Transvestic Words?: The *Rekhty* 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 Kappeler

The *rekhty* 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. Written almost exclusively by men, its audience too has always been overwhelmingly male. Scholars of Urdu literature agree that the name

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

2 The first exclusive study of *rekhty* was *Tažkira-e Rēkhty* 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 Khalīl Ahmad Siddīqī’s *Rēkhty kā Taŋqīd Muṭāʔiy* (henceforward referred to as *Muṭāʔiy*) 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 *rekhty* was widely read by women, either of the upper classes or of the courtesan society. As for female *rekhty* poets, I have come across mention of only three. The first, Naubahār “Zalī,” a maidservant of Prince Sulaimān Shikōh, has only two verses to her name (*Muṭāʔiy*, p. 380). The second, “Bēgām,” a “temporary wife” (*maṃtūa*) of Vājīd ‘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 *rekhty* form and sent him five verses for inclusion in his *tažkira*. 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‘ādat 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: Anghēkhta (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 them courtesans—wrote in that manner. (Sukhan-e Shu‘arā‘; p. 573.) Raṅgīn himself quotes one rēkhtī by an alleged female shāgīrd of his—he gives only her takhallus, Bēgham—in his anecdotal book, Majāls-e Raṅgīn. He claims that her rēkhtī was a flirtatious rejoinder to some of his own verses. This could be merely a poetic conceit. (Majāls-e Raṅgīn, pp. 70–1.)

Mirzā 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 Kamalū ‘d-Dīn Ḥaider, a.k.a. Saiyid Muḥammad Mīr Zā’īr, Tāvārikh-e Avadh; vol. I (Lucknow: Naval Kishore Press, 1907), p. 280. The prince also patronized Șāhīb Qirān, the most notorious poet of sexually explicit verses in Urdu. See footnote 36 below.

The only major study of Raṅgīn is Şābīr ‘Ali Khān’s Sa‘ādat 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.

Khāngī “parda-nisīn [i.e., purdah-observing] women who surreptitiously engage in prostitution in their homes” (Saiyid Aḥmad Dehlavi, Farhaṅg-e Ḍaftar).
mundane events in the domestic life of women.\(^7\)

Inshā’u Ḩal Khān, Inshā (1756–1817),\(^6\) a polyglot, multi-talented poet, who also wrote many rēkhtās, was a close friend of Raṅgin. In Daryā-e Latāfāt, 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 Raṅgin: “Because he is an avid patron of prostitutes [randal], Raṅgin’s mind has taken to vulgarity and lewdness [shuhud-pan]. Consequently, putting aside rēkhta, he has invented rēkhtā, 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 Raṅgin with the invention of the rēkhtā.\(^9\)

The term “rēkhtā” may indeed have been coined by Raṅgin, 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 Raṅgin may have come across their verse during his many travels or even while in Delhi, before his arrival in Lucknow around 1789. Both Khalil Ahmad Siddiqi and Badi’ Ḥusaini list several poets of the Deccan who preceded Raṅgin, and suggest that the verses of one of them, Muḥammad Siddiq, Qais (d. 1814?)—a slightly older con-

\(^7\)How 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.

\(^6\)Inshā has deservedly received more attention than Raṅgin. Most of his prose and poetry is now available in carefully edited editions.

\(^9\)Inshā, Daryā-e Latāfāt, pp. 96–7. The second quotation is found on p. 171, but it leaves out a sentence about Raṅgin’s sexual proclivity. The original Persian is quoted by Badi’ Ḥusaini (Dakan Mēn Rēkhtā kā Irtiqā; p. 27), and may be translated: “...Raṅgin ... 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 [bāh], has had much experience with the women of purdah [zanān-e parda-nishin]. He has written a few pages on their language, and also a volume of verses in that language. He is the inventor of the rēkhtā ....”

