

Transvestic Words?: The *Rekh̄ti* in Urdu

The assumption of the female point of view and narrative voice—the assumption of linguistic and narrative female “subjectivity”—in no way lessens ... the fundamental elision of the woman as subject. On the contrary, it goes one step further in the total objectification of woman.

—Susanne Kappeler¹

THE *rēkh̄ti* is a curious genre of poetry in Urdu. Historically, the word has come to refer to a body of verse written in an exaggerated “feminine” voice, full of linguistic, social and bodily details specific to women.² Written almost exclusively by men, its audience too has always been overwhelmingly male.³ Scholars of Urdu literature agree that the name

¹ *The Pornography of Representation*, p. 90.

² The first exclusive study of *rēkh̄ti* was *Tazkira-e Rēkh̄ti* by Saiyid Tamkīn Kāzīmī—date of publication not known, and long out of print—which I was not able to consult. Of the several more recent books, I found Khalil Aḥmad Ṣiddīqī’s *Rēkh̄ti kā Tanqīdī Muḥāli‘a* (henceforward referred to as *Muḥāli‘a*) the most useful; it is also the most comprehensive. Other relevant books, not necessarily mentioned in the notes, are listed in the bibliography.

³ There is, to my knowledge, no written record that suggests that the *rēkh̄ti* was widely read by women, either of the upper classes or of the courtesan society. As for female *rēkh̄ti* poets, I have come across mention of only three. The first, Naubahār “Zalīl,” a maidservant of Prince Sulaimān Shikōh, has only two verses to her name (*Muḥāli‘a*, p. 380). The second, “Bēgam,” a “temporary wife” (*mamtū‘a*) of Vājid ‘Alī Shāh, is described by ‘Abdu ‘l-Ghafūr Naṣṣākh as “having expertise in singing.” Naṣṣākh seems to have known her; he also mentions that she mostly wrote in the *rēkh̄ti* form and sent him five verses for inclusion in his *tazkira*. None of the thirty-seven other women poets mentioned by him—most

rēkhtī was coined by the eighteenth-century poet Raṅgīn to designate certain verses that he wrote for the entertainment of his patron, Mirzā Sulaimān Shikōh, a Mughal prince then living in exile in Lucknow.⁴

Sa'adat Yār Khān, Raṅgīn (1755–1835),⁵ was trained by his father to be a soldier of fortune, but he mostly earned his living as a trainer and trader of horses, or as a poet/courtier at various places. He eventually organized his copious writings into nine books, including two *divāns* of conventional ghazals, one of heterosexually explicit verses, and a fourth of *rēkhtīs*. In the introduction to the latter, Raṅgīn noted that in Delhi he used to patronize *khāngīs* a great deal, and always paid much attention to their speech.⁶ Consequently, he came to know their idiom well and composed verses in it, calling them “*rēkhtī*”—as opposed to “*rēkhta*,” which was the term then commonly used to refer to the Urdu ghazal and also the language. More telling, perhaps, was the title that he gave to that collection: *Āngēkhta* (the aroused [verses]). The thematic contents of Raṅgīn’s “aroused” verses may be summarized as follows: adulterous sex between men and women; sex between women; lustful women; quarrelsome women; jealous women; women’s superstitions and rituals; women’s exclusive bodily functions; women’s clothes and jewelry; and a variety of

of them courtesans—wrote in that manner. (*Sukhan-e Shu'arā'*, p. 573.) Raṅgīn himself quotes one *rēkhtī* by an alleged female *shāgird* of his—he gives only her *takhalluṣ*, *Bēgham*—in his anecdotal book, *Majālis-e Raṅgīn*. He claims that her *rēkhtī* was a flirtatious rejoinder to some of his own verses. This could be merely a poetic conceit. (*Majālis-e Raṅgīn*, pp. 70–1.)

⁴Mirzā Sulaimān Shikōh arrived in Lucknow from Delhi in 1790 and resided there as a guest of the Navabs of Avadh till sometime in 1828, when he left for Kasgunj and then for Agra, where he died in 1837. See Saiyid Kamalu 'd-Dīn Ḥaidar, a.k.a. Saiyid Muḥammad Mīr Zā'ir, *Tavārīkh-e Avadh*, vol. I (Lucknow: Naval Kishore Press, 1907), p. 280. The prince also patronized Ṣāhib Qirān, the most notorious poet of sexually explicit verses in Urdu. See footnote 36 below.

⁵The only major study of Raṅgīn is Ṣābir 'Alī Khān's *Sa'adat Yār Khān Raṅgīn*. Not all of Raṅgīn's poetic works have yet been published. Autograph manuscripts of his nine books are in the collection of the British Library, London.

⁶*Khāngī*. “*parda-nishīn* [i.e., purdah-observing] women who surreptitiously engage in prostitution in their homes” (Saiyid Aḥmad Dehlavī, *Farhang-e Āṣafīya*).

mundane events in the domestic life of women.⁷

Inshā'u 'l-Lāh Khān, Inshā (1756–1817),⁸ a polyglot, multi-talented poet, who also wrote many *rēkhtīs*, was a close friend of Raṅgīn. In *Daryā-e Latāfat*, his delightful book on the Urdu language, Inshā has a testy old Delhiite living in Lucknow decry the quality of local poets and poetry, including the following on Raṅgīn: “Because he is an avid patron of prostitutes [*randī*], Raṅgīn’s mind has taken to vulgarity and lewdness [*shubudpan*]. Consequently, putting aside *rēkhta*, he has invented *rēkhtī*, hoping that young women of good families would read his verses and fall for him and that he would then ‘blacken his face’ with them.” Elsewhere in the same book, Inshā is only slightly more politic as he again credits Raṅgīn with the invention of the *rēkhtī*.⁹

The term “*rēkhtī*” may indeed have been coined by Raṅgīn, but contrary to his and Inshā’s claims, the kind of verse it denoted was not his invention.¹⁰ Several poets had already written similar verses in Bijapur and Hyderabad. In fact Raṅgīn may have come across their verse during his many travels or even while in Delhi, before his arrival in Lucknow around 1789. Both Khalīl Aḥmad Şiddīqī and Badī' Ḥusainī list several poets of the Deccan who preceded Raṅgīn, and suggest that the verses of one of them, Muḥammad Şiddīq, Qais (d. 1814?)—a slightly older con-

⁷How these matters were considered “entertaining” in the Urdu milieu of the late eighteenth century, and why they are seen in the same light even now, were perhaps the primary questions that triggered this paper.

⁸Inshā has deservedly received more attention than Raṅgīn. Most of his prose and poetry is now available in carefully edited editions.

