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Fawzia Afzal-Khan

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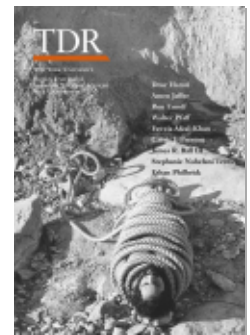
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# Roshan Ara Begum

## Performing Classical Music, Gender, and Muslim Nationalism in Pakistan

*Fawzia Afzal-Khan*

The performance—or lack thereof—of (North Indian) classical music in Pakistan, and especially the obstacles women performers have faced, cannot only be blamed on Islam’s putative hostility to the musical and performing arts in general and to women performing in public in particular. Rather, the discourse of a religiously inflected nationalism collides with gendered, classed bodies within the performative space of a political imaginary such that the role played by music both constitutes and deconstructs this history. Women singers’ roles are crucial in

*Fawzia Afzal-Khan is University Distinguished Scholar/Professor of English at Montclair State University and Visiting Professor at NYU Abu Dhabi. She is the author of Cultural Imperialism: Genre and Ideology in the Indo-English Novel (Penn State Press, 1993), A Critical Stage: The Role of Secular Alternative Theatre in Pakistan (Seagull Press, 2005), and Lahore with Love: Growing Up with Girlfriends Pakistani Style (Syracuse University Press, 2010); and editor of The PreOccupation of Postcolonial Studies (Duke University Press, 2000) and Shattering the Stereotypes: Muslim Women Speak Out (Interlink Books, 2005). Siren Song: Pakistani Women Singers is her award-winning NEH-funded short film and forthcoming book from Oxford University Press. She is an Indian classical singer, a playwright, and a poet. khanf@montclair.edu*

both shaping and resisting this politically performative historical space of the Pakistani nation, yet are hardly well understood or appreciated.

It is unfortunate but unsurprising, therefore, that there isn't much written about the late, great classical singer, Roshan Ara Begum, who, like two other Muslim female singers of the era—Malka Pukhraj and Noor Jahan—began her career in pre-partition India and then settled in Pakistan a year after partition in 1947. She had very humble beginnings:

Born in Kolkata in 1917, Roshanara's real name was Wahidunnissa. A fakir recommended that she be named Roshanajahan (one who illuminates the world) after he heard her recite a *naat* [hymn sung in praise of the Prophet Mohammed]. She came to be called Roshan Ara when she worked briefly as an actor in *Noor-E-Islam* [The Light of Islam].

Roshanara trained in classical singing for a decade before she began touring Bengal and Bihar for *mehfils* [musical gatherings] where she was immediately recognized for her mastery over *raags* [classical melodies]. She sang *thumris* and *ghazals* and even began recording songs for All India Radio. She was introduced on the radio as “Bombaywali Roshanara Begum” because she had by then decided to move to the city to live closer to her *ustad* [teacher], Abdul Karim Khan, a cousin. Under his tutelage, Roshanara came to be associated with the *kirana gharana* style of singing, in which *sur* [melody] takes center stage. She also married a police officer who was stationed in Mumbai. (Gaekwad 2015)

## Deconstructing Source Materials

One useful interview conducted with Roshan Ara on PTV (state-owned Pakistan Television), recorded during the later years of her life, contains some interesting exchanges between her and interviewers Khalil Ahmed and M. Iqbal that reveal much about her early years in Kolkata and Delhi and the challenges she faced after moving in 1948 to the small backwater town of Lalamusa. Located between Lahore and Rawalpindi, Lalamusa was the hometown of her husband, Chaudhry Mohammed Hussain, a police officer who had been stationed in Bombay in the 1930s. This two-part, two-hour interview sheds light on the imbrication of classical music, gender, class, and national ideology.<sup>1</sup>

At the outset we are told by the great singer that she asked her mother Chanda Begum for an *ustad* when she was only nine years old—the same age that Malka Pukhraj's rigorous training and career began in Jammu and Kashmir. Noor Jahan started singing even earlier—at the age of five, according to various sources. Roshan Ara's first *ustad* was Laddan Khan sahib, well-known in Kolkata as a sarangi player (a Nepali string instrument). She tells us that she studied with him for three to four years and then a friend of his heard her and told her that he'd heard a singer in Bombay who “just makes you cry with the beauty of his song.” Roshan Ara pleaded with her mother to go to Bombay so she could learn from that singer (in actuality her cousin). Luckily her *kbala* (aunt), Azmat Begum Noori, also a singer, lived in Bombay and Roshan Ara stayed with her.

She says in the interview: “I was the only daughter, only child, so I was spoiled and my mother did whatever I wanted.” Yet her mother also beat Roshan Ara when she misbehaved (in her words, when she questioned her mother's authority, or didn't listen to her commands right away, etc.). Warsi Faqir sahib, a Sufi mystic, came to their house one day and asked Roshan Ara to sing. She recited the Quran, then sang a *naat*. Warsi was so pleased he asked her name. When she told him, he said “No, your name must be Roshan Jahan because you will become famous in the world for your singing, which will be a ray of light.” Jahan means world, and Roshan means

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1. All references to the 1982 interview that follow are from the YouTube video posted by Jamal Mustafa (2014).

Figure 1. (facing page) Roshan Ara Begum performing at a private concert in Lahore circa 1960s. (Courtesy of Zulqernain Farooq)

light. This, claims Roshan Ara, was the *dua* or prayer/prognostication from a *dervish* (a prayer from a Sufi) that launched her career.