\(^8\)Not only is Raṅgin’s claim to have invented the rēkhtā on his own quite doubtful, even the special glossary attributed to Raṅgin by Inshā is not his. Imtiāz ‘Alī Khān ‘Arshī compared Raṅgin’s text with a similar compilation by Sirjū ‘d-Dīn ‘Alī Khān, Ārzū (1687–1756), the famous grammarian and lexicographer, and found Raṅgin’s list to be a literal translation of Ārzū’s findings. (Yaktā, Dastīrū ‘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 ṭēkhṭī. That distinction, according to them, belongs to Saiyid Mīrān, Hāshimi (d. ca. 1697), who spent most of his life in Burhanpur and Bijapur.¹² Hāshimi was not attached to the Adil Shahi court; he did, however, have many patrons among the nobility. Reportedly he was blind, though perhaps not from birth.

Before Hāshimi, 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 ṭēkhṭī.

Hāshimi 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 ṭēkhṭīs. Significantly, Hāshimi does not separate the latter into a distinct group; in fact he frequently has the “rēkhṭī” and “non-rēkhṭī” 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 maqṣa' he has his poetic persona declare: “díyē hain Hāshimi ‘izzat hamare āt ki bolī kain,” (“Hāshimi has given dignity to our āt ki bolī”), āt being an exclusively feminine exclamation of surprise. In a couplet in

¹¹Muṣṭā‘ī’s, pp. 237–8; Husainī, p. 138 ff. Husainī details the remarkable similarity between some of the ṭēkhṭīs of the two poets. Qais’s divān of ṭēkhṭīs 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 [ṣīkhi] bēgams of the imperial palaces of Shahjahanabad.” Qais clearly was trying to make his wares appear more “exotic” to his patrons.

¹²Ehsānī ‘l-Lāh’s is the only full-length study of Hāshimi. Jālibī also has a long section devoted to this poet (pp. 354–69). Ḥafiz Qatīl’s edition of Hāshimi’s verse is quite dependable.
another ghazal he says, “bōle hai khūb bātic ghaşlañ bhi kat zanāñ” (“… you have also composed many fine zanāñ (feminine) ghazals”). Elsewhere in the ḍivān, however, he refers to his compositions simply as ghazals. No contemporary of Hāshimī seems to have emulated him.  

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 ʿAlī Khān Yaktā, who finished his taqkira in 1834, not too long after Raṅgin 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.”

Additionally, on the basis of our own readings of the rēkhtīs of Hāshimī, Raṅgin, and Inshā, we may posit three other differences between the rēkhtī and the rēkhta, the conventional ghazal, of which the former was implied by Raṅgin 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 hāzīl, i.e., in sexually explicit humorous poetry—for example in such verses of Raṅgin and Şāhīb 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

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

often seems to mock or denigrate the object of desire.

Only one more major poet needs to be mentioned to conclude this historical section: Mir Yār ‘Alī, Jān Shāhib (1810–1886). Born in Farrukhabad, 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 Shāhib wrote exclusively in the rękhti 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 Rangīn, wrote several other types of topical poems in the language of the rękhti.

Subsequent rękhti poets, including our own contemporaries, have modeled themselves after Jān Shāhib. 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

* The thematic developments in the rękhti, from Hāshimi to Jān Shāhib and later, may be summarized as follows:

Hāshimi: wrote conventional ghazals in both the “Indic” and “Persian” modes, sometimes even in the same ghazal; placed his rękhti and conventional ghazals in the same divān; while mainly employing “realistic” language in his rękhtis, 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:

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15Jān Shāhib’s divān 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 Aḩmad Sīdīqi brings the story to the 1920s. Later poets are mentioned by ‘Abbāsī.
17This peevish woman will be discussed in more detail below.
khāvind kē apnē ai nanē sevak bō nit sēvā karō
har kis kē sunkar bāt āṭup nā kar nashār sēvā karō
You’re your husband’s maid, little girl, so serve him constantly.
Don’t spread gossip for nothing—make that a habit.

onū avenā tō pardē sōn g̱art bhar bār hai bārō
bāhāna kar-ke mōtiyan kē pirōtē bār hai bārō
If he comes I shall sit outside for a moment, unveiled, pretending
that I was stringing pearls into a necklace.

aji maiṇ pēt te hūn c̄hōrō mērt pēshvāz kā dāman
hūgā g̱ōr zulum muj̱ par, jūdā hōnē se ḍārti hūn
Hey, let go of my gown! I’m pregnant. It will be a terrible
thing—I’m scared I may lose the baby.

