

QUEER VOICES IN URDU REKHTI POETRY IN INDIA

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ABSTRACT

Representation of the lived reality of diverse human experiences through literature is one of the most powerful methods of communication. One of such multitudinous experiences can be located in the realm of sexual orientation and sexual identity. In fact queer approaches to literature accommodate various plural possibilities with regard to sexual identity categories, sexual relations and sexual politics. Queer literature provides the platform to address the issues and concerns of the non-heteronormative people. Rekhti poetry which originated in the city of Lucknow provided a fertile ground for the flourishing of cultural diversity and thereby facilitated the registering of queer voices in the early 18th and 19th century in India. Rekhti poetry refers to Urdu poetry written mostly by men disguising female personae during those times. Rekhti poetry foregrounds the marginalized female voices including within its ambit female-female romantic relations in 18th and 19th century India. A close reading of Rekhti poetry lays bare the lives of women during that period and vividly projects their everyday realities. This paper is an attempt to examine the queer world of Rekhti poetry where the well-established binary categories of gender and sexuality namely, male/masculine, female/feminine are systematically deconstructed. This paper further seeks to analyze Rekhti poetry's celebration of female sexuality which was controlled and regulated by the male poets who wrote them mostly for the purpose of titillation.

KEYWORDS : Sexual identity, non-heteronormative, queer, female personae, marginalized, cultural diversity, deconstructed.

At times ambiguous and unstable expressions of gender identities in literature involves the construction of queer in literature which highlights the process by which heteronormativity is challenged. Queer literature provides a counter narrative to the dominant, acceptable, structures discourses based on normative desire and sexuality. The representation of queer discourses seeks to overturn society's traditional views of sex and morality. In fact much of the works in gender studies and queer theory while influenced by feminist criticism emerges from post-structuralist notion of fragmentation, decentering of *logos* in language and psychoanalysis. Such works also seek to explore issues of sexuality, power and marginalized populations in literature and culture. In the pre-colonial and colonial literary scenario of India several queer possibilities were witnessed. In Islamic societies symbolic poetry was always been the frequently used medium for expressing new and bold subjectivities. Urdu poetry also known as Rekhta in the past was written largely by men and the gender of the beloved was not always clear. Within the genre of Rekhta, sometimes also a female voice is used to speak about the female beloved. The erotization of the Sakhi (female friend) reaches its climax in the 18th and 19th century in India through Urdu Rekhti poetry. Rekhti poetry is a type of Urdu poetry whose distinguishing features are a female speaker and a focus on women's lives. These were written mostly by men in 'begumati zaban, (language of the women). The disguised female persona addresses another female, representing female homoerotic relationships.

The purpose of this paper is to examine queer voices in Urdu Rekhti Poetry in India and analyse its anti-essentialist position within the framework of acceptable normative discouse. To study the rich corpus of literary production of Rekhti poetry various critical theories including queer theory can well be applied.

There is no precise definition of the word "queer" and as scholars do not agree on agree on its possibility of fixed definitions. In the words of Richard Thomson Ford,

"Queer denotes not an identity but instead a political and existential stance, an ideological commitment, a decision to live outside some social norm or other. At the risk of certainty of oversimplification, one could say that even if one is born straight or gay, one must decide to be queer." (Ford: 2007)

Queer critics challenge gender assumptions in sexuality, labels, identity politics and essentialist language. Alfred Kinsey refused to use labels to describe sexual orientations, since he believed sexual behavior could be described, but sexual identity was not fixed. (Schimmel and Queen: 1997) Thus the concept of queer evades any definitions. Even within the queer community there is little consensus as to the

definition of queer. The list of terms included within 'queer' are: lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, omniseual, pansexual, asexual, metrosexual, pomosexual. The last word 'pomosexual' is reactionary term that subverts any scholarly attempts to categorize individuals into even the broadest dimensions of queer sexuality:

“ Pomosexuality lives in the space in which all other non-binary forms of sexual and gender identity reside—a boundary-free zone in which fences are crossed for the fun of it, or simply because some of us can't be fenced. It challenges either/ or categorization in favour of largely unmapped possibility and the intense change that comes with transgression, as well as the need to transgress limits that do not make room for all of us.” (Schimmel and Queen: 2007)

From the postmodern perspective there is no single sexuality as the sexual boundaries are no more fixed. The queer theorists Butler, Sedgwick etc promotes to deconstruct sexual identity. Sedgwick asserts that “ one of the things that 'queer' can refer to is “the open mesh of possibilities, gaps, overlaps, dissonances and resonances, lapses, and excesses of meaning when the constituent elements of anyone's gender, of anyone's sexuality aren't made to signify monolithically.” (Tendencies, 8)

