reminiscent of another difficult time for musicians in north India, when Mughal emperor Aurangzeb banned music in 1668 and the community of musicians was said to have enacted a funeral procession for music, as if someone important to them had died. In fact, the ban on music meant the loss of their livelihoods.

The language of the compositions became simpler and more folk-like. The artificiality of *bandīś kī ṭ.* texts was removed, together with the importance of the composer and, on a musical level, the genre started being set only to *rāgas* and *tālas* of folk origin. Although these might seem minor changes, they caused *ṭhumrī* to become a completely different genre with a distinct style. The only common factors with the older *ṭhumrī* were the female perspective, the importance of lyrics and the romantic themes. The new *ṭhumrī* of Benares came to be known as *pūrab ang kī ṭhumrī*, or Eastern style *ṭ.*, and certainly drew considerable inspiration from local *pūrbiyā gīt*, or Eastern folk songs of separation from a faraway husband, *kajrīs*, or folk songs of the monsoon, and *chaitīs*, or folk songs of the Summer.

There was a general decreasing of tempo in all genres at the time, coinciding with the arrival of amplification technology during the 1920s, which allowed more emphasis on the melodic rather than the rhythmic element (Trumper 2017, 329). In *ṭhumrī*, this made it possible to introduce a slower, in-depth kind of melodic unfolding, similar to that of the *bol ālāp*, or slow elaboration with lyrics, in *khyāl* and favoured by the need to associate *ṭhumrī*, with classical genres. However, this did not make *ṭhumrī* really sound like *khyāl* at all, because the vital dance part was not just removed, but was simply replaced by vocal interpretation. In fact, thanks to these adjustments, *bol banāo*, or vocal dramatization of lyrics, became the main improvisatory technique used in *ṭhumrī* and also synonymous with slow *ṭhumrī*.

In this transitional phase at the beginning of the twentieth century, the search for new patrons brought many women hereditary performers to work successfully in radio and the newly born recording industries as singers, or to find their space in theatre and, later, in the cinematic industry as dancers and actresses. They were more open to new promotional and broadcasting media, compared to male musicians, and these were also good chances for them to find a new identity (Trumper 2017, 325).

Around the time of the Independence of India (1947), revivalists of Indian culture began a renaissance of art music, which consisted of a reform programme of the traditional music system as it had been transmitted by hereditary musicians. Trying to build a new Indian identity, these British-educated reformists turned again to traditional arts, but in order to present them to the new middle class, they had to provide them with a new “respectable” background (Du Perron 2002, 188; Qureshi 2006, 312; Walker 2010, 290).

On one hand, there was an institutionalisation and democratisation of performing arts, and on the other, this involved their concomitant sanitisation, Sanskritization and gentrification. This was when Western

concepts like “classical” started being applied to Indian art music, creating a hierarchy among pure classical genres and semi-classical or light-classical genres, which were mainly those from the female repertoire.

These reforms meant the effacing of the entire hereditary musicians’ category and of any association with courtly culture, and as a result, they were especially damaging for hereditary women artists. Official bans, police raids on salons and British-educated middle-class prejudices were the means to target their reputation and art but, once again, their answer was through strategic adaptation of their lifestyle and repertoire (Qureshi 2006, 312).

On a personal level, many artists of the matrilineal tradition who did not want to give up the music profession married and began to adapt to the patriarchal model; they also avoided performing at private concerts or decided not to train their daughters, and many changed their last names from *bāī* or *jān*¹³ to the “respectable” *devī* and *beghum*.¹⁴ Some had to go further to make up family stories which highlighted father figures or their accidental non-hereditary association with music (Qureshi 2006, 326). In some cases, there was a complete dissociation from feminine genres and a strong association with male maestros of music lineages, as in the case of accomplished khyāl singers such as Kesarbai Kerkar (1892-1977), Gangubai Hangal (1913-2009) and Mogubai Kurdikar (1904-2001) (Qureshi 2001, 99). Even today it is practically still taboo to mention the matrilineal background of a hereditary singer.

