



ĠANI (ARTICLE 2)

ĠANI, MOLLĀ TĀHER KAŠMIRI (d. 1079/1668-9): the most famous Persian-language poet of the region of [Kashmir](#) in South Asia. *He practiced the “Speaking Anew” (tāza-gu’yi) stylistics of the ġazal that had arisen across the Persian world in the early 1500s. In its intricate deployment of kinds of syllepsis, paronomasia, oronym and amphiboly—collectively termed ihām—whose non-salient (ba’id) meaning or meanings the poet privileged over their salient (qarib) ones, his poetry constitutes a highpoint of the polysemy and semantic density characteristic of Speaking Anew.*

LIFE

A scholarly controversy has surrounded the probable date of Ġani’s birth, though it is certain he died in 1668-9 in Kashmir, most probably in the regional Mughal capital of Srinagar. Ġani’s near contemporary and later biographers had long believed that he had died in his youth (Rāšedi, pp. 968-969, 972, 974, 983; Nājibābādi, pp. 23-4). Naṣrābādi (Rāšedi, p. 968), Lodi (Rāšedi, p. 971), Āzād (Rāšedi, p. 980), Šafiq (Rāšedi, p. 983) and Gopāmavi (Rāšedi, p. 988) interpreted this youthful death as the evidence of the precociousness of Ġani’s Sufi and poetic accomplishments.

Ġani, as some of his early biographers attest (Rāšedi, pp. 969, 983, 990), appears to have spent all of his life in Kashmir though one of his quatrains (*robā’i*) complains of Mughal North India’s (*Hendustān*) heat (Ġani, 1984, p. 225), suggesting he traveled to that region. In Kashmir, he studied at the Madrasa-ye Qoṭbiya in Srinagar with the litterateur [Mirzā Moḥsen Fāni](#)



Kašmiri (d. 1670-71), who, in his turn, was known to have studied with Moḥebollāh Allāhābādi, a distinguished commentator of Ebn al-‘Arabi’s mystical teachings (Košgu, p. 348; Lodi, p. 161). This pedagogical affiliation could account for the recurrent formulations of Ebn al-‘Arabi’s theory of hierophany (*tajalli*) in Ġani’s poetry as well as in the preface to his *Divān* by his student and compiler, Moslem (Ġani, 1984, pp. 53-6). Ġani was also acquainted with some of the most famous Speaking Anew poets who had gathered in Kashmir in the courts of the region’s Mughal governors or accompanied the Emperor Šāhjahān (r. 1628-58) on his visits. Among these acquaintances were Šā‘eb-e Tabrizi (d. 1676), who passed through Kashmir in 1632 before returning to Iran; Abu Ṭaleb Kalim-e Kāšāni, the poet laureate at Šāhjahān’s court who spent the last seven years of his life in Kashmir and at whose death in 1651 Ġani composed a chronogram (Ġani, 1984, p. 249); Mollā Toḡrā, whom Ġani reviled in a short verse (Ġani, 1984, p. 234); and Moḥammad Qoli Salim-e Tehrāni (d. 1647).

Despite such evidence of his courtly connections, Ġani seems to have kept aloof from the Mughal court in Kashmir, since he appears nowhere in contemporaneous courtly chronicles. This is probably why one of the earliest reports on him in biographical dictionaries (*taḍkera*) characterizes him as a Sufi who refused the imperial summons to court, preferring his ascetic love of God to imperial service (Rāšedi, pp. 968-969). This characterization seems borne out by a letter by Ġani himself to an unnamed but probably courtly addressee, wherein Ġani confesses his inability to both “adorn the new bride of poetry” such that it would appeal to discerning litterateurs as well as “fill the sea/meter of the praise of the choicest of the lineage of nobility and liberality” (Ṭabāṭabā‘i-Eṣfahāni, pp. 339-40). It would thus appear that he practiced poetry in a physical location separate from the court but was routinely visited by poets who attended it. This exposure to courtly literary circles perhaps accounts for the popularity of his poetry among the Mughal elite and for Ġani’s own complaints across ten of his *ḡazal* distichs of the literary theft of his verses (Ġani, 1984, pp. 61, 63, 142, 143, 162, 165, 192, 205, 210, 210).

