Words persist in the unlikeliest of places: in dark, unlit rooms, in the wilderness of decay, and in memory. The following excerpt is all that remains of an unfinished manuscript - written by Talatum “Adambezar” Khatun, *b. 1896 in Lucknow – that defies and complicates traditional conceptions of genre. Khatun was the originator of a style termed *Adab-e-Awr, † as exemplified by the fragment, which weaving history, poetry, memoir, and riffs on etymology to seamlessly produce an avant-garde and frankly, bizarre text. Little is known of Khatun’s life, except that she appears to have been somewhat of a rabble-rouser with no end in mind beyond the purpose of shock. She learnt English by making use of her father’s collection of dictionaries – he was a publisher – and through a line of tutors, each of whom left her house more exasperated than the last. Based on what we currently know, Khatun’s life is difficult to tell; difficult to determine; difficult to chart.

However, by way of detail, history furnishes three yellowing news reports from *The Pioneer*, the first of which places Khatun at the All India Ladies Conference in 1922. In an assembly of 400 women, Khatun – stifled by talk about definitions of purdah and the intricacies of inheritance – sprinted through the hall joyously screeching, “An al Haq! An al Haq!” while lobbing leaflets at passersby that contained a hagiography of Hazrat Babajan. Given the meagre information at our disposal, it is impossible to make a definitive statement about Khatun’s interest in Sufism. Additionally, an unsubstantiated anecdote claims that she spat on the Irish suffragette and Theosophist, Margaret Cousins, who was instrumental in arranging the conference. A second report from 1932 claims that Khatun was charged under a public nuisance clause, because she recited a rekhti and set her burkha on fire. The poem contained a preamble that denigrated the seminal practitioners of the genre (Insha, Rangin, Juraat, Jan Sahib and Qais) and declared their vision of womanhood myopic and false. The report also states that Khatun subverted the conventions of the chaptinama and roared a poem about her love for another poet, a courtisan, named Jahanara. Unfortunately, we have been unable to find any record of this poem. The final report places Khatun outside the Amir-ud-Daula Public Library in 1939, where she was burning novels written by a prominent writer and reformist, Nazar Hyder. Khatun castigated the heroines of the novels - *Akbartunstra Begum* (1910), *Surayia* (1930), and *Najma* (1939) – as too respectable for her liking. She implored witnesses, “Awr apnao, ashraf ko bhagao!” These reports and some correspondence constitute the sum total of information about Khatun that is available at present.

The following fragment is Khatun’s anthology of *Adab-e-Awr*, an attempt to create a history through poetry of aberrant and deviant women writers in India. The entirety of the manuscript contained entries of fifty different women and was incomplete at the time of Khatun’s death. Our current understanding of the intended manuscript is that each page contained two entries on different women and that these entries were kept distinct by a middle column through which a poem about women snakes through. The existing excerpt contains two entries on Princess Zeb-un-Nissa and the courtisan Mah Laqa Bai. Zeb-un-Nissa’s takhallus is Makhfi (The Hidden One) and her collection of poems *Diwan-i-Makhfi* contains both ghazals and ruba’is. Mah Laqa Bai’s takhallus is Chanda (Moon) and her poetry was published under the title *Gulzar-e-Mahlaqa*, which is a collection of ghazals. Both texts were published posthumously as the public prefers its poets dead than alive. The entry on the second page is devoid of hints that point to a specific historical subject, and at one point Khatun briefly addresses the reader and herself. In a Lacanian moment, Khatun embodies the notion of dugana, a mirroring of the self, as she taunts the reader, “You cannot imagine me.” This theory is given credence by the fact that the entry descends into a repetitive and self-reflexive refrain, perhaps a commentary on the difficulty of biography, poetry, or any form of story-telling. Towards the end, Khatun loses the plot as any unity unravels into echoes.