laṭāpat mēn tūsē hain kōs ē band dēḵē tō hai mushkīl
bičāri sās miskīn hai nānād dēḵē tō hai mushkīl
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 bālō jō sānā hātā sōn c̄ẖēnē kā
kahā maiṇ ji-iē dūngā hō jō bēŋē nānān sānē 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, Raṅgin, and Inshā: wrote conventional ghazals only in the
“Persian” mode;18 used only “realistic” language in their rēḵhts; separately
organized their rēḵht 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:

kābē kō pahmāṇgī, bātī, maiṇ tum bārī āngīyā
ek sē ek mērē pās hai bārī āngīyā (Qais)
Why should I wear your bodice, sister? I have my own, each richer
than the other.

rāt kābhē pe tērī dēḵē lī īrī annā

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

He’s worse than any haunting spirit, this wretched eunuch.
main to kuch keli nahti hain aist kaeti goliya
jao na samjhiin bit-zinakhi-ji tumhari boliya (Insha)
I'm not as naive as you think, dear zinakhi. I know what your words really mean.

Jan Sahib: wrote only rekhtis, though using many more forms than others; made fun of the “peevious” 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 Jan Sahib. Examples:

vo hatha-pai rat koi kit muj se Cand Khan
mahram katan ki tum ne merti jar-jar ki (Jan Sahib)
Cand Khan, you were so rough last night! You tattered my fine cotton brassiere.

tum agar doge na tan-pet koi roshi kapra
kyaa khuuda ke bit nahti gar mien tinkaana mera (Jan Sahib)
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?

le cachaa muh mien hai lalaa merti sau bar zabaa
hoo gayaa kab ka musalman, ye kya kafir hai (Jan Sahib)
Lallu has sucked my tongue many a time. He has long been a Muslim—he’s no kafir.

mujh kii to dilaa gar mien, firaangi ke hoo murid
masjid banaa ap ne girja ke samaa (Jan Sahib)
You brought me home, but you devote yourself to that English woman. You, sir, built a mosque in front of a church!

caqta tak rakhaa na ab gar mien Bahadur Mirza
bhe hai hukm se sarkar ke hathiyar talash (Jan Sahib)
Don’t keep at home even a pocket knife, Bahadur Mirza, the government has ordered searches for weapons.

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

22 Bahadur Mirza can be a name, and it can also mean, with some irony: “Brave Mirza.”
Zal to beshak hai tu, beta, agar Rustam nahi tu
bar do do jorun kaa aur kamar mene kham nahi tu (Begam) 23
You are certainly a Zal, if not a Rustam! 23 You carry two wives and
yet your “back” is not bent.

pthir namait aurtun par jana ba torya hai zulm
kaunlo mene jah kot begam nahi khanam nahi tu (Begam)
There are no Begams or Khanams in the council houses—no won-
der we women suffer much cruelty.

ilahi khan tuku, sawa hho ’ariqa sil ka
uqta kar le gai, j’hara-pher, basti meri sil ka (Shaidah) 25
May God that my rival spit blood and die of consumption! The
wretch went off with the “pestle” of my “mortar.”
suras mene joo padaun to maike mene ho khabar
ek ishtibar nand hai ek ishtibar sas (Shaidah)
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.

ek to hai god mene aur darsa hai pet mene
sal bar se mujh pe hai afat pe afat dekhnii (Shaidah)
I carry one in my lap, and another in my belly—it’s been one long
year of one trouble after another.

mardue quid hue ’aurteh azad hui
kaia atin banaya hai vaathan se paichho (Sajni) 26
Men are chained, but women are free. What kind of a constitution

23 Abid Mirza, Begam, was born in 1857 in Lucknow, grew up in Calcutta in
the household of the exiled King of Avadh, and eventually lived in Hyderabad
(Mutali’a, pp. 472–82).

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

25 Ni’zar Husain Khan, Shaidah (b. 1868), of Allahabad; published his collec-
tion of rukhtus in 1932. (Mutali’a, pp. 490–511).

26 Saiyid Sajid, Sajni (1922–93?), was originally from Lucknow but spent
much of his life in Bhopal. His collection, Nigoriyat, was published in 1987.
Interestingly, he took to Rikht, 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 itrē hain
das karrē main agar bas ēdē (Sajnī)
He smirks because he took “four.” If I had my way, I’d take “ten.”

