

'Folded in a Pocket': Negotiating 'Past' Texts for Same-Sex Desire between Women in Saba Dewan's *Tawaiifnama* and Ruth Vanita's *Memory of Light*

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Abstract: This paper will attempt to analyse how two twenty-first century texts, Saba Dewan's *Tawaiifnama* (2019) and Ruth Vanita's *Memory of Light*, (2020) negotiate with several other texts and literary traditions, in order to imagine, reconstruct, or place on record silenced narratives of desire between women. I would argue, that on the one hand, the stories that Dewan and Vanita seek to tell are tales that appear to be like something hidden in a pocket, lapped in the fabric of other narratives, having the power to unsettle established narratives when finally brought out into the light of day. On the other, they make us aware of the ways in which the past inhabits the present, as a lost utopia which we yearn for, or as silences that cannot be 'redeemed' from their violent erasure.

Keywords: Saba Dewan, Ruth Vanita, non-linear temporality, same sex love, haunting

'This was in the pocket. Thought you might want it.' She looks at me, her face masked, as I open it gently, trying to avoid tearing it. For a moment my mind goes blank, then something submerged surfaces- it's a sketch of Chapla. The paper is worn along the seams.

Ruth Vanita, *Memory of Light* (194)

Feminist and queer texts have repeatedly attempted to re-imagine the past, inventing complex lost worlds of pleasures and moments of resistance, as well as recounting histories of systematic oppression. As Judith Halberstam points out, a queer approach to cultural texts and records frequently calls for the deployment of "scavenger methodology," using gleanings from various disciplines to "collect and produce information on subjects who have been deliberately or accidentally excluded from traditional studies of human behaviour" (Halberstam 13). These explorations often straddle the realms of history and fiction, the line between "research" and "imagining," testing postmodernism's ability to "[put] into question, at the same time as it exploits, the grounding of historical knowledge in the past" (Hutcheon, 92). Thus, Kidwai and Vanita's pioneering *Same Sex Love in India* (2000) offers the reader gleanings from a variety of texts that refused to allow any simple disciplinary categorization, from Hindu epics, to court judgements. Moreover, queer imaginings are also invested in inventing a legacy that might or might not 'really' have existed. Thus, Sarah Waters' *Tipping the Velvet* is engaged in reminding us of marginalized histories of London in the late nineteenth century- the city's street life, its music halls and theatres, and its engagement with a nascent Socialist movement. On the other hand, it is also a fantasy about what *might* have happened- in the bars where "toms" congregate in the novel, for instance, which perhaps did not exist at all in Victorian England. If according to Jose Munoz, queerness can never be in the "now" but can be felt "as the warm illumination of a horizon imbued with potentiality," (9) these texts are indeed deeply invested in the potentiality that the past holds/held out, that can be realized through our

imaginative interventions, even if such things never happened, or escaped the discipline of recorded history. As Wendy Brown, in her reading of Derrida's hauntology writes, "We inherit not 'what really happened' to the dead but what lives on from that happening, what is conjured from it, how past generations and events occupy the force fields of the present, how they claim us, and how they haunt, plague, and inspire our imaginations and visions for the future" (150).

As Gayatri Gopinath's research on queer films of the Indian diaspora has shown, earlier canonical texts are often embedded within later queer texts. Thus, according to Gopinath, Deepa Mehta's *Fire* (1993) evokes Chughtai's "Lihaaf," a text written fifty years before, in 1942, and Pratibha Parmar's *Khush* cites on-screen kisses from *Razia Sultan* (1983) and *Mughal-e- Azam* (1960) (111-113, 131-160). Moreover, one could claim that there exists a uniquely Indian legacy of queering feminine spaces that are expected to be spaces of seclusion and 'timeless' subservience to the imperatives of heteropatriarchy, which finds expression not only in well-known texts such as "Lihaaf" or *Fire* or in late eighteenth- and early nineteenth-century *rekhti* poetry, but also in a number of other lesser known texts which have garnered a more modest degree of critical attention, such as Shweta Narayan's "The Padishah Begum's Dream" (2011).

In this paper, I will attempt to focus on explorations of desire between women in the space of a *kotha* in a bygone era in two texts- *Tawaifnama* (2019) by Saba Dewan, specifically the chapter "Pyaari and Zehra," and *Memory of Light* (2020) by Ruth Vanita. While the plot of Vanita's novel is centred upon the romance between Chapla Bai and Nafis Bai, two courtesans or tawaifs in a *kotha* in the late eighteenth- and early nineteenth-century Lucknow, Saba Dewan's account of the lineage of a matrilineal family of hereditary tawaifs, is a text that deliberately positions itself on the border of fact and fiction in order to respect the wishes of those upon who shared their experiences with Dewan in the course of her research (15). I will attempt to explore how these stories of same-sex love weave a system of inter-textual references so that these love stories are positioned into the liminal spaces that exist, as it were, in the crevices of other well-known texts. They would appear to function like the sketch of Chapla, folded and hidden away in the pocket of a well-worn dress, yet capable of unsettling the narrative when remembered and brought into the light of day once again. This coming to light, makes one abruptly aware of the voices that have been irretrievably lost. As Nafis realizes upon seeing the sketch of her lover, if Chapla were telling the story, "it would be almost entirely different from hers," since "[m]emory, that most perfidious of hypocrites, holds up not a picture but a mirror" (194). As I will argue, both texts, written in English, a language that is both a foreign tongue, and a quotidian feature in the lives of Nafis Bai and Dewan's interlocuters, are mirrors of the present, as well as pictures that seem to be drawn on an impulse to refuse a linear temporality as the plane on which to locate ones politics, and instead be "willing to be bathed in the fading light of whatever has been declared useless" to use Elizabeth Freeman's term (xiii). The losses of the past cannot be made good, yet the past continues to haunt the present.

