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# Mihri Hiravi; An Audacious Poet in the Age of Discretion

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## Introduction

Tīmūr Gūrkānī's catastrophic incursion and mass slaughter at the end of AH 8th/14th century delivered a devastating blow to Iran, compounding the destruction wrought by the earlier Mongol invasions. Following Tīmūr's death, the succession wars persisted for fifteen years, during which Shāh'rukḥ, his fourth son, gradually consolidate control over the Timurid domains, extending his authority to regions such as Mazandaran, Khwarazm, Isfahan, Fars, Kerman, and Azerbaijan. The reign of Shāh'rukḥ, spanning over four decades, marked a renaissance in intellectual and artistic production in Herat.<sup>1</sup> Responding to the counsel of his wife, Gawhar'shād Āghā, Shāh'rukḥ transferred the capital from Samarkand to Herat, and transformed the city into an epicenter for artists and scholars. Although his era was not devoid of revolts and warfare, it brought relative stability, particularly to the eastern provinces of Iran, and, owing to his dedication to public welfare, support of the arts, and commitment to rebuilding, Iran's social conditions largely normalized and everyday life was restored.<sup>2</sup>

Shāh'rukḥ and Gawhar'shād were eminent patrons of the arts and letters, heralding the emergence of the Herat school of art, whose unique style became prominent in this period. The nomadic (tīyāfī) and tribal character of the Timurid polity accorded women considerable autonomy, status, and opportunity for political engagement; as generally observed, societies of no-

matic origin afford women higher social standing and greater freedom.<sup>3</sup>

Gawhar'shād's authority imposed a highly disciplined order within Shāh'rukh's court; indeed, historical accounts attribute Shāh'rukh's renown to her remarkable astuteness and administrative acumen. Her husband, Shāh'rukh, unlike his father, was distinguished by a peaceable disposition, a quality that was entirely consistent with Gawhar'shād Khātūn's temperament.<sup>4</sup> Shāh'rukh also demonstrated a greater proclivity for the delegation of authority. Governance during Shāh'rukh's era was, in practice, executed by leading commanders, Gawhar'shād, and her children. In conducting the affairs of the state, particularly with respect to the administration of justice and the punishment of offenders, Gawhar'shād relied either upon her own judgment or the sharī'at (Islamic law).<sup>5</sup>

Gawhar'shād expressed considerable favor toward her grandson 'Alā al-Dawlah, and was resolute in her intention to secure his accession to the throne after her husband's death.<sup>6</sup> With the support of her family, the Tarkhāniyān, she achieved this aim with relative ease. Nevertheless, this preferential treatment engendered significant jealousy among the princes. Ultimately, Sultān Abū Sa'īd Tīmūrī, Shāh'rukh's nephew, who faced insurmountable obstacles to succession as a result of Gawhar'shād's support for his rival, had her assassinated in AH 861/1457, when she was eighty years old. In retribution, Yādigār Muhammad avenged his mother by bringing about the persecution of Abū Sa'īd.<sup>7</sup>

Gawhar'shād commissioned several monumental architectural works and encouraged her family's active participation in philanthropic endeavors. It is reported that she undertook the considerable hardship of a lengthy journey to visit an observatory, demonstrating her direct involvement in the construction of such edifices.<sup>8</sup> Among her most significant charitable foundations are the Herat Cultural Complex and the Great Mosque of Mashhad.<sup>9</sup>

<sup>1</sup>Laylā Muḥammadī, "Bar'risī-i 'amal'kard va mushārikat-i Gawhar'shād Baygum dar sākhṭār-i siyāsī-i impirātūrī-i Tīmūrī" [A study of the contribution of Gawhar'shād Baygum in the political structure of the Timurid Empire], *Pizhvāk-i Zanān dar Tārīkh 1* [Women's echo in history] (Fall 1399/2020): 98.

<sup>2</sup>Muḥammad Rizā'ī and Insiyah Dārā'dūst, "Ta'sīr-i nahād'hā-yi siyāsī va ijtimā'ī bar shī'r-i fārsī dar 'asr-i Tīmūrī" [The effects of the political and social institutions on Persian poetry in the age of the Timurids], in *Proceedings of the 2nd International Conference on Literature and Linguistics* (Tehran, Tir 29 and 30, 1395/ July 19 and 20, 2016), 7.

<sup>3</sup>Zaynab Ma'rūfiyūn and Nawrūz Banī Sa'īd, "Bar'risī-i fa'āliyat'hā-yi Gawhar'shād Tīmūrī dar zamīnah-ī siyāsāt, farhang va tamaddun-i Tīmūriyān" [A study of Gawhar'shād Tīmūrī's activities in the fields of politics, culture and Tīmūriyān's civilization], *Tārīkh-i Naw 7* [New history], no. 21 (Winter 1396/2017): 111.

<sup>4</sup>Ma'rūfiyūn and Banī-Sa'īd, "Bar'risī-i fa'āliyat'hā-yi Gawhar'shād Tīmūrī," 109.

<sup>5</sup>Muḥammadī, "Bar'risī-i 'amal'kard va mushārikat-i Gawhar'shād Baygum dar sākhṭār-i siyāsī-i impirātūrī-i Tīmūrī," 101.

<sup>6</sup>It is plausible that, being well acquainted with her grandson's disposition, Gawhar'shād regarded him as a more suitable candidate for the throne, as his accession would allow her to retain effective authority under his nominal rule. As one source notes, "After many controversies, she placed

her favored grandson on the throne, and for ten years, she was effectively the ruler of a vast empire stretching from the Tigris to the borders of China.” See Ma’ rüfiyün and Banī Sa’ īd, “Bar’risī-i fa’ āliyat’hā-yi Gawhar’shād-i Tīmūrī,” 113.

<sup>7</sup>Muhammadī, “Bar’risī-i ‘amal’kard va mushārikat-i Gawhar’shād Baygum dar sāktār-i siyāsī-i impirātūrī-i Tīmūrī,” 108.

<sup>8</sup>Abbās ‘Alī Āzar’niyūshah and Rāziyah Firistādah, “Naqsh-i siyāsī, ijtimā’ī, iqtisādī-i Gawhar’shād Āghā dar Khurāsān-i ‘ahd-i Tīmūrī” [Gawhar’shād Āghā’s political, social and economic roles in Khurasan in the Timurid period], *Khurāsān-i Buzurg* 2, no. 4 (Fall 1390/2011): 12.

<sup>9</sup>Ma’ rüfiyün and Banī Sa’ īd, “Bar’risī-i fa’ āliyat’hā-yi Gawhar’shād Tīmūrī,” 109.

<sup>10</sup>Ma’ rüfiyün and Banī Sa’ īd, “Bar’risī-i fa’ āliyat’hā-yi Gawhar’shād Tīmūrī,” 115.

<sup>11</sup>Ghulām Rizā Amīr’khvānī, “Bāz’shinākht-i jaryān’hā-yi farhangī-i Hirāt dar ‘asr-i Shāh’rukḥ” [A review of cultural movements in Herat in the age of Shāh’rukḥ], *Pazhūhash’hā-yi ‘Ulūm-i Tārīkhī* 6, no. 2 (Fall/Winter 1393/2014): 21–38.

<sup>12</sup>Rizā’ī and Dārā’dūst, “Ta’ sīr-i nahād’hā-yi siyāsī va ijtimā’ī bar shī’r-i fārsī dar ‘asr-i Tīmūrī,” 5.

