Gender Dynamics in
the *Mushā'ira* Culture of Amroha

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Abstract. This study explores the participation of women poets in *mushā'ira* of Amroha by analysing gendered spaces within this traditionally male dominated Urdu poetic space by focusing on how deeply embedded patriarchal norms shape participation and recognition of women. The study reveals that the literary society in Amroha discourages women from actively participating, particularly in public recitations, by reinforcing gendered expectations and subtle exclusion to retain the position of incumbent as suggested by Bourdie in his cultural capital. Using qualitative methodology, this research draws from personal narratives collected from both male and female poets of the city in addition to the observation of the settings of *mushā'ira*. Textual analysis in addition to narrative analysis is also used as per the relevance to substantiate the cultural and historical facts. The demographic diversity of the narratives helps uncover varied perspectives and highlight the shifts within the literary culture. Ultimately, the paper argues that gender politics within the *mushā'ira* culture of Amroha reflects societal constraints on women's cultural agency.

Keywords. *Mushā'ira*, Amroha, women poets, Urdu poets, poetic space, male domination, cultural currency.

Introduction

Mushā'ira is a poetic event popularized by Indo-Islamic culture in India in which poets gather and perform their piece of writing and appreciate the fellow poets. According to C.M Naim, *Mushā'ira* is a gathering of poets for the purpose of reading poetry before an audience (Niam, 1991). *Mushā'ira* as a performative and intellectual space substantially shaped Urdu literary culture. According to a blog on Rekhta, *Mushā'ira: A History of Thunderous and Traditional Waah-Waahs*, Vishakha Goyal defines *mushā'ira* as,

> *Mushā'ira* (*maḥ-fil* or *bazm*) is a gathering of poets who write, recite and listen to poetry of one another written in Urdu

> language, with a participative and responsive audience. It is not a contest which has a winner in the end, but the poets simply read out their self-composed poems in their patented and individual styles, crafted in accordance with a specific metrical pattern and carrying a certain loftiness of thought (Goyal, 2020).

Despite *mushā'ira* being a space for preserving Urdu poetry and culture, it also reflects deeply entrenched social hierarchies including those based on gender.

The paper deals with the gender dynamics in the *mushā'ira* culture of Amroha. The small city has a rich cultural heritage and artistic expressions that are known in the Urdu poetry world, especially the poets like Sa'adat Amrohvi, Mas'hafi, Jaun Elia, Rais Amrohvi, Qaem Amrohvi, Azeem Amrohvi, Nasim Amrohvi made the place known to the poetry world. Once the legacy of culture and poetry that was preserved and expanded has now considerably changed. Much like the larger literary landscape of Indian literature, *mushā'ira* has remained predominantly male centric. The exclusion or non-existence of women performers were often visible in traditional *mushā'ira*.

The gender dynamics in terms of *mushā'ira* refers to the power relation and roles of the two genders as performers as well as the listeners in *mushā'ira*. While the *mushā'ira* is claimed to be an egalitarian space, it upholds a male dominance that discourages or sidelines women in the *mushā'ira* as an institution. Women's absence from *mushā'ira*(s) has been historically normalised as seen in Mirza Farhatullah Baig's *The Last Mushā'ira of Dehli* (Baig, 2010). Baig begins his work from the perspective of Karim-ud-din, a *maulvī* by lineage and scholar cum calligraphist by profession.

Karim-ud-din initially met Navvab Zain-ul Abidin Khan Arif, Mirza Asadullah Khan Ghalib's nephew, who took the responsibility of organising a *mushā'ira*. Throughout the elaborate plan and the preliminary arrangements and even in the *mushā'ira*, not a single woman was invited, nor was there any mention of their existence. The text authored by a male writer focuses exclusively on male poets both from the royal court and among the commoners which was obviously the social norm of the time and authentically depicted by the author. Class differences are discussed primarily through sartorial distinctions, suggesting that the *mushā'ira* functioned as an egalitarian space with regard to class, where class disparity was disregarded. However, this inclusivity did not extend to gender. The absence of women highlights a clear gender-based exclusion, reinforcing that class boundaries may be suspended in the *mushā'ira* but the gender disparities remained intact.

This study explores the socio-cultural factors that contributed to the exclusion of women from *mushāʿira* spaces. This study also seeks to explore how male and female poets perceive gender imbalance. It also notes the transformation of *mushāʿira* culture and the emerging shifts that promote gender inclusivity and resistance to patriarchal norms. It also focuses on the narratives of various poets, revealing their relationship with poetic expression and public performance.

The paper employs a qualitative methodology rooted in personal narratives, observation and textual analysis as per the relevance. The triangulation of data is being made in the study to provide deeper understanding of *mushāʿira* and the role of gender in it. The narratives were recorded with poets from Amroha with varied demographic perspectives in terms of age group, profession other than poet, gender, region, religion, sect and their connectivity to poetic background. By introducing Pierre Bourdieu's idea about the distribution of power within the artistic field, the role of gender in *mushāʿira* is being discussed.

