> are not stoned to death if we are "unfaithful," or if it is found that we are not 'virgins.' But "sexual liberation" has intensified our work. In the past, we were just expected to raise children. Now we are expected to have a waged job, still clean the house and have children and, at the end of a double workday, be ready to hop in bed and be sexually enticing. For women the right to have sex is the duty to have sex and to enjoy it (something which is not expected of most jobs), which is why there have been so many investigations, in recent years, concerning which parts of our body—whether the vagina or the clitoris—are more sexually productive.
>
> But whether in its liberalized or its more repressive form, our sexuality is still under control. The law, medicine, and our economic dependence on men, all guarantee that, although the rules are loosened, spontaneity is ruled out of our sexual life. Sexual repression within the family is a function of that control. (25)

Apart from the issue of sexuality, this film is the story of working women such as Shireen Aslaam, Leela, and Rihaana. In the neoliberal era, the market is open. It can provide numerous opportunities for women to explore and develop their independent identities, leading to a constant desire to explore more, as seen in the case of these characters. On the one hand, these women's desires, and aspirations have often been suppressed in the name of being a wife, mother, and so on. Shireen Aslam wants to work in the sales and marketing sector to earn better. Leela desires to go to Delhi with her lover Arshad to start a business, and Rihaana, who stitches Burkha in her father's *Burkha* shop, dreams of becoming a singer.

In the context of religion, it is worth highlighting that, on the one hand, the Burkha, as a metaphor of constraints, seemingly restricts women characters, whereas later in the last half an hour, we see a special day for Rosie's dream on the occasion of Diwali. Hence, one can deduce it is not only *burkha* which restricts the desiring body of women but also socially determined festivity, which attempts to repress and thereby organize their joyousness according to the dominant order of patriarchy. All the religious practices are equally involved in this as one can see how Shrivastava has drawn Muslim male characters,

whether it be Rihaana's father or Shireen Aslam's husband. Both have been depicted in very conservative and even oppressive ways. At Rihaana's home, the audience can see that it was Rihaana's father's decision to send her to college. However, the film neglects the day-to-day contradiction between Rihaana and her parents. Moreover, the film depicts Rihaana as someone who sees liberation in wearing jeans as she shouts the slogan *Jeans ka hakk jeene ka hakk* [the right to wear jeans, is the right to live life]. The film could be read as portraying the *Burkha* as symbolizing oppression, whereas wearing jeans and applying lipstick become acts of liberation. One needs to keep in mind that the lipstick- symbolizing erotic fantasy, as Rosie's voiceover suggests, remains confined under the *Burkha*. Hence, the potential of liberation through censored desire (of voiceover) is under the dictates of patriarchal oppression, which can be realized only with the solidarity and hence, with the search for collective. On the extreme, Shireen Aslam's husband, who spends most of his time in Saudi Arabia, seems to consider women as his sexual object and has more than one marriage, which does not break the stereotype or bring something new for the audience about the representation of the Muslim community on screen. Rather, it shows entrenched patriarchy in the Muslim community. On the other hand, Srivastava critically engages with the Diwali festival as well when *Buaji* was thrown out. The entire city has been lit up with candles, *diyas*, and lights. Everyone is going to visit the fair. On the contrary, on the same day, Rihaana's father prohibited her from attending college, and her mother was ordered to find a boy for her. Shireen has been raped by her husband and Leela, whose marriage has almost broken because of her sexual relationship with another man, is confused. Moreover, there is a sequence when *Buaji*, as a motherly figure for the entire society, has been thrown out of the house by Ram (Usha's brother's son) and the other family members. This is a pertinent sequence around 4 minutes long in which she is collecting her belongings and suddenly falls (1:42:52-1:46:57). The space has been lit up with *diyas*. Everyonehas become merely a spectator of this moment. In the background, we can also hear the sound of crackers and celebration. Diwali, as a festival, is celebrated in the Hindu family system to commemorate the day Lord *Rama* returned home. According to Hindu mythology, *Sita* had to appear