Throughout her life, Gawhar’shād Khātūn maintained a profound devotion to literature and poetry, both composing verse and bestowing royal patronage upon poets. She spoke in Persian and was instrumental in establishing it as the official language of the royal court. Together with Shāh’rukḥ Tīmūrī, she inaugurated a genuine cultural renaissance, under whose auspices Persian language and poetry were substantively transformed.<sup>10</sup>

## Persian Language and Poetry in the Timurid Age

Numerous efforts were undertaken during the Timurid era to advance the development of Persian language and literature. The literary output in Persian consistently increased during this time.<sup>11</sup> From certain perspectives, the Timurid era can be regarded as one of the flourishing periods of Persian literary activity, or arguably, the last significant epoch of classical Persian literature. However, it is important to observe that, although fields such as historiography, calligraphy, miniature painting, manuscript illumination, and architecture reached remarkable heights, Persian literature itself slowly began to decline. One clear indication of this decline is the lack of any highly prominent poet or a distinctive literary style characterizing this era.<sup>12</sup>

Nonetheless, the circumstances of women’s poetry differed markedly. Research into the characteristics of women poets of the AH 9th/15th century proves challenging, primarily due to the paucity of surviving verses. Yet, the extant verses nevertheless signal a period of literary efflorescence in women’s poetic production. These are unmistakably “feminine verses,” means poetry that is written through the lens of a woman’s perspective and arises from women’s desires, which, like a fleeting spark, briefly illuminated a particular time and place before fading into obscurity. Thanks to the peace and stability secured by art-loving sovereigns, often revolving around influential women such as Gawhar’shād, the poetry of certain women during this period draws closer to an authentic feminine character and breaks free from the constraints of a masculine expression, which was earlier



embodied, for example, in the poetry of Jahān Malik Khātūn.

One woman poet at the Timurid court, as well as confidante and companion to Gawhar'shād Āghā, was Mihrī. A notable poem by Mihrī, crafted with her characteristic wit and opportunism at Gawhar'shād's request on a special occasion, attests to the support Mihrī received from the royal patron. Beyond Mihrī, attention should also be paid to Ātūnī, likewise associated with Herat. Ātūnī's husband, who would sleep with his back to her, composed a quatrain (rubā'ī) admonishing her.<sup>13</sup> In response, Ātūnī authored the following poem:

O Mullā, your charms and coquettish airs have undone me.  
How long will you keep pointing at me in reproach?  
Each night you turn your back on me in sleep  
Enough! My heart is weary of your cold indifference.<sup>14</sup>

She also composed another poem of even greater candor:

Sleeping with an impotent man is killing me.  
His back is the only part I may possess.  
He lacks the strength even to lift his feet.  
I would prefer a hundred blows to this cold neglect.<sup>15</sup>

It is evident that Ātūnī's husband was advanced in age, as was the husband of Mihrī, who will be discussed subsequently. Another bold poem was penned by Bījāh Nahān, a 9th/15th-century poet. At this era, associated with Qā' in eastern Iran, in which she threatens to divorce her husband and marry two other men:

I will divorce you, and send you away,  
And out of spite, take on two husbands instead  
One, a fresh young man,  
The other, a cruel common Turkman.  
From the youth, I will take my pleasure.  
To you, I will consign the cruel one.<sup>16</sup>

<sup>13</sup>During this period, certain poems were composed either at the request of others or in response to existing verses. A notable example is the pair of quatrains by Ātūnī, written in direct reply to a quatrain composed by her husband expressing his complaints.

<sup>14</sup>Muhammad Fakhrī bin Muhammad Amīrī Hiravī, *Rawzah al-salātīn va javāhir al-'ajāyib*, ed. Sayyid Hisām al-Dīn Rāshidī (Hyderabad: Sindī Adabī Būrd), 138.

<sup>15</sup>Shīr 'Alī Khān Lūdī, *Taz-kirah-'i mir'āt al-khiyāl* [The mirror of imagination], ed. Hamīd Husaynī and Bīhrūz Sa-far'zādah (Tehran: Rawzanah, 1377/1998), 280.

<sup>16</sup>Alī Qulī Khān Vālah Dāghistānī, *Riyāz al-shu'arā* [Garden of poets], ed. Abū al-Qāsim Rādfar and Gītā Ush-īdarī (Tehran: Pazhūhash'gāh-i 'Ulūm-i Insānī va Mutālī'āt-i Farhangī [Research Institute for Human Sciences and Cultural Studies], 1391/2012), 1592.

<sup>17</sup>Maryam Ghafūriyān and Nasr Allāh Pūr'Muhammadī Amlashī, "Sabk'shināstī-i ash'ār-i zanān-i pārsī'gū-yī shibbah'qārah-'i Hind az qarn-i hashtum tā yāzdahum" [Stylistic analysis of the poetry of Persian-speaking women poets of the Indian subcontinent from the AH 8th/14th to the AH 11th/17th century], *Sabk'shināstī-i Nazm va Nasr-i Fārsī* 14 (Bahār-i adab) [Stylistics of Persian poetry and prose] 66 (Ābān 1400/November 2021).

<sup>18</sup>Vālah Dāghistānī writes in the *Riyāz al-shu'arā* that her husband, Mullā Baqā'ī, was a companion to Amīr 'Alī Shīr Navā'ī. The Mir'āt al-khiyāl records that 'Alī Shīr Navā'ī was a follower of Mullā Baqā'ī. See Vālah Dāghistānī, *Riyāz al-shu'arā*, 280.

<sup>19</sup>Due to political and cultural constraints, women's poetry began to adopt a more reserved and discreet tone from the 7th/13th century onward, departing from the freer, more expressive style characteristic of women poets in the earlier period (up to the 6th/12th century). This trend toward literary discretion persisted until the Constitutional Revolution (Mashrūtah).

It is beyond the scope of this article to pursue this discussion further. It suffices to state that the nature of the government and the position of women within the power hierarchy, particularly influential women who supported women poets and embraced the role of their patrons, exerted a direct impact on women's poetic production and stylistic expression. For women to articulate their femininity and personal identities in poetry, access to power and patronage was essential. Such opportunities were exceedingly rare in the patriarchal history of Iran.

To date, no independent scholarly article has been devoted exclusively to Mihri; however, her name and select poems have been cited in *tazkirahs* (biographical anthologies). Maryam Ghafūriyān and Nasr Allāh Pūr'Muhammadī classify Mihri among the poets of the Indian subcontinent and examine her work alongside the poems of fifty-four other poets of the period.<sup>17</sup> Both Mihri and Ātūnī are categorized as poets of the Indian subcontinent, which is an incorrect attribution given that both in Herat.<sup>18</sup> The Ghafūriyān and Pūr'Muhammadī argue that, from a linguistic and literary perspective, the poetry of the women poets of the Indian subcontinent is characterized by a deficiency in elegance and innovation, largely reliant on imitation. This observation holds true for the women poets of the AH 8th/14th to the AH 11th/17th century, the period on which this study focuses, a time marked by guarded expression (*dar-pardah'gūyī*)<sup>19</sup> and the dominance of masculine literary discourse and expression. Women's poetry of this period, especially exemplified by poets such as Zayb al-Nisā (Makhfi), tends to be highly desexualized and masculinized; the woman poet and her beloved often remain obscured, with the beloved rendered not only sexless but suspended ambiguously between the celestial and the terrestrial. Nonetheless, in the same period of discretion and guarded expression, a nascent orientation toward feminine authorship and self-expression emerges in the poetry of certain northeastern Iranian women poets of the AH 9th/15th century, although surviving verses are scarce. The authors argue that in these poems—as opposed to the lyrical poetry of the Samanid



period, spanning AH 5th and 6th/ 11th and 12th century—the lover is portrayed as a deprived, destitute, and oppressed figure, condemned to separation and misfortune, as in the following lines by Mihrī:

I am thirsty and you seem to be the Khizr of the time  
For God’s sake, why do you not give me water?<sup>20</sup>

The authors, however, focus only on this verse in which Mihrī addresses her elderly husband, neglecting her other verses, which celebrate times of fortune and favor. The authors also cite the following verse to support their claim that “the portrayal of the beloved in the poetry of the period is generalized; as some scholars argue, such generalized descriptions prevent readers from forming a clear image of the beloved.”

O my idol, remove these disheveled locks from your face  
Let me behold dawn after this dark night<sup>21</sup>

Yet, more detailed and vivid descriptions of the beloved are indeed present in several of Mihrī’s poems, which will be discussed later. Therefore, it appears that the authors have not comprehensively engaged with all of Mihrī’s poetry. A more nuanced and accurate classification of the poetry of this era becomes possible upon closer scrutiny.