Although many Urdu scholars of the city contributed numerous study material to look upon the history, culture and literature of Amroha in Urdu language including *Tārīkh-e-Amroha* (Abbasi 1930); *Tārīkh-e-Sādāt-e-Amroha* (Naqvi 1934); *Pāk-o-Hind Mushāʿira Bayād-e-Mushafī* (1983); *Tazkira ʿulamāʾ-e-Amroha* (Husain 2003); *Hindustān kī Pahlī Jang- Āzādī meṉ Amroha kā Ḥiṣṣa* (Naqvi 2007); *Tārīkh-e-Asgharī* (Naqvi 2007); *Nāmwarān-e-Amroha* (Amrohwi 2009); *Shuʿarāʾ-e-Amroha* (Siddiqui 2004); *Amroha ke Hindu shuʿarāʾ* (Siddiqui, 2006); *Qaṣīda nigārān-e-Amroha* (Amrohvi 2016) etc., none of the aforementioned books focused on *mushāʿira* culture of the city. A book *Mushāʿira Amroha* (Hashmi, 2015) seems relevant to this study because of its title, is yet again a collection of nine renowned poets of the city from ancient times to present times written in Urdu.

Interestingly few works are also available in Hindi language. For instance, *Amroha Nagar Ka Pracheen Itihaas* (Sharma, 2017) traced the ancient history of Amroha city. Another book *Amroha ke Gaurav* (Amrohvi, 2017) by Bhuvanesh Kumar Sharma is a collection of twenty-two categories of people in which he added all the renowned people of the city. He also mentioned all the renowned poets of the city in a separate category called *Kavi-Shāʾir Varg*. For this reason, it is concluded that no exclusive study has been made on the gender dynamics of *mushāʿira* in Amroha. It is important to note that this study will exclusively deal with the changes that occur in the space of *mushāʿira* due to its gender dynamics and this research is not aimed to appraise the aesthetic or content of the poetry produced within the city.

The next section briefly presents a history of *mushāʿira* and how and when it reached Amroha. A brief review was also made on the society of Amroha. Following that, the paper outlines the changing dynamics of *mushāʿira* participation. Drawing from Bourdieu's concept of field theory, the paper seeks to challenge the male centered narratives of incumbents. It aims to make visible or at least acknowledge the disparity within the poetic space.

Advent of *Mushāʿira* in Amroha

According to Ludmila Vasilyeva's research *The Indian Mushāʿira: Tradition and Modernity*, (2010) it was during the middle-ages that the tradition of public poetry readings had been spread throughout Muslim countries. Vasilyeva credited pre–Islamic Arabs of late fifth and early sixth centuries with initiating public reading of poetry, which could be seen as the progenitor of the *mushāʿira* culture. Akhtar Qamber substantiates the fact in the introduction of the translation of *The Last Mushāʿira of Dehli* (Baig 2010), by citing examples of the poets in the early Arab era who wrote *marsiya*[1] or *qaṣīda*[2]. By the time of Persian poet Fughani of Shiraz, *mushāʿira* was a well-established institution with its own conventions (Baig 2010). Although it is believed to have originated in Arabia, it was majorly developed in the Persian region. It was later in fifteenth century Iran, that literary circles expanded and poetry was being performed in front of an audience. The poetry of the Arabs moved along the Muslim imperialists and reached Afghanistan through Central Asia and later, to the northern regions of India. The prosody and metrical patterns of Arab poetry was adopted by Persians, Turks and later by Urdu poets of India as the latter is heavily influenced by the former mentioned languages. Highly influenced by Persian, Urdu adopted the tradition of *mushāʿira* from Iran together with its language, poetics and classic literature (Vasilyeva 2010).

However, Shamsur Rahman Faruqi claimed that the *mushāʿira* came to India in the sixteenth century but was restricted to Persian language till it lost its position to *Rekhta* or Hindavi later in the same century (Vasilyeva 2010). The Urdu *mushāʿira* that developed in India was also believed to be born out of syncretic poetic culture that already existed in India. Like *gōshtī mushāʿira* were organised at the royal court, a house of a poet, a palace of a noble patron or a luxurious or spacious mansion of an aristocrat (Vasilyeva 2010). *Mushāʿira* were even organised at a courtesan's place as seen in Mirza Hadi Ruswa's *Umrāʾo Jān Adā* (1899). *Mushāʿira* too demanded learned men with proper knowledge of prosody and language. Thus, the origin of *mushāʿira* was also credited with the birth of the Urdu language that emerged

[1] Marsiya- A form of poem in lamentation that mourn the tragedy of Karbala.

[2] Qaṣīda- A panegyric poem that praises a warrior or a hero.

out of Indian culture and developed a new form of poetic gathering with
its own etiquettes.

However, more definite evidence of *mushā'ira* in Urdu is credited to the
arrival of Wali Aurangabadi to Delhi in 1700s where he recited his *ghazals*
in vernacular Urdu. The gathering where Wali recited his work in *Rekhta*
was initially called *Murakhtah* which later standardized as *Mushā'ira.* Many
literary sources suggest that Mīr Dard (1720/21-1785), a mystic poet held a
monthly *mushā'ira* at his house. Akhtar Qamber also noted in the
introduction of the Aligarh edition of *Dehlī Kī Ākhirī Sham'a*, that Maulānā
Ahsan Marahravi noted that Mīr Taqī Mīr (1723-1810) regularly organizes
mushā'ira at his house twice a month. During the Mughal Period (16th- 19th
centuries) Persian was the court language which was replaced by Urdu in
1839 during the reign of Bahadur Shah Zafar. Later, after the uprising of
1857 and establishment of *Anjuman-e Punjāb* at Lahore, the modern *mushā'ira*
came into existence.

