

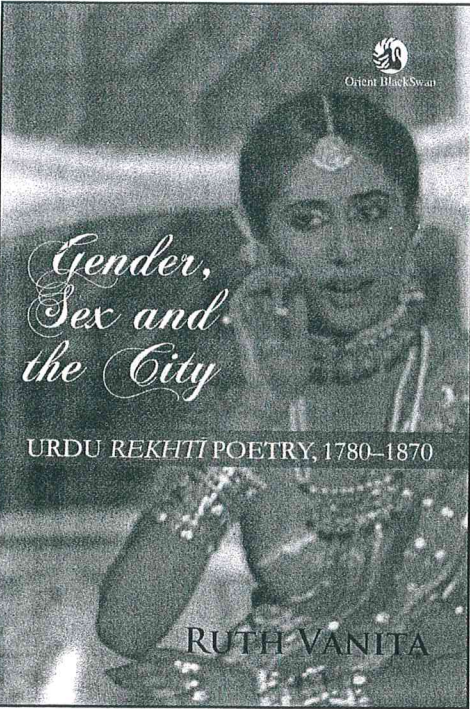
In *Gender, Sex and the City*, Ruth Vanita has painstakingly put together a not-very-visible-reality by focusing on an otherwise

**GENDER, SEX AND THE CITY: URDU REKHTI
POETRY, 1780-1870**

By Ruth Vanita

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vibrant language used effectively in the voice of women; poetry in this voice did not necessarily have to remain within the domain of mystic and romantic love. While they did of course fall in love, they used a down-to-earth city language to articulate ordinary experiences related to work; they went to the bazaar, dressed, ate and engaged in the mundane ways of the world, even in poetry. The focus was on women's lives and the speech was primarily urban reflecting the culture of the city of Lucknow. In 'Women in the City: Fashioning the Self', in the section that maps 'feminine geography of the rooftop', Vanita quotes from Nisbat:



*Gender,
Sex and
the City*

URDU REKHITI POETRY, 1780-1870

RUTH VANITA

Come dear, let's go on the first floor to entertain ourselves
We'll open the window and view the Meena Bazaar.

All the verses have been translated by Ruth Vanita herself.

Interestingly, she notes how rekhti inverts the stereotype of men as watchers of women

through a depiction of rooftops as places for women to view men. Women's concerns and their ordinary day-to-day life find their way into their poetry in rekhti. The festivals of Holi, Basant and some other festivities that women indulged in offered symbolic as well as practical modes of intermingling with people of both the sexes and since there was an existent long history of erotic symbols around these festivities, poetry in rekhti too acquired similar connotations.

At Holi she dressed up as a jogin and seeing her,
The 'free people' (azad log) forgot their usual ways.

-Says Insha

Vanita comments on how even the celibate Sufis got allured by the play-acting of these women! Ceremonies and descriptions of dresses and perfumes abound in this poetry, celebrating women's inclinations. So much so, the decorative drawstrings (izarband) used by women drew the attention of many a poet. This indeed is different from the present days when drawstrings lie concealed as a part of undergarments.

While a large body of this poetry deals with the mundane womanly matters with a touch of romance, there is also a typical women's mystical depiction within the

domestic sphere. Female diviners possessed by jinns are invoked, till later in the 19th century, when these practices were perceived as un-Islamic.

Rekhti has been traditionally seen as an inferior 'low class' colloquial language in comparison to Urdu or rekhta which is formal and closer to Persian, the language of the court. In her book *Gender, Sex and the City*, Ruth Vanita attempts to establish the aesthetic value of rekhti poetry and suggests how this needs to be recognized through the understanding of women's way of using language for poetic ambiguity. In that, this poetry cannot be dismissed as lesser in its appeal. She acknowledges the energy and pace of this poetry and establishes a case for deconstructing the hierarchies built into critical appreciation of Urdu, rekhta and rekhti poetry. In fact, one of the chapters of this book is entitled 'Playfully Speaking: Transforming Literary Convention'.

The post-1857 scene represents not just the physical destruction of monuments but also as Ruth Vanita puts it, there was a burial or a shattering of some poetic monuments as well. Her book is an effort at excavating some of the lost treasure!

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