⁹Inshā, *Daryā-e Latāfat*, pp. 96–7. The second quotation is found on p. 171, but it leaves out a sentence about Raṅgīn’s sexual proclivity. The original Persian is quoted by Badī' Ḥusainī (*Dakan Mēn Rēkhtī kā Irtaqā'*, p. 27), and may be translated: “...Raṅgīn ... who is the noblest in friendship and in the manly art of soldiering, and who long rode the charger of his ambition in the field of virility [*bāb*], has had much experience with the women of purdah [*zanān-e pardānīshīn*]. He has written a few pages on their language, and also a volume of verses in that language. He is the inventor of the *rēkhtī*....”

¹⁰Not only is Raṅgīn’s claim to have invented the *rēkhtī* on his own quite doubtful, even the special glossary attributed to Raṅgīn by Inshā is not his. Imtiāz 'Alī Khān 'Arshī compared Raṅgīn’s text with a similar compilation by Sirāju 'd-Dīn 'Alī Khān, Ārzū (1687?–1756), the famous grammarian and lexicographer, and found Raṅgīn’s list to be a literal translation of Ārzū’s findings. (Yaktā, *Dastūru 'l-Faṣāḥat*, Introduction, p. 2. footnote 1.)

temporary of Raṅgīn—could have provided the inspiration for Raṅgīn’s alleged invention.¹¹ Neither, however, credits Qais with inventing the *rēkhtī*. That distinction, according to them, belongs to Saiyid Mirān, Hāshimī (d. ca. 1697), who spent most of his life in Burhanpur and Bijapur.¹² Hāshimī was not attached to the Adil Shahī court; he did, however, have many patrons among the nobility. Reportedly he was blind, though perhaps not from birth.

Before Hāshimī, the ghazal in Dakani was written in what we might roughly call two modes: the “Persian” and the “Indic.” In the “Persian” mode, the poet used a masculine voice for himself, and addressed a beloved who could be male or female. (This mode later gained exclusive dominance in the Urdu ghazal in all parts of India.) In the “Indic” mode, on the other hand, the poet/lover adopted a feminine voice for himself, while addressing a beloved who was always male. Dakani poets freely used the two modes, frequently using both in the same ghazal. In either case, the dominant themes for them were love—mystical or carnal—and its pains and pleasures, and not the topics mentioned earlier as peculiar to the *rēkhtī*.

Hāshimī seems to have done two new things: (1) he added the domestic life of the women of élite households to the thematic range of his ghazals, and (2) he made the language of the “Indic” mode replete with a peculiarly feminine vocabulary. His published *divān* contains 305 ghazals, out of which 240 are identical in content with what later came to be called *rēkhtīs*. Significantly, Hāshimī does not separate the latter into a distinct group; in fact he frequently has the “*rēkhtī*” and “non-*rēkhtī*” verses in the same ghazal. But he is definitely aware of the difference between his new verse and the ghazal in the so-called “Indic” mode. In one *maqtaʿ* he has his poetic persona declare: “*diyē haiñ Hāshimī ʿizzat hamāri ūī kī bōlī kūñ*,” (“Hāshimī has given dignity to our *ūī kī bōlī*”), *ūī* being an exclusively feminine exclamation of surprise. In a couplet in

¹¹ *Muṭāliʿa*, pp. 237–8; Ḥusainī, p. 138 ff. Ḥusainī details the remarkable similarity between some of the *rēkhtīs* of the two poets. Qais’s *divān* of *rēkhtīs* has not been published, but three manuscripts are available at Hyderabad. In one there is a statement to the effect that the poet used “the idiom of the vivacious [*shōkh*] *bēgams* of the imperial palaces of Shahjahanabad.” Qais clearly was trying to make his wares appear more “exotic” to his patrons.

¹² Eḥsānu ’l-Lāh’s is the only full-length study of Hāshimī. Jālibī also has a long section devoted to this poet (pp. 354–69). Ḥafīz Qatīl’s edition of Hāshimī’s verse is quite dependable.

another ghazal he says, “*bōlē hai khūb bhōtic ghazlān bhī kai zanānī*” (“... you have also composed many fine *zanānī* (feminine) ghazals”). Elsewhere in the *divān*, however, he refers to his compositions simply as ghazals. No contemporary of Hāshimī seems to have emulated him.¹³

It should be underscored here that it was not just having a female narrative voice that differentiated the *rēkhtī* from other genres, for that alone could be true of any number of ghazals written in Dakani that are now described as being in the “Indic” mode. (In fact, in many verses of Hāshimī and Inshā we can discern a male addressing a female.) Rather, the chief distinguishing feature was the so-called “feminine-ness” of its vocabulary and themes. That becomes clear from the definition set forth by Aḥad ‘Alī Khān Yaktā, who finished his *taḥkīra* in 1834, not too long after Raṅgīn and Inshā had popularized the *rēkhtī* in Lucknow: “*Rēkhtī* is a kind of poetry in which only the speech and idioms of women are used and only those matters are mentioned that happen between women or between a woman and a man. Further, it must not contain any word or phrase that is exclusive to men.”¹⁴

Additionally, on the basis of our own readings of the *rēkhtīs* of Hāshimī, Raṅgīn, and Inshā, we may posit three other differences between the *rēkhtī* and the *rēkhta*, the conventional ghazal, of which the former was implied by Raṅgīn and Inshā to have been the “feminine” form.

(1) Compared to the usually multi-valenced and/or symbolic language of the ghazal, the language of the *rēkhtī* is almost crudely realistic, and devoid of any ambiguity or multiplicity of referents. Its meaning is fixed.

(2) In the ghazal, the averred protagonists are never named; they remain simply “the lover,” “the beloved,” and so forth. In the *rēkhtī*, however, proper names may be used, though only in a non-specifying manner. Interestingly, this also happens in the *hazl*, i.e., in sexually explicit humorous poetry—for example in such verses of Raṅgīn and Ṣāḥib Qirān—suggesting that there could be some shared goals or intentions underlying the two genres.

(3) Whereas in the ghazal the object of the lover’s passion is celebrated and idealized, there is in the *rēkhtī* no grand passion and, consequently, no idealization of the desired object either. In fact the *rēkhtī*

¹³According to Khalil Aḥmad Ṣiddīqī, Hāshimī found some followers only much later in Hyderabad, one of them being the above-mentioned Qais, whose verses, he argues, provided Raṅgīn with his model.

¹⁴Yaktā, *Dastūru l-Faṣāḥat*, “Text,” p. 97.

often seems to mock or denigrate the object of desire.

