

AIPS Short-Term Research Grant Project Proposal

My research unearths the particularities of the admission, experience, and reception of women poets in the largely male-dominated world of Urdu poetry from the nineteenth century onwards. I examine the patronage processes, literary networks, and socio-political transformations that undergirded women's participation in the Urdu poetic sphere in colonial India and the state of Pakistan. While scholars have studied certain isolated aspects of women's poetic composition in Urdu, they have not researched the *longue durée* history of women's participation in Urdu poetics in any serious fashion. I begin my examination in the nineteenth century, which was seminal in the construction and canonization of Urdu literary history and in cementing a marginal place for women within mainstream narratives. Through a textual study of biographical compendia of Urdu women poets, called *tazkirahs*, and periodicals of the time, I examine how women poets were cast in specific, reified molds. The *tazkirahs* in particular are neglected sources in English and Urdu scholarship on Urdu poetry and provide evidence for how male litterateurs of the nineteenth century created the standard templates with which women poets, their personalities, and their poetic oeuvre were analyzed. Urdu women poets who followed in the early twentieth century and beyond were forced to contend with these hegemonic notions in their writings and in the physical setting of the poetic assembly, or *musha'irah*. I examine how these women poets engaged with the enduring legacy of nineteenth century representations and challenged the aesthetic and genre restrictions that were placed on them. Specifically, I am interested in the strategies women poets utilized to break out of the marginal niche assigned to them in the male-dominated Urdu sphere, the particular patronage networks that sustained their textual and performative participation, and their allies in the world of Urdu literature. I wish to explore how Urdu women poets gained access to the *musha'irah*, and how their involvement in this public medium shaped the perception and reception of their poetry. My research crafts a history of Urdu poetry through the experience of the women poets who were relegated to the sidelines and fought to carve a space for themselves within the Urdu literary milieu. It captures the diverse historical and literary lineages Urdu women poets situated themselves within despite the narrow space allotted to them, and that spanned not only the Urdu cultural complex but the worlds of Persian and European literatures, global feminist theory, and political resistance.

I am applying for an AIPS Short-Term Research Grant to fund three months of archival and ethnographic research in Lahore, Islamabad, and Karachi. In this time, I will gather the *tazkirahs* and periodicals that form the essential core of my primary sources. In Lahore, I will access the archives of the Punjab Public Library, the Government College Library, and the Punjab University Library. In Islamabad, I will extract sources from the Ganj Bakhsh library at the Iran-Pakistan Institute for Persian Studies and the National Archives. In Karachi, I plan to research at the Anjuman-i Taraqqi-i Urdu, the Mushfiq Khwaja Library and Research Centre, the Bedil Library, and the Ghalib library. Additionally, I will conduct ethnographic interviews with poets Zehra Nigah (1937-) in Karachi and Kishwar Naheed (1940-) in Islamabad. These conversations will be invaluable in helping me construct the world of Urdu poetry through the eyes of women poets who lived through and were seminal figures in the feminist movement to center women's voices in Urdu poetry. This research in Pakistan will allow me to gather the primary sources I require to return to Austin and begin the dissertation writing process. My dissertation will open up the world of Urdu poetics, aesthetics, and literary history through the experiences of its subaltern participants.