### **Mihrī Hiravī and Other Poets Named “Mihrī”**

The name Mihrī appears multiple times throughout Persian literary history. For instance, Mihrī Isfahānī, born in AH 1309/1891, whose given name was Rubāb, was the daughter of Mīrzā Abū al-Qāsim Kāzīrūnī and resided in Isfahan.<sup>22</sup> She composed approximately 1,500 verses, most of which have religious themes.<sup>23</sup> The other person named Mihrī is Mihrī Khū’ī, whose given name was Mullā Mihr ‘Alī. He wrote poems in Arabic, Persian and Turkish.<sup>24</sup> Another woman poet, Mihrī Mashhadī, is mentioned in Āftāb-i ‘ālam’tāb [World-illuminat-

<sup>20</sup>Ghafūriyān and Pūr’Muham-madī Amlashī, “Sabk’shināsi-i ash ‘ār-i zanān-i pārsī’gū-yi shibbah’qārah-’i Hind,” 153.

<sup>21</sup>Ghafūriyān and Pūr’Muham-madī Amlashī, “Sabk’shināsi-i ash ‘ār-i zanān-i pārsī’gū-yi shibbah’qārah-’i Hind,” 155.

<sup>22</sup>Mahmūd Hidāyat, *Gulzār-i jāvidān* (Tehran: Zībā, 1353/1974), 3:1468.

<sup>23</sup>Muhammad Hasan Rajabī (Davānī), *Farhang’nāmah-’i zanān-i īrānī va pārsī’gūy az āghāz tā Mashrūtah* [Encyclopedia of Iranian and Persian-speaking women from the beginning to the Constitutional Revolution] (Tehran: Surūsh, 1394/2015), 172.

<sup>24</sup>Hidāyat, *Gulzār-i jāvidān*, 3:1468.

<sup>25</sup>Qāzī Muhammad Sādiq Khān Akhtar Hūglī, *Tazkirah-ī āftāb-i ‘ālam’tāb* [World-illuminating sun], ed. Yūsif Bayg’bābā’pūr, Marziyāh Bayg’vardī’lū, and Maryam Barzgar (Tehran: Safir-i Ardahāl, 1393/2013), 2:663.

<sup>26</sup>Vālah Dāghistānī, *Riyāz al-shu‘arā*, 1379.

<sup>27</sup>Rajabī (Davānī), *Farhang-nāmāh-ī zanān-i īrānī va pārsī’gūy az āghāz tā Mashrūtah*, 349.

<sup>28</sup>In *Gulzār-i jāvidān*, she is presented as a distinct figure from Mihrī ‘Arab, and five of her verses are cited. See *Hidāyat, Gulzār-i jāvidān*, 3:1469.

<sup>29</sup>Āftāb Rāy Laknawī, *Riyāz al-‘arīfin*, ed. Hisām al-Ddīn Rāshidī, (Tehran: Markaz-i Tahqīqāt-i Fārsī Irān va Pākistān [Center for Iran and Pakistan Research], 1355/1976), 245.

<sup>30</sup>Husayn Qulī Khān ‘Azīm’ābādī, *Nishtar-ī ‘ishq* [Love’s lance], ed. Siyyid Kamāl Hāj Javādī (Tehran: Markaz-i Pazhūhish-ī Mirās-i Maktūb [Center for research on written heritage], 1391/2012), 2174.

ing sun], where a single verse, which is also attributed to Mihrī Hiravī, is quoted from her.<sup>25</sup> She is said to have emigrated to India.<sup>26</sup> It is possible that she was among the poets who migrated to India in the AH 11th/17th century, becoming companions of Nūr Jahān, and whose identities have subsequently become conflated with those of Mihrī and Gawhar’shād. The following are three couplets quoted from her:

Our sorrowful heart has been shattered so many times  
That glassware could be made from its fragments.  
The palm of enmity cannot take root in me,  
For my thoughts harbor no malice toward anyone.  
Like a mirror that reflects the garden  
There exists the image of a cherished thought in my mind<sup>27</sup>

Other individuals include Mihrī Dalīl,<sup>28</sup> Mihrī ‘Arab,<sup>29</sup> or Mihrī Jabal Āmilī<sup>30</sup> (Sayyid ‘Alī), whose real name was Jabal Āmilī, an Isfahan-based poet who lived at the end of the Safavid period and occasionally used the pen name (takhallus) “Sayyid.”

Prior to these figures, a woman named Mihr al-Nisā assumed the pen name Mihrī. It is likely due to her precedence that she is generally referred to simply as Mihrī, without the addition of a geographic attribution. The details of her birthplace and family remain unknown, although later discussion will note the possibility of her association with the families of Jalāyir and Tabrīzī. Since she spent the majority of her life in Herat, she is commonly known as Mihrī Hiravī, with some believing Herat to be her city of origin. Benefiting from Gawhar’shād’s patronage and companionship, and possessing an audacious personality, Mihrī was able to write poetry with an explicitly feminine voice and to articulate authentic feminine experiences (such as expressions of love for a male beloved, communicating feelings with her husband, and vividly describing a male beloved) at a time when women customarily composed poetry with circumspection and adopted a masculine literary façade, a tendency that began in the AH 7th/13th century. Her husband served as



the personal physician to Shāh'rukḥ and Gawhar'shād. He was an elderly man whose infirmity and impotence provided the impetus for several of Mihrī's poems. In stark contrast, Mihrī herself was regarded as lively, audacious, witty, and youthful. This sharp discrepancy between Mihrī and her husband is reflected in her poems. Distinct from her contemporaries, her writing is characterized by audacity and candor. Mihrī may be considered, after Rābi'ah, a Samanid poet in the AH 4th/10 century, and Mahastī, a Seljuk poet in the 6th/12th century, the third poet to candidly reveal feminine emotions in Persian verse. In the era of discretion and guarded expression, she thus constitutes a vital link in the continuum of authentically feminine poetry during the Timurid period. Poets have openly expressed their feelings toward a male beloved, describing men in their poems and, at times, even protesting against discrimination against women through their awareness of existing inequalities.

<sup>31</sup>Badī' al-Zamān Furūzān'far, *Sukhan va sukhan'varān* [Literature and literary figures] (Tehran: Khvārazmī, 1971), 11.

Some poems have been attributed to both Mihrī and Mahastī; however, based on their thematic content, they are more likely to be the work of Mihrī. She appears to be the poet most stylistically proximate to Mahastī. Despite the patronage of an influential figure such as Gawhar'shād, Mihrī was ultimately imprisoned because of her unconventional lifestyle.

### **The AH 9th/15th or 11th/17th Century**

Badī' al-Zamān Furūzān'far cautions that, when classifying poets, the accounts provided by tazkirah writers should not be accepted uncritically. He emphasizes that, without rigorous verification, the citation of such reports one of them in scholarly sources is admissible in literary studies.<sup>31</sup> At times, the narratives found in tazkirahs are entangled in chains of errors, resulting in the loss of the original narrative thread. This confusion may lead to the invention of fictitious poets or, conversely, the neglect and conflation of existing ones.

There exist two principal accounts regarding Mihrī's lifetime.

<sup>32</sup>Sayyid Muhammad Siddiq Hasan Khān Bahādūr, *Sham'-i anjuman* [The candle of the assembly], ed. Muhammad Kāzim Kahdūyī (Yazd: Yazd University Press, 1386/2007).

<sup>33</sup>Mīrzā Muhammad 'Alī Mu-darris, *Rayhānah al-adab* [The sweet basil of literature] (Tehran: Kitāb 'khānah-'i Khayyām, 1369/1990), 5:3.

<sup>34</sup>Muhammad Qudrat Allāh Gūpāmūvī, *Natāyij al-afkār* [Fruits of thoughts], ed. Yūsuf Bayg'bābā'pūr (Qom: Majma'-i Zakhāyir-i Islāmī, 1378/1999), 721.

<sup>35</sup>Muhammad Zafar Husayn Sabā, *Tazkirah-'i Rūz-i rawshan* [Bright day], ed. Muhammad Husayn Rukn'zādah Ādamiyat (Tehran: Rāzī, 1343/1964), 785.

<sup>36</sup>Akhtar Hūgī, *Āftāb-i 'ālam'tāb*, 2:662.

<sup>40</sup>Rahm 'Alī Khān Imān, *Muntakhab al-latāyif* [Selections of delicate anecdotes], ed. Husayn 'Alī'zādah and Mihdī 'Alī'zādah (Tehran: Tahūrī, 1386/2007), 582.