for Agni Pariksha to prove her purity. Against this backdrop, Alankrita Shrivastava seems to be asserting women's sexuality through her different characters. Contrary to the usual endings of the films, it does not provide a solution to the circumstances but takes the audience into a more critical, even tragic situation. Perhaps she also intends to portray the situation of today's women through Usha and other characters, as well as the consequences they might have to bear, even in the present times. Women have been preferred as sex objects but not as active sexual partners. Nevertheless, the film does not end on a tragic note. In the finalsequence, even though Shrivastava presents this in a very romanticized manner, all these four women sit together and start focusing on the story of Rosie and her *Lipstick wale sapne* (1:46:58-1:50:00). They finally light up cigarettes and laugh. This is how the film ends. Overall, the film seems to underline the sexual aspect of the four women characters. Nonetheless, the question arises whether this film limits itself to the assertion of women's sexuality? Could this then be the very limitation of the film?

Conclusion

It is surprising that we hardly witness any direct attempt by these women to assert their rights by questioning the patriarchal tendencies of the family structure, which they are part of. However, we certainly see their conversation on how women have been suppressed in society. Beyond these narrativized instances and conversations, the filmic-text is pervaded with Rosie's erotic fantasy. Though the film focuses on the lives of these women, the character of Rosie with her eroticized desire allegorically connects these fragmented narrations into a cinematic poetry. It is a sharp contrast with these women who identify themselves with the fictional character of Rosie and her erotica but at the same time, also acknowledge the inconsistency between Rosie's dream and their life. Can we call this simultaneous identification and acknowledgement by these women an example of sisterhood among them? How does the spectator identify with the identification of these characters with the erotica of *lipstick wale sapne*? What does this double identification amount to? It seems pertinent to underline here that some prominent cinematic depictions in this direction render this bonding as sisterhood (Ahmad et al.; Thakur). Nonetheless, this article, while questioning this presupposed

sisterhood, unpacks solidarity among these women characters. Undoubtedly, it envisages an incipient collective. *Parched* and *Lipstick Under My Burkha* succinctly underscores the potential of women's collectives towards their end. However, the end is unclear in the latter. The film is entirely silent on whether it is the end of their pain or else worse is yet to come. It entails a provocative ending; however, it is unclear what provokes in them and the spectator? Is it an impulsive provocation or a critical one? What sort of realization is this, where women find themselves in a room together, with their limited participation in decision-making and an uncertain future? Doesn't this render it as numbness instead of provocation? The entire situation melts down as Rihaana Abidi says, "*yeh stories hi sab gadbad kar deti hai, jhoot bolti hai ki humari lives bhi Rosie jaisi ho sakti hai*" [these stories are the ones that create problems and lie that our lives can also be like Rosie's life]. Then *Buaji* replied, "*Jhoot bolti hai par sapne dekhne ki himmat bhi deti hai*" [it lies but gives courage to dream]. However, the narration, in the background, proceeds with a description of Rosie's life, claiming that now she would not do anything in secret but would take the challenge herself. Moreover, that is how Rosie finds the key to her life with herself only. With the uncertain future, Shrivastava seemingly opts for an open ending which unsettles us as spectators. We are left puzzled about their tomorrow and here, precisely, double identification works as we are identifying with these four characters who are uncertain about their tomorrow. Nevertheless, they are looking at themselves through the gaze of Rosie and thereby negating the externalized male gaze. Our encounter as spectators with the looks of these characters via Rosie's gaze within the visualization of a lit cigarette and their laughter, opens the narration from its very inside while rejecting all possible futures residing here.[8] This is what the incipient collective of here and now is premised upon, solidarity among them, which would bring a new light into their lives. Undoubtedly, the solidarity among these women is a liberation for Srivastava. One can say that the film's feminism is achieved by bringing the women together, possibly to fight a different kind of oppression. Hence, the aforementioned discussion of the films presents, in a way, the interplay between individuality and solidarity among the women characters, and points towards the women's collective across different social identities.