The significant innovation in *mushā'ira* could be seen when Altaf
Hussain Hali (1837-1914) was exposed to western literature in 1871 when
he was appointed at a book depot in Lahore. In the preface of his poetry
collection *Divan-e-Hali* 1890 (reprinted 1946), he mentioned the western
influence on Urdu literature. After the foundation of the Progressive
Writers' Movement in 1936, the *mushā'ira* were transformed into a well-
established medium of political and social reform. In post-independent
India, *mushā'ira* in India were organized to preserve and prevent the
language or culture. In post-covid era the physical *mushā'ira* moved to virtual
spaces.

It is however ambiguous to ascertain how and when *mushā'ira* began in
the Amroha as the lack of success in finding any document or book in this
respect. Thus, the advent of *mushā'ira* in Amroha is traced mostly on the
basis of oral narratives in regard to its connection with the advent of Urdu
language. Professor Nashir Naqvi, a retired professor and former head of
the Department of Urdu, and Director of Baba Farid Centre for Sufi
Studies, Punjābi University Patiala, highlighted the connection between
Urdu language and literature and the city of Amroha by citing examples of
renowned Urdu poets. The most popular name associated with the history
of Urdu in Amroha was Mīr Sa'adat Amrohvi, who was the *ustād* of Mīr
Taqī Mīr. Mīr Sa'adat was an expert of Urdu language who taught Mīr Taqī
Mīr, the master of the Delhi School of Urdu poetry. Nashir Naqvi claimed
that if the Delhi School was proud of Mīr Taqī Mīr's poetry and his Urdu,
Amroha was proud that Mir's teacher was Sa'adat Amrohvi (Salman, 2016).

On the other hand, Mīr Khālīq, father of Mīr Anīs, a remarkable *marṣiya*

poet and son of Mīr Hasan, foremost poet of *masnawī³*. Mīr Khālīq helped in the establishment of the Lucknow School. Mīr Khālīq and Lālā Chhannulāl Dilgīr were also Sa'adat Amrohvi's disciples. This suggests that Sa'adat Amrohvi was the *ustād* of the maestros of both the school of thoughts of Urdu i.e Delhi as well as Lucknow. This also emphasizes the importance of Sa'adat Amrohvi as *ustad* that helped in shaping the thought process of his *shāgird*(s).

Amroha's geographical location places it between Delhi and Lucknow, the two schools of thoughts were known for shaping the principle of poetry in north India. The movement of many Urdu poets from Delhi to Lucknow via Amroha suggests the importance of Amroha in the world of Urdu poetry. Mīr Taqī Mīr moved from Delhi to Lucknow who was taught by Mīr Sa'adat of Amorha. Similarly, Ghulam Hamdāni Mus'ḥafī (1751-1824) born in Amroha, moved to Delhi and then to Lucknow. Thus, this suggests that Amroha is an essential chain between the Delhi School and Lucknow School for poets like *khudā-e-sukhan* Mīr Taqī Mīr and Mus'ḥafī.

Thus, this hypothesis could be seen as the advent of *mushā'ira* culture in Amroha city. Despite the fact that only two major schools of theory of Urdu poetry were Delhi and Lucknow, Urdu as a language was well developed in Amroha.

Society of Amroha

The demographic diversity of Amroha provides valuable insight and better understanding of its societal structure. Statistically the total population of Amroha as per the census 2011 is 198,471. The demographic details of the city according to the 2011 census suggests the average literacy rate of Amroha is 62.36 % in which 66.73% is male and 57.61% is female. The city is Muslim dominated with approximately 73.80% Muslim population that comprises both *Shīʿa* and *Sunnī* population. Hindus are 25.48% while 0.72% comprises the rest of the religions (Census 2011). Reportedly, Amroha is the highest concentration of *Shīʿa* population in Uttar Pradesh after Lucknow (Verma 2018). Societal hierarchies are evident in Amroha among individuals and in families like any other region of India.

Women are yet considered as the domesticated individuals. Despite having separate educational institutions for the women, very few women pursue careers within the city. They eventually move out of the city for better job opportunities or remain within the household. Teaching is the only common profession pursued by women as a career option. Veiling is

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³ *Masnawī*- A form of poetry written in a long narrative style with rhyming couplets often used for epic, romance and moral stories.

usually observed by the women in Amroha outside the home and the restriction is generally stronger among upper-class families. Different families follow different levels of veiling which includes *burqaʿ, ḥijāb, niqāb* etc. Women usually wear *burqaʿ* even to wedding parties but are permitted to remove it in the women's section. The purpose of such veiling is to stay away from the eyes of *ghayr maḥram*[4] as reported by Noman Baig, a local resident.

Gendered Transition in *Mushāʿira* Space

The earlier forms of *mushāʿira* were typically defined as 'a circle of poets gathered for the purpose of reciting poetry, appreciating fellow poets, relishing the aesthetic aura and discussing the language, form and content nuances of poetry. Mirza Farhatullah Baig's *The Last Mushāʿira of Dehli* is the most relevant work to help understand *mushāʿira* in the closed literary space. Karim-uddin decided to organize a *mushāʿira* to publish the works and lives of the poets to retrieve his printing press. Organizing a *mushāʿira* was a meticulous process that required not only finances and efforts but the prerequisite knowledge of the literary circle of the times. The need for personal invitations suggests that *mushāʿira* during the Mughal era were closed, exclusive gatherings, attended only by poets and connoisseurs of poetry. The absence of women from these events was equally apparent; neither the organizers mentioned them, nor did the poets or audience expect their presence. Given the historical and sociological context of the time, including women in such gatherings was considered entirely out of the question.