In certain tazkirahs, Mihrī is presented as a poet and confidante of Gawhar'shād Baygum (AH 9th/15th century) in Herat; in others, she appears in India as a confidante of Nūr Jahān Baygum (AH 11th/17th century), renowned queen consort of the Mughal Empire. Works such as the *Sham'-i anjuman*<sup>32</sup> (The candle of the assembly), the *Rūz-i rawshan* (Bright day), the *Rayhānah al-adab*<sup>33</sup> (The sweet basil of literature) and the *Natāyij al-afkār*<sup>34</sup> (Fruits of thoughts) introduce her as a poet living in India and associating with Nūr Jahān Baygum. In these sources, Mihrī is described as a member of the Jalair (Jalāyir) tribe and the wife of Karīm Khān Vakīl al-Saltanah, Iran's ambassador to India. They also mention another individual named Mihrī, distinct from Mihrī Hiravī.

In one particularly convoluted account, the *Rūz-i rawshan* identifies Mihrī as a companion of Nūr Jahān Baygum before presenting a story involving her and Shāh'rukh Mīrzā, thereby describing a figure distinct from Mihrī Hiravī, the associate of Gawhar'shād Baygum. This account attributes the verse "The roots of all thorns..." to her.<sup>35</sup> The *Tazkirah-'i āftāb-i 'ālam'tāb*<sup>36</sup> introduces Mihrī as the wife of Karīm Khān, the deputy of the king of Iran from the Jalāyir tribe, and a contemporary of Shāh'rukh Mīrzā. It claims that Mihrī had a sexual relationship with Shāh'rukh Mīrzā, and subsequently refers to another figure named Mihrī from the same period, noting that she is not Mihrī Hiravī. In other words, the tazkirah asserts that two distinct women named Mihrī were present at the court of Shāh'rukh Mīrzā.

The *Tazkirah-'i Husaynī* regards Mihrī as contemporary to Nūr Jahān Bīgum.<sup>37</sup> The *Tazkirah-'i riyāz al-shu'arā* (Garden of poets) introduces her as Bībī Mihrī Jalāyir, living during Shāh'rukh's era and wife of Hakīm 'Abd al-'Azīz. This source describes her as an outstanding orator and poet but refrains from presenting other narratives.<sup>38</sup> In the *Makhzan al-gharāyib* (The treasury of wonders),<sup>39</sup> she is described as an orator from the Jalāyir tribe, attached by kinship and companionship



to Gawhar'shād. The *Muntakhab al-latāyif* (Selections of delicate anecdotes),<sup>40</sup> the *Riyāz al-ʿarīfīn* (Garden of mystics),<sup>41</sup> and the *Gulzār-i jāvīdān*<sup>42</sup> (The eternal garden) all position her as contemporary with Shāh'rukh Mīrzā, and do not mention additional accounts about her. The *Akhtar-i tābān* (The shining star)<sup>43</sup> devotes a section to “Mīhrī Hiraviyah,” praising her agility, wit, and audacity in the harem (shabistān) of an Iranian king, and relating her dispute with Jāmī, the prominent Persian poet of the AH 9th/15th century, including her satirical lampoon (hajv) directed against him. The text further mentions “Mīhrī Hirātiyah,” wife of Hakīm ʿAbd al-ʿAzīz in Shāh'rukh Mīrzā's time and companion to Gawhar'shād Baygum. The ʿArafāt al-ʿāshiqīn (The plane of the lovers)<sup>44</sup> refers to her as Bībī Mīhrī Jalāyir, living during the AH 9th/15th century in the age of Amīr Shāh'rukh, and records her as one of the distinguished orators of her era, inclined toward mysticism and author many excellent poems.

Recent scholarship—for example, the *Zanān-i sukhan'var* (Eloquent women)<sup>45</sup> and the *Farhang'nāmah-'i zanān-i īrānī va pārsī'gūy* (Encyclopedia of Iranian and Persian-speaking women)<sup>46</sup>—often mentions both chronologies. Contrastingly, the *Dāyirat al-ma'arīf-i zan-i īrānī* (The encyclopedia of Iranian women) situates her in either the AH 8th/14th or AH 11th/17th century. Although this source records Gawhar'shād's life as spanning AH 807/1404 to AH 850/1446, it presents this period as the AH 8th/14th century. The source also incorrectly attributes the translation of the *Majālis al-nafā'is* (The assemblies of exquisites) to ʿAllāmah Qazvīnī, when, in fact, it was rendered by Hakīm Shāh Muhammad Qazvīnī, a scholar active in the AH 9th/15th and AH 10th/16th centuries.<sup>47</sup>

Certain works, such as the *Pardah'nishīnān-i sukhan'gū* (Orators behind the curtains),<sup>48</sup> *Kār'nāmah-'i zanān-i mashhūr-i Īrān* (Oeuvre of famous women of Iran)<sup>49</sup> and *Kār'namā-'i zanān-i kārā-yi Īrān* (Catalogue of influential women of Iran),<sup>50</sup> situate her in the Timurid era and omit association with the AH

<sup>40</sup>Rāy Laknawī, *Riyāz al-ʿarīfīn*, 244.

<sup>42</sup>Hidāyat, *Gulzār-i jāvīdān*, 3:1469.

<sup>43</sup>Abū al-Qāsim Muhtasham Shirvānī Bhūpālī, *Akhtar-i tābān* [The shining star], ed. Muhammad Khushkāb (Tehran: Saftir-i Ardahāl, 1393/2014), 73.

<sup>44</sup>Taqī al-Dīn Muhammad Awahadī Daqāqī Balyānī, ʿArafāt al-ʿāshiqīn va ʿArasāt al-ʿarīfīn, ed. Sayyid Muhsin Nājī Nasr'ābādī (Tehran: Asāfir, 1388/2009), 6:3559.

<sup>45</sup>Alī Akbar Mushīr Salīmī, *Zanān-i sukhan'var* [Eloquent women] (Tehran: ʿAlī Akbar ʿIlmī, 1335/1956).

<sup>46</sup>Rajabī (Davānī), *Farhang'nāmah-'i zanān-i īrānī va pārsī'gūy*, 349.

<sup>47</sup>Hūman Farahī, in *Dāyirat al-ma'arīf-i zan-i Īrānī* [The encyclopedia of Iranian women], ed. Mustafā Ijtihādī (Tehran: Bunyād-i Dānish'nāmah-'i Buzurg-i Fārsī, 1382/2003), 2:880–82.

<sup>48</sup>Māgah Rahmānī, *Pardah'nishīnān-i sukhan'gū* [Orators behind the curtains] ([Kabul:] Anjuman-i Tārīkh [History association], 1331/1952), 34–35.

<sup>49</sup>Fakhūrī Taqīmī, *Kār'nāmah-'i zanān-i mashhūr-i Īrān* [Oeuvre of famous women of Iran] (Tehran: Nashr-i Vizārat-i Āmūzish va Parvarish, 1352/1973), 60.

<sup>50</sup>Pūrān Farrukh'zād, *Kār'namā-'i zanān-i kārā-yi Īrān* [Catalogue of influential women of Iran] (2nd repr. ed., Tehran: Qatrah, 1381/2002), 812.

11th/17th century narrative.

Nevertheless, closer analysis demonstrates that the principal sources of the biographical anthologies associating Mihrī with the AH 11th/17th century Mughal court of Nūr Jahān Bay-gum are, in fact, works composed in the AH 12th/18th and AH 13th/19th centuries. These include the *Mir'āt al-khiyāl* (The mirror of imagination, AH 1102/1690), the *Tazkirah-'i Husaynī* (The Husaynī biographical anthology, AH 1163/1749) and the *Natāyij al-afkār* (AH 1199–1281/1784–1864). The authors of all three works lived in India. Later biographical anthologies, predominantly produced during the AH 13th/19th century—such as the *Rūz-i rawshan*, the *Āftāb-i 'ālam'tāb*, and also the AH 14th/20th century *Rayhānah al-adab*, draw upon these earlier sources.

Some sources, such as the *Khayrāt-i hisān* (Excellent virtues), and *Az Rābi'ah tā Parvīn* (From Rābi'ah to Parvīn), cite the *Mir'āt al-khiyāl* to place Mihrī in the era of Shāh'rukh Tīmūrī. This raises the question: could divergent manuscript traditions of the *Mir'āt al-khiyāl* explain the existence of conflicting narratives?