The critical edition of the *Divān* concludes with an untitled prose passage forty lines long wherein Ġani defends himself against a charge of literary theft (Ġani, 1984, pp. 257-59). The passage offers a rare window onto the relations between author and scribe in this literary culture. An acquaintance of Ġani who was studying a copy of ‘Abd-al-Qāder Badā‘uni’s chronicle, the *Montakab*



al-tavāriḳ, discovered in it a distich that had recently grown famous as Ġani's. The acquaintance alerted Ġani to this discovery. At this, Ġani resolved to compose no more poetry until his name was cleared of dishonor, for the distich was, he argued, his own. When Ġani discovered an older copy of the *Montaḳab al-tavāriḳ* and did not find the distich in question in it, he summoned the scribe who had made the allegedly incriminating copy of the chronicle. The scribe confessed that the original copy he had copied had not contained the distich. The scribe was debarred from literary assemblies, and Ġani—his name cleared of dishonor—concludes his piece by requesting his readers, who are explicitly addressed as practitioners of the Speaking Anew (*tāza-gu'yi*) stylistics of the Persian *ḡazal*, not to blame the poet for the scribe's fault when they suspected “the interpolation of topos-theft.”

Ġani's only other prose text is the afore-mentioned letter to an unnamed addressee who was probably a nobleman who expected Ġani to compose verse in praise of a member of the court. Ġani's defense of his inability to do so captures the tension that defined his social location as one that was caught between a Sufi aloofness from the court—an aloofness that may nonetheless have been as social in its hospice-setting as the court—and the court, where he had apparently found elite followers in Sufism as in poetry (Ṭabāṭabā'i-Eṣfahāni, pp. 339-40).

WORKS

The verse components of Ġani's relatively slim *divān* mostly comprise *ḡazals*, including several single distichs, followed by ninety-two quatrains (*robā'i*), two *maṭnavis*, one twenty-eight couplets long satirizing a barber and the other thirty-eight couplets long describing the winter in Kashmir, a three-couplet inter-linear graft (*taẓmin*) of a couplet by Ḥāfeẓ (d. 1398), a *ḡazal* fragment (*qeṭ'a*) commemorating the death of the poet Kalim-e Kāšāni, two separate *ḡazal* fragments in commemoration of the deaths of the poet Mir Elāhi and Eslām Ḳān, the governor of Kashmir, another *ḡazal* in description of winter, a fragment describing his bodily pain by personifying pain, and, finally, a couplet in condemnation of a barber.

The Dynamics of Ġani's Reception. The popularity of Ġani's poetry across what were, by his lifetime, the three cultural regions of Persian—Safavid Iran, Turān or Turkic Central Asia, and Hindustān or Mughal India—is evident both in the dispersal today of manuscripts of his *ḡazals* and *Divān* across these regions as well as in such reports as that of Šir Ḳān Lodi, who, in his



prosopography *Mer'āt al-kiāl* (1690-91), observes that “whatever arose from his brilliant nature is today rumored and repeated across Iran, Turān, and the region of Hindustān” (Rāšedi, p. 972). However, by the time Persian texts first came to be printed in mid-19th-century British India the Neo-Classical movement of the ‘Literary Return’ (*bāzgašt-e adabi*) in Iran had already discredited the kind of semantic density that Speaking Anew and Ġani excelled at. Ġani’s public memory after this period therefore largely survived in South and Central Asia. The mid-18th-century Indian-Iranian courtly competitions over literary competency in Persian transformed his memory into an index of the shifting literary valences of ethnicity.

Completing his *Kalemāt al-šo'arā* in 1703, Moḥammad Afzal Sarḳoš wrote in his entry on Ġani: “From the region of Kashmir, indeed from the land of India, nobody like him with such a superior imagination [*koš-kiāl*], subtle composition [*nāzok-band*], and topos-discovering [*ma'ni-yāb*] taste has arisen.” Sarḳoš also says of him in the same entry: “Most of his compositions deployed the technique [*tarz*] of *ihām*” (Rāšedi, pp. 970-971). He concluded his entry by recording second-hand a report that proved fateful for Ġani’s subsequent canonization. This report states that Šā'eb so envied a particular distich by Ġani (whose second hemistich is *dām ham-rang-e zamin bud gereftār šodam* “the net was of the same color as earth, so I became entrapped”) that he exclaimed: “If only all that I have composed in this lifetime He gave to that Kašmiri in exchange for this one distich.” Sarḳoš notes that he and a courtly poet both composed distichs on the basis of the topos (*ma'ni*) in Ġani’s. In this report, Šā'eb’s hyperbolic estimation of a distich by Ġani singles him out as “Kashmiri” as well as valorizing him for the virtue of poetic compression. This estimation of Ġani inaugurated eristic imitations of his distichs by Ġolām 'Ali Āzād Belgrāmi around 1752 and of his whole *Divān* by Gorbakš-e Ḥożuri around 1723 (Šafiq, p. 57).