In addition to this, the author consistently alludes to the fragile male ego which appears easily threatened whether in the matter of invitations, seating arrangement, or through subtle rivalries and ego clashes among the poets. One particular instance of personal rivalry in Baig's *mushāʿira* was seen in Mīr Sahib's intention to read a satire on Hud Hud. Baig provided an interesting insight on Hud-Hud by introducing him in the *Preliminary Arrangements*. Hud Hud came with Hāfiẓ Veeran along with *Ustad* Zauq. Maulānā Sahbai sarcastically remarked *"Your friend Hud Hud"* to Momin to point out their ironic relations. Hud Hud's real name was Abdul Rehman who came to Delhi from the East, to live with Hakeem Agha Jan Aish. He adopted this pen name at Aish's insistence that has an ironic meaning as well. Hud Hud is the Urdu name for woodpecker, which is known for its pecking. Hud Hud's wit and biting remarks serves as a metaphor for the bird's ability to peck deeply into the wood symbolizing how his words strike with precision. Initially he was appreciated in the court for his witty and

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[4] *Ghayr maḥram* - Refers to all those males whom a woman is permitted to marry.

clever remarks, but the admiration soon turned into resentments when he started targeting the masters with his wit. It becomes clear that the seniors would only appreciate someone until their competence began to threaten their position. Aish uses Hud Hud as a mouthpiece for his rivalries due to which Hud Hud soon were at the receiving end of ridicule. It was hinted earlier in Ghalib's comment that Mīr Sahib came with preparation to outsmart Hud Hud and ridicule him in front of others. Ghalib sarcastically remarked, "Every Pharaoh has a Moses. I hear our Mīr Sahib is going to say something in praise of Maulavī Hud Hud! If this eloquent royal falcon is able to stand his own ground against Mīr Sahib, it will be something!" (90). Those who were already vexed with Hud Hud relished the idea of him being humiliated publicly. To avert the humiliation Hud Hud left the premise. Mīr Sahib had to drop his plan to read the satire on Hud Hud as speaking about him in his absence was inappropriate and against the rules of *mushā'ira*. Sehbai's remark to Momin, Ghalib's sarcasm on Hud Hud and Mīr Sahib's intention to humiliate him were the instances of male ego clash. The tension between them underscores the deeply patriarchal structure of Mughal society, which not only excluded women entirely from literary space but also fostered unhealthy competition and insecurity among male literary elites.

The seating position and order of performance determined the social position of the poet in their circle. Typically, the poets were already aware of the fellow performers' disposition, style and achievements. The organiser made the poets sit according to their rank and the order of performance suggest the seniority in the field not on the basis of age but on the basis of achievements. The poetic recognition and status of the poet served as the marker of prestige and power among men. The theory of hegemonic masculinity by Raewyn Connell helps in contextualizing these rivalries, as poets sought to assert dominance not only over women by excluding them from the literary arena but also over fellow male poets that perpetuate a hierarchy even among them (Connell, 2005).

The complete absence of women from the gatherings on the other hand, reveals the broader gender dynamics of the Mughal society. Women were systematically excluded from the public literary spaces, regardless of their talent and interest, seniority or achievements. They were invisible on the cultural forum that denied them the access to platforms of recognition. While men's poetic abilities could elevate their social status and public esteem, women's public appearance might be the symbol of her low social status. Women possessing high social status were confined to private spheres and their creative expressions were supposed to be unacknowledged to gain more prestige in the society. Patriarchal values

relegate women to silence and anonymity in the formal Urdu literary world. This suggests that *mushā'ira* has been a gendered space of power, shaped by exclusion of women and unhealthy competition among men.

The visible change in the space of poetry could be noticed in the history of *mushā'ira* culture. Gradually the closed spaces of poetry were made open to the general public. This could be noticed in the *mushā'ira* organized by Progressive Writers Movement which is more of a cosmopolitan space. The participation of women in the poetic gatherings was a new invention of the times. As Sajjad Zaheer noted in *The Light*, the *mushā'ira* that Progressive Writers' Movement organized were more relaxed and informal in comparison to the previously held rigid structure of *mushā'ira* (2006). The PWM played a crucial role in challenging traditional patriarchal structures and gender exclusion. The inclusion of women in PWM *mushā'ira* was more visible because of the exclusion of its previous times. *Anjuman-e Punjāb,* a literary and educational society, introducing western education models failed to include women and remain male centric. In documentation of *Anjuman-e Punjāb Mushā'ira* the deep-seated gender exclusion was reflected in Muhammad Hussain Azad (1830-1910) and Altaf Hussain Hali's (1837-1914) works as no record evidence of female participation was reflected in them. On the contrary, the PWM began to open up literary platforms to women poets and writers, which was in alignment with its broader agenda of social reform. The PWM not only debated in favor of women intellectual ability but recorded a notable shift in the public presence of women.

The PWM laid the ground for women poets to claim visibility in *mushā'ira* that paved the way for more cosmopolitan ones. The All-India *Mushā'ira* of the 49th meeting of Indian National Congress was one such. The term 'All-India' made it clear that the *mushā'ira* was inclusive of everyone across the subcontinent. It transcended borders of gender, region, religion, caste and even language. For instance, Sarojini Naidu was the chairperson of the All-India *Mushā'ira* which was an unheard-of thing before. Firstly, because Naidu was famous for her English poems. Secondly, she was a woman and women were usually not part of *mushā'ira* gatherings. Thirdly, in the traditional *mushā'ira*, terms like chairperson were unheard-of. Thus, such a political *mushā'ira* rejected the traditional norms of the gathering that necessarily excluded women and questioned their cultural and literary agency.