End Notes

1 Mulvey, Laura. "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema." *Film and Theory*, Robert Stam and Toby Miller (ed.) Blackwell Publishers, 2000, pp. 483-494.

2. David Bordwell's text *Classical Hollywood Cinema: Narrational Principles and Procedures* is based on the idea that a psychologically motivated individual desires to attain some goals and hence enters into a conflict. The plot of the film determines the time or duration within which he must accomplish a particular task/goal. A deadline is also measured by a calendar, a clock or any timing machine. Usually, the film's ending sequence depicts the hero challenging the villain to save the heroine within 24 hours. The classical Syuzhet/plot divides into a double causal structure or plot lines: on the one hand, he engages in a heterosexual romance and on the contrary, he desires to achieve some goals or to conquer some conflict. Eventually, both these dual conflicts coincide at the time of climax. Finally, the character attains his targets and finally enjoys a romantic relationship with his lover.

3. Lohana, Avinash, "CBFC refuses to certify Prakash Jha's Film 'Lipstick Under my Burkha." *Mumbai Mirror*, 23 Feb., 2017, https://mumbaimirror.indiatimes.com/entertainment/bollywood/cbfc-refuses-to-certify-prakash-jhas-film-lipstick-under-my-burkha/articleshow/57302257.cms.

4. TNN. "Muslim body boycotts 'Lipstick,' warns crew & cast." *The Times of India*, Bennett Coleman & Co. Ltd. 26 Feb, 2017, https://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/city/bhopal/muslim-body-boycotts-lipstick-warns-crew-cast/articleshow/57351203.cms

5. "More trouble for Prakash Jha's Lipstick Under My Burkha: Muslim body boycotts film, threatens cast and crew," *InUTH*, 26 Feb., 2017, https://www.inuth.com/entertainment/bollywood/more-trouble-for-prakash-jhas-lipstick-under-my-burkha-muslim-body-boycotts-film-threatens-cast-and-crew/

6. Vanita uses the term *Bombay cinema* instead of *Bollywood*. See *Introduction* of her book.

7. This could be connected to Madhava Prasad's thesis of undeclared ban on kissing scenes in the cinema of 1970's for preserving Indian values, whereas with the neoliberal shift in the function of ideology, the act of kiss is mobilized under the service of nationalism as depicted in *Queen.* In the former, the ideology functions by hiding the act whereas in later it functions precisely by showing it.

8. "Finally, four women laughed and lit up cigarettes. Here, we need to think about the politics of what the cigarette symbolizes. Moreover, what is the politics of it? This is the point that smoking equals liberation." (Anupama Chopra)

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Voices of Resistance: A Feminist Reading of Gauhar Jaan and Begum Akhtar in Indian Classical Music

Moumita Biswas

Abstract

This article presents a feminist reading of the lives and legacies of two significant artists in Indian classical music, Gauhar Jaan and Begum Akhtar. They navigated complex social structures shaped by courtesan traditions, the recording industry, and a society that celebrated and stigmatised women performers. Gauhar Jaan, one of India's earliest recording artists, challenged Victorian morality and colonial scrutiny. She controlled her voice, public image, and modes of self-representation, reconfiguring possibilities for female agency in modern musical culture. Begum Akhtar, revered as the *Mallika-e-Ghazal*, transformed personal loss and institutional exclusion into a powerful musical idiom. She reclaimed the *ghazal* as a space for feminine emotion, dissent, and intellectual seriousness. The article highlights the intersections of gender, class, performance, and art. It argues that music functioned for both artists as a livelihood and as a radical mode of self-assertion within a patriarchal social structure. It also critically engages with colonial modernity, nationalist discourses, and early recording technologies to show how women artists were variously remembered, erased, or romanticised in the historiography of Indian classical music.