It is essential to consider the testimony of earlier sources regarding Mihrī. The *Majālis al-nafā'is*, written in Turkish by Amīr 'Alī'shīr Navā'ī and translated into Persian by Hakīm Shāh Muhammad Qazvīnī (who intermittently supplements the main text) is noteworthy. Amīr 'Alī'shīr Navā'ī, himself at the court of prince Bāy'sunqur, Shāh'rukh's son, would have possessed considerable insight into Mihrī, who was a contemporary young woman in Shāh'rukh's time—likely his peer. Yet, in a voluminous compendium profiling hundreds of male poets, he devotes merely a single page to women poets and writes only one line about Mihrī, simply recording: “And this matla' (opening couplet) is by Mihrī, who was the wife Mawlānā Hakīm:

O wine-bearer of lovers, pour forth the cups and make haste [in



Arabic]

For the bitter wine stirs a sweet agitation in the hearts.”<sup>51</sup>

Nevertheless, elsewhere in his work, Navā’ī attributes Mihrī’s ghazal to a certain Mawlānā Sulaymān, The Persian translator (writing in the AH 9th/15th and 10th/16th centuries), who was himself taught by a disciple of Hakīm ‘Abd al-‘Azīz (Mihrī’s husband) and who had personally met and conversed with Mihrī, comments as follows below this claim:

Hazrat-i Mīr in his book, the Majālis al-nafā’is, states that “this ghazal is by Sulaymān.” However, I have heard from my own master and many noted authorities that it is widely known this verse is by Mihrī. Mihrī was the wife of the renowned Mawlānā Hakīm, who served as the physician to Mīrzā Shāh’rukh. The substantiation for this claim lies in the testimony of my master, himself a student of Mawlānā Hakīm, who had met and conversed with Mihrī personally. He asserted that Mihrī had imitated most of Khvājah Hāfiz’s Dīvān, and that Mihrī’s Dīvān begins with this:

O wine-bearer of lovers, pour forth the cups...<sup>52</sup>

Further Information about Mihrī and Gawhar’shād appears in the same volume. This prompts an essential chronological question: when did the dispute over Mihrī’s date—the AH 9th/15th or 10th/16th century—first arise? Closer scrutiny indicates that the two-century chronological discrepancy reported for Mihrī’s life across various texts originates with the works of authors of the AH 12th/19th century in India. That is, in sources written closer to Mihrī’s own time (before the AH 12th/19th century), she is placed in the AH 9th/15th century at Gawhar’shād’s court. Compilations from the AH 9th/15th and 10th/16th centuries recount anecdotes and poems of Mihrī, Gawhar’shād, and Shāh’rukh Mīrzā dating to well before the birth of Nūr Jahān Baygum (AH 11th/17th century). If Mihrī had lived in the AH 11th/17th century, how could earlier authors have included

<sup>51</sup>Amīr ‘Alī’shīr Navā’ī, Majālis al-nafā’is [Collection of treasures], trans. Hakīm Shāh Muhammad Qazvīnī, ed. ‘Alī Asghar Hikmat (Tehran: Manūchihīrī, 1363/1984), 350.

<sup>52</sup>Navā’ī, Majālis al-nafā’is, 195.

<sup>53</sup>Mushīr Salīmī, *Zanān-i sukhan'var*, 2:249.

<sup>54</sup>In *Javāhir al-'ajāyib*, the rhyming word is *namāndah* which means "I have no more." Muhammad Fakhri Hiravī, *Rawzah al-salāṭīn va javāhir al-'ajāyib*, ed. Hisām al-Dīn Rāshidī (Haydarabad: Sanadī Adabī Board), 138.

her stories about her and poetry in works predating Nūr Jahān Baygum by centuries? How can such accounts be plausibly connected to the court of a woman born two centuries later? It is therefore certain that Mihrī Hiravī belonged to the court of "Mughals" in Iran in the AH 9th/15th century, rather than the court of "Mughals" in India in the AH 11th/17th century.

Of course, similarities exist between these two periods. First, both dynasties were referred to as "Mughals" (Gūrkanī in Persian)—one based in Iran, the other in India. Second, Nūr Jahān Baygum, an Iranian woman named Mihr al-Nisā (thus a namesake of Mihrī), became one of the most powerful female rulers of India; coins were even minted in her name. Like Gawhar'shād Baygum, she was not only a patron of the arts but also a poet, artist, and architect in her own right. Third, both women were married to kings who astutely entrusted with significant political authority. These parallels may have contributed to the persistence of this historical confusion.

### Mihrī in Biographical Anthologies

As Mushīr Salīmī notes, Mihrī was renowned for her beauty, erudition, and cultural refinement. She was trained in calligraphy and possessed a sharp wit, making clever remarks in the company of Gawhar'shād Khātūn.<sup>53</sup> Mihrī's husband, Khvājah Hakīm 'Abd al-'Azīz, a personal physician to Shāh'ruk and Gawhar'shād, was a wealthy but aged and infirm man. The significant age disparity between the couple is the subject of several poems by Mihrī. In one anecdote, Mihrī is seated with Gawhar'shād Baygum when Hakīm appears in the distance. Gawhar'shād Baygum sends several attendants to assist him and hasten his arrival. Due to his frailty, Hakīm struggles to move quickly, but instead makes awkward movements. Amused, Gawhar'shād Baygum requests that Mihrī compose a poem for the occasion, to which she responds extemporaneously:

I have no intention to be your beloved,<sup>54</sup>



I have no heart for your love and loyalty.  
The weakness of old age has sapped your strength  
So much so that you can no longer walk.

Gawhar'shād Baygum laughs and rewards Mihrī generously with a prize.<sup>55</sup> Gawhar'shād Bīgum's role in the production of this poem is noteworthy: she commissions the poem and then honors its creator with material support.

One of the key challenges faced by women, which is reflected frequently in their poetry, is coerced marriage, often to significantly older men. According to historical sources, the marriage between Gawhar'shād and Shāh'rukh appears to have been successful, and there is no indication of a large age gap between them. In contrast, Mihrī, witty, youthful, and attractive woman, was married to an elderly man who could barely walk. When prompted by Gawhar'shād to compose a poem about this moment, Mihrī openly declares her emotional detachment and lack of fidelity toward a husband rendered impotent by age and frailty.

Another anecdote further underscores the old age of Mihrī's husband: One day, Khvājah 'Abd al-'Azīz strokes his white beard and laments, "How can I bear the burden of this spool of yarn in my weakness?" Mihrī replies, "Just as you bore beds in your youth," a sharp allusion to his alleged former role as a pander or procurer.<sup>56</sup>

It is said that Mihrī developed an affection for the nephew of Gawhar'shād. Enraged by Mihrī's indifference and perceived infidelity, her husband appealed to Shāh'rukh to have her imprisoned. Shāh'rukh agreed. While in prison, Mihrī turned to her poetic talents to secure her release, composing the following *habsiyah* (prison poem):

The king<sup>57</sup> has shackled the silver-bodied cypress,  
All men and women lament this calamity.  
Those feet that once bent over a hundred necks

<sup>55</sup>This anecdote is documented in most biographical anthologies, including Fakhrī Hiravī, *Rawzah al-salātīn va javāhir al-'ajāyib*, 125; Mahmūd Hidāyāt, *Gulzār-i jāvidān* (Tehran: Chāpkhānah Zībā, 1352/1974), 3:1469.

<sup>56</sup>Mushīr Salīmī, *Zanān-i sukhān'var*, 249.

<sup>57</sup>Muhammad Muzaffar Husayn Sabā, *Tazkirah-'i Rūz-i rawshan*, 748. Some sources record the term as *shū* (husband), as in Hidāyāt, *Gulzār-i jāvidān*, 3:1470; and Mushīr Salīmī, *Zanān-i sukhān'var*, 250.

<sup>58</sup>Mushīr Salīmī, *Zanān-i sukhan'var*, 250. Akhtar Hūgī, in *Āftāb-i 'ālam'tāb*, 662, records the verse with a slight variation: "Alas, should not wither in these shackles."