ṭalāq dē to rahē hō ‘itēb-o-qabīr ke sāth
mēra shabāb bīt lūtādē mere mahr ke sāth (Sajnī)
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 rēkht in their accounts, but one gets the impression that they feel uneasy around the subject. In the only book-length study of Hāshimi’s poetry, Muḥammād Eḥsānū ‘l-Lāḥ tries hard to establish him as a poet of rectitude and decency. According to Eḥsānū ‘l-Lāḥ, “Hāshimi’s rēkht 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 Eḥsānū ’l-Lāḥ classifies Hāshimi’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’āmala-bandī]. To further underscore his point, he claims that though he examined more than three thousand couplets by Hāshimi, no more than two hundred could he call muḥtażal or vulgar. Apparently he does not think that one in fifteen was high enough a number to indicate some proclivity on Hāshimi’s part when he had already included Hāshimi’s other openly erotic verses in two “non-vulgar” categories. Eḥsānū ’l-Lāḥ concedes that one can find a “shameless woman” in Hāshimi’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 Hāshimi was

27Mahr 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.

almost single-mindedly devoted to erotic, even licentious verses.\footnote{Jālibi, \textit{Tārikh-e Adab-e Urdu}, vol. I, pp. 364–6.}

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 \textit{rēkhūt} in Urdu. Ehsānu 'l-Lāh begins by declaring that Urdu was unique in having separate varieties [\textit{zābān}] 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 Ehsānu 'l-Lāh, the \textit{rēkhūt} of Hāshimi was the natural response of a sensitive and sympathetic poet to an existing socio-linguistic situation. Jālibi, 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 Jālibi, the \textit{rēkhūt} 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 \textit{rēkhūt} that I was able to consult. Khalil Aḥmad Ṣiddiqi believes that the \textit{rēkhūt} 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."\footnote{Muṣāliʿa, p. 93.} An earlier scholar, Abu 'l-Laṣ Ṣiddiqi, argues that "Femininity combined with obscenity [\textit{nisāʾiyat aur foḥsh-gō'lı}] laid the foundation of the \textit{rēkhūt}."\footnote{Ṣiddiqi, \textit{Lakhnau kā Dabistān-e Shā'irā}, p. 41; also, "Raṅgīn's \textit{rēkhūt} 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 \textit{rēkhūt} 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).} For him, the \textit{rēkhūt} 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 Ḥaider Ḥasan, perhaps the most sympathetic writer on the subject, begins by stating: "When a nation or people's [\textit{qaum}] civilization reaches its highest point, a decline sets in, then men begin to display much more sensuality and peculiarities of habits and fashion
Again and again we find in these and other authors a sense of shame at the alleged “femininity” of the rëkhtë, and an attempt to locate the reason for this “unmanliness” of the rëkhtë poets in the decline of the political power of the Urdu-speaking Muslims, particularly of North India. 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. What they all seem to miss is a recognition of the fact that rëkhtës were written before that so-called “decadent” age, and continued to be written after it.

Pre-modern literary historians, i.e., the taźkirâ-writers, also do not show much enthusiasm for the rëkhtë. Ghalâm Hamdâni, Muśhafrî, to whom Raṅgin briefly showed his ghazals, does not mention Raṅgin’s rëkhtë in the section devoted to him in his taźkîrâ. Yaktä, whose definition of the rëkhtë was noted earlier, does not include even a single rëkhtë couplet while quoting extensively from Raṅgin’s conventional ghazals. Muṣtafâ Khân, Shêfta, a close friend of Ghalîb, places the rëkhtë in the same category as the hazl and considers it an inferior form of poetry. He gives no example from Raṅgin’s rëkhtës. Quṭbu ’d-Dîn, Bâjîn, who favors everything that Shêfta dislikes, defends Raṅgin, but only in a cursory

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

34) Muṯâlî’a, pp. 93–4; 104–17.