A high contrast to the traditionally male dominated *mushā'ira* culture could be seen in the contemporary literary festivals such as *Jashn-e Rekhta*, a three-day literary festival organized by the *Rekhta* Foundation for the preservation and promotion of Urdu language and literature. In the three-

day itinerary one can notice many events related to *mushā'ira* and poetry recitation. They have various categories of *mushā'ira* in all the editions. For instance, Grand *Mushā'ira*, alternatively known as *Rekhta Mushā'ira*, *Khulī Nishaṣt* (an open house of poetry), *Mazāḥiya Mushā'ira* (Poetry Humorous in nature), *Bazm-e Nau-Bahār* (Young Poet *Mushā'ira*), *Bazm-e Shayārat* (Women Poet *Mushā'ira*) along with many discussions on *mushā'ira* like *Mushā'irah aur Ham: Ye Niṣf kā Qiṣṣa hai* (The *Mushā'ira* and Us: This is the Story of a Half) (Schedule 2019), *Mushā'ira aur Kavi Sammelan ka Itihās* (The history of *Mushā'ira and Kavi Sammelan*) (Schedule, 2022). Such literary festivals and *mushā'ira* organized by these foundations expanded the scope for women's participation and visibility. Female poets not only performed their work but also actively participated in discussions on the Urdu literary world thereby creating a more inclusive environment that acknowledges women's voices. These organizations deliberately offer prestigious platforms and opportunities to women to challenge normative hegemony created by male poets of traditional *mushā'ira*. However, the questions of tokenism, audience reception and thematic constraint persist. For instance, the Grand *Mushā'ira* of 2018 began with the speech of the *Nāzim* (roughly translated as presenter/compere/stage manager) Shakeel Jamali. All the nine poets and the *Nāzim* (who was also one of the poets) were present. The only female poet on the stage was Malka Naseem. This raises the concern about tokenism of women poets in the contemporary *mushā'ira*. In February 2023 *Rekhta* foundation in collaboration with Prabha Khaitan foundation organized a *mushā'ira* at India International Centre. The *mushā'ira* was part of *Ehsaas* campaign by Prabha Kahitan foundation which aims at recognizing women from different spheres of life. Yet, the *mushā'ira* was not specifically a women's *mushā'ira* and out of eleven poets only three were women. The symbolic inclusion of women among a roster of male poets serves not as a mark of progress but rather as Rosabeth Moss Kanter identifies as tokenism, a practice of inclusion of minority members as women in this case to give an illusion of equality while maintaining dominant group's control (Kanter, 1977).

The situation is similar among the poets of Amroha. During the fieldwork for this research, Nikhat Amrohvi emerged as the only female poet who participated in the study. This could be attributed either to a lack of interest among other women poets or their unavailability due to other commitments. Moreover, in the initial pool of participants, almost all the poets interviewed suggested Nikhat's name, indicating not only her prominence but also the scarcity of active female voices within the local *mushā'ira* circle. This structure also reinforces Connell's theory of hegemonic masculinity, where the public literary domain remains a

masculine space and women's participation is allowed only in controlled or symbolic form. Nikhat's active participation in *mushā'ira* of Amroha subtly perpetuates the idea that women's poetic voice is secondary to normative male centric discourse of the *mushā'ira*.

An example of thematic constraint could be seen in Ali Khan Mahmudabad's *Poetry of Belongings* in which he writes about *Bazm-e Urdū Shimla*'s yearly *Mushā'ira* where one of the poets started to recite a poem about a courtesan. The *Nāẕim* stopped him in the middle as there were women present in the audience. The idea of inappropriateness not only discourages women but also restricts men to talk about the so-called inappropriate topics such as *tawā'if* (Mahmudabad 2020).

Gendered Perception of Women Poet in Amroha

Drawing on narrative interviews, observation, and textual studies, this study examines not only the extent of participation by women but also how their presence is framed, evaluated, and sometimes limited to prevailing social and cultural norms. The role of women is essential to point out in the section since a lot of discouragement of women is noticeable in *mushā'ira* spaces in Amroha. The role of women in Urdu poetry initially appeared primarily as a subject within the works of male poets, without giving them a space to their own voice or authorship. Male poets write about women and their poetry is about the yearning for a woman who is an unattainable object for man. According to Nasir Amrohvi, the basic themes of *ghazal*[5] involve 'talk about woman', 'talk to woman', 'talk about beloved' and 'talk to beloved'. The scenario changed in the history of the Urdu language when women took the responsibility of giving voice and perspective to the female subject. Women's voices emerged as a rebellion and resistance to the male hegemony in the Urdu poetic space. The patronization provided by the Mughal court to Urdu language and poetry produced many male poets since they were the part of the court and openly took part in the courtly matters. Women were restricted to the *zanāna*[6] but the only women who had access to the poetry were either courtesans or princesses, but mostly courtesans produced poetry. They had access to the compositions of male poets within the court as they were the part of the inner court. The traditional themes of 'talk to or about women or beloved' then turn into themes like love and loss. The taboo regarding women as a poet began when courtesans adopted Urdu as their literary language. A very famous dialogue of Gulzar's *Mirza Ghalib* series affirms this fact in which Ghalib expresses that the popularity of a poet is determined only when his poetry is either adopted by a

[5] *Ghazal-* A form of Urdu poetry consisting of rhyming couplets and a refrain. Often expressing love, loss and mysticism in content.
[6] *Zanāna-* A place of a household reserved for women.

courtesan in her brothel or a *fakir* in a street (Gulzar 2006). The first woman to compose a *Dīvān*[7] was a courtesan from the court of *Niẓām* of Hyderabad, and she wrote under the pen name *Chanda* (Rewati 2022). Thus, earlier Urdu poetry is associated either with the male language or the language of courtesans.