Keywords: Women performers in South Asia; *Tawaif* (Courtesan Tradition); Intersectionality; Colonial Modernity

Introduction

The contributions of women to Indian classical music have long been marginalized within dominant cultural narratives, which tend to prioritize male virtuosity and the transmission of musical knowledge through the revered *guru-shishya* (teacher-student) lineages. These narratives often ignore the crucial roles that women, particularly those from the courtesan tradition, have played in shaping the musical landscape. This article seeks to explore the lives and

legacies of two iconic female performers, Gauhar Jaan (1873–1930) and Begum Akhtar (1914–1974) who, despite the deeply gendered and socially stratified contexts of colonial and postcolonial India, became central figures in Indian classical music. By exploring their careers through a feminist and intersectional lens, this article argues that these women were not merely passive subjects of societal norms but actively engaged in cultural resistance and self-fashioning, thereby reshaping the roles of women in the public sphere of music.

The courtesan, or *tawaif* tradition, often romanticized as the *kotha* (courtesan house) culture played a foundational role in the development of Hindustani classical music. Courtesans were more than mere entertainers; they were skilled musicians, poets, dancers, and connoisseurs of art and culture. Their role was complex, as they were not only entertainers for the elite but also guardians of the rich cultural traditions that formed the bedrock of classical music. Genres such as *thumri*, *dadra,* and *ghazal*, which would later come to define Indian classical music, found their roots within the courtesan tradition. These musical forms were inherently emotional, centered on themes of love, longing, and devotion, often expressed through intricate lyrics and delicate melodic structures. However, despite their immense cultural contributions, courtesans faced severe stigmatization, especially as colonial moral discourses and emerging nationalist ethos began to reshape societal values. The colonial administration's moralistic stance on sexuality and respectability, combined with the nationalist ideal of a 'pure' domestic woman, led to the gradual erasure of the courtesan's contributions from the cultural fabric of India. Courtesans, once seen as symbols of both artistic and erotic power, became associated with moral corruption (Sampath 254). The nationalist movement, while aiming to reclaim India's cultural heritage, often aligned itself with bourgeois ideals that championed the figure of the domesticated woman, thereby relegating the courtesan to the margins of social and cultural life. This ideological shift effectively silenced the voices of women who had historically been central to the creation and transmission of Indian classical music.

Among these silenced voices, Gauhar Jaan stands out as one of the first Indian women to break through the barriers of both gender and class. Born into a Christian Anglo-Indian family, she rose to prominence in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries and became one of the first performers to be

recorded by the Gramophone Company in 1902. Her recordings were a significant event in the history of Indian music, as they marked a technological and cultural convergence between the traditional art of Hindustani music and the emerging modern world. Gauhar Jaan's engagement with recording technology signified both defiance against the stigmas surrounding her identity as a courtesan and her ability to adapt to colonial modernity. In an era where women were often excluded from public musical performance, Gauhar Jaan's success helped challenge the prevailing norms that sought to limit women to private, domestic spheres. While Gauhar Jaan's legacy was shaped by the colonial context of her time, Begum Akhtar, who rose to prominence in the twentieth century, inherited and redefined this tradition in a postcolonial world. Begum Akhtar, often referred to as the 'Queen of *Ghazals*,' had a musical career that spanned several decades. Like GauharJaan, her background in the courtesan tradition deeply influenced her musical expression. However, by the time Begum Akhtar emerged on the public stage, India was navigating the complexities of independence, partition, and the transformation of its cultural identity. As a female artist in a male-dominated world, Akhtar's association with the emotional and 'feminine' genres like *thumri*, *dadra*, and *ghazal* made her an unconventional figure in the broader musicological canon, which still held male virtuosity in higher esteem. In many ways, both women's careers reflect a broader shift in the musical landscape of colonial and postcolonial India. The courtesan tradition, once central to the development of Indian classical music, was gradually displaced by a more institutionalized and patriarchal music system in the post-colonial era. This shift not only marginalized women but also undermined the cultural legitimacy of the genres that women like Gauhar Jaan and Begum Akhtar had so skillfully cultivated. Despite this, both women persisted in carving out their place within the cultural fabric of India, reconstituting what it meant to be a female artist. The significance of their contributions goes beyond their musical talent. By navigating the intersection of colonial and nationalist politics, gendered expectations, and cultural transformation, both Gauhar Jaan and Begum Akhtar enacted a form of self-fashioning that allowed them to transcend the limitations placed on their identities. In their music, they not only performed traditional compositions but also reinterpreted and reshaped them, investing them with personal meaning and defying the boundaries of genre and gender. The erasure of the courtesan's