<sup>59</sup>According to Yāsaman Ārang, the poetry of Iranian women can be divided into four different periods: unguarded expression (first period), guarded expression (second period), onset of self-expression (third period), self-expression (fourth period). Yāsaman Ārang, *Az chishmah tā daryā* [From the spring to the sea] (Tehran: Nigāh, 1404/2025).

<sup>60</sup>Navā'ī, *Majālis al-nafā'is*, 195. This quatrain also appears in an alternate version:

"If I had a desire toward old men  
What charm is there in my own old, feeble husband?"  
See Mushīr Salīmī, *Zanān-i sukhan'var*, 251. It appears that Mihrī composed this quatrain in response to one by Mahastī:  
"These young beautiful boys, whose origins are from soil  
Great is God, what is their nature?  
Sweet-talking, sugar-lipped and silver-bodied  
O God, what water of life flows from these beauties."  
See Mahastī Ganjavī, *Dīvān*, ed. Shahāb Tāhirī (Tehran: Tahūrī, 1336/1957), 41.

Will now, alas, wither in these shackles.<sup>58</sup>

In this quatrain (*rubā'ī*), Mihrī uses metaphor to allude to her cypress-like stature and silver-toned body, and more importantly, to her personal relationships openly. These features are consistent with themes found in both the age of indiscretion or guarded expression (first period) and the age of self-expression (fourth period).<sup>59</sup>

It is noted that "Mihrī could improvise poetry with the highest level of rhetorical sophistication and fluency. One day, Mīrzā Shāh'rukh asks Mihrī, 'Why do you always desire unbearded young men rather than white-haired old men like us?' Mihrī responds instantly with this poem:

I only desire unbearded beautiful youths  
O God, of what water and clay am I made?  
If I desired bearded old men,  
I have no blame for my deceitful husband?"<sup>60</sup>

This response reinforces the notion of a considerable age gap between Mihrī and figures such as Shāh'rukh Mīrzā and Gawhar'shād. While they had grown old, Mihrī was still in the prime of her youth. The poem plays on the symbolic contrast between the "unbearded" (youthful and attractive) and "bearded" (elderly and undesirable).

According to certain biographical anthologies, such as the *Āftāb-i 'ālam'tāb*, Mihrī's husband, due to his old age and impotence, suspected her of engaging in a secret affair with Shāh'rukh. As this account claims, the above quatrain was written after the husband discovered the affair and, despite his infirmity, imprisoned Mihrī himself. However, according to the earlier narrative, there was a considerable age difference between Mihrī and Shāh'rukh and it suggests that she simply had no desire for elderly men.



## Mihrī's Poetry

No more than forty-five verses attributed to Mihrī have been preserved in biographical anthologies. It is reported that a copy of Mihrī Hiravī's *Dīvān* is housed in the Library of the Iranian Parliament under the catalog number 8173/137.61 However, upon examination, it becomes clear that this is was not a stand-alone *Dīvān*, but rather a miscellany of poems (*jang*) by various poets, which includes several poems attributed to Mihrī. The manuscript was transcribed by Suhbat Allāh Khān, or Dabīr Humāyūn, a member of the art-loving nobility during the Qajar period (Nāsiri and Muzaffari eras). The poems appear to have been copied from the *Naql-i majlis* (Account of a gathering) by Mahmūd Mīrzā Qājār.<sup>62</sup> In this manuscript, the poems of Mahastī immediately follow those of Mihrī, and the quatrains are transcribed in such a way that the boundaries between the two poets' works are not clearly delineated. This arrangement could easily lead to confusion, particularly for an untrained reader or an inexperienced scribe, making it difficult to distinguish between the poems of each poet.

Despite these challenges, Mihrī's poetry has survived for over six centuries. A short *masnavī* (rhyming couplets) is attributed to her and was published in 1976 in Dushanbe, Tajikistan.<sup>63</sup> It is also reported that she composed in imitation of Hāfiz, though only the first verse of such a poem has been preserved.

In Mihrī's poetry, rhetorical devices are used with subtlety and elegance, rather than appearing forced or artificial. Her verse reveals an intellectually engaged and philosophically inclined mind. One of her *ghazals* opens with the metaphor *pīr-i khi-rad* ("the elder of wisdom"), exploring the classic literary motif of the conflict between mind and passion. The term *lā-ya'qal* (lacking understanding), used to connote drunkenness, appears repeatedly in her poems, further emphasizing her engagement with themes of emotional excess and mysticism. Mihrī's philosophical orientation is centered on existential inquiry. Her poet-

<sup>61</sup>Rajabī (Davānī), *Farhang'nāmah-i zanān-i īrānī va pārsī gūy*, 350.

<sup>62</sup>Javād Bashārī, *Fihrist-i nuskhah'hā-yi khattī-i kitāb'khānah-i majlis* [Catalogue of manuscripts in the Parliamentary Library] (Tehran: Markaz-i Pazhūhish-i Kitāb'khānah, Mūzah va Markaz-i Asnād-i Majlis-i Shaw-rā-yi Islāmī [Library, Museum and Document Center of Iran Parliament], 1388/2009), 317.

<sup>63</sup>Rajabī (Davānī), *Farhang'nāmah-i zanān-i īrānī va pārsī gūy*, 349.

<sup>64</sup>Alī Akbar Muṣḥir Salīmī, *Zanān-i sukhan'vār: Az yik hizār sāl pīsh tā imrūz kih bih zabān-i Fārsī sukhan guftah'and* [The eloquent women: They have spoken Persian from a thousand years ago until today] (Tehran: 'Ilmī, 1333/1954), 252.

ry reflects a desire to experience and understand the mysteries of existence. One ghazal begins with the word “solution,” and she writes:

The solution to every problem that puzzled the elder of wisdom  
We sought and found it easily in a cup of wine.<sup>64</sup>

This verse characterizes Mihrī as a reflective and contemplative poet, concerned with the enigmas of existence. The metaphorical figure of the elder sage, unable to resolve life’s complexities, underscores the limits of rationality. In contrast, Mihrī turns to wine and love as means of intuitive understanding. At the beginning of her *Dīvān*, Mihrī turns to the wine-bearer of lover to hasten the pouring of wine, as its bitterness stirs a sweet restlessness in the heart. Wine and love serve as her metaphysical refuge, dissolving the unresolvable knots of human existence. Her poetry also expresses a deep empathy with nature. Through devices such as personification, *husn-i ta’līl* (favorable causation), and emotional projection, Mihrī finds reflections of her inner longing in the outer world:

I wished to talk of the fire in my heart with the candle  
But it already held on its tongue all that was in my heart.  
In the morning, in the garden, because of my heart’s lament  
The scorched tulip lay heartsick and sunk in the earth.

Drawing on the story of Babylon and the angel Hārūt, Mihrī locates the origin of this inner flame in the enchanting eyes of the beloved. She then turns to the image of wine, this time introducing a satirical critique. She contemplates inquiring at a religious school about the prohibition of wine but discovers that those within are themselves intoxicated:

What is told Babylon and Hārūt,  
I saw entirely reflect in the magic of your eyes.  
I thought to ask the school about the prohibition of wine,  
But at every door I knocked, each was intoxicated and drunk.



To see your face was a blessing for Mihrī  
Alas, such fortune was brief and fleeing.<sup>65</sup>

<sup>65</sup>Mushīr Salīmī, *Zanān-i sukhan'var*, 252.

The extant corpus of Mihrī's poetry includes two ghazals, eight quatrains, one du'baytī (double distich), which may in fact be a fragment of a longer ghazal, and fifteen individual verses. Her poetic persona is characterized by ecstatic intensity and vivid imagery, as exemplified in the following verse:

<sup>66</sup>Mushīr Salīmī, *Zanān-i sukhan'var*, 254.

From the roots of every thorn that grows from my soil  
If the ascetic carves a toothpick, he becomes intoxicated<sup>66</sup>

<sup>67</sup>Mushīr Salīmī, *Zanān-i sukhan'var*, 251.

The opening lines of her *Dīvān* reportedly read:

O wine-bearer of lovers, pour forth the cups and make haste [in Arabic]  
For the bitter wine stirs a sweet agitation in the hearts.<sup>67</sup>

<sup>68</sup>Mushīr Salīmī, *Zanān-i sukhan'var*, 253.

