Spirit of the Sarangi

Zehra Jabeen Shah

This essay explores the *sarangi* within the tradition of Indian classical music and the social context of present-day Pakistan. As a current student of the *sarangi*, I am particularly interested in the mystical and spiritual elements associated with the instrument. I explore this predominantly through mythical tales, legends, and oral histories gathered from the only two professionally active *sarangi* players[1] of Pakistan: Gul Muhammad of Hoshiyarpur *gharana*[2] and Zohaib Hassan of Amritsari *gharana.* The essay focuses on the social life of the *sarangi*, a story in which it is a vessel and guide through which players act as messengers. I also investigate the trait of nurture associated with the gendering of the *sarangi* as female, and apply that to the nurturing roles of women in the two *sarangiyas'* musical journeys.

Zohaib Hassan is a seventh-generation *sarangi-nawaz* of Amritsari *gharana*, who currently resides in Lahore and follows in the footsteps of his grandfather, Hussain Bakhsh Khan Sahib. What makes Zohaib stand out — not just from *sarangiyas* of Pakistan but also of India, Nepal, and Bangladesh — is that he is the hereditary master of the four-finger technique,[3] a playing style unique to his *gharana*. Gul Muhammad, on the other hand, is a fifth-generation *sarangi-nawaz* of the Hoshiyarpur *gharana*, who currently lives in Karachi. He uses the three-finger playing style. Gul is Ustad Akhtar Hussain's son and grandson to well-known *sarangiya* Ustad Ghulam Muhammad.

For my inquiry, I take inspiration from Regula Qureshi,[4] who is one of a few female players of the *sarangi*. Qureshi is of Canadian origin and received her training from *sarangi* maestros in India and Pakistan. I hope that by giving written form to the oral knowledge and legends shared by the two *sarangiyas* mentioned, this essay will provide insight to readers who are otherwise at a far remove from the tradition and practices of the *sarangi*. As Qureshi says, "To convey this participatory dynamic is a major goal for me, since I see in it the very uniqueness of this oral culture."[5] Moreover, my writing shares the objective that Bates outlines for his essay:

> … my goal is not to provide a comprehensive overview or theory of the *saz*,[6] an instrument that (like most instruments) is grossly undertheorised. Rather, in order to explain the immense thing-power of the *saz*, I chose examples that demonstrate the heterogeneity of networks in which *sazes* have agency, and the multitude of attitudes towards and engagements with the *saz*… I also hope that this article will encourage others to publish their own *saz* stories, to expand our understanding of the social life of the *saz*.[7]

Spiritual Anecdotes

A society's narrative around an instrument and its community of practitioners is important for understanding the web of relationships in which it resides — relationships "between humans and objects, between humans and humans, and between objects and other objects."[8] A reimagining of organology within the field of ethnomusicology argues that the instrument is a living object or being. Instruments are protagonists of their stories who love and hate, break and make up, curse and laugh. Places such as instrument museums are mausoleums,[9] thereby being antithetical to their living condition. The instruments neatly curated behind glass windows and placed on wooden shelves in these places are considered dead. They are seen as relics of a dead musical past where the soul of the instrument was once awakened by the hands of the player.

Sue DeVale claims that organology's final destination is "to help explain society and culture", so that one could tap into the "essence" of other cultural traditions.[10] In that vein, she writes about "instrument-spirits as participants in rituals."[11] This idea is not new to the Indian classical music tradition. Within each *saz* and *gharana* resides a world of spirits and divine occurrences waiting to happen. Gul Muhammad also speaks about this phenomenon. He agrees that the *sarangi* has a story it is impatiently waiting to convey, and that because the *sarangi* is closer to the human voice than other musical instruments, it is only natural for it to speak.[12] The strings used in the sarangi are traditionally made of the gut of sheep or goats, and that is believed to bridge the gap between voice and instrument. *Sarangiyas* of the present — and past — prefer the traditional method of using gut strings as opposed to modern-day nylon equivalents, even though the former are more difficult to play with. This connection with 'voice' and 'spirit' invokes the vast range of spirituality experienced with, and by, the *sarangi* itself. Gul states that soul enters the *sarangi* once it is played, after which the player's soul also enters it. The two souls align and merge to bring about a sweet or melancholic melody. He emphasises that the instrument prior to being plucked is equivalent to a corpse; he must serenade and awaken it so it must live and return the favour to him. This is equated with the tradition of the *sarangi*-maker who births a *sarangi* in his workshop by making it from scratch.