As for the female repertoire, *bol banāo kī ṭ*. lyrics in particular were sanitised of any excessively erotic expression; the devotional metaphor of Radha and Krishna was favoured over worldly romance, and the theme of the separation of lovers to that of the union of lovers, as more suited for the Hindu mystic and devotional interpretation (Du Perron 2007, 31). The two main themes of ancient Indian erotic poetry had always been the separation and the union of lovers, which originally derive from the celebrations of the two fertility seasons, Spring and the monsoon. *Thumrī* is strongly based on these two themes and their original meanings (Trumper 2012), but for its features, *bandīś kī ṭ*. was more associated with the union of lovers, while *bol banāo kī ṭ*. is more often associated with the separation of lovers (Du Perron 2007, 37).

There was also a historical sanitisation enacted by the revivalists and aimed at emphasising the role of men in the shaping of the genre. Stories of alleged “inventors,” usually Wajid Ali Shah or the musician Sadiq Khan

¹³ *bāī* was the name used by those courtesans who were mainly singers, while *jān* indicated those who could both dance and sing.

¹⁴ They both generally indicate a lady, but *devī* refers to Hindu women and *beghum* to Muslim women.

(Shukla 1983, 150-151; Manuel 1989; Du Perron 2002, 187), were promulgated, and the influential role in the evolution of *ṭhumrī* of other male musicians, such as Bhaiya Ganpat Rao, Moujuddin Khan, Bade Ramdas and Mahadev Mishra, was stressed. These undoubtedly were crucial figures, but many were known to have been influenced by the style of women singers who were never specifically mentioned until the arrival of the recording industry. There has also been an interest in well-known *khyāl* male singers taking a leading role in spreading *bol banāo kī ṭ.*, as in the case of Bade Ghulam Ali Khan of Patiala *gharānā*, Fayaz Khan of Agra *gharānā* and Abdul Karim Khan of Kirana *gharānā*. After them, standardised *ṭhumrī* became one of the favourite shorter concluding items of a modern *khyāl* concert. It became more and more rare to hear a concert based solely on female genres.

In the meantime, female singers from middle-class families were encouraged to take up musical careers after the 1940s (Maciszewski 2001; 141-146), and some of them took an interest in *ṭhumrī*. Some even kept the traditional courtesan vocal style with *nakhrā*.¹⁵ In the twentieth century, after female hereditary singers were deprived of their identities and music realm, their next move was to gain back possession at least of their communication tool. Scholars such as Rao (1990, WS32-34), Maciszewski (2006, 343) and Qureshi (2001) acknowledge the subversive use of female genres, while others like Du Perron (2002, 184) believe *ṭhumrī* has no real empowering element, since the feelings expressed depend on a male addressee. I see both self-assertion in reclaiming a female voice together with the emotional element and covert resistance to patriarchal society in using metaphors, ambiguity and multi-layered meanings. Although hereditary *ṭhumrī* singers were deprived of the intimate audience that had inspired the features of their performance, the new distance of the stage turned personal communication with the addressee into a dialogue with their true selves.

Pukār, or call, a distinctive feature of their singing, became a general quest for their voice to be heard. The female perspective of the composition became their own perspective. *Bhāv*, or vocal expression of emotions, became their own subversive tool against patriarchy. The grief of separation from a lover or Krishna became the expression of sorrow for their lost identity. Themes of loss, isolation, defamation or betrayal became the most common ones in *ṭhumrī* because these reflected the singers' feelings of social rejection (Maciszewski 2001). Thus, I see the time of transition from

¹⁵ This is a clear case of class privilege: male performers had a gender privilege in performing *ṭhumrī* with *nakhrā*.

a class of hereditary performers to that of middle-class performers as also the most fecund for *ṭhumrī* intensity and authenticity.

On a musical level, I second Rao's claim that the uniquely fluid approach to the concepts of *rāga* and *tāla* in *bol banāo kī ṭ.* can be interpreted as an equally subversive feature as the ambiguity of the lyrics (1990, WS35-37). The simplicity of the text has provided much scope for multiple meanings and covert communication.

