

## **Rekhti: Poetry of Dissent and Subversion**

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### **Abstract:**

The paper deals with a lesser known genre of Urdu Poetry, Rekhti. The dominant mode of writing poetry is Rekhta, which focuses on certain male-centric sensibility, and emphasises on experiences from a male perspective. As a counter to the dominant Rekhta, Rekhti lays bare women experience, and their responses to the complexities of life. In the present paper I read Rekhti as a poetic mode to express dissent against the dominant structures in the realm of aesthetic and what is considered as suitable content for poetry. The fact that most of the Rekhti poets were men of certain standing in society who deliberately mocked women and their mannerism, sexuality and much more points at the garb that has been deployed to cover their own sexuality.

**Key Words:** Dissent, Subversion, Homosexuality, Urdu Poetry, Aestheticism

Rekhta, the dominant genre of poetry in Urdu, is mystical in nature and accentuates heterosexual love by presenting it in themes of separation and longing. Contrary to it, Rekhti is non-mystical and speaks unabashedly of earthly aspects of love, not attempting any metaphysics; the love depicted can be homosexual or heterosexual. The important point of departure in tradition of rekhti, as above mentioned distinctions are amorphous and largely depend on reader's vantage point, is of diction and gender of 'mashuq'(beloved) and 'ashiq'(lover). Rekhta, comparatively for a long time, glorified Persian language and its metaphors, symbols and imagery, while rekhti was attempted in *aam zuban* (commoner's language), if not *auraton ki zuban* (womenfolk's language). Rekhti challenged the patriarchal values and conventions embedded in the dominant rekhta. The subversion or inversion in rekhti is at the level of language, representation of marginal subjects, and engendering the love-conventions of Urdu poetry. Rekhti facilitated discovery of Hindustani tropes, metaphors and idioms; it emancipated Urdu poetry from the hegemony of Persian culture. In rekhti, we observe the deployment of Indic mangoes against Persian grapes, and parrots over nightingales as indigenous symbols of our culture.

Main is chaman men band nahin ab hazar se  
Toti hun ek Hind ki bahsun hazar se  
(Jan Sahib, 315)

Arguing female parakeet stands as a symbol of Hind in dialogue with other cultures. Earlier rekhta poetry blindly confined itself to Persian mode and manner of composition, but rekhti

allowed cultivation of very own Hindustani metaphors to speak with. Secondly, it gave an upper hand to Hind over rest of the traditions and paved way for decolonisation of Urdu poetry. Thirdly, the idiomatic language of rekhti asserted its ingenuity fiercely as exemplified in the above quoted verse: I am not confined to this garden of verse by a thousand.

The style and diction of rekhti was diametrically opposite to Persian and persianised Urdu; it was colloquial, and ushered in the marginal subjects and their concerns of the cosmopolitan centres. We frequently hear milkmaids, vendors, rural womenfolk and pedestal life conversant with the female speaker in rekhti. Rangin, the poet to whom innovation of this poetry form is usually attributed, claims that he attempted poetry in *auraton ki zuban*. Elaborating on the hybrid language of rekhti, Rangin writes, "I do not restrict this to prostitutes (*Khangis*) or to domestic (*Gharelu*) women. I am interested here only in women's speech"<sup>1</sup>. The language has no fixed origin-it rather borrows from the speech of womenfolk across the social classes. The womenfolk, whether of royal households, courtesans or street tarts had access to the high culture of awadh and the dwellings of commoners. It lends certain peculiarity to their language which blends elegance of Persian with rustic colloquial hindvi. However, most of the rekhti poets incline towards the taunting, sarcastic and easy-flow tongue of womenfolk. In rekhti, one rarely comes across high-flown diction or Persian words. The distinctiveness of rekhti in comparison to contemporary rekhta appears in the former's use of idiomatic language.