Zakir Hussain in an interview[13] describes the spirituality of instruments:

> What I tell people is: try to experience the music a little bit, and if it actually excites you and makes you happy, then it has the potential to turn into a lifelong relationship. And it *is* a relationship. Every musical instrument has a spirit, and that spirit has to accept you. It's like in the film *Avatar*, when the Na'vi bond their hair to a horse or bird. That animal has to accept you as a friend before you can ride it. Only then can you fly the way you imagine yourself to. That's what music is all about. My own relationship with the *tabla* is such that we are both friends and lovers. We are together on this journey and every time I grow and find new shades in my musical expression, I find that the *tabla* is right there saying, "Okay, let's try this."

As Zakir Hussain talks of the instrument's spirit, so do the two *sarangiyas* of Pakistan. Zohaib Hassan narrates a personal life experience where his father and *ustad* got into a fight, which cost Zohaib his music lessons as well as his *ustad*. As he was in the initial stages of training, it was hard for him to keep up without a mentor. He stopped playing regularly and even began despising the *sarangi* since he was left with an untuned instrument, and didn't know what to do with it because he hadn't learnt the art of tuning yet. For weeks, Zohaib pleaded with his father to let him visit his *ustad*, even if just to have his *sarangi* tuned. His father did not budge and seemed so absolute in his decision that Zohaib thought his journey with the *sarangi* was over. Internally, however, his father was deeply worried for him and his *sarangi*. On the night of the final appeal, Zohaib made a prayer and went to sleep. The next morning, Zohaib's father woke up from a dream in which his own father, *sarangi-nawaz* Hussain Bakhsh Khan Sahib, came and said, "Don't worry, I will help Zohaib." Zohaib was shocked to discover that, after that day, he was able to tune the *sarangi* completely and all by himself. According to Zohaib, this is a clear case of the spirit of his grandfather guiding him.

For Gul Muhammad, however, *aamad*[14] is what truly guides and curates the playing experiences of a *sarangi-nawaz*. According to him, *aamad* enters a *sarangiya's* journey 40 to 50 years after one has dedicated their life to practising and playing. Gul labels this *aamad* as *ruhani ilm*, which translates to 'knowledge of a spiritual nature'. In this process of learning and acquiring knowledge, there enters a ray of light which cannot be seen; it can only be felt. He narrates his first spiritual and/or supernatural experience with the *sarangi* thus: he was alone, playing Raag *Puriya Dhanasare*e (an extremely sorrowful raag), without light, in the corner of his house. He was hours into practice when, suddenly, he saw the raag's *shakal* [face]. This terrified him and he instantly stopped playing, at which the face vanished. In this narration, it is important to note that when an Indian classical musician states that they saw the raag's 'face', they hardly mean it literally. This is part of the understood musical language where a raag's 'face' can come in any shape, form or colour. The face usually appears when the musician is sombre and deep into their practice, achieving a state similar to what is known as 'nirvana'.

A popular, deceased *sarangi-nawaz* of Pakistan, Hamid Husain, is known to have experienced the following:

> Practising for "real" is called *riyaz*.[15] I did six years of *riyaz*, while some do 12. During *riyaz* you do nothing but music. Your nourishment — that is, eating, sleeping — it [is] all music. In this way you do about 14 hours daily of music, practising, playing, often until you get into a transported state (*sama*). You can't stop… You delve deeply

> into the *raga* and you forget everything… I never got bored. Often I would kiss my fingers and embrace my instrument for the wonderful, great gift they are and the happiness they give.[16]

Further, the way in which both players chose and nurtured the *sarangi* can be seen as a sort of spiritual awakening. Both Zohaib and Gul extensively narrate how the hereditary instrument — that is, the *sarangi* — was not their first instrument of choice. For each, a stringed instrument from the other side of the world, the guitar, was their introduction to music. Zohaib's brothers also chose Western instruments. Zohaib's twin Sohaib (who currently plays the harmonium and accompanies Zohaib during classes and performances) had first gravitated towards the keyboard, while their youngest brother chose the drums. Zohaib, his brothers, and Gul all started playing music as teenagers.