Only one more major poet needs to be mentioned to conclude this historical section: Mīr Yār ‘Alī, Jān Ṣāḥib (1810–1886). Born in Farukhabad, he grew up in Lucknow and also spent much of his life there.¹⁵ After the dissolution of the kingdom of Avadh in 1856, he briefly lived in Bhopal and Delhi before eventually settling in Rampur, where he enjoyed the patronage of the local navab. In contrast to the earlier masters, Jān Ṣāḥib wrote exclusively in the *rēkhtī* mode. He, however, modified and widened its thematic parameters with great skill and imagination. He minimized, if not entirely discarded, the subject of lesbian sex, highlighted the life of married women and their relationships with members of their extended families, made comments on life outside the confines of the household and, like Raṅgīn, wrote several other types of topical poems in the language of the *rēkhtī*.

Subsequent *rēkhtī* poets, including our own contemporaries, have modeled themselves after Jān Ṣāḥib. With the passage of time, the use of sexually explicit language and the mention of lesbian sex has disappeared completely; instead, there now appears an increasing concern with social and political issues and a somewhat sympathetic view of women. But an exaggerated, presumably “feminine” voice still remains its distinctive feature, as does its avowed function as “entertainment.”¹⁶

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The thematic developments in the *rēkhtī*, from Hāshimī to Jān Ṣāḥib and later, may be summarized as follows:

Hāshimī: wrote conventional ghazals in both the “Indic” and “Persian” modes, sometimes even in the same ghazal; placed his *rēkhtī* and conventional ghazals in the same *dīvān*; while mainly employing “realistic” language in his *rēkhtīs*, also made some use of conventional “symbols”; displayed a didactic intention by offering advice on domestic behavior to women; made fun of the “peevish” woman, but quite infrequently;¹⁷ and mentioned only heterosexual acts. Examples:

¹⁵Jān Ṣāḥib’s *dīvān* was published in his life in 1845, but that edition is not extant. Even the carefully edited, but expurgated, editions put out by Niẓāmī Badāyūnī, in 1923 and in 1927, are now hard to come by.

¹⁶Khalīl Aḥmad Ṣiddīqī brings the story to the 1920s. Later poets are mentioned by ‘Abbāsī.

¹⁷This peevish woman will be discussed in more detail below.

*khāvind kī apnē ai nan^hi sēvak hō nit sēvā karō
har kis kī sunkar bāt čup nā kar nashar shēvā karō*

You're your husband's maid, little girl, so serve him constantly.
Don't spread gossip for nothing—make that a habit.

*onū āvēn tō pardē sōn ghārī b^har b^hār baiṭ^hūngī
bahāna kar-ke mōtiyan kē pirōtē hār baiṭ^hūngī*

If he comes I shall sit outside for a moment, unveiled, pretending
that I was stringing pearls into a necklace.

*ajī main pēt tē hūn č^hōrō mērī pēshvāz kā dāman
hōēgā ghōr zulum muj^h par, judā hōnē sē dartī hūn*

Hey, let go of my gown! I'm pregnant. It will be a terrible
thing—I'm scared I may lose the baby.

*laṭāpaṭ mēn tūṭē haiñ kōi yū band dēk^hē tō hai mushkil
bičārī sās miskīn hai nanad dēk^hē tō hai mushkil*

The ties of my gown got torn in the tussle—it would be awful if
someone sees. My mother-in-law is harmless, but it would be
terrible if my sister-in-law notices.

*kahā kyā 'aib hai bōlō jō sīnā hāt^h sōn č^hīnē kā
kahī main jī-ic^h dūngī hō jō lēngē nāōn sīnē kā*

I said, "What's the harm if I touch your breasts?" She replied, "I'd
kill myself if you'd even mention my breasts."

Qais, Raṅgīn, and Inshā: wrote conventional ghazals only in the
"Persian" mode;¹⁸ used only "realistic" language in their *rēkhtīs*; separately
organized their *rēkhtī* and conventional ghazals; displayed no didactic
intention, aiming only to "entertain"; made conspicuous fun of the
"peevish" woman; and mentioned both lesbian and heterosexual acts.
Examples:

*kāhē kō pahmūngī, bājī, main tum^hārī aṅgiyā
ēk sē ēk mērē pās hai b^hārī aṅgiyā (Qais)*

Why should I wear your bodice, sister? I have my own, each richer
than the other.

rāt kōṭ^hē pe tērī dēk^h lī čōrī annā

¹⁸This statement is restricted to Raṅgīn and Inshā; I had no access to the
actual collections of Qais's poetry.

kālī ūpar t̄hī čar̄hī nūčē t̄hī gōrī annā (Qais)

I found out your secret, Nanny, last night on the roof. The black one was on top, Nanny, and the fair one lay underneath her.

t̄ōkiyān q̄hīlī haiñ aur tañg pic̄hāvan mēñ dadā

is tarah b̄hī koī sītā hai gañvārī aṅgiyā (Qais)

The cups are loose and the backside is tight—no one, Nanny, sews a bodice in such a rustic manner.

guzrē haiñ ma‘mūl sē par din do-čand

ab-ke huī hūñ main̄ ghaḡab bē-namāz (Raṅgīn)

Twice as many days [of menses] as is usual! I never had to miss so many prayers before.

Raṅgīn qasam hai tēri hī hūñ mailē sir sē main̄

mat kb̄l kar-ke minnat-o-zārī izār-band (Raṅgīn)

I swear to you, Raṅgīn, I still have a “dirty head.”¹⁹ Don’t insist, please. Please don’t untie my pajamas.

āj kyōñ tū nē dogāna ye šabūrā bāñdhā

t̄hēs lagtī hai, b̄halā kyōñ-ki bačē-dān bačē (Raṅgīn)

Why did you tie on this dildo, my darling friend? It hurts. I fear for my womb.

ēk tō šakl đarānī hai terī bičā sī

tis-pe ye p̄hār-ke dīdē muj̄hē mat gb̄r dadā (Raṅgīn)

As it is, your face is scary like a ghoul’s, Nanny. Don’t glare at me with bulging eyes.

marduā muj̄h sē kahē hai čalō ārām karēñ

jis kō ārām vo sam̄j̄hē hai vo ārām hō nauj (Inshā)

The wretched man says to me, “Come, let’s rest for a while.” Sure! His “rest” would be some rest indeed!

sārē b̄hūtōñ sē parē hai ye muā khvāja khabīs

muj̄h-kō gb̄ūrā hī karē hai ye muā khvāja khabīs (Inshā)

He’s worse than any haunting spirit, this wretched Khvāja.²⁰ He just keeps staring at me, this wretched eunuch.

¹⁹I.e., “I’m still having my period.”

²⁰The eunuch who supervised a seraglio was called the Khvāja Sirā.

main to kuč^h kbēlī nahīn hūn aisī kačči gōliyān
jō na samj^hūn bi-zinākhī-jī tum^hārī bōliyān (Inshā)

I'm not as naïve as you think, dear *zinākhī*.²¹ I know what your words really mean.