Ji nigora taras gaya ha'e ha'e  
Ab tau sunane ko aapki awaaz  
(Jan Saheb)  
Alas, alas, my heart yearns  
To hear your voice now (Ruth Vanita, 99)

In this couplet Rangin has deployed colloquial womenfolk idiom of 'h'ae h'ae' and 'ji nigora' imparts a household charm in contrast to present rekhta poetry which too, having freed itself from Persian dominance, borrows from *aam bolchal ki zubaan*.

Along with the characteristic diction of rekhti tows the choice of its subject matter, rather the two have an intricate linkage. Ruth Vanita in *Gender, Sex and the City* points out, "In rekhti, there are hardly any individualised servitors; the cup-bearer (*saqi*), tavern keeper and tavern boys are types, not individuals, and they rarely speak." In sharp contrast to rekhta, rekhti brims with the hustle-bustle urban low class life; the activities of subordinates, marginals and often unacknowledged spheres of urban life take centre stage. The servants, vendors, milkmaids, palanquin bearer, low caste singing women (*domnis*) and bandis are individuated to the extent of exercising influence on language and mannerism of high rank women. The female speaker, in rekhti, sheds her royal inhibitions and converse with them in their language. Critics are quick to point it as mockery of language and speech conventions of the marginalised sections<sup>2</sup>. The mockery, however, upturns the relation between master-servant; rekhti would be celebrated in annals of Urdu literature as the poetry of impoverished section and their conventions. It marks the influence of low culture on high literary culture. Much like Wordsworthian romantic poetry, the choice of *auraton ki zubaan* is informed by the subjects voiced in rekhti. The marginals come onto the scene mainly through

<sup>1</sup> Ruth Vanita in introduction of *Gender, Sex and the City* translates the quote from Darya-e-latafat p 145

<sup>2</sup> Refer to C M Naim's 'Transvestic words?'

conversations with the begum of the house; we seldom hear them talking aloud among themselves, in the absence of the begum. Their speech is incorporated in the verses, not directly, but through the responses of the female speaker. It removes the language of rekhti one-fold from the real idiom of these subordinates. The language of rekhti is replete with colloquial idioms, but it is, at the same time not the real language of servitors; it is the language of the low class city dwellers raised to novelty. In some couplets, such as the one quoted below, we sense a mild critique of the rustic dialect

‘How move to the side, we’ll be dead’ -

From which village is this language, kaharo?

(Rangin, Ed. Faruk Argali, 220) (translation of Ruth Vanita)

It is difficult to ascertain the nature of diction deployed in rekhti; for the language is colloquial and seems indigenous in comparison to the language of dominant rekhta, but it betrays the language of downtrodden; it exhibits heavy influence of idiomatic diction of low class city dwellers and of varied dialects of standard language—but it defies all attempts at categorisation.

Rangin distinguishes the language of his rekhti by the metaphor of ‘female parrot’; Indic literature has used the metaphor of ‘tota’ (parrot) in opposition to nightingale of Persian literature, but Rangin, with the metaphor of female parrot, further makes distinction between rekhta and rekhti. Rekhti poets deliberately wrote in a language so as to challenge the hegemony exercised by Persian culture on popular rekhta poetry. Isha claimed that his story *Rani Ketaki ki Kahani* contains no Persian or Arabic word, and his romance *Silk-e Gauhar* is without *nuqta*.<sup>3</sup> Rekhti calls upon poets to search for potent cultural symbols and tropes in a language that speaks people’s sensibility