This story of her childhood, her naming, and her passion to sing no matter what, alongside the benediction of a saintly figure, is almost identical in its apocryphal overtones to the story that Malka Pukhraj, her contemporary, relates in her memoir, *Song Sung True* (2003), of her own childhood and coming to music.

Using the “respectability” of a saintly benediction to gain acceptance as a singer by the mainly Muslim Pakistani viewers of this television broadcast, Roshan Ara Begum coyly answers questions by her two male interlocutors regarding her marriage, upholding the normative discourse. When asked how and why she married, and whether she “got to know” her husband before they were married, Roshan Ara, to ward off any speculations of romance or sexual desire on her part, replies firmly that her husband, a lover of music, heard her at one of the many soirees in Bombay where he was stationed at the time and, impressed by her singing, brought a proposal of marriage to her mother. When asked if she had been interested in marrying, the singer replies no, she really hadn’t been interested or ready to contemplate marriage. Her *ustad* was worried that marriage would spell an end to her singing because, as she admits, “singing wasn’t considered a good thing” for women to do. Most men insisted their wives drop their singing careers after marriage. However, Roshan Ara tells her interviewers that she told her mother in no uncertain terms that she would not marry unless her husband-to-be promised that her musical career would never be affected negatively. This condition he agreed to, according to Roshan Ara. So she married largely to please her mother who wanted her only daughter to have the security that a “respectable” marriage brings. To her interviewers, Roshan Ara says quite unequivocally that all her romance and passion were reserved for her music—and if there had ever been any question of having to choose, she would have picked her singing over marriage. Luckily, she claims, her husband loved music and declared undying support for his wife’s passion.

Yet as the interview progresses, and the interviewers continue to probe into the difficulties and obstacles that Roshan Ara faced as a singer after her move to Lalamusa, a somewhat different picture emerges that is buttressed by an account written by Lutfullah Khan, a music aficionado of Pakistan and a close friend of Roshan Ara’s husband.

While at first Roshan Ara denies having suffered a lack of performance opportunities after her move from Bombay to Lalamusa, claiming to have continued to sing and perform on Radio



Figure 2. Roshan Ara Begum with *ustad* Shareef Khan (left) and poet Hafeez Jullandari (right) at one of Radio Lahore’s annual *Jashn-e-Baharan* festivals of the 1950s. (Courtesy of Zulqernain Farooq)

Pakistan in Lahore, it becomes clear that for the first year and a half after moving, her husband did not allow her to sing. She could not even find musicians to keep up her musical practice. When Khalil Ahmed confronts her saying she faced an uphill struggle to maintain her musical career after marriage and moving to Pakistan, Roshan Ara reluctantly acknowledges the truth of this. However, it is the contradictory nature of her response that signals the disjuncture between public and private discourse—her need to maintain a public façade of decorum and respectabil-

ity while negotiating a legitimate space for the expression of a desiring self, a self who wants to sing for the public. Roshan Ara is quick to defend her husband by saying that he loved music and encouraged her to keep practicing, but then acknowledges that in Pakistan, societal norms were different from India and because his family did not approve of his wife's singing career, there wasn't much he or anyone else could do. It was a matter of family honor, of maintaining peace within the home and a respectable position outside it. Here again we have the ideology of the masculinist *asbrafi* (respectability) discourse in which the nation is an extension of the private domain where men's honor is tied to keeping "their" women in a kind of *pardab*, insisting that the women remain away from the public sphere. Roshan Ara appears complicit in acquiescing to this status quo. Then, just as quickly in the interview, she reverses herself with a *gestus* of stating that yes, she was held back from performing in Pakistan for some time by her husband and his family but eventually she managed, with the help of some true music lovers who appreciated her art, to pressure her husband into allowing her to get on with her singing career. "Gestus" in Brecht's theory of acting is both an activity and a commentary. An actor's *gestus* thus dictates the attitude of the play to the audience, and in Brecht's case, that attitude is almost always political (Jestrovic 2006). Roshan Ara's *gestus* is her commentary in the interview where she teases out the imbrication of discourses of patriarchy, religion, gender, and nation that she, as a female singer, both resists and accepts. She claims agential space for herself in her response to Ahmad and M. Iqbal who were badgering her on public TV to admit to her "oppression" at the hands of the same ideology that grants them, middle-class working men in the TV industry, a measure of respectability that is withheld from female performing artists (an irony they do not acknowledge).

I want to call attention specifically to the fact that Roshan Ara Begum's performance as the subject of the interview is "neither moralizing or sentimental" but "put[s] morals and sentimentality on view" (Brecht [1930] 2008:172)—including the moralizing sentimentality of her male, college-educated, middle-class interlocutors who wish to construct a particular reading of her for their viewers. As in Brecht's epic theatre, Roshan Ara's performance in the interview succeeds in making her *gestus* appeal less to feelings than to reason. Watching her, the spectator isn't so much invited to "submit to an experience uncritically [...] by means of simple empathy" with Roshan Ara, as they are subjected to "a process of alienation [...] that is necessary for understanding" ([1935] 1957:71)—in this case, understanding the multilayered and complex negotiations involved in becoming "Roshan Ara Begum of Pakistan."