37) Shêfta, Gushân-e Bî-Khâr, p. 88. Interestingly, in his comments on Šâhib Qîrân, perhaps the most notorious writer of obscene verse in Urdu, Shêfta 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”: “mujh bâhmat hui tayammum sî lî muqarrar kisi ख़म़ाल कि ख़बर” (“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 Raṅgin’s rēḥtī couplets, namely the first three verses of the divān, which, as convention requires, are in praise of God.38 In other words, he too was not particularly admiring of the rēḥtī.

Qādir Bakhsh, Šābir, who comes a bit later but still belongs to the older order, wrongly credits Inshā with inventing the rēḥtī—making Raṅgin only an imitator—but he does not quote any rēḥtī 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 rēḥtīs of his contemporary Delhi poet, Mirzā ‘Ali Bēg, Nāznīn, and makes some interesting comparative comments:

This ignorant writer Šābir, a man of little skill, has examined carefully and fairly the rēḥtī of the three [i.e., Inshā, Raṅgin, and Jān Šāhib], and rarely found that they had combined the language of the rēḥtī 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 [fūzūl ... nā-mā’qūl]. Impropriety [nā-ma’qūliyat] does not mean that they have polluted their pen with obscene or erotic words [kalām-e foḵsh-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 Šābir’s obvious bias in favor of Nāznīn, a fellow dilli-vālā, what we get from him is a fairly accurate description of the main themes of the rēḥtī at the time.

By now it should be obvious that the rēḥtī, contrary to Raṅgin’s assertion, was not a “feminine”-ization of Rēḥtī; it was rather a trivialization of it. Inshā’s allegation about Raṅgin’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 (Raṅgin); p. 184 (Jān Šāhib).
40Ibid., pp. 445–6.
importance. More significant is the fact that Raṅgin 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 rekhtı poets of the past. The early rekhtı 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—rekhtı and non-rekhtı alike—namely, their satirical verses. We would not, therefore, be wrong if we viewed the rekhtı 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 rekhtı and the conventional ghazal to highlight their differences. But the overly sublime creature of the ghazal and the quite disagreeable protagonist of the rekhtı 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, the lustful and quarrelsome women of the rekhtı are traceable to other, equally edifying, medieval texts. The two stereotypes, of course, are intimately linked and interdependent.

The lustful woman of the rēkhāt 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 rēkhāt. (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.)

This sexually voracious woman in Islamicate and Indian texts—both medieval and modern, and both popular and elite—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. 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 rēkhāt.

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

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42This popular male fantasy is well depicted in a maṣnawi 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 (Muṣāli‘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.” 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 Nādvī, a most highly regarded Muslim scholar of the past century. In his book on ʿAʾisha, 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 Ḥaẓrat Ṭaʾṣsiraʾ’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.”

There is, however, another aspect to this matter. Fights have always been seen as good entertainment. In the Lucknow of Raṅgin’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

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44 The 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—Farhang-e Amīl by Saiyid Masʿūd Ḥasan Rāvi (Lucknow: Kitāb Nagar, 1958) and Khazāna-e Aqvāl-o-Amīl by Munir Laknāvi (Kanpur: Maktaba-e Majdī, 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 Ügāskar, Urdu Khavātīn aur Un Kē Samāji va Lisānī Pahāl (New Delhi: Modern Publishing House, 1988), pp. 178–82.

45 Nādvī, Sīratu ʿl-ʾĀʾisha, p. 41. Emphases added.
fights, quail fights, partridge fights—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 bhatōrī 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 men—and, perhaps, by women too—suggests a parallel for the entertainment value of the quarrelsome woman of the rekhtī. The rekhtī women quarrel with each other or with their lovers; there is, in the rekhtī, no shrewish wife driving her husband to distraction. 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 rekhtī as an “entertainment” become available when we consider how and when it was presented to an audience. A passing comment in the famous novel, Umrao Jan Adā, informs us that rekhtī poets were ranked among the non-serious jocular poets in any mushā'ira—for someone to be asked to read before the rekhtī poets, who usually read first, was a clear indication of that person being considered an absolute buffoon. The fights would formally start, it is said, by one woman saying to the other, “ā ū parūsan laṛēn” (“Come, neighbor, let’s fight”). The other would respond, “larē mērē jūtē” (“My slipper will fight with you”), expressing her utmost scorn. No verbal holds were barred after that.