role in the development of Hindustani music, particularly in the postcolonial era, has had long-lasting effects. It is important to reexamine the contributions of these women through the lens of cultural history and feminist scholarship.

Gauhar Jaan: Self-Fashioning and the Public Sphere

Gauhar Jaan's career represents a powerful instance of feminist self-assertion within the complex sociocultural landscape of colonial India. As one of the first female artists to record her voice on the gramophone, she was not just a performer but also a self-aware creator who actively shaped her public persona. The declaration, "*My name is Gauhar Jaan*," which begins her famous early gramophone recordings, is a powerful statement of identity and authorship. It encapsulates the reclamation of her public image, a declaration of ownership over her artistic output at a time when women's participation in public cultural life was often heavily policed (Sampath 147). The advent of recording technology marked a transformation in how music was consumed and distributed, and for Gauhar, it provided an opportunity to transcend the physical and geographical limitations imposed on female performers. Early gramophone recordings, as Amanda Weidman notes, played a crucial role in expanding the scope of musical circulation, particularly for women's voices, which had traditionally been confined to the private spaces of elite courts or salons. By recording her music, Gauhar Jaan made her voice accessible to a much larger audience, breaking through the gendered spatial boundaries that had previously limited women's public performances. The ability to circulate her voice on a mass scale allowed her to participate in shaping the musical culture of the time, creating a legacy that resonated far beyond the elite urban centers where her live performances were primarily heard (Weidman 116). Gauhar's commercial success was not just due to her musical talents but also to her strategic use of technology and her public image. The visual representation of her on early record labels, often depicted in elaborate, opulent attire, is emblematic of her mastery over both the sonic and visual elements of performance. These images, combined with her exceptional musical abilities, created a public persona that was both commanding and feminine, resisting traditional gender norms that sought to restrict women to the private sphere. As her recordings circulated, Gauhar became a figure who symbolized both cultural sophistication and

economic agency, carving out a space for women in the male-dominated world of public performance. Gauhar Jaan remains one of the most prolific and versatile musicians of early twentieth-century India, and is competent in genres such as *Khayal* and *Dadra*. These genres were considered to be masculine and more technical in nature. Among her most significant compositions are "*Ras Ke Bhare Tore Nain*," "*Mere Man Liyo Cheen*," "*Baasuri baaj rahi dhun madhur*" etc. (Sampath 376). These compositions exemplify her command over *sringara* rasa, *bol*-oriented expressivity, rhythmic precision, and her pioneering adaptation of courtesan aesthetics to the temporal discipline of the gramophone. Collectively, her recordings constitute a vital sonic archive, preserving multiple generations of Hindustani musical knowledge. In a society where women who performed in public were often viewed with suspicion or moral disdain, Gauhar's success was groundbreaking. She not only performed publicly but also insisted on receiving adequate compensation for her work, a move that positioned her as one of the highest-paid performers of her time (Sampath xvii). It can be argued that Gauhar Jaan's insistence on controlling her career and negotiating her financial terms was a radical act of economic and symbolic resistance. She effectively rejected the traditional notion that women should be passive recipients of male patronage, instead demanding agency over her financial and artistic endeavors. This was significant in the broader context of colonial India, where the cultural and economic landscapes were shaped by both British colonial rule and entrenched patriarchal structures.