Roshan Ara's *gestus* is similar to Jacques Rancière's formulation that art reveals its politics by identifying "its forms with the forms that life uses to shape itself" (2006:23) or as Cecilia Sjöholm reading Rancière puts it, "through the way in which it both disseminates and reconstructs sensible experience" (2015:4). That is, we hear (understand rationally) and feel (emotionally) Roshan Ara's pain at the substantial decrease in, if not total loss of, her musical career. This deprivation is enacted in the name of a Muslim respectability normalized by the Pakistani nation-state, a respectability that impinges upon the already classed and gendered politics of the home-space. This loss/deprivation is transformed by her *gestus* into freedom. But—and this is a crucial point—this freedom is not individualist; it is the "contingent freedom" we can trace to Hannah Arendt's political philosophy:

Action, the only activity that goes on directly between [wo]men without the intermediary of things or matter, corresponds to the human condition of plurality, to the fact that [wo]men, not Man, live on the earth and inhabit the world. While all aspects of the human condition are somehow related to politics, this plurality is specifically the condition [...] of all political life. (1958:570)

Sjöholm, expanding upon this notion of Arendtian action, explains how "every action of individual agency and freedom 'amounts to an affirmation of plurality itself'—the kind of plurality of vision that is the condition of politics in Hannah Arendt's terms" (2015:18–19).

Musical performances, by this logic, can also be seen as “affirmations of plurality.” Singers performing in public space realize “through the plurality inhabiting the public sphere” how thought and action are always dependent upon contingencies (18). In Roshan Ara’s case (and that of other Pakistani female singers), the interaction between singer and societal norms takes place where the female performing/singing body is always already constituted outside societal norms. What follows from this is a rethinking of the grounds of freedom. Freedom is based in differentiation emerging in an ontology of plurality, where others—both people and things—“impinge upon our choices, decisions, and actions” in ways that condition our freedom. While such a concept of freedom may appear counterintuitive,

it is precisely the encroaching character of differentiation that ends up conditioning freedom. This is a *radical and antiheroic gesture*. Thinking the concept of freedom not through demands of emancipation but rather through actions that are made possible through the contingent formations of collectivity, Arendt affirms a kind of freedom that manifests itself in our everyday life, without goals or purposes. (Sjöholm 2015:18; emphasis added)



Figure 3. Roshan Ara Begum appearance on Radio Pakistan, Lahore, circa 1970. (Courtesy of Ghulam Haider of Radio Pakistan)

Indeed, Roshan Ara Begum’s gestus—and not just at the point in the interview I remarked above, but throughout the interview’s two-hour duration—enacts an antiheroic, Brechtian, and Arendtian freedom. This freedom is not cast as some obvious Western liberal feminist conception of liberation from the strictures of “wifedom” in Muslim majority Pakistan, nor is it cast in terms of a simple antinationalist critique of the Muslim Pakistani state allowing Roshan Ara to point to the state’s patriarchal ideology as the cause of both her own and other musicians’ decline. Rather, her stance instantiates the Arendtian sense of a freedom that manifests itself in her everyday life, in which compromise and negotiation are key for her as she carves out a space where she can turn from a female singer into a respectable woman. This is a freedom that involves a complex negotiation on the part of Roshan Ara to obtain for herself an entry into public performance space while acknowledging that her choices, decisions, and actions are indeed impinged upon by those of others. Most especially her actions are impinged upon by the choices, wishes, decisions, and actions of her husband, which are, like those of other

male elites embedded in ashrafi discourse, molded by the nation-state’s societal structures and ideologies. And these structures and ideologies, in their turn, are derived from and are a consequence of the colonial modernity of India.

### Middle-Class Muslim Male Ashrafi Ideology and Roshan Ara Begum

Paraphrasing Lutfullah Khan, the aforementioned music aficionado, we learn that in emigrating from India to Pakistan Roshan Ara performed the role of an obedient wife:

The music aficionados of Bombay tried their level best to prevent Roshan Ara from accompanying her husband to Pakistan. But such a refusal was impossible. It was not “right” for a married woman to satisfy her personal ambitions at the expense of her husband’s respectability. But in fulfilling the expectations of a good wife, Roshan Ara’s career suffered. Still she was at least outwardly cheerful, a woman with the pious attribute of self-sacrifice. (Khan 1997:183; my translation)

Despite being acknowledged as the leading classical female singer of the entire subcontinent, we see her submission to ashrafi codes of honor and respectability. After praising Roshan Ara for her “wifely decorum,” Khan continues to describe her life as he observed it during decades of close friendship with both Roshan Ara and her husband:

The problem with living in Lalamusa was that it was a very small town that lacked the cosmopolitan atmosphere required for appreciation of her art. Yes, it’s true she could have continued with her *riyaaaz* [daily music practice] for possible future performance opportunities, but the truth of the matter was that she could not even find a basic accompanist like a *tabla* [drum] player to practice her singing with. No *tabla* player was willing to travel to the backwaters of Lalamusa from Lahore to provide her with the accompaniment she needed to continue her *riyaaaz*. Actually, there was one *tabla* master who did go out to her but he ran back to Lahore in a matter of days as he found Lalamusa unbearable! Now, I don’t recall when exactly she went on a tour of India after Partition, after living in Lalamusa for some time. But in India, she got so much attention, with fans begging her to come back and settle in India, saying that in her old hometown of Bombay, where her singing was much missed, she would get the respect and encouragement unavailable to her in Lalamusa.