That woman appears later, in the prose writings of such humorists as Shaukat Tānvi and Aṣīm Bēg Čughtāi, and infrequently in the more recent rekhtī. But she is never mean or evil, and is basically treated as a plaything, to be humored, yes, but finally controlled.

Rusvā, Umrao Jan Adā, p. 84. The English translation has, “the comic poets,” which is not quite accurate (p. 39). ‘Abdu ‘r-Razzāq Kānpūrī, however, describes a rekhtī poet, ‘Īsmat (a shāgīrd 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 rekhti poets presented themselves and read the verses was also a major source of delight. We have no record of how Raṅgin and Inshā read the rekhti before their princely patron, but some later poets, we are told, used vivid gestures while presenting their verses. The terms employed in such descriptions are batlāna and ādā 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 Hayāt has Inshā use his long scarf as a woman’s dupāṭā to cover his head and gesture in an effeminate manner, as he addressed his patron with a rekhti verse. In the fictional account of a pre-1857 mushaira in Delhi, written by someone who had heard eyewitness accounts of similar events, we are told that the host had a fine muslin coverlet [āqīn] brought on a tray to the rekhtī poet Nāznīn, who then put it on coyly, and used hand gestures and voice modulations as he read his verses.

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 mushaira or other similar gatherings, no rekhtī poet is reported to have routinely gone around dressed as a woman or behaving in any allegedly “effeminate” manner. On the contrary, the rekhtī 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. More significantly, it appears that that particular poet’s status as a special guest on that occasion. Farḥatu ‘l-Lāh Bēg has Nāznīn read after just one other poet, “Yal,” a comic figure (Qamber, The Last Musha’irah of Delhi, pp. 74–9).

49Naṣṣākh, Sukhan-e Shu’arā’, p. 420.

50Āzād, Āb-e Hayāt, p. 289.

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

52Naṣṣākh (Sukhan-e Shu’arā’, p. 194) on Raṅgin; Ṣābir (Gulistān-e Sukhan, p. 444) and Bēg (Dehlī ki Ākhīrī Sham’, p. 75) on Nāznīn; Āghā Haider Ḥasan (Jān Sāḥib, Divān-e Jān Sāḥīb, p. 42) on Jān Sāḥib. Raṅgin himself took great pride in how he and his brother were trained for soliderly by their father (Khān, Saʿādat Yār Khān Raṅgin, p. 37).
all rēkht poets were heterosexual males. No rēkht poet is reported in the taḵkiras to have been a homosexual, though the homosexual orientation of several other poets is casually mentioned, without any prejudice.53 Neither Raṅgin nor Inshā adopt a special female name as their takhallus.

In fact, many a time these rēkht poets depict themselves, in the magā or the signature verse, as the possible male lovers of their female protagonists.54 Jān Śāhib and Nāznīn, each of whom adopts what would be considered an “effeminate” takhallus, 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 rēkhts 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


54 Two examples will suffice: (1) “khat par nē kō dyōrī kē āpar cāhīye kō i būrīā sā / Inshā to hāi hattā-kattā hāi ye dogānā hāt kudūrīb” (“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) “bōli samajh na mujh-kō, suntā hāi Jān Śāhib / aisi nāhin hūn na’tī ažū jō tērē dām mēnī” (“Don’t think I’m naive, Jān Śāhib. 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 rękhs—in particular the rękhs of four of the major poets, Qais, Raґğin, Inshâ, and Jân Šâhib—to be quintessentially transvestic. 56 The rękhi 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 maqṣa’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 rękhi 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 rękhi that speaks out so bluntly in this verse by Jân Šâhib, arguably the best of all rękhi poets:

qadr kyâ nā-mard jânēn, mardu jō mard haiñ
Jân Šâhab, shâd bôtê haiñ vahi sunkar mujê

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

55 Kahn, 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 rękhi owes a great deal to Kahn’s insightful book.

56 As for Hâshimi, on the one hand, and the rękhi poets who came after Jân Šâhib, on the other, the implied misogyny in their verses is not so pronounced. The reasons could be that Hâshimi wrote within a still flourishing “Indic” mode—his zanâni 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 mushâ’iras 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.
Bibliography