Gauhar Jaan's life and legacy ultimately compel a rethinking of how technology, gender, and cultural labour intersect within the history of Indian classical music. The gramophone enabled her to claim authorship, circulate her voice beyond elite and gender-segregated spaces, and assert economic agency at a moment when women's public performance was subject to intense moral regulation. As Amanda Weidman argues, early recording technologies fundamentally altered the terms on which women's voices entered the public sphere, expanding visibility while simultaneously subjecting performers to new forms of abstraction and scrutiny (Weidman 74). Gauhar Jaan's career exemplifies both the possibilities and limits of this transformation. Despite extraordinary fame, commercial success, and artistic authority, her final years—marked by ill health, financial depletion, and social isolation—expose the

structural precarity of women performers whose labour generated immense cultural value without guaranteeing long-term security (Sampath xvii). From a feminist courtesan-studies perspective, this contradiction reveals how the *tawaif's* voice could be archived, celebrated, and endlessly reproduced, even as her body and material well-being remained vulnerable to patriarchal, legal, and familial dispossession. Yet Gauhar Jaan's enduring sonic archive—spanning more than twenty languages and multiple classical and semi-classical genres—continues to disrupt narratives that marginalize courtesan contributions to musical modernity. Her career, thus, stands as a foundational precedent for contemporary women artists who strategically use media technologies to assert self-representation, creative control, and economic independence. In preserving both brilliance and loss, Gauhar Jaan's recordings demand to be read not only as musical heritage but as feminist cultural texts that expose the uneven costs of women's entry into modern public culture.

Reconstitution of the *Ghazal*: Feminine Subjectivity in Voice

Begum Akhtar, born Akhtaribai Faizabadi in 1914 in Faizabad, Uttar Pradesh, is a significant figure of Hindustani classical music. Emerging from the culturally dense milieu of early twentieth-century North India, her life and career bridged the courtesan tradition and the consolidation of modern Indian music. Trained under eminent *ustad*s such as Ustad Imdad Khan and Ata Mohammed Khan, she attained exceptional mastery over the *ghazal*, *thumri*, and *dadra*, eventually earning the honorific *Mallika-e-Ghazal* (Qureshi, "In Search of" 97). Her artistic trajectory unfolded amid profound political and social transformations, including the nationalist movement and the reconfiguration of women's roles in public culture. Despite operating within a deeply patriarchal musical economy and facing the moral stigma attached to women performers, Begum Akhtar's artistry reconstituted the *ghazal* as a space of feminine subjectivity, emotional authority, and aesthetic agency. Begum Akhtar's engagement with *thumri* and *ghazal* illustrates the gradual transformation of a courtesan-inflected expressive idiom into a modern concert aesthetic. Peter Manuel's analysis of her *thumri* "*Koyeliya Mat Kar Pukar*" is particularly illuminating. The text, "Don't cry out, cuckoo, your call is like a dagger in my heart," draws upon the *Meghadûta* trope associated with Kalidasa, wherein natural elements function as messengers of longing and separation (Manuel,

Thumri 12-13). Begum Akhtar intensifies this classical conceit not through dramatic excess but through melodic restraint and affective compression. Her vocal delivery privileges emotional concentration over ornamentation, allowing grief to register as an inward, sustained experience. Similarly, in the *dadra* "*Ae Papiha Idhar Main Bhi*," translated as "Oh cuckoo, I too am here," her decision to render the *antara*[1] or the final stanza in free rhythm without tabla accompaniment foregrounds the flexibility of Urdu lyricism and momentarily suspends rhythmic discipline. This aesthetic choice underscores her prioritization of textual affect over *tala*-driven[2] virtuosity.