Jān Ṣāhib: wrote only *rēkhtīs*, though using many more forms than others; made fun of the “peevish” woman; mentioned heterosexual acts almost exclusively; commented on events outside the domestic world; showed traces of empathy with women; and made some attempt at moralization directed at women. And that basically remained true for those who came after Jān Ṣāhib. Examples:

vo hāt^hā-pāi rāt kō kī muj^h sē Čānd Khān
maḥram katān kī tum nē merī tār-tār kī (Jān Ṣāhib)

Čānd Khān, you were so rough last night! You tattered my fine cotton brassiere.

tum agar dōgē na tan-pēt kō rotī kaprā
kyā khudā kē bhī nahīn g^har mēn ṭhīkānā mērā (Jān Ṣāhib)

So you won't even give me a slice of bread and a piece of cloth? Do you think I won't find shelter in God's house either?

lē čukā muñ^h mēn hai lallū mērī sau bar zubān
hō gayā kab kā musalmān, ye kyā kāfir hai (Jān Ṣāhib)

Lallu has sucked my tongue many a time. He has long been a Muslim—he's no *kāfir*.

muj^h-kō to dālā g^har mēn, firāngin ke hō murid
mašjid banāi āp nē girjā kē sāmnē (Jān Ṣāhib)

You brought me home, but you devote yourself to that English woman. You, sir, built a mosque in front of a church!

čāqū tak rak^hmā na ab g^har mēn Bahādur Mirzā
hōtē haiñ ḥukm sē sarkār kē haṭṭiyār talāsh (Jān Ṣāhib)

Don't keep at home even a pocket knife, Bahādur Mirzā;²² the government has ordered searches for weapons.

²¹ *Zinākhī*: According to various glossaries of the *rēkhtī*, when two women would become very fond of each other they would together hold and snap apart the wishbone (*zinākh*) of a chicken, thus “formalizing” their love for each other.

²² Bahādur Mirzā can be a name, and it can also mean, with some irony: “Brave Mirzā.”

*Zāl tō bēshak hai tū, bētā, agar Rustam nahīn
bār dō dō jōrūōn kā aur kamar mēn kham nahīn* (Bēgam)²³
You are certainly a Zāl, if not a Rustam!²⁴ You carry two wives and
yet your “back” is not bent.

*p^hir namūī ‘aurtōn par jō na hō t^hōrā hai zulm
kaunsilōn mēn jab koī bēgam nahīn khānam nahīn* (Bēgam)
There are no Bēgams or Khānams in the council houses—no wonder
we women suffer much cruelty.

*ilāhī khūn t^hūkē, saut kō hō ‘āriza sil kā
u^hā-kar lē gai, j^hārū-p^hirī, baṭṭā merī sil kā* (Shaidā)²⁵
May God that my rival spit blood and die of consumption! The
wretch went off with the “pestle” of my “mortar.”

*susrāl mēn jō pādūn to maikē mēn hō khabar
ēk ishtihār nand hai ēk ishtihār sās* (Shaidā)
If I fart in my husband’s house the news reaches my mother’s
place—my mother-in-law and her daughter are a pair of news-
papers.

*ēk tō hai gōd mēn aur dūsrā hai pēṭ mēn
sāl b^har sē muj^h pe hai āfat pe āfat dēk^hnā* (Shaidā)
I carry one in my lap, and another in my belly—it’s been one long
year of one trouble after another.

*marduē qaid huē ‘aurtēn āzād huīn
kaisā āin banāyā hai vaṭan sē pūṅ^hō* (Sajni)²⁶
Men are chained, but women are free. What kind of a constitution

²³Ābid Mirzā, Bēgam, was born in 1857 in Lucknow, grew up in Calcutta in the household of the exiled King of Avadh, and eventually lived in Hyderabad (*Muṭāli‘a*, pp. 472–82).

²⁴Zāl was the father of Rustam, the legendary Iranian warrior.

²⁵Niṣār Ḥusain Khān, Shaidā (b. 1868?), of Allahabad; published his collection of *rēkhtīs* in 1932. (*Muṭāli‘a*, pp. 490–511).

²⁶Saiyid Sājid, Sajni (1922–93?), was originally from Lucknow but spent much of his life in Bhopal. His collection, *Nigōriyāt*, was published in 1987. Interestingly, he took to *Rēkhtī*, by his own admission, only after moving to Bhopal, and after realizing that he was never going to make a name as a ghazal poet.

is this?

cār karkē vo itrāē haiñ
das karūñ main̄ agar bas čalē (Sajni)

He smirks because he took “four.” If I had my way, I’d take “ten.”

ṭalāq dē to rahē hō ‘itāb-o-qahr kē sāt^h
mērā shabāb b^hi lauṭādō merē mahr kē sāt^h (Sajni)

So you’re greatly enraged and divorcing me? Go ahead, but you should also give my youth back when you give me my *mahr*.²⁷

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Modern historians of Urdu literature do not shy away from mentioning the *rēkhtī* in their accounts, but one gets the impression that they feel uneasy around the subject. In the only book-length study of Hāshimī’s poetry, Muḥammad Eḥsānu ’l-Lāh tries hard to establish him as a poet of rectitude and decency. According to Eḥsānu ’l-Lāh, “Hāshimī’s *rēkhtī* was not devoted to entertainment and sensuality.... He has often kept a purpose before himself: to direct women towards a life of decency and morality.”²⁸ Accordingly, when Eḥsānu ’l-Lāh classifies Hāshimī’s verses by their contents, he sets up six categories: (1) love thoughts of an unmarried woman; (2) love thoughts of a wife for her husband; (3) jealous thoughts of a wife towards her rival; (4) events of daily life; (5) advice to women; and (6) erotic interactions [*mu‘āmalā-bandī*]. To further underscore his point, he claims that though he examined more than three thousand couplets by Hāshimī, no more than two hundred could he call *mubtaẓal* or vulgar. Apparently he does not think that one in fifteen was high enough a number to indicate some proclivity on Hāshimī’s part when he had already included Hāshimī’s other openly erotic verses in two “non-vulgar” categories. Eḥsānu ’l-Lāh concedes that one can find a “shameless woman” in Hāshimī’s verses, but asserts that such verses come with others that contain edifying morals. Jamīl Jālibī, on the other hand, declares in his magisterial history of Urdu literature that Hāshimī was

²⁷ *Mahr* is the “bride-money” that a Muslim husband should give to his wife before the marriage may be consummated. In South Asia, unfortunately, this rule is hardly ever observed in practice—one reason why this couplet was widely quoted in Indian newspapers during the famous Shah Bano case in the 1980s.