Here is an example of a traditional *bol banāo kī ṭ.* text¹⁶:

bājūbanda khulī-khulī jāye
saṁvāriyā ne jādū dārā

jādū kī puṛiyā bhara-bhara mārata
aṁcharā urī-urī jāye

Translation:

My armband is getting looser and looser,
The brown-skinned one (Krishna) has put a spell on me.

He throws bags full of spells
and my veil keeps flying up

Ṭhumrīs such as this one always present a challenge for those who try to understand their texts literally. Manuel (1989, 11) and Du Perron (2007, 24) have reported explanations from contemporary performers, and the result has been almost hermetic.

This text is much more interesting than the few lines resulting from its literal translation. I would personally interpret it through what I call “the subversive Krishna metaphor” or a subversive use of the *krishnaite* theme in *bol banāo kī ṭ.* Bracelets and armbands clearly represent the patriarchal (marital) bond in traditional India, but a woman subjected to the spell of Krishna, usually enacted through his gaze or the sound of his flute, is set free from that bond. The lifting veil is a very erotic image of a liberated woman who acts so by virtue of Krishna's spell.

Modern performers treat the erotic part differently; for example, Rita Ganguly sings the sanitised concluding line *kā kare vaidā bichārā* (tr. “what would the poor doctor do?”) which she probably learnt beforehand. Singer Girija Devī, instead, used to sing the original line, since the devotional theme would keep the erotic connotation in the mystic interpretation.

¹⁶I learnt this composition from my guru Sunanda Sharma.

The lyrics also show a clear example of a typical juxtaposition of opposites in a phrase reinforcing the subversive element. The word *bājūband* (armband) is made up of *bājū* (arm) and *band* (closed), offering an almost alliterative effect, which is immediately followed by the repetition *khulī-khulī* (open-open).

Although the preference for the krishnaite interpretation in *ṭhumrī* has been a convenient adaptation for the urban audience for hereditary women performers in the twentieth century and an easy approach to erotic poetry for middle-class women performers, I argue it had all the features of a covert resistance repertoire for hereditary women performers. After all, even the rājasthānī saint poetess Mirabai (1498 ca.–1546 ca.) used it to subvert the patriarchal system that expected her to commit suicide on the marital funeral pyre, even though her poetry was exclusively devotional. Nevertheless, the affinity of mystics with courtesans as subversive figures in patriarchal society has been noticed before (Srinivasan 2006, 170).

While the replacement of a worldly addressee by Krishna is a clear way to show a convenient dissociation from the purely erotic meaning¹⁷, I see it at the same time as a way to reject the importance of having a human male addressee and to substitute instead a subversive symbol such as Krishna. Moreover, this double accepted meaning would suit the ambiguous nature of *ṭhumrī*.

Another typical subject of *ṭhumrī* is the river metaphor, as in this text:¹⁸

naiyā parī majhadhāra lagā do pāra

geherī nadiyā nāva purānī
tū hī khevanahāra

Translation:

My boat is stuck in the middle of the stream, do bring me across

The river is deep and the boat is very old,
only you are my boatman

This text does not even specify a lover; there is only a boatman addressee, who is usually a third person in *ṭhumrī*, like the confidante or other such characters. For this reason, in this composition the sufi metaphor of the soul trying to reach God after death with the help of a spiritual guide

¹⁷ The use of Krishna as an addressee is at the same time a convenient route to Hinduisation of a non-religious repertoire often sung by Muslim performers.

¹⁸ Taken from a private recording of singer Naina Devi.

is particularly strong and makes the *eros and thanatos* pair return once again in *ṭhumrī*. There are other vilambit *ṭhumrīs* on the same theme which clarify the need of the heroine to cross the river to meet her lover, like the following one¹⁹:

*e morā saiṃyā bulāve ādhī rāta
nadiyā bairī bhaī*

*suna re mallāh hūṃ to terī cherī
naiyā lagā dījo pāra*

Translation:

Oh, my beloved is calling me in the middle of the night
the river has become my enemy

Heed me boatman, I am at your service
bring my boat across

Still, these apparently simple, standardised texts based on folk boatman songs well reflect the situation of someone caught in a liminal space between two stages and two worlds, just like professional women singers of hereditary traditions between the nineteenth and twentieth centuries; the lover they long for becomes less a physical person and more a symbol of an intimate dimension of the artist in a quest to be heard.