This conception later changed and women emerged as prolific writers both in prose and poetry. Nazia Akhtar in her article for *Praxis* titled "The 150 years Old Indian Women's Literary Tradition You Didn't Know," writes about the triple marginalization of Hyderabadi women writers of Urdu. Hyderabadi Urdu writers were already marginalized for their association with the south Indian dialect of Urdu which was often dominated by the northern dialect of Urdu. They were also relatively less researched for being a part of the princely state. Hyderabadi women writers were also often sidelined by Urdu historiographers for being women and associated with *tavā'if* (courtesan) especially. She claimed that *tavā'if* were an important and prominent group of literary women who composed poetry and set it to music and dance that not only influenced intellectual and literary culture but also influenced political culture at times. She also added that courtesans were not the only women composing poetry but they were the prominent ones as their public visibility was greater than other women. The scenario changed later in the second half of the 19th century when middle class women adopted Urdu as a language of creative expression. This happened by the conscious effort put by Salar Jung (1829-1883), a social reformer who worked for the education of women. The first school of Hyderabad that was inclusive of women education was founded by Christian missionaries in the 1870s along with Hyderabadi reformers like Salarjung (Akhtar, 2023). However, the former association of Urdu with the language of courtesans is much emphasized by many of the male poets of Amroha. They insist on the fact that Urdu was once the language of courtesans and producing poetry by a woman is not a respectable thing (Saifi, 2021) (Amrohvi, 2021). The present-day discouragement of women in Urdu poetic circles has its roots in the psyche of men who determine the involvement of women in poetic circles as the reason for decline of culture. The highly male dominated space of the *mushā'ira* still discourages women poets on the basis of propriety. The idea of inappropriateness is associated with recitation of poetry in front of an audience by women to discourage women writers.

Amrohian male society is no different than any other male dominated society where the women are psychologically discouraged from facing the public. Zubair Ibn-e Saifi reported about Syeda Kaisar, an Amroha born

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[7] *Dīvān*- Collection of poems particularly in Urdu or Persian.

Ṣāḥib-e-Dīvān poet who never went to *mushāʻira* as a reciter. On the contrary, he added that the women who came to Amroha after getting married did not hesitate to recite on stage. He gave examples of Masooda Hayat who hailed from Badaun and married Amroha's Sharif Bharti and Tasleem Siddiqui, wife of Raees Alam Faiz. He concluded that the daughters-in-law of the city have no hesitation performing on stage while the daughters of the city refrain from facing the audience. Additionally, he claimed that the scenario is changing with time as a few daughters like Nikhat Amrohvi are open to embracing the change and confidently face the audience. In this explanation, he was trying to point out the Islamic custom of seclusion of women from the eyes of *ghayr maḥram*. He was trying to create a binary between daughters who behaved with utmost propriety while the daughters-in-law were more relaxed in this sense.

In the *mushāʻira*, a separate arrangement is made for the women audience, which is usually quite small in comparison to the male seating arrangement. Regarding this, Zubair Ibn-e Saifi remarked that "in Amroha the tradition of separate arrangement for women is conscientiously followed by the grace of Allah and the shameless behavior of mixing male and female audience have not taken up here" (Saifi 2021). This suggests that the elder poets like Zubair felt the need to preserve traditional values of the city by keeping the women community separate like the olden times. The discouragement of women poets and their presence in the audience stems out of concerns about modesty, negative reputation and fear of criticism for being publicly visible, based on the convention that the poetic space is male dominated. The notion of pursuing poetry as a career for women is discouraged in patriarchal society. He added that the separate arrangement made by setting up a canopy between the male and female space that resembles the old distinction of *zanāna* and *mardāna*,[8] facilitates women to relish good poetry because most of the time women themselves are not comfortable sitting in the midst of a large number of men. Sometimes the families restricted women to attend gatherings that include a large male audience. Zubair's assertion about the seclusion of women from the poetic space on the pretext of religious values is similar to Mahmudabad's assertion about *mushāʻira* in Lahore. He noted that after the advent of postal service the number of women poets increased as *pardah-nashīn* (women who observe seclusion) women did not attend *mushāʻira* but sent their work for *iṣlāḥ* (improvement/ correction) from an *ustād shāʼir*. He cited an example of a religious scholar of the Barelvi sect of Islam, *Maulavī* Abdul Ahad's daughters, who sent their work to Majid Ali Allahbadi for

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[8] *Zanāna* and *Mardāna*- Place reserved in households for females and males respectively.

iṣlāḥ. This suggests that the women were not discouraged to write poetry but they were discouraged to read it in front of an audience. The attendance of women in *mushā'ira* is not objectionable until they are restricted as the audience and connoisseurs of poetry and remain in the separate section.