²⁸ Eḥsānu ’l-Lāh, *Hāshimī Bijāpūrī*, pp. 153–4.

almost single-mindedly devoted to erotic, even licentious verses.²⁹

The seemingly wide difference between the two assessments is, of course, very telling. One soon discovers that each author has a favorite explanation for the existence of the *rēkhtī* in Urdu. Eḥsānu 'l-Lāh begins by declaring that Urdu was unique in having separate varieties [*zabān*] for men and women—i.e., Urdu contained verbs, adjectives, idioms and proverbs that were uniquely feminine. He adds that Urdu-speaking woman were (1) secluded in purdah and (2) denied education, and these two factors enhanced the existing difference. In other words, for Eḥsānu 'l-Lāh, the *rēkhtī* of Hāshimī was the natural response of a sensitive and sympathetic poet to an existing socio-linguistic situation. Jālibī, on the other hand, believes that when a society begins to “decline” it becomes less “manly” and devotes itself to the pleasures of the senses. Thus for Jālibī, the *rēkhtī* was an inevitable consequence of a socio-political situation: an alleged falling from grace of the Urdu-speaking Muslim community of India.

These two explanations form the staple for all the studies of the *rēkhtī* that I was able to consult. Khalīl Aḥmad Ṣiddīqī believes that the *rēkhtī* was the expression of a society given to sensual pleasure: “When just talking about women no longer satisfied them, the poets turned to the language and sentiments of the women themselves.”³⁰ An earlier scholar, Abu 'l-Laiṣ Ṣiddīqī, argues that “Femininity combined with obscenity [*nīsāiyat aur foḥsh-gō'ī*] laid the foundation of the *rēkhtī*.”³¹ For him, the *rēkhtī* was worth any attention only because it was a treasure-trove of the language of the courtesans, particularly of their refined and special idioms. Even Āghā Ḥaidar Ḥasan, perhaps the most sympathetic writer on the subject, begins by stating: “When a nation or people’s [*qaum*] civilization reaches its highest point, a decline sets in, then men begin to display much more sensuality and peculiarities of habits and fashion

²⁹Jālibī, *Tārikh-e Adab-e Urdū*, vol. I, pp. 364–6.

³⁰*Muṭāli'ā*, p. 93.

³¹Ṣiddīqī, *Lakḥnau kā Dabistān-e Shā'irī* p. 41; also, “[Raṅgīn’s *rēkhtī* is not great poetry] but it has definite historical and linguistic significance. From it we get a sense of the depths of mental decline that the society had reached in those days; we also learn about that psychological sickness which, when healthy channels are closed, forces human feelings to go astray and seek unnatural ways of expression. If the *rēkhtī* has any worthy aspect it is only this: in it are preserved the elegance and subtlety of the language of the courtesans and their special idioms” (p. 362).

[*raṅgīnī, bānkpān aur vaṣ‘-dārī*].³²

Again and again we find in these and other authors a sense of shame at the alleged “femininity” of the *rēkhtī*, and an attempt to locate the reason for this “unmanliness” of the *rēkhtī* poets in the decline of the political power of the Urdu-speaking Muslims, particularly of North India.³³ Needless to say, in different contexts these and other authors reverse their reasoning and allege that a growing “effeminacy” of that society—seen as synonymous with cultural decline—was an important cause for that loss of political power.³⁴ What they all seem to miss is a recognition of the fact that *rēkhtīs* were written before that so-called “decadent” age, and continued to be written after it.

Pre-modern literary historians, i.e., the *taẓkira*-writers, also do not show much enthusiasm for the *rēkhtī*. Ghulām Hamdānī, Muṣḥafī, to whom Raṅgīn briefly showed his ghazals, does not mention Raṅgīn’s *rēkhtī* in the section devoted to him in his *taẓkira*.³⁵ Yaktā, whose definition of the *rēkhtī* was noted earlier, does not include even a single *rēkhtī* couplet while quoting extensively from Raṅgīn’s conventional ghazals.³⁶ Muṣṭafā Khān, Shēfta, a close friend of Ghālib, places the *rēkhtī* in the same category as the *hazl* and considers it an inferior form of poetry. He gives no example from Raṅgīn’s *rēkhtīs*.³⁷ Quṭṭbu’ d-Dīn, Bāṭīn, who favors everything that Shēfta dislikes, defends Raṅgīn, but only in a cursory

³²Jān Ṣāḥib, *Dīvān-e Jān Ṣāḥib*, “Introduction,” p. 4. Ḥasan, interestingly, starts his Introduction in the language of the *rēkhtī*.

³³Muḥammad Ḥusain Āzād, no less a believer in the political “unmanliness” of his compatriots and yet scared of angering his colonial masters, blames the *rēkhtī* for all of it. He writes, “This invention [i.e., the *rēkhtī*] should be considered one cause for the effeminacy, lack of ambition, and cowardice that developed in common people” (*Āb-e Ḥayāt*, p. 272).

³⁴*Muṭāli‘a*, pp. 93–4; 104–17.

³⁵Muṣḥafī, *Taẓkiratu ‘sh-Shu‘arā’*, pp. 137–40.

³⁶Yaktā, *Dastūru ‘l-Faṣāḥat*, “Text,” p. 96 ff.

³⁷Shēfta, *Gulshan-e Bē-Khār*, p. 88. Interestingly, in his comments on Ṣāḥib Qiran, perhaps the most notorious writer of obscene verse in Urdu, Shēfta is much more critical. And yet he quotes one “excellently subtle” couplet so that “the bold and lusty youths [among his readers] should have nothing to complain”: “*muḥ kō shahvat huī tayammum sē / thī muqarrar kisī ‘bināl kī khāk*” (“I got horny doing the *tayammum*. / It must have been some harlot’s dust”) (p. 124); *tayammum* being the use of clean dust or sand, instead of water, for ritual ablutions.

fashion. He quotes three of Raṅgīn's *rēkhtī* couplets, namely the first three verses of the *dīvān*, which, as convention requires, are in praise of God.³⁸ In other words, he too was not particularly admiring of the *rēkhtī*.