Rekhti poetry is counterpoised to Rekhta, the “literature narrated in masculine voice.” The convention of Rekhta is culled from Persian poetry and it traditionally presents a gendered identity to the lover. Rekhti poetry is similar to Rekhta in its usage of the ghazal format and its metrical rhyme scheme, however, the gender of the lover is presented in an ambiguous way. It regards mention that that the ghazal originated in the Arabian peninsula during the 8th century from where it spread to Persia. The aesthetics of modern Urdu ghazal is derived from Perso-Arabic literature, including the gender of the 'maashuq' (beloved), which, in most cases, is grammatically gender neutral and the identity of the beloved could either be male or female. The following couplet by Ghalib may be considered here:

Yeh na thi hamari qismat ke visal-e yar hota

Agar aur jeete rahe yahi intizar hota

(It was not my fate to unite with the Beloved

Yet had I gone on living, I'd have kept up this same waiting)

In this couplet, the gender of the Beloved referred to 'yar' is grammatically gender neutral as it could connote either a female or a male.

Urdu poetry has always been the prerogative men where the narrator and the beloved usually refer to masculine genders. This patriarchal convention creates ample space for representation of male homoeroticism but it was silent about any female same-sex intimacy. Rekhti poetry with its projection of female lived experiences by a male narrator could be seen as a counter discourse to the traditional male centric Urdu ghazals. In Rekhti, terms like 'dugana', 'yagana', 'zanakhi', 'begana', 'shakhi', 'ilaichi', 'wari', and 'pyari' loosely denote the female beloved. The term Rekhti was coined by Saadat Yaar Khan "Rangin" (1757-1835) Non-normative bondings and same-sex love are prohibited in Islam, but Rekhti poetry depicts a certain social reality with candid expressions as can be seen in a quote by Rekhti poet, Rangin:

Meri du-gana aur main yun nahi hain jaise Rekhta,

Dono ki jane'n ek hain tane jo kasti ho abas.

(My female lover and I are not scattered like the Urdu,

Our two lives are one; you taunt us for nothing.)

A genre of Rekhti called 'Chaptinama', which is a rambling poem dealing with female homosexuality. According to Ruth Vanita and Saleem Kidwai, 'Chapti' means the activity of sticking, clinging or rubbing together and the term dogana is used to indicate this activity between women as well as the women engaging in it. The notion of lesbian activity as rubbing is close to the French term for a lesbian, 'tribade' from the Latin 'tribas', Greek 'tribein' (rubbing) as well as to the Arabic term for lesbian activity, 'Sahq' (rubbing). Rekhti poet, Qalandar Bakhsh Ju'rrat (1748-1809) writes:

Aisi lazzat kahan hain mardon maein

Jaisi lazzat du-gana chapti mein.

(Where is the pleasure in men, compared to pleasure, du-gana , in Chapti)

Insha Allah Khan, "Insha" (1756-1817) another versatile Rekhti poet, based large part of his poetry on queer sexuality. For instance, as in the following verse:

Aag lene ki jo aaayin to kahin laag laga

Bibi humsaai ne di jee men meri aag laga

Na bura mane to lun noch koi muthi bhar

Begama har teri kyaari men hara sag laga

(When she came to take fire, an attraction took hold;

The neighbor lady lit a fire in my heart

If you don't mind, may I seize a handful or two?

Young lady, greens grow in every bed of yours!)

Rekhti poetry's shift from the heavily Persianised register of Rekhta can be seen by its employment of a more colloquial cadence. Most Rekhti poetry is written by men, some of whom disguised as women and wore make-up during public recitals. Rekhti is centered around feminine lifestyles as its themes and its settings, scenarios, subjects and objects relate to commonplace materials used or encountered by women in their everyday life. Unlike the Urdu ghazals Rekhti poetry dealt with the real world, the joys and sorrows and the chores of petty, daily rhythms of life. As such it was not only confined to the aristocratic and affluent women of Lucknow but the subjects ranged from housewives to concubines and courtesans and ladies to servants. The diverse realities of women belonging to all walks of life were showcased in Rekhti poetry. Unlike Urdu Rekhta which is characterized by the use of Persian and Arabic vocabulary, the language of Rekhti poetry uses words and idioms of everyday speech forms from north Indian languages and dialects. Indian queer scholars Ruth Vanita and Saleem Kidwai explored the realms of homoerotic love in India. These scholars covered a wide range of queer representations from the historical to the literary and popular culture. The central concern of Rekhti poetry is unrequited love. Moreover the most distinguishing feature is the beloved of Urdu Rekhti poetry is gender neutral. The one addressed is never spoken of-referred to in the female gender as in the classical Persian form. Rekhti poetry is considered by some scholars as a distorted form of Ghazal of Urdu; the format of Ghazal is deliberately defied for producing "a consciously transgressive and subversive poetic voice." (Petievich 2007:27) Ghazals are contextually conversations between gentlemen, Rekhti are conversations between women, or at times between women and men. According to Hafiz Qateel, a Dakani scholar, it is a *badnam* (disreputable) genre of Urdu poetry which is thought to serve especially for the expression of women's emotions and generic concerns in idioms (auraton ki boli) (Cited in Petievich 2002: 238)