Mihrī's approach to the existential condition is to seek solace in love and intoxication. As a result, she aligns herself closely with the poetic worldview of Khvājah Hāfiz Shīrāzī and responds to his ghazals. Her poetry reflects an acute awareness of the transient nature of existence. She perceives the world as moving swiftly yet silently, and this awareness of impermanence suffuses her verse. She portrays the pain of separation from the beloved with poignant resignation. The phrase *pārah-'i jigar* (a piece of the heart) symbolizes both tears and the beloved. In the closing couplet, she reflects on the ephemerality of all things, whether beautiful or ugly:

Tears always remain in my eyes  
What can I do? It is a piece of my heart.  
The beloved has gone, and the rival after him  
In this world, both beauty and ugliness are transient.<sup>68</sup>

Despite her intellectual acumen, Mihrī was a young woman navigating life in a traditional and patriarchal society. She found

<sup>69</sup>Hidāyat, Gulzār-i jāvidān, 3:1470.

<sup>70</sup>Hidāyat, Gulzār-i jāvidān, 3:1470.

herself confined within an ill-suited marriage to an elderly man, who was frail, unsympathetic, and devoid of affection or intellectual companionship. The inner turmoil of this impassioned woman did not dissipate; rather, it gave rise to poetic protest and lamentation. As will be discussed further, Mihrī may be considered the second female poet in the Persian literary tradition, following Mahastī, to articulate and defend women's rights through verse.

Thanks to her association with a powerful patron such as Gawhar'shād Bīgum, and her connections with the Timurid court, Mihrī was able to give voice to her experiences within the broader discourse of Persian literature. Three of her quatrains reflect the plight of women trapped in unfulfilling marriages, expressing discontent and emotional alienation. Here, the silenced voices of women emerge with clarity and strength. Although Mihrī seemingly enjoys material comfort and status in the household of her esteemed and wealthy husband, she lacks what she considers most essential: emotional and spiritual fulfillment. In one quatrain, she writes:

In your house, there is nothing suited to me,  
Nothing that untangles the knot of my untamed heart.  
It seems that I have all things, wealth and possessions  
Yes, everything, but not that which truly matters.<sup>69</sup>

Without hesitation or shame, Mihrī boldly gives voice to the suffering of young women compelled to live with elderly husbands. In the final hemistich of another quatrain, she employs a pun to criticize her husband's inability to fulfill her marital needs:

You never satisfy me in bed.  
I speak to you at night, but you do not reply.  
I am thirsty and you seem to be the Khidr of the time  
For God's sake, why do you not give me water?<sup>70</sup>



Here, the poet laments her nightly deprivation of companionship and affection. Her husband, distant and indifferent, fails to respond even to her spoken words, let alone her emotional and physical needs. In another verse, Mihrī invokes a proverb to emphasize the severity of such a marriage, asserting that death would be preferable for a woman than life with an aged spouse:

If a young woman's husband is old,  
Her entire old age will be filled with sorrow.  
Indeed, this is a proverb among women"  
Better an arrow in the side than an elderly husband.<sup>71</sup>

Ātūnī also expresses dissatisfaction with her husband's indifference in the conjugal relationship and alludes to his impotence. Yet Mihrī is far more direct and forthright in voicing her sexual deprivation.

Mahastī similarly addresses this theme, highlighting the contradiction in expecting fidelity from a woman forced into marriage with an impotent man. In one of her most provocative verses, Mahastī presents a dramatic scene in which the hypocrisy of patriarchal judgment is exposed:

The judge wept when his wife conceived.  
He asked angrily, "What is this calamity?"  
"I am old and my body is incapable"  
"And this harlot is no Mary; so, whose child is this?"<sup>72</sup>

Several centuries after Mihrī, the poet Zhālah Qā'im Maqāmī demonstrates a similar boldness in challenging the legitimacy of forced marriage. She categorically denounces such unions as a form of historical oppression against women. In one quatrain, she declares that a man who marries a woman without her consent is more nā'mahram (unrelated (or impermissible) than a thousand strangers:

The manlike degenerate who is our "husband"

<sup>71</sup>Hidāyat, Gulzār-i jāvidān, 3:1470.

<sup>72</sup>Mahastī, Dīvān, 28.

<sup>73</sup>Zhālah Qā'im Maqāmī, *Dīvān*, ed. Yāsaman Ārang (Isfahan: Adab-i Imrūz, 1389/2010), 70.

<sup>74</sup>Muhtasham Shirvānī Bhūpālī, *Akhtar-i tābān*, 74.

<sup>75</sup>Hidāyat, *Gulzār-i jāvidān*, 3:1470.

Is more a stranger to women than a thousand other men.  
One who buys a woman with money and force, without her consent,

Is unrelated in truth, even if, in form, he is called her husband.<sup>73</sup>

Mihrī demonstrates literary subtlety by employing her pen name not only in her ghazals but also in her quatrains. Nonetheless, some of these verses are still mistakenly attributed to other poets, such as Mahastī. One notable example includes the punning verse: “I said I know you, you are without mihr (love).”

Mihrī’s use of literary devices is characterized by delicacy and restraint. Unlike Mahastī, who frequently engages in elaborate wordplay to display her verbal prowess, Mihrī allows the lyrical quality of her verse to flow naturally, like the gentle current of a stream. Consider the following quatrain:

I only desire unbearded beautiful youths  
O God, of what water and clay am I made?  
If I desired bearded old men,  
What appeal would my decrepit husband have?

This quatrain illustrates Mihrī’s capacity for poetic punning, particularly in Persian where *chigil* (“beautiful”) phonetically echoes *chih gil* (“what clay”). This interplay of meaning and emotional directness also appears in the lines:

I said I know you, you’re without mihr  
He said you do not know my yet.<sup>74</sup>

And:

Yes, there is everything, but not what matters.<sup>75</sup>

Mihrī’s themes and poetic boldness align not with the “age of discretion or guarded expression,” but rather with the earlier “age of indiscretion or uninhibited expression” (*bī’pardah’gūyī*),



spanning from the AH 4th/10th to the end of AH 6th/12th centuries. During this period, women openly wrote about personal emotions and experiences. Several characteristics of that literary era are evident in Mihrī's surviving poetry:

<sup>76</sup>Hidāyat, Gulzār-i jāvidān, 3:1470.

Range and diversity of subject matters: Although only a limited number of verses remain, they encompass a wide array of philosophical, social, lyrical, satirical, and carceral (prison) poems. Detailed descriptions of the beloved: For example, she vividly portrays the amber-like beauty mark of the beloved, blending visual imagery with emotional intensity:

That amber-like beauty mark upon my beloved's cheek  
Captures the heart of all who behold his radiant face.  
The pupils of his eyes, deft as butchers,  
Have turned the lashes into hooks that snare hearts.

Another example showcases her use of favorable explanation and pun, enhanced by auditory imagery through onomatopoeic *chik chik* ("drop by drop"):

Water drips, drop by drop, from his lips  
Why does he grasp the jug's neck, leaving the handle aside?  
All lovers have lost their senses,  
For he has tied knots his musk-scented curls.<sup>76</sup>

Description of the poet's own body and beauty: For example, Mihrī refers to herself as a "silver-bodied cypress," asserting the presence of the female body in poetic discourse. The celebration of one's own beauty is a recurring motif in Persian women's poetry.

Boldness of referring to her beloved, even by name: Mihrī breaks conventional taboos by explicitly mentioning her beloved, underscoring her poetic courage.

From her poetry, it can be inferred that Mihrī lived to an advanced age, experiencing the frailty of old age, a theme she addresses in one or two of her poems. In one poem, she uses metaphorical imagery such as *garībān-i javānī* ("the collar of

<sup>77</sup>Hidāyat, Gulzār-i jāvidān, 3:1470.

<sup>78</sup>Hidāyat, Gulzār-i jāvidān, 3:1470.

<sup>79</sup>Mushīr Salīmī, Zanān-i sukhān'var, 253.

<sup>79</sup>Muhammad Hakīm Āzar, "Tarz-i Bābā'faghānī" [Bābā'faghānī's method], Pazhūhish'hā-yi adab-i 'irfānī 3 (Gawhar-i gūyā) [Research in mystical literature], no. 9 (1388/2009).