The net result of these developments was that the greatest living singer of classical music in the subcontinent became a victim of depression, left her practice and singing, and stopped performing. What harm this caused to the larger world of arts and culture is another story. Anyhow, thankfully after quite some years of this criminal neglect, people of culture who appreciated and admired the art of music woke up from their slumber, came to her husband, Chaudhury Sahib, and begged him to figure out a way to keep her spirit and talents alive for the greater good of Pakistani culture. He too was not pleased with the way things had turned out and he gave his permission to Roshan Ara to travel to Lahore periodically to perform her art on Pakistan Radio. Finally, music lovers heaved a sigh of relief!

Then Radio Pakistan in Karachi started to invite Roshan Ara to do concert recordings there and her programs acquired national exposure. Then music lovers started inviting her to do private concerts in their homes, but Chaudhury Sahib did not approve of these; if forced through public pressure to accept, he would check out the patrons thoroughly to ensure the highest standards of respectability were met. In every such *mehfil* [gathering], he would sit in the first row and Roshan Ara would glance frequently at her husband to ensure he approved of her singing and her manner of performance, as well as to gauge through his expressions how far the audience itself was measuring up to respectable norms. He would guide her behavior and modulation by his facial expressions. At times, he would even request her to sing certain songs, a *thumri*, or a *dadra*, [semi-classical forms of music, usually sung by women] and when she didn’t remember the lyrics in their entirety, he would look for a suitable moment to intervene and supply her with the words! This would bring a smile to her face. (Khan 1997:185–88; my translation)

Khan tries to sweep away any notion of blaming the decline of Roshan Ara’s career as a singer on her husband. Indeed, he argues the opposite, writing that any respect that the singer commanded in Pakistan was in large measure due to the aura of “respectability” conferred on her by her husband. For Khan, the Pakistani state was the real culprit:

The way that Roshan Ara’s behavior and singing were thus controlled at every step by her husband made many folks cast blame for the restrictions she suffered on her husband. To some extent, I guess they are correct, but not entirely. Knowing Chaudhury Sahib as well and as closely as I did, I can say without compunction that the honorable reputation Roshan Ara commanded till her last days, was due to the fact that she was so closely guarded and protected by her husband. Had she fallen into the wrong hands of





Figure 4: Roshan Ara Begum at Radio Pakistan Lahore in 1976, on the occasion of the creation of “Yaad Bagh”—a Garden of Memories. (Courtesy of the Friday Times of Pakistan)

strange men looking to make money off her art, the position of respect she held in society would have vanished. I can tell you that her husband really was a true lover of classical music who tried his best to promote the cause of this art form in general, and of his wife’s singing in particular. However, even he finally could not put up with the lack of true appreciation for this music, lack of respect for musicians, and the paucity of state support for the arts. The result was a devastating blow to our musical culture because Roshan Ara was forced to withdraw from public performance and into early retirement in Lalamusa. It was a cultural tragedy of national and international

proportions that can never be forgotten and will be forever mourned. A classical vocalist of Roshan Ara’s stature and caliber was forced to live out the remainder of her life in seclusion, cut off from the musical world that nourished her soul and her art. (188–90; my translation)

Khan gives us a male cultural critic’s point of view regarding Roshan Ara’s trials and tribulations establishing a singing career in the cultural ethos of a Pakistani society dominated by ashrafi codes of respectable behavior. The ashrafi ethos itself was part of an effort to define the Pakistani state in contradistinction to the perceived Hindu ethos, where the musical arts were folded into a religious identity. Thus, Roshan Ara’s husband is depicted as both upholding ashrafi discourse by *controlling* how and where his wife performed and also, in the very act of *permitting* her to perform, participating in his own negotiations with the codes of middle-class respectability. Roshan Ara, for her part—and again, as seen from Khan’s point of view, that of a sympathetic Pakistani Muslim man belonging to the middle-class urban bourgeoisie—is characterized as both a victim of the ashrafi codes and her husband’s adherence to them, and also as a praiseworthy woman because of her feminine sweetness of temper, and her willingness to submit to and uphold ashrafi norms.

In this account, written by a man who acknowledges that he is a friend of her husband (albeit sympathetic to Roshan Ara’s situation), we do not hear from the singer herself; we do not hear her exercising agency as we do in the PTV interview. If she is able to sing, according to Khan’s account, it is only because others persuade her husband to allow her to do so. And even when he grants permission, at her concerts Roshan Ara looks at her husband for affirmation and guidance to ensure that she remains within the ambit of respectability. Roshan Ara is someone for whom freedom/agency is contingent upon the demands and values of others whose ideology was rooted in a particular understanding of Islam as antithetical to classical music. Virinder Kalra points out that this view of music was the same in the national imaginaries of both Muslim Pakistan and Hindu India (Kalra 2014).

It is therefore possible to read Roshan Ara's remarks toward the end of her interview with Ahmad and Iqbal in at least two ways. Responding to her interviewers' leading questions that (1) she must be unhappy because of a lack of support for her music in Pakistan (the interviewers want her to criticize the state's negligence of the arts); and to their urging that (2) she teach younger generations of pupils what she knows in order to keep the tradition of classical music alive in Pakistan, she replies:

I now just spend my time in prayer, and praise Allah through my *ragas* [melodic pattern of notes used as basis of improvisation in North Indian classical music]. No one is really interested in learning this music anymore. It's just too demanding as an art form. Youngsters want to be able to master what took years to learn in a matter of days. (in Mustafa 2014)

This response can be understood as a strategy for resisting colonial modernity, but from two different perspectives. Let me explain.