It is significant to mention that in the 1970s male Urdu poets in India reflected the notion of what French feminist Helene Cixous calls *écriture féminine* in her book *The Laugh of the Medusa*. According to Petievich, male Urdu poets were involved in "Speculative experiments with what women would write about if women could be Urdu poets and questions about what would mark their art as distinctly feminine go back to some two hundred years." (Petievich 2005:223) The concept of *écriture féminine* was associated with the feminine. Cixous gave emphasis on defying the syntactic norms of language. Moreover Cixous not only insisted on giving up the normativity of syntax but also called for celebration of women's body in writing. Cixous states,

"Women must write through their bodies, they must invent impregnable language that will wreck partitions, classes and rhetorics, regulations and codes, they must submerge, cut through, get beyond the ultimate reserve-discourse, including the one that laughs at the word 'silence'...such is the strength of women that, sweeping away syntax, breaking that famous threads (just a tiny little thread, they say) which acts for men as a surrogate umbilical cord." (Marks and Courtivron 1981: 256)

Rekhti poetry also shows similar transgressions by its flouting of linguistic rules of syntax as well as semiotic transgressions; the male poets transcending their sexual identities and writing in the garb of females.

In Rekhti poetry gender fluidity is evident from impersonation and switching over of sexual identity categories. Carle Petievich argues that Rekhti poetry was a parody of love literature namely the ghazals by men. According to Petievich it was only Rekhta which expressed love and Rekhti poetry was merely sexually suggestive bawdy poetry. But queer scholar Ruth Vanita argues that Rekhti poetry as very much in tradition of Riti kavya, medieval romances and erotic treatises. Rekhti depicted female homosexuality and its reception in the late 18th and 19th century Indian society. The very fact of its popularity confirms the truth that alternative

sexuality of women was recognized and the society which was familiar with male homoerotic relationships was also equally aware and acceptable about female same-sex love. T. Graham Bailey calls Rekhti poetry the language of “women of no reputation” and the poetry “a debased form of lyric invented by a debased mind in a debased age.” Ali Javed Zaidi views that it catered to those “who sought decadent pleasures.” According to him it is “vulgar” it provides insight into the “evils that feudal order bred in the lives of women.” Whatever might be the intentions behind Rekhti poetry it indeed reflected the lived reality of some women during the 18th & 19th century in India. Rekhti reflects the voices of the “debased” women meaning the voices of the courtesans (tawaifs), who epitomized the culture of Lucknow at that time. Pioneering sexologist Havelock Ellis coined five Indian words for homoerotic women: dugana, zanakha, satar, chapathai and chapatbaz. According to Ruth Vanita and Saleem Kidwai, “whatever be their sources, the male poets accurately portray sexual details in contrast to Western 19th century fictions on lesbianism written by men-such as Gautier’s *Mademoiselle de Maupin* (1836) - which pretend ignorance regarding lesbian lovemaking.” Much of the corpus of Rekhti is lost as it was considered as obscene and perverse with the advent of Victorian morality. In the 20th century Rekhti poetry was labeled obscene and was eliminated from the gamut of Urdu literature.

Rekhti poetry is iconoclastic by its very nature- it often flouts rules and standards of poetic diction by not adhering to metrical schemes and established poetic styles. It defies strict dichotomies and overlaps conventional social boundaries-those of elite and subordinates, those of Urdu language and Hindi language, of mistresses and servants, of noble ladies and courtesans. In other Rekhti poetry’s discourse was non-conformism which was its natural attribute. In spite of its apparent controversies reflected the aesthetic expressions of different realms of female lived experiences and female pleasures. It also indicates the fact that in order to represent an alternative reality how poetry defies religious and social norms. The symbolism of love depicted through various shades of queer sexuality challenges normative heterosexuality and patriarchal bias as could be inferred from the discourses of Rekhti poetry. Non-binary approaches in the expression of human emotions regardless of gender identities have always been a part of any culture and society.

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