This claim is contradicted by Nikhat Amrohvi in her interview. She recounted her struggle as a woman poet who was initially discouraged by her relatives. The conservative atmosphere of Amroha city discouraged Muslim women from stepping out of her houses to face the public. Later her poems were covered by a program on ETV Urdu, a broadcast channel which changed the perspective of her family. Gradually she attained recognition among the poets of Amroha. Nikhat Amrohvi credited social media and Urdu programs on television as the sole reason for her recognition in the city. She reported that her blue tick Facebook page had almost 1 lakh 24 thousand followers and was hacked by someone in order to restrict her popularity in the city. Personal comments were made about her to discourage her from facing the public. She also added that she is no longer invited to the *Nishast*[9] (Urdu poetic gatherings) organized in Amroha. She was only invited twice for *Nishast*s in Amroha in the long career of reading in *Mushā'ira*. She recounted once she was invited to the monthly *Nishast* at the house of Advocate Baqa. On reaching there she realized that all the established poets of Amroha were present there including Jamshed Kamal Sahab, Dr. Ladle Sahab, Dr. Liyaqat Amrohvi, Shiban Qadri and others.

Her presence was disapproved by many poets who left the gathering as a sign of protest. A lot of male poets later protested against the organizer and asked them not to invite them if they ever invited her in the gathering. They complain that inviting women to such gatherings is against the norm of the *mushā'ira* culture in Amroha. Being a female poet is extremely difficult for a poet from a non-poetic background because of the discouragement by society but she rejected the fact that the daughters of Amroha do not face the public. She cited the example of Rukhsar Amrohvi, Kamal Amrohvi's daughter who is an established female poet of Amroha. Her father's aunt Ummul Banin was one of the known poets in earlier times (Amrohvi, 2022). Few more poets were Chunni and Mukhtaro who moved to Pakistan taught by Saifi Amrohvi were also women poets of Amroha. Chunni and Mukhtaro was taught by Saifi Amrohvi from behind the curtain. Thus, the assertion made by Zubair Ibn-e Saifi that only the daughters-in-law of Amroha faced the public suggests the psychological discouragement of women as a poet. The idea of impropriety was associated with women poets reciting in public to discourage them from pursuing

[9] *Nishast*- Urdu poetic gatherings typically smaller in scale than *mushā'ira*

poetry as a profession in Amroha.

The discouragement of women and resistance by women poets suggest the persisting culture and gender politics among male and female poets in the city. The *mushā'ira* culture is a vital site for the political struggle of women where women negotiate questions about their identity as poets in Amroha. Nikhat Amrohvi talked about her popularity in the city and compared it with male poets. She was among the few who gained popularity not only on social media but also on television. She insisted that she occupied a much more prestigious place in the literary circles of Amroha than any male poet of contemporary times. Nikhat Amrohvi reported that people discouraged her as a poet until she made it to television. The same people who were discouraging her are now associating themselves with her after her Urdu poetry was covered by Sab TV and ETV Urdu. This discouragement of women initiated on the popular belief that it is inappropriate for a woman to be a part of poetic culture propagated by male poets. The resistance to this by giving it a poetic voice suggests the strife between the two genders in the poetic circle of Amroha.

While patriarchal perceptions continue to marginalize women in Amroha's literary circle, women poets too developed a form of resistance to assert their authority. However, these authorities are not always based on literary merits alone, at times it is personal too. For instance, in one of the *Nishasts* of Amroha, Nikhat Amrohvi, a female poet, pointed out the wrong usage of the word *Iqtibās* (to quote) by an established poet of the city. The poet used the word *Iqtibāsī* instead of *Iqtibās* to meet the *qāfiya*[10] of the _ghazal_ which ultimately led to the mispronunciation and wrong usage of the term. She pointed out that the word *Libāsī* cannot be used for *Libās* (clothing). Similarly, *Iqtibāsī* is the wrong usage of the term *Iqtibās*.

The wrong usage not disrupts the sentence semantically but it also affects the grammatical structure of the sentence. The word *Iqtibās* is used to quote or cite or borrow from another text which is used as a noun in Urdu text while by adding a suffix ī it turned into an adjective, which is not a recognized adjective form in literary usage. The usage is wrong because the poet used it to meet the *qāfiya* with another word by completely disregarding the correct usage. This is a forced usage of a word that is made up for the rhyming purpose instead of semantic logic. *Iqtibāsī* implies something related to quoting which is not an attested form. Nikhat gave another example of *Libās* and *Libāsī* to prove her point. *Libās* is an Urdu word used for clothing or dress which is a noun. Its replacement with the word *Libāsī* is wrong because it is a forced adjective form which is again not

[10] *Qāfiya-* Rhyme in Urdu prosody is known as qāfiya.

recognized like *Iqtibāsī*. The substitution of a noun with non-standard adjective form is a distortion of language. It is not acceptable in poetry as the *qāfiyā* is forced and does not naturally fit in the poetry. This compromises semantic as well as grammatical logic of the sentence. In the Urdu literary scenario this is seen as a practice of language corruption.

Nikhat's critique in this situation is not purely literary but also based on gendered stand. She not only asserted her literary competence but also challenged male dominance. She called out the presiding poet for not pointing it out on the pretext that the purpose of such gatherings is not being fulfilled. This should be noted in the incident where Nikhat pointed out the error in the usage of the word, is the same *Nishast* where the poets protested against her presence. Her purpose was to establish herself a refined poetess before those who were complaining against her presence. She highlighted that she was resisted in the gathering even when she upholds a higher standard of literary integrity then her male contemporaries. Thus, their rivalry was not purely poetic; rather it had a personal and even ideological motive. The way of dealing with such rivalries changed in contemporary times where the poet does not choose to read a piece of satire or engage in literary banter; rather she tried to prove herself a better poet by pointing out their mistakes.