## Colonial Modernity

By conjoining raga singing with devotional practice, Roshan Ara claims an Islamic religious space for Indian classical music in Pakistan, in contradistinction to the dominant cultural and political discourse in Pakistan that sees Indian classical music as essentially Hindu. This could be read as in fact privileging religious prayer over singing, as she claims she spends her time now mostly just praying, and even when she sings, her music is at the service of praising God. However, her statement could also be read as an exemplary act of agency. Although she is exercising this agency within Islamic ashrafi norms, the "Islam" she invokes by linking her raga practice to singing the praises of God is a heteroreligious, heterogeneous space that speaks to, and is inclusive of, diverse religious communities from Madras and Bombay, unlike the narrowly dogmatic interpretation of Islam being promoted by the Pakistani state. She recalls on Pakistani state television that her favorite concert after Partition took place in Madras, India, where, despite linguistic barriers, listeners responded with great love and passion to her music. Her *gestus* here is thus a political critique of both the Pakistani state's lack of support/encouragement of singers and music, and its dogmatic interpretation of Islam. In linking raga singing to Muslim prayer, Roshan Ara is responding to the milieu around her, which has remained suspicious of this music as Indian Hindu-derived. Roshan Ara cleverly shifts the signified from Hindu to Muslim, thus muting its negative association in Pakistani ashrafi circles. But it is also worth noting that, as Virinder Kalra reminds us, "classical"<sup>2</sup> music in India and Pakistan has: "In practice [...] remained resistive to attempts of standardization and sacralisation, far outside the attempts of moulding it during colonial modernity, ultimately to service the needs of the postcolonial states of India and Pakistan" (2014:161). In this light, Roshan Ara's comment about singing ragas at home as a ritual of remembering and prayer can be read as another *gestus* marking her religious identity, adapting her musical practice to the norms of her social and political domain, while simultaneously signaling a site where the lyrics, the melodic and rhythmic structures, the fact of her training in the kirana gharana—a style of raga performance tracing its lineage to India—all "illustrate the continuation of multiplicity, heterogeneity and heteropraxy" (161).

Roshan Ara's second remark, which might be read—and her interviewers suggest as much in their comments—as shrugging off her responsibility, as one of the last of classical vocalists in Pakistan, to train future singers, can, instead, be seen as resisting the colonial modernity that can be traced back to the late-19th-century Indian musicologist Vishnu Narayan Bhatkande who took his cues from the British colonialist philologist and administrator William

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2. "Classical" is used by Kalra to differentiate the term from the Western musical genre of "classical" music.

Jones (1746–1794). Jones was the father of a colonial modernizing project that, as we shall see, led to a systematization of music through written notation as a key component of a nascent secular Indian nation-state that nevertheless rested on the ideology of the Hindu religion (Kalra 2014; Bakhle 2005). For, as Jones pontificates after cursory research into the history and musical modes of Indian music: “Had the Indian empire continued in full energy for the last two thousand years, religion would, no doubt, have given permanence to systems of musick invented, as the Hindus believe, by their Gods, and adapted to mystical poetry” (1799:442). But because he cannot find any evidence of notation of classical forms of music he concludes that the history of conquest of India since the time of Alexander the Great, combined with a “want of due culture” (!) has resulted in formal notation disappearing, if it ever existed. He tells us:

When I first read the songs of JAYADEVA, who has prefixed to each of them the name of the mode, in which it was anciently sung, I had hopes of procuring the original musick; but the Pandits of the south referred me to those of the west, and the Brahmens of the west would have sent me to those of the north; while they, I mean those of Nepal and Cashmir, declared that they had no ancient musick, but imagined, that the notes to the *Gitagovinda* must exist, if anywhere, in one of the southern provinces, where the Poet was born: from all this I collect, that the art, which flourished in India many centuries ago, has faded for want of due culture, though some scanty remnants of it may, perhaps, be preserved. (421)

It falls to someone like Jones himself, a cultured colonial administrator of the British Raj, to recover those “scanty remnants” and encourage the so-called natives to commence the modernist project of musical notation so that a proper comparison of musical traditions between India and England might commence. This, in turn, would contribute to a “harmonious accord” between the two (Jones 1799:421).

It is clear from this treatise that Jones sees the music of India as largely “Hindoo” and the blame for lack of a notation system that could help the British and their Indian (read: Hindu) subjects communicate better is laid on Muslim ustads (since classical Indian music at this time was squarely the purview of Muslims) who are seen as either ignorant and incapable of devising such a “modern” system of notation, or else resistant to “progress” (Bakhle 2005).

Mimicking Jones’s project of colonial modernity, V.N. Bhatkande created “for India a bonafide national classical music, with historical pedigree, theoretical complexity, and a system of notation” (in Bakhle 2005:259). Because for Bhatkande (following Jones), “classical” meant “order, discipline and theory,” he found the Muslim ustads “lacking in standards and quality” that were a necessary prerequisite for achieving a national tradition of classical music. Thus, Bhatkande denigrated the non-notational oral traditions used for centuries by Muslim ustads in creating classical *gharanas*, or classical music modes, each with its own methodology and system of transmission and performance.

## Refusing Postcolonial Modernity

Against this background, we can see that Roshan Ara’s refusal to “teach” classical singing to aspiring young singers is a refusal to participate in a project of modern nation-building where classical music serves instrumental ends that link it to colonial modernity. Such a modernist project has been responsible for the demise of the very heterodoxy that once afforded space for singers like Roshan Ara to emerge within its own highly—but differently—disciplined universe. Such a universe, predating the British colonial intervention, should not be reduced to a narrow obsession with “theory” and written “notation.”