Qādir Bakhsh, Šābir, who comes a bit later but still belongs to the older order, wrongly credits Inshā with inventing the *rēkhtī*—making Raṅgīn only an imitator—but he does not quote any *rēkhtī* verse from either. On the other hand, he mentions Jān Šāhib, and quotes his verses with approval.³⁹ Šābir, however, reserves his highest praise for the *rēkhtīs* of his contemporary Delhi poet, Mirzā 'Alī Bēg, Nāznīn, and makes some interesting comparative comments:

This ignorant writer Šābir, a man of little skill, has examined carefully and fairly the *rēkhtī* of the three [i.e., Inshā, Raṅgīn, and Jān Šāhib], and rarely found that they had combined the language of the *rēkhtī* with the subtleties of the art of poetry to bring forth something refreshing and heart-pleasing. Mostly there is nothing [in their verse] but conversations of women, and those matters which are, for connoisseurs of poetry and subtle-minded people, foolish and improper [*fuḏūl ... nā-ma'qūl*]. Impropriety [*nā-ma'qūliyya*] does not mean that they have polluted their pen with obscene or erotic words [*kalām-e foḥsh-āmēz yā kalimāt-e shahvat-āngēz*], for that is an essential aspect, in fact the very leaven, of this kind of verse. What is improper is that the events which happen to a woman in her domestic life—e.g., going for a visit to some female relative or friend, inviting some male relative to her home, desiring the husband to buy her a ring, or entreating him to get her blouse and bra dyed a new color—are depicted by them so unsubtly that no poet with good taste can get any pleasure out of them. On the other hand, [Nāznīn] has depicted the same with a subtlety that overwhelms.⁴⁰

Discounting Sabir's obvious bias in favor of Nāznīn, a fellow *dillī-vālā*, what we get from him is a fairly accurate description of the main themes of the *rēkhtī* at the time.

By now it should be obvious that the *rēkhtī*, contrary to Raṅgīn's assertion, was not a "feminine"-ization of *Rēkhta*; it was rather a trivialization of it. Inshā's allegation about Raṅgīn's lecherous intentions was probably more than just a joke between friends, but that is not of much

³⁸Bāṭin, *Gulistān-e Bē-Khizān*, p. 99.

³⁹Šābir, *Gulistān-e Sukhan*, p. 254 (Raṅgīn); p. 184 (Jān Šāhib).

⁴⁰*Ibid.*, pp. 445–6.

importance. More significant is the fact that Raṅgīn was hugely successful in pleasing his princely patron, as well as his own peers, not so much by meeting some standards of good poetry as by satisfying some shared expectation of entertainment. Apparently adultery and sex between women, on the one hand, and quarrelsome females, feminine superstitions and ordinary domestic events, on the other, were then perceived—and also now—as highly entertaining, even more so when expressed in a female narrative voice.

*

Sexual words are always good for a chuckle or two, and particularly so when we feel ourselves secure from their consequences; the excitement comes not so much from indulging in something forbidden as from the thrill of getting away with it. That, however, would not fully explain the motives of the *rēkhtī* poets of the past. The early *rēkhtī* poets and their peers did not have to worry about a Victorian censor. They could use any word or trope they felt was apt for their purpose, and they did. I know of no manuscript of their verses where words have been replaced by asterisks or blank spaces. In fact, unabashed ribaldry, profanity, and scatological details abound in at least one kind of writing by many major pre-modern poets—*rēkhtī* and non-*rēkhtī* alike—namely, their satirical verses. We would not, therefore, be wrong if we viewed the *rēkhtī* as very much a satirical verse that aimed to entertain its male audience by making gross fun of females. Its enhanced appeal lay in the fact that it also pretended to be a view from the inside—in fact, it claimed to be the very words of those whom it ridiculed.

Earlier a comparison was made between the *rēkhtī* and the conventional ghazal to highlight their differences. But the overly sublime creature of the ghazal and the quite disagreeable protagonist of the *rēkhtī* are also age-old and authentic in equal measure in Urdu culture. If the idealized beloved of the ghazal is traceable to the theories of profane love among the Arabs,⁴¹ the lustful and quarrelsome women of the *rēkhtī* are traceable to other, equally edifying, medieval texts. The two stereotypes, of course, are intimately linked and interdependent.

⁴¹See, for example, A. Kh. Kinany, *The Development of Gazal in Arabic Literature* (Damascus: Syrian University Press, 1951), and Lois Anita Giffen, *Theory of Profane Love Among the Arabs: The Development of the Genre* (New York: New York University Press, 1971).

The lustful woman of the *rēkhtī* who cannot be satisfied or controlled sexually is abundantly present not only in such entertaining Islamicate texts as the *Arabian Nights*—the classic, in fact, launches its narration by presenting three such insatiable women—but also in those more edifying treatises that claim to deal with the essential natures of men and women, namely books of *adab* and treatises on medicine. This woman is heterosexual, and lusts for men, but when men are not available, she engages in sex with whatever comes handy, with domestic animals, as in some Arabic texts, or with other women, as in the *rēkhtī*. (Sex with other women, however, does not imply a change in sexual orientation—it is merely a momentary aberration, corrected by the first man who appears on the scene.)⁴² This sexually voracious woman in Islamicate and Indian texts—both medieval and modern, and both popular and élite—has been much commented upon recently, for example in the writings of Fatima Mernissi, Fatna A. Sabbah, and Fedwa Malti-Douglas on the Islamicate side and Sudhir Kakar on the Indian.⁴³ I need not dwell upon her at any length. Suffice it to say that this “woman-as-body” of the male unconscious, common to both the patriarchies, was very much a source for what came to be seen as the “entertainment” value of the *rēkhtī*.

It would, however, be useful to dilate a bit on the quarrelsome woman of our poets’ imaginary, for she is not that well-known. All *adab* texts warn men to expect the worst of their wives. Wives are expected to be shrewish, and should be bullied into submission immediately. As the

⁴²This popular male fantasy is well depicted in a *maṣnavī* of Raṅgīn’s, in which two women making love to each other in a garden are surprised by a man, who not only points out to them their “improper” behavior but quickly puts them aright by having sex with both of them (*Muṭāli‘a*, pp. 330–4).

⁴³See the bibliography for titles. Sabbah calls this creation of the Muslim male fantasy, “the omnisexual woman”: “The omnisexual woman,” she writes, “is woman-as-body, exclusively physical. Her other dimensions, especially the psychological, economic, and engendering dimensions, are not reduced or marginalized; they are nonexistent” (*Woman in the Muslim Unconscious*, p. 25).