Another gendered perspective that came into forefront where Nasir Amrohvi, a poet pointed out another sort of corruption that young poets face these days. People with presentable personality and having a melodious voice purchased poems written by less-known poets and read them out on stage. According to him, reading in *tarannum*[11] is the main reason behind this sort of problem. He said that *tarannum* was also used by the earlier poets but it negatively affected the *mushā'ira* when the female poets adopted it and established it as the favored style among the masses. A direct finger was pointed at women poets who rendered their poetry in *tarannum*. Nasir Amrohvi added that the poet of *tarannum* bought the poems written by other poets and recited them on stage which led to unethical practices in the *mushā'ira*. He also added that this issue is less common among poets who recite in *taḥt*[12]. He added that his assertion does not mean that *tarannum* led to the downfall of *mushā'ira* but the demand of melodious voices and beautiful faces instead of content of the poetry led to such downfall. However, a gender bias can be easily perceived in his undertone where he directly blames women poets for using their beauty and voice to attract male audiences.

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[11] *Tarannum*- Recitation of poetry in musical tone.
[12] *Taḥt*- Recitation of poetry without musical tone.

A similar assertion was seen in Rauf Parekh's article "*Mushā'ira*: Still a Cultural Institution or a Means of Entertainment?"

> …the women who usually `brighten up` *Mushā'ira* with their `worthy` presence and singing, are mostly young and good-looking, not known as poets though. Rumour has it that the 'thought-provoking' poetry of most of the female poets is a result of the mental gymnastics of their male `patrons` (Parekh 2008).

As Parekh noted in his article, the presence of women also added glamor to such gatherings that prompted the organizers to engage new faces every time a large-scale *mushā'ira* was organized. The organizer invited them not for their poetry writing ability but for their presentable appearance (Parekh, 2008). Nasir Amrohvi also hinted towards a similar practice in Amroha without taking names, where organizers promoted women poets and even provided them with poetry to read or rather sing in such gatherings. He added that however such faces are not recognized as their presence required only for a few gatherings after which they would be replaced by some other new face. Thus, this section brings forth the gendered dynamics within the highly male dominated space of *mushā'ira* that manifests as subtle and sometimes overt discouragement of women poets, revealing underlying gender politics that shape poetic participation.

Male Incumbency in Urdu *Mushā'ira*

Drawing on Pierre Bourdieu's theory of the field, incumbents are the dominant players who establish and maintain the rules while insurgents are the challengers who disturbed the existing order. The incumbents or the dominant players in the field maintain the field in its original form while the insurgent aims to alter the field to compete with the incumbents (Bourdieu,1993). In the context of Amroha, senior male poets often function as incumbents who hold cultural authority within the field and challenge to that authority is highly frowned upon.

Zubair Ibn-e Saifi's insistence on keeping male and female spaces of poetry separate could be seen as a potential threat to the incumbents. He asserted that Amroha is spared from the '*shameless behavior*' of mixing male and female poets and the audiences. His declaration regarding this suggests his assertion that the olden norms are preserved in the *mushā'ira* of his city so does his position as a dominant social actor. Zubair being a senior, reputed, male poet, serves as a gatekeeper of poetic tradition, taste and legitimacy. His assertion that women write poetry in Amroha but they usually refrain performing it in the *mushā'ira* suggests that inclusion of women is often tolerated only when it does not threaten the position of

incumbents in the field of *mushā'ira.*

In this context, senior male poets shaped the norms, aesthetics and structure of *mushā'ira* through their long-standing networks and symbolic authority. In Amroha, those senior poets who protested against Nikhat Amrohvi's presence at *nishast* used their long-standing symbolic authority to maintain their hegemony over the poetic space. Conversely, Nikhat, whose presence challenges the gendered power hierarchies of the *mushā'ira* functions as an insurgent. The participation of women not only contests the gatekeeping mechanisms of male incumbents but also redefines poetic legitimacy from the margins.

Conclusion

The most common conflict among poets of Amroha is the inclusion of women poets in the literary circles. The idea of inappropriateness is connected with the image of women poets which discourage women poets from reciting in front of the male dominated audience. The women poets of the city are discouraged in the name of Islamic doctrines by many poets. The women are not discouraged to write but to read it in front of the audience that comprises a large male audience. The conservative atmosphere of the city discouraged women to face the audience but once the women established themselves on national or international levels, they obtained a position among the prolific poets of the city. As reported by Nikhat Amrohvi, women were not only restricted or discouraged but even defamed and boycotted by some male poets of the city. The discouragement of women is the outcome of the conflict among the genders in Amroha. The male poets of the city blamed women poets for declining the status of *mushā'ira* in Amroha where the audiences attend the *mushā'ira* not for the aesthetic or literary purpose but for the sake of witnessing female beauty. It should be noted that despite claiming *mushā'ira* as an egalitarian space, the community of poets are majorly dominated by high class male privileged poets who acquire cultural capital because of their already accumulated economic and social capital. The space is predominantly occupied by male privileged classes that reinforce the power dynamics. This reveals how male poets have historically operated as incumbents maintaining their authority while female poets emerge as insurgents, challenging their authority. Their presence, though slow, brings a meaningful shift in the gender dynamics of *mushā'ira* of Amroha.

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