Roshan Ara’s rejection of colonial modernity’s hegemony seeks also to cast a nostalgic gaze back on systems of patronage that were eviscerated with the change from a feudal society to a capitalist economy on which entry into the community of nation-states is predicated. Regula Qureshi writes about this feudal structure and its patronage of classical musicians:

Up until the early twentieth century hereditary musicians were the sole guardians and exponents of art music in northern India; it was their exclusive purview to deliver music to their patrons in a feudally based economy [...] As a participant in their oral world, I was taught about music and how to be a musician. In the process, they showed me a world marked by feudal associations. Many older musicians recalled courtly patronage and corresponding musical practices: making music under feudal patronage was a way of life. It was their vivid and detailed experiences of that still-vivid past that made me realize how enmeshed their spontaneously improvised music and its personal transmission were with feudal patronage, and how thoroughly they were challenged by the bourgeois transformation of musical life, despite overt government efforts to preserve their art. (Qureshi 2009:81)

While on the one hand Qureshi's own nostalgic description helps us recognize that a gesture such as Roshan Ara's is a backwards glance (and Qureshi reminds us in her article that life for classical musicians under feudal patronage could also be precarious), nonetheless, Roshan Ara's gestus is also a critique of a present and future world ruled by monolithic nation-state or post-national global ideologies where music is a commodity. As a commodity, music needs to be reduced to what can be learned and mastered in the shortest possible time. This Roshan Ara, vehemently devoted to North Indian/Pakistani classical music, refused to do: per Sjöholm, her "antiheroic" gesture was "radical," instantiating an Arendtian concept of freedom grounded in a space different from that of either the nation-state or the postnational globalized culture.

Roshan Ara's gestus can be tellingly compared and contrasted with the negotiations enacted by her "sister-pupil" Hirabai Barodkar, the daughter of Roshan Ara's *ustad* and cousin, Abdul Karim Khan.

These two women singers' careers shed light on "the three modern concepts" of "nation, notation, and religion" that emerged as "the sine qua non of music" toward the end of the 19th and early 20th century in India (Bakhle 2005; see particularly chapter 2). Thanks to several British colonialists' treatises on Indian music, Hindu nationalists were quick to latch on to the (faulty) orientalist British call for a Hindu "classical tradition." The question they posed was, how could they "modernize" this classical tradition? Their answer: by adopting the Western system so that the classical ragas of Indian music and their performance forms of *khayal* and *dhrupad*<sup>3</sup> could be archived, passed down in a systematic and orderly fashion from *ustads* to pupils, and thence circulated within an emerging educated



Figure 5: Roshan Ara Begum performing the raag "Bhairavi" on Pakistan Television in her later years. (Courtesy of Shahid Imtiaz)

3. Both of these are Indian classical music genres, with the more recent, *khayal*, seen as having evolved from the ancient *dhrupad* form, mentioned in the ancient Hindu Sanskrit text, the *Natyashastras* (200 BCE–200 CE). *Khayal* singing was popularized by Niyamat Khan (aka Sadarang) and his nephew Firoz Khan (aka Adarang), both musicians in the court of the Muslim ruler Muhammad Shah Rangile (1719–1748) though some impute its creation to another Muslim musician and poet, Amir Khusrau (1253–1325).

public sphere via written notation. Embracing such a “scientific” methodology of music notation, it was argued in a colonial-derived nationalist discourse, would make the music accessible to a larger public, including to “respectable” middle-class women who could be encouraged to become singers in this great tradition. At the time, this music (and also dance) was seen by the native Hindu male elite as “debased” due to its control by “women of ill repute”—courtesans of the Muslim Mughal courts (Bakhle 2005:71). As the ethnomusicologist Peter Manuel has also explicated, both these Muslim women performers’ and their Muslim ustad’s “contribution to music [has] often been devalued by modern Hindu writers, some of whom have pointedly criticized Muslim performers for their illiteracy, ignorance of written theory, alleged lack of spirituality, and historical ties to archaic court and courtesan culture” (1996:126). Certainly, Roshan Ara Begum would have been seen by others and understood by herself to be held to/debased by these colonial/Hindu nationalist standards.

Thus, to recap: for Indian—read Hindu—nationalists of the late 19th and early 20th centuries (including the so-called secular musicologist V.N. Bhatkande) for whom notions of “gendered respectability were central to the creation of a public cultural domain” (Bakhle 2005:52), the introduction of a notation system would make it easier for middle-class Hindu women to learn music in the respectable confines of their homes or in chaste music schools. Such music learning became an important goal for Hindu male nationalists, linking “their” women with both purity and antiquity, since Hindustani music, as Manuel reveals, has always for Hindus been “linked in various ways to Hinduism, with its [devotional] texts, quasi-religious Sanskrit theoretical treatises, and its traditional associations with Hindu cosmology, mythology, and epistemology” (1999:121). The ideal of “the pure Indian Hindu woman” reveals Indian/Hindu nationalist aspirations cast in the colonial mold of “Western-educated Indian women” who could provide “companionate marriages” for their modernizing menfolk (Bakhle 2005:62).