## II

Love liaisons depicted in rekhta, both homosexual and heterosexual, were couched in metaphysical ambiguity. Poets never kept the linguistic envelope near; farther they stretched it better deemed quality of their verse was the accepted and much glorified norm. In classical antiquity, even prior Rumi-Tabrez, male-male love was a common theme; however, the male homosexual relations or the love of *murid-pir* was never presented as physical affliction. The male-male coupling was always concealed and the desire was projected as the inherent tendency of individuals to move higher in the realm of metaphysical through unification with the sufi master. In Indic tradition, great Aamir Khusrao sang mystical songs moved by love for Khwaja Nizamuddin Auliya. Khusrao enriched the conventional hindvi poetry and continued, more or less, in the footsteps of traditions. The poems, in fairly recent times, are reinterpreted given the critical tools of Queer theory and Gay poetics, what is often absent in those interpretations is the context and conventions of Hindvi poetry in times of Khusrao. In conventional poetry, beloved is always addressed in gender neutral words or as a male figure. Secondly, the poet sings in the persona of a female-lover and directs her emotional upsurge to a male deity, a pir or a male lover who could be stand-in for God. In one of his ghazals, Khusrao sings,

Shaban-e-hijran daraz chun zulf,  
Wa roz-e-waslat cho umer kotah  
Sakhi piya ko jo main na dekhun,  
To kaise kaTun andheri ratiyan

<sup>3</sup> Refer to Ruth Vanita’s *Gender, Sex and the City* p 15

The poet assumes a female persona stricken with pangs of separation who expresses his/her longing to see his/her beloved (male) to his/her female companion. In traditional poetry, we find male poet concealing his identity under the garb of a woman and wailing to unite with a male persona (Pir, female beloved or God almighty). This role playing allows the poet greater freedom to express his very baser afflictions which his gender-instituted-role doesn't allow. It is interesting to note that we seldom come across female-female love in rekhta. The most obvious explanation tended by critics enunciates female is not associated with God in Semitic religions.<sup>4</sup> Islam denotes Allaha(God) in genderless terms or as a male figure. By extension, female couldn't be appropriated as a subject proper for rekhta or for depiction of *Ishq-e-haqiqi* (love of truth). In rekhta, we observe male-male bonding and male-female amour with minimum reference to sexual desire, in contrast, rekhti portrays female-female amour with explicit sexual content. In rekhti female-beloved is addressed as *du-gana*, *be-gana*, *shakhi*, *ya-gana*, *zanakhi*, *ilachi*, *wari*, *khasi* and *pyari*. All these terms can be used to loosely denote female beloved, but, as Rangin notes, all these titles mark varied degree of intimacy

Du-ganas are two women who split and eat a doubled (literal meaning du-gana) fruit or nut, with the masculine and feminine roles being arbitrarily assigned to each depending on the part each happens to get; a zanakhi is the one with whom a woman splits a chicken breastbone, with gendered roles being arbitrarily assigned depending on who gets the longer or shorter part of the bone; an ilachi is one with whom a cardamom is shared, and this sharing institutes a marriage (Ruth, 139)

The female-female coupling is explored to a greater detail by all the rekhti poets. The poets have provided the reader with a long glossary of titles popular among female lovers. The taxonomies laid by rekhti poets, although vary, but is indispensable to their respective literary oeuvre.

*Chaptinama*, a subgenre of rekhti, is a longish poem dealing with erotic relations between women. 'Chapti' refers to female genitalia and elsewhere, Vanita points, *Chapti* is a 'play without a dildo' (*bin sabure ka khel chapti hai*). The following couplet hints at the sexual pleasures that women derive from the play of *Chapti*

aisi lazzat kahan hai mardon mein  
jaisi lazzat du-gana chapti mein  
(kulliat-i-Mir Jafar Zataille, 143)

Chapti-baz, by extension, are women with enormous appetite for sexual indulgence and do not stick to a single lover. The unapologetic non-procreative sexual indulgence, both between men-men and women-women, is descriptively presented in rekhti. It thus subverts or challenges the convention of metaphysical nature of love, suffering of a devoted lover and affinity for potential procreative unions installed by dominant rekhta. Rekhti not merely inverts the conventions of language and of subject matter (male-male platonic love and male-female courtly love), rather it explores love relations of promiscuous dimensions where men and women engross in multiple love affairs and easily give into flirtations. Ruth Vanita translates a rekhti nazm which hints at female-lovers indulging in orgies