Here, I am particularly reminded of the verses of Hindi poetess Mahadevi Varma (1907-1987), who was the only female exponent of the modern romantic *chāyāvād* literary movement and who had to seek self-expression through the traditional themes of mystic poetry, as in the following example:

*[...] puṣp meṃ hai anant muskān
tyāg kā hai mārut meṃ gān
sabhī meṃ hai swargīya vikāś
vahī komal kamnīya prakāś
dūr kitnā hai vah sansār!
kaun pahūmchā degā us pār? [...]*

Translation:

[...] There is an eternal smile in a flower
a song of separation in the wind

¹⁹ Composition learnt from my guru Sunanda Sharma.

there is a heavenly evolution in everything
that same dim charming light.
How far is that universe!
Who will bring me to the other side? [...]

To return to music poetry, Du Perron notes that the heroine of *bol banāo kī ṭ.* is usually more assertive and in control than that the heroines of *bandīs kī ṭ.* (2007); in my opinion, this is because the focus of *bol banāo* is more on the performer and her ability to transform and communicate the emotional nuances of the composition. While courtly *ṭ.* performers did not want to express their real feelings, as mentioned earlier, hereditary *bol banāo kī ṭ.* performers began to use self-expression as a mode of subversion of patriarchal society.

Bandīs kī ṭ. performance was characterised by the use of *nakhrā*, while the *bol banāo kī ṭ.* style became synonymous with *pukār*, a vocal technique consisting of an intense call, and with a distinctive vocal tension similar to when someone is about to break into a cry.²⁰

The last hereditary *ṭhumrī* specialists were aware that their art had been repressed and practically eradicated by the changes in society, and all that was left to them was to use it as a form of covert resistance by a marginalised community.²¹ The strongest tool to target their community had been defamation, and it is not by chance that a common theme in *bol banāo kī ṭ.* is the bad reputation of the heroine; here are a couple of examples:

re rasiyā tore kārana brija meṃ bhaī badanāma
aisī holī kou khelata nāhīṃ
jaisī tū khelata śyāma

karata na lāja bakata manamānī
gara lāgata para bāma

Translation²²:

oh charming Krishna, because of you I gained a bad fame in Braj
nobody plays *holī*²³ as you do, dark one

²⁰ As described by singer Dhanashree Pandit Rai.

²¹ A similar use of the repertoire in a different context for a community of Indian bards is described in Kumar, Mukesh (2019), “The Art of Resistance: The Bards and Minstrels’ Response to Anti-Syncretism/Anti-liminality” in *Journal of The Royal Asiatic Society*, Series 3, 29 (2): 219-247.

²² Composition as heard from my gurus Girija Devi and Sunanda Sharma.

²³ The Spring festival of colours in India, particularly associated with the God Krishna.

he feels no shame, he says whatever he likes
and embraces other women

Although in *holī-ṭhumrīs*²⁴ it is a cliché for Radha to complain about Krishna's naughty behaviour, the following example has no clear devotional context²⁵:

dila leke mujhe badanāma kīyā

aba kāhe jalāvata mora jiyā

prīta karī hai to nibhānī paregī

bārī umariyā meṃ dāga diyo re

Translation:

After taking my soul²⁶ you ruined my reputation
now why are you setting my heart on fire?

If you have felt the love you must carry it on
you have tainted me in my teenage

The subversive nature of early twentieth century *ṭhumrī* is achieved by the constant tension created through vocal modulation, the ambiguity of the lyrics and the fluid approach to *rāga* and *tāla*, as well as the juxtaposition of opposites in the text and, most of all, the expression of the female voice. The tension is usually found in the juxtaposition of opposites like day and night, coming and going, closed and open, black and white, which become separation and union, male and female, reluctance and search, union and separation, secular and devotional. The subtle play between two dimensions was the real art of female *ṭhumrī* singers, an art through which they were able to express their condition (Rao 1990; Qureshi 2001, 105).