Zohaib's journey as a guitarist ended soon when his uncle, Iftikhar, disapproved of it and pushed Zohaib's father to have him learn the family *sarangi* instead. Iftikhar went as far as insisting that he would pay for Zohaib's training. Zohaib was not willing. However, all that changed when he heard the *sarangi* being played for the very first time. A chord struck and he was not the same again. He broke into goosebumps and thought to himself, 'Oh my God, what is this thing?'[17] After that pivotal moment, he agreed to learn the *sarangi*. He states that this sudden change in his 'life path' was only possible in the way that "a child does not fear touching a snake." This metaphor might seem odd to the reader unfamiliar with the *sarangi*, but Zohaib's imagery hints at the association between the difficulty of mastering a *sarangi* and the animistic/spiritual qualities of a snake, in the context of the desert where the *sarangi* was originally played. Once the fear of mastering it is removed, the *sarangi* is understood, felt, and communicated with and that, according to *sarangiyas*, is the only real way to play it.

For Gul, the journey back to the *sarangi* was somewhat similar. At first, his main motivating factor was the immense respect his father, Akhtar Hussain, received as a regular *sarangi* player at the National Academy of Performing Arts (NAPA) in Karachi. After Gul and the instrument got well acquainted with one another, he found himself at a crossroads where he would try to leave the instrument but the instrument wouldn't leave him. "What have I done to myself?" he would scream in anguish. For Gul, befriending the *sarangi* took a long time, but it was a path he admits he would follow again if given another lifetime. The weeping sounds of the strings were so sweet and so bitter that all his pain would vanish. Despite the difficulty of mastering the instrument, neither player fell back on the easier stringed alternative, the guitar.

These accounts make clear that both players attained a spiritual awakening once they felt the soul of the *sarangi*, and therefore were not able to go back to its Western counterpart. Gul desperately tries to leave the *sarangi* but is unable to, attesting to the transformational and binding connection that ethnomusicologist Kevin Dawe describes: "musical instruments can transform minds and bodies, affecting states of mind as much as joints, tendons and synapses, ergonomics, and social interaction — the joy of playing musical instruments is a joy that comes from exhilaration felt at physical, emotional, and social levels."[18]

This speaks to another social dimension of the *sarangi*. There is an acknowledgement and even a blatant encouragement of 'friendship with pain'. Zohaib says:

> Roses also have thorns. If you want to touch pearls, you need to go into the ocean. To gain something precious, you need to endure pain… sweetness through pain. It is impossible to leave no marks on your fingers or body if you strive towards an instrument like the *sarangi* or sitar. It's the rule of nature.[19]

Where Zohaib encourages the merging of pain and pleasure, Gul states how he was initially unable to befriend pain and labels his early practice as not simply devoid of spirituality but an 'anti-spiritual' playing altogether. He hadn't yet "arrived";[20] he had not learnt the way a *sarangiya* enters the spiritual dimension that is integral to *sarangi* playing. To bring out the feel of a *sarangi*, Gul remarks, "one must befriend pain." There seems to be an unavoidable spiritual wealth that *sarangi* players inherit and consequently play with. It is one that guides the relationship between the *sarangiya* and their instrument.

The Gendered Sarangi

In the Indian classical music tradition, every instrument is assigned a gender which cannot change. The gender of the *sarangi* is female, so I occasionally refer to it with she/her pronouns in the essay. Zohaib Hassan also points out that she is called "*sarangi*" and "not *saranga*",[21] confirming her identity as female. Just as the *tabla* is male and the *Saraswati veena* is female, he explains, one can ascribe a female identity to the *sarangi*. Zohaib also goes on to say that the only way to befriend a *sarangi* is to make her your *saheli*.[22]

The *sarangi's* element is the desert and that is where she belongs. The spiritual passions of dwelling, wandering, and isolation that are found in the desert shape her. Zohaib narrates how these were the original traits of the *sarangi* and, over time, she took on a subcontinental aesthetic. The Indo-Persian Sufi musician, poet, and mystic, Amir Khusrau, is said to have invented the *sarangi*[23] in the desert, after which everyone adapted it to their own *gharana's rasa*.[24]

An instrument's pitch is one way to determine its gender.[25] Since the *sarangi* can be tuned from C sharp to F sharp, this wide range could suggest that she is female. The *sarangiyas* extend this female personification and describe the instrument as having a body and a personality that has particularly feminine traits. The body of a *sarangi* is divided into four parts — head, face, belly, and bottom — some of which can be considered feminine.