Kakar writes: “The fantasy [of the Hindu male, as reflected in *The Laws of Manu*] thus starts with the wish to ‘guard’ a woman from her overwhelming sexual temptation and from the interlopers who would exploit it for their own and her pleasure. Yet guarding her by force is not realistically possible, and perhaps it is better to keep her thoroughly engaged in household work and thus fancy free.... On the other hand, even the dam of ‘busy-ness’ is really not enough to constrain her erotic turbulence....” (*Intimate Relations*, p. 18).

well-known Persian proverb, which is also popular in Urdu, puts it: “Kill the cat the first day.”⁴⁴ These and other edifying texts repeatedly assert that jealousy, quarreling, and cursing come naturally to women. Not surprisingly then, one finds this view expressed even in the female-reform literature that appeared in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries in Urdu, including many of the books written by women. In these novels, the woman that needs to be reformed is always shown as swearing, cursing, and throwing tantrums. What is most telling is that the linguistic effects used to bring out her character are elsewhere employed to describe the parameters of an exclusively “feminine” language. When Urdu literary historians commend Naẓīr Aḥmad for having a masterful control of “women’s speech,” they have in mind not the words of his model women but the language of his less-edifying females. The “good” women in his books talk like men, or at least almost like them.

The strength of this belief in a “naturally” peevish woman can be seen in the fact that it finds expression even where one least expects it. Here are two examples from Saiyid Sulaimān Nadvī, a most highly regarded Muslim scholar of the past century. In his book on ‘Ā’isha, the beloved wife of the Prophet Muḥammad, even he slips in the following statements because they come “natural” to him: “Once someone stole something of ‘Ḥazrat ‘Ā’isha’s. *As is customary with women*, she cursed that person;” or, “Once on a journey, her camel began to walk too fast. *Like all women*, a curse fell off her lips too.”⁴⁵

There is, however, another aspect to this matter. Fights have always been seen as good entertainment. In the Lucknow of Raṅgīn’s time, organized fights were a popular form of entertainment. And not just the usual wrestling or jousting matches between men. There were cock fights, ram

⁴⁴The story for the proverb is built around just such a wife, and is not dissimilar in its strategy to the story of *The Taming of the Shrew*. An examination of two short books on proverbs—*Farḥāṅ-e Amṣāl* by Saiyid Mas‘ūd Ḥasan Rizvī (Lucknow: Kitāb Nagaṛ, 1958) and *Khazāna-e Aquāl-o-Amṣāl* by Munīr Lakḥnavī (Kanpur: Maktaba-e Majidī, 1932)—showed five Persian and two Urdu proverbs condemning women—e.g., “If women didn’t have noses they would be eating shit”—three Urdu proverbs praising men—e.g., “A man’s name is more powerful than the man himself”—and one Persian proverb favoring wives—“He who doesn’t have a wife, doesn’t have bodily comfort.” Also see, Yūnus Ūgāskar, *Urdū Khavātin aur Un Kē Samāji va Lisānī Pahlū* (New Delhi: Modern Publishing House, 1988), pp. 178–82.

⁴⁵Nadvī, *Sīratu l-‘Ā’isha*, p. 41. Emphases added.

fight, quail fight, partridge fight—each a blood sport that even common people could indulge in, shedding the blood of innocent birds, of course, not their own—while the royalty additionally enjoyed fights between elephants, between camels, between bears, or between a mix of them. Then there was a still more curious kind of fight. A frequent entertainment for men of means was to invite certain lower class women to put on a display of quarreling and cursing. They are said to have been *bhaṭṭyārins* or the women who cooked meals for travelers staying at inns. Apparently these women gained their dubious reputation because they would fight over their customers. That an organized display of their fighting was considered so enjoyable by upper class men⁴⁶—and, perhaps, by women too—suggests a parallel for the entertainment value of the quarrelsome woman of the *rēkhtī*. The *rēkhtī* women quarrel with each other or with their lovers; there is, in the *rēkhtī*, no shrewish wife driving her husband to distraction.⁴⁷ Likewise, in the puppet shows that I saw growing up in Avadh, the featured attraction used to be a pair of hugely quarrelsome female puppets called Gulābō and Shitābō, who would burst onto the stage flailing at each other. Male puppets, as I recall, were different; they fought in “manly” ways, and always had some ostensible cause too. Not so, with Gulābō and Shitābō—they just fought and fought.

Further insights into the *rēkhtī* as an “entertainment” become available when we consider how and when it was presented to an audience. A passing comment in the famous novel, *Umrā’o Jān Adā*, informs us that *rēkhtī* poets were ranked among the non-serious jocular poets in any *mushā’ira*—for someone to be asked to read before the *rēkhtī* poets, who usually read first, was a clear indication of that person being considered an absolute buffoon.⁴⁸ And it was not just their verses that provided

⁴⁶The fights would formally start, it is said, by one woman saying to the other, “*ā’ō paṭōsan laṭēnī*” (“Come, neighbor, let’s fight”). The other would respond, “*laṭē mēri jūti*” (“My slipper will fight with you”), expressing her utmost scorn. No verbal holds were barred after that.

⁴⁷That woman appears later, in the prose writings of such humorists as Shaukat Tḥānvī and ‘Aẓīm Bēg Čughtā’ī, and infrequently in the more recent *rēkhtī*. But she is never mean or evil, and is basically treated as a plaything, to be humored, yes, but finally controlled.

⁴⁸Rusvā, *Umrā’o Jān Adā*, p. 84. The English translation has, “the comic poets,” which is not quite accurate (p. 39). ‘Abdu ’r-Razzāq Kānpūrī, however, describes a *rēkhtī* poet, ‘Iṣmat (a *shāgird* of Nāznīn’s), to have read at dawn, at the very end of the *mushā’ira* (*Yād-e Ayyām*, pp. 90–1). That may have been due to

entertainment, the way the *rēkhtī* poets presented themselves and read the verses was also a major source of delight. We have no record of how Raṅgīn and Inshā read the *rēkhtī* before their princely patron, but some later poets, we are told, used vivid gestures while presenting their verses.⁴⁹ The terms employed in such descriptions are *battlānā* and *adā karnā*, which are also used in the context of dance and light classical singing. The former indicates the use of mostly hand gestures, facial expressions and eye movements to underscore the words, while the latter refers to the modulation of one's voice for the same purpose. Āzād, in *Āb-e Ḥayāt* has Inshā use his long scarf as a woman's *dupaṭṭā* to cover his head and gesture in an effeminate manner, as he addressed his patron with a *rēkhtī* verse.⁵⁰ In the fictional account of a pre-1857 *mushā'ira* in Delhi, written by someone who had heard eyewitness accounts of similar events, we are told that the host had a fine muslin coverlet [*ōṛḥnī*] brought on a tray to the *rēkhtī* poet Nāznīn, who then put it on coyly, and used hand gestures and voice modulations as he read his verses.⁵¹

The spectacle of a man pretending to be a woman, stylized gestures and all, was doubtlessly highly entertaining to an exclusively male audience. But, it was only a *temporary* act. Outside of a *mushā'ira* or other similar gatherings, no *rēkhtī* poet is reported to have routinely gone around dressed as a woman or behaving in any allegedly "effeminate" manner. On the contrary, the *rēkhtī* poets' friends and chroniclers often make a point of describing them as outstandingly "manly" men in their bearing. We are told that these poets were fierce Pathans, or professional soldiers, or expert in the use of arms.⁵² More significantly, it appears that

that particular poet's status as a special guest on that occasion. Farḥatū 'l-Lāh Bēg has Nāznīn read after just one other poet, "Yal," a comic figure (Qamber, *The Last Musha'irah of Delhi*, pp. 74–5).