Let's invite all the women in town who are given to clinging (Chaptbaz)

<sup>4</sup> Ruth Vanita in *Gender, Sex and the City*

Welcome them to our house with flowers and betel, embracing,  
 Perfuming each other; when of their husband they start to complain,  
 That's when you and I begin our chant, teach them our refrain:  
 Come du-gana, let's play at chapti<sup>5</sup> (Jurat, 261)

Rekhti gives explicit imagery of lovers engrossed in pursuing their desires which *Chaptinama* advances into description of foreplay between the female couples. It also depicts the riff-raff between the female couples, much in the fashion of rekhta and allows to normalise otherwise socially subversive relation. The following couplets of Rangin accounts the day of quarrel preceded by a rough night spent by the lovers

Tis peru men uthi ohi meri jan gayi  
 Mat sata mujh ko du-gana tere qurbaan gayi  
 Tujhse jab tak na mili thi mujhe kuch dukh hi na tha  
 Hat malti hun, buri baat ko kyu maan gyi  
 Jun jun pahunchti hai chammak bandi ka dum rukta hai  
 Ab meri jan gayi jan yah man gayi  
 (Ed, Faruq Argali, 99)

The female speaker curses herself and the day when she accepted their relation. It reads as a regular twisting of word between cross-sex lovers. The poem seeks to implicate the pathos of female-female coupling, and does, ironically, the opposite. It lays bare the interiority of same-sex love as no different from heterosexual one.

In rekhta, male-male flirtations and bonding were not uncommon. The male-to-male love was couched in the safe backdrop of mysticism and higher affiliation. Rekhti shifted the male-male coupling out of the mystical environs, and represented them in the twilight of customs and conventions they attempted to valorise. Rekhti, majorly written by male poets, performed by male poets in complete male gatherings, implies a greater subversion occurring in the performance arena. In all rekhti poems two voices can be dissected: actual speaker and an apparent speaker. The apparent speaker is a female persona in conversation with a female-beloved, on the other hand, actual speaker, the male poet, performs rekhti in company of his male friends, if not lovers. The performance aspect of rekhti forged a space for male homosexuals to breed and flourish safely under the mask of female persona. There appears to be a natural tension between the actual and apparent speaker which is evident in former's hurling taunts at the latter. Jan Sahib, a later day rekhti poet who earned fame through performances of rekhti that he gave in public arena, used to drab himself in elegant female attire, miming the female temperament performed in exclusive male gatherings. The mockery, clever puns and derision in his performance directed at women exhibit the natural tension between him and whom he imitated.

Rekhti openly expresses admiration of male beauty and disdain for masochism. It valorises different ideas of masculinity exhibited in the practices of the society. On wedding of a Rai Sidhari Lal, Jurat compliments the groom with this couplet

Hai Rajan bhi ajab Mathura ka pera  
 Badan gadraya, munh mehtab sa ha( Jurat 225:36)

<sup>5</sup>Translated by Ruth Vanita in *Gender, Sex and the City*. p 142

Not particularly in the context of above quoted verse, in general we can gauge who is speaking thus in rekhti? It was common for male poet to write verse complimenting a boy-lover or *nazm* in longing for the fulfilment of desire. The male-male love and infatuation was not a new theme for rekhti; the mode of dealing with same-sex love was. In rekhta, the love is seldom consummated and rarely crosses the demarcation of dreamy metaphysical charms to lurk in the somatic pleasures of love. Rekhti, upturns the convention of gender neutral lover and male-lover, tempers with the traditional theme of longing of *ashiq* for union with *mashuq* and portrays the culmination of lover and beloved, irrespective of their gender, in the realm of pleasures of indulgence. Again reflecting on the language of rekhti, the language here too is informed by the choice of subject matter. The rekhti poets felt the Persianised Urdu redundant to their themes; they naturally had to turn their interest to the language of desire-filled and desiring womenfolk.

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