One of the formative moments in Akhtar's career was the 1934 Bihar earthquake relief concert, where her performance received public acknowledgment from Sarojini Naidu, encouraging her to pursue rigorous musical training. In the early 1930s, her association with the East India Film Company in Calcutta expanded her cultural reach and economic standing. Appearing in films such as *Ek Din Ki Badshahat* (1933), *Nal Damayanti* (1933), *Ameena* (1934), and *Mumtaz Begum* (1934), she achieved parallel careers in cinema and classical music (Mukherjee 45). Marriage in 1945 to Ishtiaq Ahmed Abbasi marked a decisive rupture in her career. Renamed Begum Akhtari, she withdrew from public performance for several years—a silence that exacted a severe toll on her health and emotional well-being. Her return to music in 1949, through broadcasts at All India Radio in Lucknow, was marked by intense emotional release, underscoring the extent to which performance was inseparable from her sense of self. Subsequent selective engagements with film music, including collaborations with Madan Mohan, and her cameo appearance in Satyajit Ray's *Jalsaghar* (1958), positioned her within a regime of cultural respectability, where the *ghazal* circulated as high art rather than courtesan entertainment. A close listening to *ghazals* such as "*Ae Mohabbat Tere Anjaam Pe Rona Aaya*" translated as "Oh love, tears come upon seeing your end" and "*Kuchh To Duniya Ki Inayaat Ne Dil Tod Diya"* translated as "Some of the world's kindnesses have broken my heart" reveals Begum Akhtar's distinctive approach to poetic articulation. She treats each *sher*[3] as an autonomous emotional unit, frequently inserting strategic pauses that heighten semantic and affective resonance. Rather than deploying exquisite *taans*, she relies on subtle *meends*[4], elongated vowels, and controlled

vibrato to foreground poetic meaning (Ranade 112-14). The slow, deliberate unfolding of melody invites the listener into an intimate psychological space, transforming the *ghazal*[5] into a confessional mode of listening.

From a gendered perspective, Begum Akhtar's *ghazals* articulate a feminized subjectivity that is reflective rather than demonstrative. While the *ghazal* tradition historically voiced desire through a predominantly masculine lyrical 'I,' her performances re-inscribe this subject position through a woman's embodied experience of love, abandonment, and social constraint. Feminist musicologists have noted that her singing internalizes emotion rather than projecting it outward through spectacle, producing what Amanda Weidman terms a form of "voiced interiority" characteristic of twentieth-century female classical performers (180-82). This inwardness marks a decisive shift from the courtesan's direct address to patrons toward a concert-oriented aesthetic of restraint and respectability. Technologically, Begum Akhtar's recordings for All India Radio and commercial labels were instrumental in standardizing a slow-tempo, text-centric *ghazal* style that became normative for later generations. The microphone amplified nuances of breath, timbre, and pause, enabling an affective vulnerability that would have been difficult to sustain in pre-amplified performance contexts. In this sense, her *ghazals* exemplify how recording technology facilitated new forms of emotional intimacy while simultaneously reinforcing ideals of feminine decorum and controlled expressiveness (Weidman 257). The *ghazal*, with its Persian and Arabic roots, had historically articulated love, longing, and loss largely through masculine poetic voices, relegating women's desire to the margins of cultural expression. Begum Akhtar's interpretations profoundly altered this dynamic. Drawing upon her position as a woman navigating public performance, her *ghazals* became complex articulations of feminine emotional landscapes rather than passive reproductions of romantic sorrow (Qureshi, "In Search of" 121). In this reconstitution, her artistry resonates with Judith Butler's notion of performativity, wherein identity is enacted through repeated gestures, including artistic expression (173). Her voice, thus, emerges as an embodied form of resistance, challenging exclusionary musical traditions by asserting a distinctly feminine emotive authority. Her temporary withdrawal from public performance after marriage reflects nationalist ideals that sought to relocate women within domestic space, a process Partha Chatterjee identifies in his formulation of the "new