⁴⁹Naṣṣākh, *Sukhan-e Shu'arā'*, p. 420.

⁵⁰Āzād, *Āb-e Ḥayāt*, p. 289.

⁵¹Bēg, *Dehlī kī Ākhirī Sham'*, p. 91. Qamber, *The Last Musha'irah of Delhi*, pp. 74–5. Kānpūrī describes 'Iṣmat as wearing an extravagantly wide-bottomed white pajama and a light gray *dupaṭṭa* as well as several black glass bangles on his wrists (*Yād-e Ayyām*, p. 90).

⁵²Naṣṣākh (*Sukhan-e Shu'arā'*, p. 194) on Raṅgīn; Ṣābir (*Gulistān-e Sukhan*, p. 444) and Bēg (*Dehlī kī Ākhirī Sham'*, p. 75) on Nāznīn; Āghā Ḥaidar Ḥasan (Jān Ṣāhib, *Dīvān-e Jān Ṣāhib*, p. 42) on Jān Ṣāhib. Raṅgīn himself took great pride in how he and his brother were trained for soldiery by their father (Khān, *Sa'adat Yār Khān Raṅgīn*, p. 37).

all *rēkhtī* poets were heterosexual males. No *rēkhtī* poet is reported in the *taẓkīras* to have been a homosexual, though the homosexual orientation of several other poets is casually mentioned, without any prejudice.⁵³ Neither Raṅgīn nor Inshā adopt a special female name as their *takhalluṣ*. In fact, many a time these *rēkhtī* poets depict themselves, in the *maqṭaʿ* or the signature verse, as the possible male lovers of their female protagonists.⁵⁴ Jān Ṣāḥīb and Nāznīn, each of whom adopts what would be considered an “effeminate” *takhalluṣ*, are emphatically described as being tough Afghans. Being totally “effeminate” was then not a cherished quality or an approved persona in Urdu culture. (And this is still the case.) Had there been a poet so utterly “effeminate,” the sight of him would have been entertaining enough, but no patron or audience would have felt comfortable having any sustained interaction with him—their “masculinity” would have been threatened. It is also possible that they would not have found his company that rewarding, for, in any such instance, they would have found themselves laughing merely at the individual before them, and not at one half of humanity, as they did through the so-called “feminine” verses of the otherwise very manly men.

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In the title of this essay I asked a question: are the *rēkhtīs* in Urdu transvestic words? Before offering an answer I should perhaps first explain what the term “transvestic” means to me. Here I depend on the definition proposed by Madeline Kahn in her study of the eighteenth-century English novel. She writes:

A transvestite is a man who dresses temporarily and periodically as a

⁵³For a detailed discussion of homosexuality in Urdu poetry, see C.M. Naim, “The Theme of Homosexual (Pederastic) Love in Pre-Modern Urdu Poetry,” in *Studies in the Urdu Gazal and Prose Fiction*, ed. Muhammad Umar Memon (Madison: South Asian Studies, Univ. of Wisconsin, 1979), pp. 120–42. Also see, Tariq Rahman, “Boy-Love in the Urdu Ghazal,” in *Annual of Urdu Studies*, No. 7 (1990), pp. 1–20.

⁵⁴Two examples will suffice: (1) “*khaṭṭ parḥnē kō d̥yōṛḥī kē ūpar cāhiyē kōʾī būṛḥā sā / Inshā tō hai haṭṭā-kattā hai ye dogānā bāt kudḥab*” (“We need someone old to read letters at the door, but Inshā is a burly youth. That makes it very difficult, dear friend [to get him near us]”), (2) “*bḥōlī samajḥ na mujḥ-kō, suntā hai Jān Ṣāḥīb / aisī nahīn hūn nanḥī aūn jō tērē dām mēn*” (“Don’t think I’m naive, Jān Ṣāḥīb. Listen, I’m not that young that you can fool me”).

woman. He is not a transsexual who wants to *be* a woman and who today can be one, through surgery. Neither is he, generally, a homosexual. He is a heterosexual man who reaffirms his masculinity by dressing as a woman. In that dress, he does not become a woman; he becomes a man who is hiding his penis beneath his skirt.⁵⁵

It is in the above sense, I think, that we can regard most *rēkhtīs*—in particular the *rēkhtīs* of four of the major poets, Qais, Raṅgīn, Inshā, and Jān Ṣāḥīb—to be quintessentially transvestic.⁵⁶ The *rēkhtī* poets temporarily adopt a woman’s voice, but they never stop being the men they are. In fact, most of them explicitly revert to their male selves in the *maqtaʿ*’s, often in a hyper-masculine manner. They may pretend to look at women and themselves through a woman’s eyes, but they mostly see what their masculine and heterosexual selves desire. No wonder the histories of the *rēkhtī* mention no more than a couple of names of women poets, all courtesans or concubines, who were no less an object of entertainment to their male patrons than the paltry verses they wrote—doubtlessly for the men’s added pleasure. And it is this truth about the *rēkhtī* that speaks out so bluntly in this verse by Jān Ṣāḥīb, arguably the best of all *rēkhtī* poets:

qadr kyā nā-mard jānēn, marduē jō mard haiñ
Jān Ṣāḥīb, shād hōtē haiñ vahi sunkar mujbē

My verses cannot be appreciated by “non-males”; they please, Jān Ṣāḥīb, only those men who are truly males. □

⁵⁵Kahn, *Narrative Transvestism*, p. 13 (emphasis in the original). It is a somewhat “simplistic” formulation, as Kahn herself describes it, but it is useful enough for my purpose. My understanding of the *rēkhtī* owes a great deal to Kahn’s insightful book.

⁵⁶As for Hāshimī, on the one hand, and the *rēkhtī* poets who came after Jān Ṣāḥīb, on the other, the implied misogyny in their verses is not so pronounced. The reasons could be that Hāshimī wrote within a still flourishing “Indic” mode—his *zanānī* ghazals were essentially an extension within that mode; while the later poets were writing at a time when fame and prosperity more and more depended on catering to the larger public, and not some princely patron; literacy had spread among women, and they were making their own voice heard through every available media; and the audiences of the *mushāʿiras* radically changed in that they commonly included large numbers of women seated within special *purdah* sections, particularly after the introduction of electricity and public address systems.

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