As described by both *sarangiyas*, and a third by the name of Khan Saheb Abdul Majid Khan of the Jaipur *gharana*,[26] traditionally the *sarangi* is seen as an 'accompanying' instrument rather than one which is played on its own.[27] In line with patriarchal notions that gender her female, the *sarangi* is expected to 'sacrifice her ego' in order for the singer to bask in the spotlight. Traditionally and historically, the vocalist is the most important performer of any musical gathering. *Sarangiyas* within the Indian classical music tradition further highlight the vocalist's significance and declare that the *sarangi*, as an accompaniment, must be female in nature. The *sarangi* is described as "adaptive" and "so perfect"[28] that she aids the *sarangiya's* performance by knowing exactly when to supplement the singing and respond to *sawaal jawaab*.[29] The *sarangi* is also a 'guiding spirit' and a 'humble companion' who must correct the vocalist when they miss a note or sing it incorrectly, almost acting how a 'good' mother or wife is expected to.

Gendering of instruments is not exclusive to the Indian classical music tradition, and goes back all the way to prehistoric times.[30] Gendered attribution is based on the perceived nature of the instruments, which are believed to either personify male or female spirits or 'abstract sexualities', as determined by the particular social context. For instance, instruments that were created from utensils used in the kitchen and around food were played only by women and were associated with women's music, whereas instruments used during warfare or hunting were attributed as male and mainly played by men.

In conversation with Zohaib and Gul, the presence of a musical environment with the care of women as its backbone is quite evident. I don't mean to create a myopic view of what it means to 'nurture' or 'support', but rather, offer an alternative acceptance of the role of the woman as a 'nurturer' within the current structures of limited female agency. Can we ask what it means to be female within this musical context? While questioning, can we re-own femininity? Is it possible to support the role of the nurturer or are the systematic divides at present too large, too complex of a matter? I don't have answers for these yet, but I still believe it is crucial to give voice to these perplexities. The following oral accounts illustrate these through the relationship between the *sarangi* and woman, and *sarangiya* and supporter.

I begin with the first case, where Gul Muhammad recounts his early childhood encounters with music through his grandmother.[31] When Gul was a boy, his *daadi* [paternal grandmother] would offer prayers early in the morning in the form of *ustayaan*, which is a form of song or singing.

She was the one who taught Gul's siblings and cousins how to sing and craft raags. Gul was a slow learner and was often criticised when unable to pick up the right notes: "You're a donkey! Idiot!" she would remark. Gul's eldest brother, however, was a keen learner and picked up the art as expected by their *daadi*. Unfortunately, that was not Gul's experience; his voice wouldn't match, so whenever his grandmother told him to sing, he would shy away and go out with his friends instead. Once he began his *sarangi* training, only then did he realise that his ear was already perfectly tuned. He attributes this skill entirely to his *daadi's* singing lessons, without which he would have been unable to pick up the *sarangi* as quickly as he did. His realisation comes with a tinge of regret though. He wishes he had been more present during those singing lessons.

Zohaib's mother played a similar role for him. When first starting out, Zohaib's *sarangi* strings would routinely break while playing, and it was his mother who would repair and replace them. Once, Zohaib's father told a wandering band of musicians that his wife re-strings his son's *sarangi*. The wandering band laughed at this preposterous claim; they thought it was not only ridiculous, but impossible. They believed that only a *sarangi-nawaz* could string a *sarangi* and no one else, let alone a woman. Zohaib's father, in a fit of both rage and pride, eagerly invited the band over that very second. This group of half a dozen male musicians arrived at their house and Zohaib's father ordered: "Break a string on your *sarangi* so that your mother can re-string it!" Zohaib did as he was told and tightened the string so much that it snapped under pressure. Zohaib's mother was put on the spot. She grabbed the coil of gut strings, arranged it over the instrument, mapped it neatly, cut the string at the right edges, and stitched it back on the *sarangi*. The musicians were shocked when they saw this and told Zohaib that with a mother like this, he would surely become a great *sarangi-nawaz* one day.