<sup>80</sup>Hidāyat, Gulzār-i jāvidān, 3:1470.

<sup>81</sup>Mushīr Salīmī, Zanān-i sukhān'var, 254.

youth") and dāman'gīrī-i pīrī ("the shackles of old age") to reflect on her youthful regrets:

Had I known of the shackles of old age,  
I would not have surrendered the collar of my youth to sorrow.<sup>77</sup>

She also reflects on her financial independence, noting that regular pensions safeguarded her from being seduced by superficial charm or material wealth. In one verse, she critiques disingenuous affections motivated by dependence:

Do not be fooled by the kind words of the wealthy,  
For a child flatters its nurse only in pursuit of milk.<sup>78</sup>

It is commonly believed that the roots of the Indian style (sabb-i hindī) can be traced to the late AH 9th/15th and the early AH 10th/16th centuries, particularly in the works of poets such as Bābā'faghānī Shīrāzī.<sup>79</sup> However, even prior to his contributions, elements of this style are discernible in Mihri's poetry. Several of her verses may be regarded as early manifestations of this style of poetry, given their departure from the conventions of the Iraqi style (sabb-i 'irāqī), and their innovations, witticism, use of similitude equation (uslūb-i mu'ādilah), and imaginative, far-fetched imageries. For example:

The make-up of old people surpasses that of the youth,  
Restoration is necessary for ancient monuments.<sup>80</sup>

Had I known of the shackles of old age,  
I would not have surrendered the collar of my youth to sorrow.

Do not be fooled by the kind words of the wealthy,  
For a child flatters its nurse only in pursuit of milk.

I am so ablaze that, should I sigh,  
That sigh might carry me to the skies.<sup>81</sup>



In some cases, repetition generates a musical quality in her verse, as seen in phrases such as *hayf va sad hayf* (“alas, a hundred times”) and *chik chik* (“drop by drop”).

A quatrain is attributed to Mihrī in the *Tazkirah-i Āftāb-i ‘ālam’tāb*. Although it is unclear whether Jāmī ever met Mihrī in person, he lived during the same period and was associated with the Timurid court.<sup>82</sup> Jāmī is also known for his antagonistic poetic address toward Bījah Munajjimah,<sup>83</sup> a female astronomer and poet, to which Bījah responded with a satirical composition. Thus, it is not surprising that Jāmī may also have disparaged Mihrī:

That king of warriors, the lion of God,  
Was wounded by two (men named) ‘Abd al-Rahmān.  
One was the son of Muljam, the other, Jāmī  
The first struck with a sword, the latter with the dagger of his tongue.<sup>84</sup>

At times, Mihrī employs poetic exaggeration without introducing novel themes:

No night is shorter than the night of union with you  
The moment you lift your veil (*burqa’*), the sun begins to shine.

This verse raises the question: why did Mihrī use the word *burqa’* for the beloved? Does this suggest the beloved is a woman? It is important to note that historically, veils and masks were not exclusive to women. Men also wore them, often as symbols of nobility, modesty, or to shield themselves from harsh environmental conditions such as sun and sandstorms. For example, in the *Makhzan al-asrār* (The treasury of secrets), Nizāmī describes the Prophet Muhammad as “wearing the *burqa’* of Medina and the mask of Mecca.”<sup>85</sup> Thus, the use of *burqa’* in Mihrī’s verse should not be interpreted solely through a gendered lens.

Mihrī sometimes highlights the same themes using diverse rhe-

<sup>82</sup>Ma’ rufiyūn and Banī-Sa’īd, “Bar’risī-i fa’āliyat’ hā-yi Gawhar’shād-i Tīmūrī,” 115.

<sup>83</sup>Navā’ī, *Majālis al-nafā’is*, 350–51.

<sup>84</sup>Akhtar Hūglī, *Āftāb-i ‘ālam’tāb*, 662.

<sup>85</sup>Muhammad Rizā Turkī, “Ay Madanī burqa’ Makkā niqāb,” *Nāmah-i Farhangistān* 11, no. 2 (1390/2001): 42.

<sup>86</sup>He was Gawhar'shād's nephew.

<sup>87</sup>Navā'ī, *Majālis al-nafā'is*, 195. "Mas'ūd" here simultaneously refers to the lover's name and conveys the meaning of "fortunate," creating a layered wordplay: both addressing Mas'ūd and suggesting "look at my good fortune."

<sup>89</sup>According to another version of the story, on a holiday, as was customary, Mihrī visited the prince, who was seated in a tower of the palace. As her husband happened to pass by below, the prince smiled and pointed him out to Mihrī. In response, she spontaneously composed the aforementioned verse. See Hāshimī Sandilūyī, *Makhzan al-gharāyib*, 8.

torical strategies, including pluralization of proper nouns and layering of metaphor, simile, and analogy:

From your ruby (la'ī, symbolizing lips) has ruined Badakhshan,  
And your two agates (‘aqīq, symbolizing eyes) have brought  
Yemen to ruin.

Mihrī's poetic voice is marked by exceptional audacity, which remains rare, if not unparalleled, among women poets of the Persian literary tradition. She was endowed with beauty, intellect, and wit, and openly declared her refusal to remain emotionally or romantically engaged with her elderly husband. On at least two occasions, she saved her life through the power of her verse and left behind poetry that remains luminous to this day. According to one account:

It is said that Mīrzā Mas'ūd<sup>86</sup> had an affection for Mihrī and would occasionally express his fondness toward her. One day, at a time when Mīrzā Mas'ūd was intimately involved with Mihrī—Mīrzā was acting like any man and Mihrī was acting like any woman—by coincidence, Mawlānā Hakīm, Mihrī's husband, arrived and witnessed the scene with his own eyes. In order to divert his suspicion, Mihrī improvised the following verse on the spot:

I rose over the summit of the tower of my moon  
O Hakīm, behold the fortune of my Mas'ūd<sup>87</sup>

This verse is particularly remarkable for its use of celestial imagery and double entendre, composed spontaneously under pressure.<sup>88</sup> Though Mihrī found herself bound in a discordant marriage in her youth, she defied traditional constraints and challenged patriarchal norms that imposed restrictions solely on women. In one of her verses, she addresses her husband directly, boldly naming her beloved and employing linguistic ambiguity while simultaneously confronting her husband with poetic defiance.<sup>89</sup>



## Conclusion

Although only a limited number of verses attributed to Mihrī have survived, these fragments are sufficient to demonstrate that she was a gifted poet whose voice articulates distinctly feminine concerns. Her contributions cannot be overlooked in the history of Persian literature, as she is mentioned in several of the most significant tazkirahs (biographical anthologies).

Mihrī lived in Herat during the ninth century AH/fifteenth century CE, in the Timurid period, and was known to be a friend and companion of Gawhar'shād Baygum. While some later biographical sources situate her at the Mughal court in India as a companion to Nūr Jahān Baygum in the eleventh century AH/seventeenth century CE, this claim is contradicted by earlier sources composed prior to Nūr Jahān's birth. These earlier texts contain direct references to Mihrī, her poetry, and anecdotes concerning her life. On this basis, it can be asserted with confidence that Mihrī was affiliated with the court of Gawhar'shād Baygum, not that of Nūr Jahān.

Mihrī's poetry is structurally sound, thoughtfully composed, fluent, and marked by subtle wit. Her verses clearly reflect a female perspective. In at least five quatrains, she explicitly protests against forced marriages to elderly men and criticizes the inappropriate conduct of husbands toward their wives. She writes with remarkable boldness, unhesitatingly expressing themes related to her personal and intimate experiences.

Traces of the stylistic tendencies later identified with the so-called Indian Style (*sabk-i hindī*) can already be discerned in her poetry. She is reported to have composed a *Dīvān* modeled on the ghazals of Hāfiz, although only the opening verse of this collection has survived. Her use of literary devices is both refined and organic, lacking the artifice often seen in less accomplished verse. Her work exhibits many of the defining features of what has been termed the age of indiscretion or uninhibited

expression ('asr-i bī'pardah'gūyī), a period characterized by a more candid and emotive style of poetic expression.