In the mid-18th century, provoked by the disparagements of India’s Persian philology, poetry, and Indian-born litterateurs by the famous Iranian émigré intellectual and poet, Moḥammad 'Ali Ḥazin Lāhiji (d. 1766) (Ḥazin, 1954, pp. 92-5; Ḥazin, 1998, pp. 228-31), some defendants of Indian-born Persian-language poets responded by hyperbolically inflating reports of Ġani’s meeting with Šā'eb and, in particular, of Šā'eb’s anthologization of Ġani’s distichs in his personal anthology (*bayāż*). In fact, however, Šā'eb had copied no more than twelve of Ġani’s distichs into his personal anthology. The implication of these inflations was that if no less an Iranian poet than the great



Şā'eb could acknowledge, steal from and even submit to the Indian-born Ġani's poetic authority then such mid eighteenth century literary Iranian disparagers of Indian birth as Ĥazin could claim no authority by virtue of their birth. So, *Serāj-al-Din Kān-e Ārezu* claimed in his biographical dictionary *Majma' al-nafāyes* (1750-1) that Şā'eb had copied two hundred of Ġani's distichs into his personal anthology, praising the former for his fair-mindedness (Rāšedi, p. 978). In 1748, Mir Ĥosayn Dust Sambhali said in his *Tadkera-ye ĥosayni* that Ġani had himself selected a thousand distichs from among one hundred thousand in his *Divān* and, handing Şā'eb this selection, had sunk the remainder in water (Rāšedi, p. 977). In this anecdote Ġani rivals Şā'eb's reputation for copiousness and spontaneity of composition. In the 1770s, Qodratollāh Şawq declared in his prosopography *Takmelat al-šo'arā* that Şā'eb had copied a few of Ġani's distichs into his anthology and sunk the rest of Ġani's *Divān* into water, condemning Şā'eb's injustice (Ġani, 1984, p. 11). The implication here was that the period's most authoritative Speaking Anew poet, who was an Iranian, had risen to fame by maliciously ruining the prospects of an Indian one. However, as 'Ali Javād Zaidi, the editor of the 1984 edition of Ġani's *Divān* notes, neither of these events can have occurred, since Ġani never compiled his own *Divān* in his lifetime and it was his aforementioned student Moslem who, within a year of Ġani's death, gathered Ġani's dispersed verses, compiled them into a *Divān*, and wrote a preface to it (Ġani, 1984, p. 11-12).

Witness as he was to the mid eighteenth century disputation between Ĥazin Lāhiji and Kān-e Ārezu over the authority of Indian-born poets to practice exemplary innovations (*taşarrofāt*) in poetic Persian, Sambhali also introduced into the archive on Ġani a report that became, in the course of the twentieth century, a famous local legend in Kashmir formulating patriotic pride in locality. This report states that, after Şā'eb heard a Persian couplet by Ġani that contained a word in the Kashmiri language—*krāl-pan* for 'potter's thread'—he set out from Iran for Kashmir to ask Ġani its meaning (Rāšedi, p. 977). The 1984 critical edition of the *Divān* does not contain the reported distich. That Sambhali's report is improbable only confirms that in his text Ġani's memory and this apocryphal meeting with the Iranian Şā'eb served as evidence—counter to Ĥazin's ethnically biased contentions—of Indian poetic authority in Persian. The authorizing functions of this anecdote are corroborated by its conformity in plot to an equally apocryphal but better-known report from Şams-al-Din Aflāki's (d. 1360, Anatolia) *Manāqeb al-ārefīn* wherein Sa'di, on failing to understand a verse by Rumi, traveled to Anatolia to



query him on its meaning.

Through the second half of the nineteenth century, the debates related to this ethnic criterion for literary authority in Persian were mostly forgotten with the demise in India of Persian itself as a prestigious literary medium. However, since the death of Persian in India seems to have been inversely indexed in the explosion of Persian lexicography and commentary, Ġani's memory came to be re-evaluated in the Reformist terms of the Urdu literary criticism composed by the period's Muslim Reformists. Akbar Šāh Kān Nājibābādi, one such intellectual of Kashmiri origin, implied in his *Savānih-ye Mawlānā Ġani* (1919) that Ġani was an exemplary bourgeois Muslim subject in being an exception to his age's decadent late Mughal obsession with amorous topoi, since he deployed mystical topoi of spiritual poverty instead and refused to pay court to the Mughals (Nājibābādi, pp. 22-23).

In 1924 the poet and philosopher of Kashmiri origin, Moḥammad Iqbāl, related in his Persian *matnavi* *Payām-e mašreq* an anecdote originally illustrating Ġani's Sufi virtue of relinquishing attachment to personal property (Rāšedi, p. 990). In this anecdote an acquaintance asks Ġani why he leaves the door to his house open when he is not at home and closes it when indoors. Ġani replies that, since he is the only valuable commodity the house contains, he closes the door when at home and leaves it open when not. Iqbāl, who contributed to his period's worldwide consolidation of the popular and superficial dichotomy between West and East as corresponding, respectively, to materialism and spirituality, assigned this originally Sufi memory of Ġani the historically new and exemplary Reformist significance of Eastern spirituality.

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