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* She shortened her name to T.A. Khatun in correspondence. Adambezar, which means misanthrope and can arguably be interpreted as misandrist, is Khatun’s takhallus.
† Adab means respect, etiquette, and literature, while awr is the Arabic root of Awrah or Aurat, which means defectiveness, blemish, imperfection, nakedness. Thus, we can think of Khatun’s style in a variety of ways, including but not limited to the literature of nakedness or the etiquette of imperfection.
Hidden away in a tower unbidden I speak, I scream, I hiss, I despair because protest remains my power, and I was made for trouble, from turbid waters, muddied at the root, and awry from the beginning, I wonder if every life is condemned to imperfection, faultiness, and deficiency from birth or if these are the tall tales men tell themselves to fall asleep at night and to stay elevated in their seats, slaves to the throne, unable to keep quiet, they boast of hunts, conquest, and conflict, and of their unfaithful lovers, their unquiet lovers, their undeserved lovers, and their ungrateful lovers, and reduce us to mere adornment when we are in fact unhinged, unruly, unsung for so long that all that’s left to do is roar, and screech, and shriek, and cackle, and heckle at those that support our imprisonment including our fathers, and our husbands, and our lovers, and our brothers, and our cousins, and our sons, and even our friends who despite secluding and sequestering us, forget such spaces steam with subversion and sedition, slowly and steadily because in the women chitchat, spitfire, and hurtle in ways unfathomable to others and with daggers swashbuckle and protect us from the prying eyes and the noise of the city, all the heat of the city, because when I was young, I absorbed all the noise of the city, all the heat of the city, all the joy of the city, and now all this gamut of sound and light flows through my veins throbbing and pulsating, and some days I feel I’d burst with all the motion inside me, and that is why I scamper-scuttle-scurry, destined to hurry, for the rest of eternity, with lightness and levity and burn my effigy.

Around a circle-orbit-surround but I break from the circuit and hurdle restless-errant-rootless because the four walls of a house could never contain my multitudes, I spill out of nooks and crannies, flooding and illuminating every corner, and this is the story of my celestial self, my journey as a moonfaced-mercurial-mundivagant poet, running amok in the streets of Hyderabad, leaving evanescent verses in my wake that children try and catch as they shimmer-gleam-glimmer for what am I if not the supreme extravaganza-ostentation, what am I, if not a revelation for those who look at me and are driven mad and ecstatic, but gaze at your own peril, mere mortals, poor mortals, hapless mortals, they grasp and they gasp as I buzz-careen-whizz past them, evading death effervescently since my birth, my mother, she paid a red ransom at a مزار while death briefly held me hostage, but I babbled-gurgled-bubbled in my mother's womb, creating merry havoc, alerting her to the danger destined for me, reciting verses in jabber-tongue, cherubic churrings of the unborn young, willing myself into this world, because there’s no other way to be, to be, to I sing, I dance, I recite, I write, I right infelicities with words because they allow us to weave our way out of misery, provide brief respite-distraction-delay from the inevitable decay that will befall us all, because I was born with a god-shaped hole in my heart that I chose to fill with every bit of life that I could find: walk-talk-shock, live-love-loathe, but let me tell you a little secret, an obvious one, I can’t stop moving, because when I was young, I absorbed all the noise of the city, all the heat of the city, all the joy of the city, and now all this gamut of sound and light flows through my veins throbbing and pulsating, and some days I feel I’d burst with all the motion inside me, and that is why I scamper-scuttle-scurry, destined to hurry, for the rest of eternity, with lightness and levity and burn my effigy.
they wrenched me out after they cut my mother open as I’d wrapped the umbilical cord around my neck as one ties a noose in order to not fall loose and from the first I inspired compassionate clucks at the end of complaints to my mother who was beside herself with what to do with me and my abundance so it only made sense that by the time I could write a sentence it was the shape of a poem I’d written about the time I began bleeding and all the girls pointed at me with shrieks and exclamations forming an echo that reverberates in my brain when I’m tired and my sister panicked and took me home because my شلوار was a muddied red because real blood is never bright but dull and my mother was mortified to see her daughter draw so much attention even if it was inadvertent and she unleashed a barrage of words all rooted in the prefix of negation as she characterized my excess as unseemly undignified untoward unabashed unrepentant and that was the first time I felt unloved and unholy and unable to understand fully what prompted such vitriol especially now that I regard blood as a banal fact of life and neither worthy of worry or veneration but documentation at best and so from a budding poet I became a bloody poet, and what if I were to show you my person, my poems, snipped of a bejeweled idiom, the cups of wine spilt, the flowers wilted, and the bloody Beloved, vanquished and vanished, because I cannot imagine me

and I stupefy and stymie your understanding of what it means to be, and what if there is a third a fourth a fifth or infinite ways to be to being to becoming to belonging to be to being to becoming to belonging to be to being to becoming to belonging to be to being to becoming to belonging to be to being to becoming to belonging to be to being to becoming to belonging to be to being to becoming to belonging to be to being to becoming to belonging to be to being to becoming to belonging to be to being to becoming to belonging to be to being to becoming to belonging to be to being to