Zohaib's mother also possessed the talent to craft an entire *sarangi* bow from scratch. She was able to make the bow of the *sarangi* and effectively weave in horsehair, which many *sarangiyas* claim is difficult to manage. Again, the music community found this hard to digest as even Zohaib's *ustad*, Khawar Hussain,[32] had not acquired the skills to create a *guz* [bow]. When asked why no one believed his mother's capabilities, Zohaib replied, "because she was a woman." No one in Pakistan at the time knew how to make a bow, apart from *sarangi-nawaz* Faqir Hussain Khan, who passed this knowledge on to her because she was like a daughter to him. The process entails the following: once the horse's hair is shed, cleanse, compile, and carry it back home; burn it methodically; clean and comb the hair; stitch the hair in the frame of the bow, tighten, and finally, neaten. Zohaib's mother came from a family of tailors, so perhaps it is not surprising that she had the talent and wisdom to craft the *sarangi* bow and string.

In light of these oral narratives, we can think about the missing role of women as *sarangiyas* even as they continue to facilitate the musical journey of *sarangi* maestros. The *sarangi* itself

moves between vessel and guide, and in both of these guises it is strongly gendered as feminine. The patriarchal context in which the *sarangi* lives manifests itself in both these narratives. As Zohaib says,[34] for women to become professional *sarangi* players in Pakistan, "*jaan maarni paray gi*."

Notes

1. Locally known as *sarangi-nawaz,* and traditionally as *sarangiya*.
2. A stylistic tradition or lineage in North Indian classical music or dance.
3. The standardised technique for classical *sarangi* is playing with three fingers. Zohaib's *gharana* incorporates the pinky as the fourth finger.
4. "Master Musicians of India: Hereditary Sarangi Players Speak."
5. Qureshi, Regula. *Master Musicians of India*, 10.
6. Although Bates uses this in the context of Turkish instruments, *saz* in Hindi-Urdu translates to "an instrument" and is the definition I derive from this quote and essay.
7. Bates, "The Social Life of Musical Instruments," 375.
8. Bates, "The Social Life of Musical Instruments," 365.
9. Ibid.
10. DeVale, "Organising Organology," 366.
11. Ibid.
12. Gul Muhammad. Interview with the author, 18 May 2022.
13. Grillo, "In the Comfort Zone: A Conversation with Tabla Virtuoso Zakir Hussain."
14. Otherworldly wisdom.
15. Musical practice.
16. Qureshi, *Master Musicians of India: Hereditary Sarangi Players Speak*, 278.
17. Hassan, interview with the author, 30 April 2022.
18. Bates, "The Social Life of Musical Instruments," 368.
19. Hassan. Interview with the author, 30 April 2022.
20. Muhammad. Interview with the author, 18 May 2022.
21. He refers to the event of naming a baby, how names that end with an 'ee' sound make for stereotypically 'suitable' female names, as the 'aa'-ending sound does for names for boys.
22. The English translation loses its cultural meaning, but the closest is 'female friend'.
23. Hassan. Interview with the author. 30 April 2022.
24. Musical expression that translates closest to 'nectar', 'essence', 'taste', or 'flavour', referring to a particular aesthetic of sound, music, or an instrument that evokes emotion.
25. Libin, "Gender attribution," 1.
26. He was the disciple of legendary vocalist Alladiya Khan, who was also the founder of the Jaipur *Gharana*. Found in "Khan Saheb Ustad Abdul Majid Khan."
27. Traditionally, the sarangi is either played with a vocalist or with other *sarangis*, not solo.
28. "Khan Saheb Ustad Abdul Majid Khan."
29. Literally, question-answer. Refers to the improvisatory call-response playing among musicians.
30. Libin, "Gender attribution," 1.
31. Samaa Originals, "Karachi Kay Aakhri."
32. Ali, "On a Sad Note."
33. Hassan. Interview with the author. 30 April 2022.
34. This Urdu phrase means that you will have to make extraordinary effort; literally it translates to "you will have to kill yourself".

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