Such an avowedly secular Indian nationalist goal also became ironically intertwined with the renewed Hinduization of Indian classical music, especially the Hindustani music of North India, which had been firmly in the hands of Muslim male musicians/ustads for the past several centuries of Muslim rule. This process began in earnest in the early 20th century with the creation of music academies across India known as Gandharva Mahavidyalayas, spearheaded by the religious-minded Hindu musicologist V.D. Paluskar. This ironic re-cast(e)ing (pun intended) of Indian classical music in its turn cast a long shadow on the fate of classical music in Pakistan after the 1947 Partition, affecting both male and female performers (Qureshi 1991:159). Small wonder then, that in Muslim-majority Pakistan, classical music started to be regarded with suspicion for its connections to Hinduism—however historically inaccurate such an understanding was. It is interesting to note that one of the unintended consequences of Christian missionary activity in India, which undergirded the British colonialist enterprise there as elsewhere, was that “it fostered an evangelical Hinduism,” which in turn led Indian classical music “to embark on a *bhakti*-influenced devotional path” under the guidance of men like Paluskar (Bakhle 2005:62).

Because women’s education could now encompass learning music by reading, playing, and singing notated scores, the founders of music appreciation societies—such as Kaikhushroo Kabraji of Bombay, who founded the pioneering music appreciation society Gayan Uttejak Mandali (GUM)—promoted a music that was “overtly linked to the [Hindu] temple and religious devotion” and had been cleared of “the elements of debauchery” (Bakhle 2005:71). These “debauched women” were associated with the courtesans who were part of the Muslim *nawabi* or ruling elite culture of the Mughal empire of India prior to the colonial takeover by the British.

Over the span of the first quarter of the 20th century, music clubs and associations such as GUM came into being thanks to the efforts of both Bhatkande and Paluskar. These produced middle-class “respectable” Hindu women singers who did not fear a “stigma attached to music anymore” (75). Furthermore, the founding of these new music societies began to fulfill

a more ambitious Indian nationalist agenda of seeking “colonial approbation to secure a wide audience” (76).

The “wide audience” sought after by these music *samajs* (associations/societies) was mostly Hindu, and to a lesser extent, Parsi and Sikh. Muslims, both as musicians and pupils, were excluded. As Manuel underscores:

In the twentieth century, Hindustani music successfully underwent a transition from Muslim feudal patronage to predominantly Hindu bourgeois patronage. The concurrent renaissance of Hindustani music has derived largely from its becoming allied, whether overtly or implicitly, with modern Indian [read: Hindu] cultural nationalism. Inspired by the early twentieth-century proselytizing efforts of V.D. Paluskar and V.N. Bhatkhande, the emergent middle class came to regard traditional art music as an important cultural heritage worthy of support from the state, private sources, and a network of institutions. In the process, it has been inevitable that Hindustani music has become to some extent a contested entity in the redefinition of national culture. (1996:125)

“Upper class Parsis and Brahmin musicians and musicologists” made up the boards and committee members of the music “reform” associations, while Muslims were absent not only as “organizers, lecturers, and authors” of these societies but also as students. Bakhle points out that “while there were many Brahmin students of Muslim teachers, there were virtually no Muslim students of Brahmin teachers” (2005:81). And since Muslims were not included in the educational reforms, they therefore did not develop the wherewithal to form their own musical associations. The lack of any Muslim *gayan samaj* (music society) was thus not, as many have claimed, the result of the Muslim musician community’s “secretiveness and unwillingness to share musical knowledge” (81). Rather, what seems more probable is that:

In the face of the juggernaut of musical modernity and an overwhelmingly Hindu public sphere that received colonial approval, perhaps the reticence of Muslim musicians can be read not as inexplicable but as an understandable withdrawal from a movement that so pointedly ignored them. (Bakhle 2005:82)

At the very least, as ethnomusicologist Max Katz notes, one could characterize the efforts to modernize Hindustani (North Indian) music, as “undermining the tradition of Muslim hereditary musicians” (2012:280).

## Gender and Nationalism

Adding gender respectability, or the “woman question,” to this mix, the contrast between the two female star pupils of Ustad Abdul Karim Khan—Roshan Ara and Champakali Khan—could not be more telling. On the one hand, Roshan Ara, the more famous of the two at the beginning of their respective careers, embraced the life of a respectable middle-class Muslim married woman after migrating to Pakistan, sacrificing her career to the Muslim ashrafi norms of respectability. Karim Khan’s daughter on the other hand, born a Muslim, became a Hindu, middle-class, respectable, married singer-performer of a variety of music genres, changing her name to Hirabai Barodkar. The differing fates of these two women singers can be directly linked to the imbricated discourses of gender, nation, religion, and music that emerged in the late 19th century and shaped the public sphere along communal “Hindu” and “Muslim” lines.