This tension is released only in the *laggī*, the final part where the *tablā* (Hindustani percussion) player considerably speeds up the tempo and the singer repeats the main phrase of the composition (*mukhrā*) as a refrain (*tek*) with virtuosic ornamentation, until they end together on the first beat of the

²⁴ A subgenre of *ṭhumrī* based on the theme of *holī*.

²⁵ Composition as heard from the recording of singer Shobha Gurtu, *Golden Raga Collection II*, 2013, Times Music.

²⁶ The word *dila* means heart, but it is a synonym of the word *jiyā* in the next line, so I translated it as *soul* to avoid repetition.

cycle. Self-expression transforms the once seductive relation between the performer and the listener, with the emotional involvement bringing the audience towards a dramatic catharsis.

If, on the one hand, the distinctive dramatic *bhāv* (expression) of *bol banāo kī ṭ.* made it the real female voice of Hindustani music, on the other, its subversive nature did not pass unnoticed. The expression of emotions and the actual female voice were the true resistance components of *ṭhumrī*, as it is seen as dangerous and uncontrollable in the patriarchal society as much as expressions of female sexuality (Lutz, 2009, 71).

This is how in the urban context the female vocal repertoire has been labelled as easier and lighter and restricted to a short, flattened concluding part of *khyāl* concerts. Middle-class women started engaging in music careers but were compelled to challenge their male colleagues in classical genres, especially *khyāl*. *Ṭhumrī* became a less relevant genre and was standardised as something that any *khyāl* singer could sing with no special training.

There are a few female *ṭhumrī* specialists today, including my guru Sunanda Sharma, but in India it is still hard to be a female performer in general on account of the freedom of agency this profession requires, and more so for a *ṭhumrī* specialist, whose repertoire is regarded as “lighter.” I consider my guru someone who has found an effective key for being an artist with genuine self-expression in *ṭhumrī*, as she combines a strongly rooted traditional base with versatile, thorough training in all genres, a deep connection to her feminine identity, and a balanced openness to a modern mindset, which is not so common. Those who can retain a genuine female perspective and a strong connection to music with lyrical content are still major *ṭhumrī* specialists and will keep this genre alive and relevant.

Cultural reforms after Independence and the systematic erasure of the class of hereditary female performers in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries ended not only the artistic tradition of these women, but also a relevant tool for female expression, even when middle-class women became able to take up the profession of art music.

The most effective means to target the community of professional women artists was defamation and the induced dissociation of vocal music from poetry, which was the distinctive feature of the female repertoire in Hindustani art music. This was achieved by presenting *khyāl* to the bourgeoisie as a more complex and authoritative genre and by emphasising the more abstract melodic and rhythmic aspects of the latter, with a concurrent negation of the lyrical content.

The defamation of hereditary women artists also involved an effacement of their role in the history of Hindustani music, even in the case of female

genres such as *ṭhumrī*. Questioning the non-Indian labels of classical and semi-classical or light-classical²⁷ and the way Indian music history has been told and presented in the twentieth century to the Indian middle class and the West would be a good start in acknowledging the importance of women in Indian music.

When the courtly performing style of *ṭhumrī* was banned and dance was dissociated from the genre and started being called *kathak*, the body and sensuality of courtesans was removed from the music. While the sensuality of courtesans was controlled by men, it began to be constructed as dangerous in an urban patriarchal context and was replaced with the vocal expression of *bol banāo*, made acceptable thanks to mystic metaphor. Still, when dramatic expression began to reflect the real female voice, it was once more felt to be uncomfortable for its subversive nature.

My aim here is to shed light on the vast expressive potential and the deep, complex lyrical content of *ṭhumrī*, which goes far beyond simple devotional or erotic poetry, being both at the same time and more. *Thumrī*, as a female voice in Hindustani music, is still a relevant tool for the expression of women artists, but it must be learned from specialists in the traditional system, since the subtle use of poetry cannot be learned effectively in institutions, and women artists should start to re-learn a decolonised version of Indian music genres and history in order to gain a new voice through a traditional repertoire, as hereditary performers did a few decades ago.

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²⁷ For a more in-depth discussion on the category of semi-classical genres, see Manuel 2015.

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