Thus we see how Champakali’s mother, herself a Hindu aspiring singer and the daughter of a *baiji*, or courtesan, who in her early youth had run away with a Muslim musician (Abdul Karim Khan), ran away a second time, this time from her Muslim husband, taking her children along with her. By giving them Hindu monikers she reintroduced them to the possibility of becoming professional singers and actors on the Marathi stage. Due to the newly emerging Hindu national public sphere in the early to mid-1900s, the disreputability of women singers was on the wane. Once “Champakali” became “Hirabai” and married a middle-class



Figure 6. Roshan Ara Begum performing the raag “Bahar” to celebrate the onset of spring, on PTV, circa late 1960s. (Courtesy of Ghulam Haider and Waseem Anwar)

Hindu man in a match arranged by her mother, she was no longer seen as a “sexual figure, as *baijis* were said to be, but was perceived as a sister, a friend, a neighbor’s daughter, and most tellingly, a singer whose talent was unquestionable” (Bakhle 2005:248). The suffix “Bai” which connotes disreputability and is often taken to indicate that the woman thus referred to is either herself, or a descendant of, prostitutes, was now increasingly replaced by “tai,” meaning “older sister.” This change is exemplified by Hirabai Barodkar who became a respectable bourgeois performer with caste credentials via her marriage to a middle-class Hindu man (254)—even though her moniker

belied a complete break with “bai” culture. Nonetheless, we see how Hirabai is a key figure on the “road to respectability” for women singers of Indian music, whose emergence as a successful woman performer rested not only on her acquisition of “gendered caste respectability” through her marriage status, but also a “total break with her Muslim musician father” (252). This road to respectability was traveled by Hindu women alone, as their musical prowess became a hallmark of the colonial-derived and culturally blessed Indian national modernity.

Muslim women singers like Roshan Ara Begum, by contrast, suffered the same fate as male Muslim singers and musicians such as her ustad, Hirabai’s father, Abdul Karim Khan in India. While the latter managed to “maneuver his way through the thicket of musicology and Hinduization” (Bakhle 2005:252) that was radically altering the sociological milieu of the India he and other gharana musicians had known, Roshan Ara Begum, after her marriage and move to Pakistan, fell prey to a Muslim respectability ethos that had evolved as a counter to that of the Hindu public sphere. The Muslim intelligentsia had most unfortunately bought into the Hinduization of Indian classical music—both the one promoted by the overtly Hindu musicology of Paluskar, which, as we have seen, promoted the idea that Indian classical music was inextricably linked to Hindu devotional texts—and to Bhatkande’s more secular nationalist agenda. The success of the latter’s efforts in the creation of a “bonafide national classical music” for the emerging Indian nation-state, complete with a “historical pedigree, theoretical complexity, and a system of notation,” (259) was thus built on the denial and erasure of the crucial contributions to Indian music by Muslim ustad and performers (see Qureshi 1991; Manuel 1996; Bakhle 2005; Katz 2012). These musicians were sidelined because the Muslim gharana system relied on music being taught and learned one-on-one, the art passed on by ustad to *shagird* (pupil), through a rigorous apprenticeship that lasted for decades. This way of transmitting

performance knowledge did not rely on notation, which was seen as anathema to the improvisational mandate of the music.

Linking this nationalization and modernization of Indian classical music to Roshan Ara “Bombaywali” (an appellation carrying a connotation similar to “bai”), we can understand that her becoming Roshan Ara “Begum” (the appellation for “wife”) is not just a gendered retreat from the public sphere into a woman’s private/domestic space, but mirrors a retreat initially forced upon Muslim male musicians, and later adopted by the Muslim community of India as a gesture signifying Islamic codes of propriety and honor that were foisted particularly upon Muslim women aspiring to upward class mobility. Middle- and upper-class male Muslims needed their wives to be secluded and free of the taint of “Hindu music.” This retreat from the world of music and performance signaled the “respectability politics” upon which these men built their ashrafi nationalist agenda, which had to be contrasted to the supposedly secular Hindu nationalism of men like Bhatkande, who promoted the notation and systematization of Indian music as a way to simultaneously construct an ideal of the “respectable” Hindu woman. Roshan Ara’s refusal to teach classical music to others via music classes in “modern” Pakistan can therefore be seen as a gesture of resistance against the modernity of musicology that was thrust upon Muslim gharana musicians like her own *ustad*. Her gesture can be read further as a challenge to the Hinduization of female singers, a cultural intervention that wrote a very different script for her “pupil-sister” Hirabai in a supposedly secular, “modern” India than it did for a Muslim woman performer such as she.

## Postcolonial Modernity and Its Discontents

On a website devoted to Roshan Ara Begum, one fan posted:

Very unfortunate that PAKISTAN couldn't maintain the HUGE legacy of Roshanara Begum... No one really cared for her... Roshan Ara was wasted in Pakistan... not to use stronger language... When she was in United India (Bombay), she used to live in a huge bungalow (and not an apartment) in Mumbai... Dy. Commr. of Police who was a Chaudhry Saheb proposed to her and married her... He was from Lala Musa... Respecting her husband's wishes... Roshan Ara left her settled life in Mumbai...and went to the village Lala Musa...where she is now buried.

She went to Pakistan out of her own free will. Had she remained in India, she would have reigned in Hindustani Classical Music...until her death in 1982. (Das 2012)

However, as I’ve shown, the criticism leveled at the Pakistani state for its indifference to Roshan Ara Begum in the above quote (and to other female artists like her by extension)—when conjoined with the notion (also expressed in the same quote), that she could have led a far more fulfilling life as a singer in India—does not take into account the complexity of the imbricated discourses of gender, class respectability, religion, and national identity that I’ve been exploring. It is only by attending to their complex interaction that we can achieve some clarity about a postcolonial Muslim Pakistani state where music and the performing arts have indeed suffered a decline that has especially impacted female musicians. This decline, however, must be traced back to the machinations of colonial modernity, which enabled the creation of a Hindutva-inspired India where Muslim musicians could not, and did not, fare well. Indeed, the decline of classical “Indian” music in Pakistan, affecting the careers of both male and female musicians negatively, must be understood in the larger context of a Hindu-dominated “modern” Indian cultural nationalism.

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