Vanita's *Memory of Light*, is set in a newly built capital of Awadh, the time span of the novel being roughly between Raja Chait Singh's rebellion against the East India Company in 1781 and the death of the poet Insha Allah Khan 'Insha' in 1817. The novel is structured by Nafis Bai's recollections of the romance she shared with Chapla Bai, a dancer from Benaras or Kashi, when both women were young. Through the course of the novel, the famous *rekhti* poets of the day, Insha, Saadat Yaar Khan 'Rangin,' and Shaikh Kalandar

Baksh 'Jur'at,' drop in and out of the *kotha*, and their verse, which so often deals with emotional and sexual relationships between women often in the same household, frames the relationship between Chapla and Nafis. *Tawaifnama*, on the other hand, traces the peregrinations of Saba Dewan, in her quest for finding out about the vanishing world of the *tawaifs* or courtesans of Benaras. However, her novel too, is a novel of 'comings and goings,' in and out of homes. Her relationship with her interlocutors straddles a continuum between being an audience granted by the ageing *tawaifs* to a visitor/patron and the sharing of personal and domestic concerns with a friend whom they look after and protect. Indeed, Saba Dewan herself, functions as the one 'real, historical' character in the narrative, like the 'real' poets in Vanita's fictional world. Indeed, in a sense, *Tawaifnama* and *Memory of Light*, are texts that negotiate with previous texts by these authors, drawing upon a world which they have explored for the purpose of creating texts quite different from these- in Vanita's case her scholarly work *Gender, Sex and the City: Urdu Rekhti Poetry 1780-1870* (2012) and in Dewan's, her 2009 documentary *The Other Song*.

If *rekhti* is non-mystical poetry invested with the stuff of everyday life, articulated by a female speaker, and often set in a household, exploring the life that takes place in the "bedroom, kitchen, and bathroom," as well as "the market and the street," then in this fictional world, inspiration for the male *rekhti* poets, often comes from the doings of this particular *kotha* (Vanita, *Gender, Sex, and the City*, esp. 1-5). Like Chapla and Nafis' love poems going back and forth between the two of them, the roles of the 'source of inspiration' and the 'inspired' keep shifting between the poems and the dwellers of the *kotha*. Thus, in Nafis' narrative, Mir Insha's poems about Chapla Bai's dancing at the English kings' birthday celebrations or Dulhan Jaan's wedding, poems heavily invested in providing details of the finery on show, are woven into her own memories of the details of the costumes that she designed for these occasions (Vanita, *Gender, Sex, and the City* 193-194; *Memory of Light* 94-99, 122-128).¹ Nafis' role, as the designer of these costumes, is not exactly that of a muse, but rather that of an artist whose work is woven into the text of another artists work. Indeed, in this light, Insha's work occupies a continuum between Nafis' use of her mother's old *peshvaz* in a costume for her sister, or the copying of Nafis' designs for costumes onto different colour combinations by Mattan Apa's *kotha*, a rival establishment, and the final cutting up of these clothes by a beggar woman (Vanita, *Memory of Light* 57-58, 194.)

However, if the poets of the day find 'copy' in the *kotha*, Nafis and Chapla also take their poetry and make it their own through their intimate conversations and performances. Given texts, exist in order to be played with. Such as Rangin's *sarapa*, or head to toe description of a dancer, described as a *pari* or fairy-faced one. Perhaps reminded of the last couplet of Rangin's poem, ("The tips of her toes are 'colourful,' Rangin/ Truly she's an incomparable fairy") upon seeing Chapla paint her toes, Nafis plots in order to get Chapla to dress according to the details of the dancer in the poem, without letting her know which text she plans to sing as an accompaniment to Chapla's dance, getting her to wear the appropriate jewellery and trying to make her wear the appropriate colour, red (Vanita, *Gender, Sex, and the City* 197; *Memory of Light* 62-64). Departing from the text, however, Chapla wears orange, which is "close enough to red," while Nafis wears red. Nafis' plan weaves together the public and the private, using the opportunity of paying a public compliment to Rangin by performing his verse in a public gathering at his house, as a pretext for the pleasures of a joint performance with the object of her secret love, in the context of a *mushaira*, where romance is made manifest through the public performance and appreciation of poetry, song, and dance. Similarly, the fish-shaped earrings lent to

Chapla to wear are at once a public compliment to the city at Chapla's first public performance in Lucknow, as fishes were the emblem of the state of Awadh, as well as being a staple of descriptions of Krishna in Sanskrit and Braj poetry, but for Nafis they have a private significance as well, because she had worn them with a red dress, the first time she saw Chapla (Vanita, *Gender, Sex and the City* 197-199; *Memory of Light* 62-68).

By building up a narrative in which the poems are transformed into performances, snatches of conversation, or events that 'really happened,' Vanita's novel refuses the notion of any moment of origin. In the middle of rehearsals for the entertainments being put up at a wedding, for example, then arises an episode in which bodices feature prominently. Nafis' sister Shirin finds the bodice made for her too tight in the sleeves, while the cups are too loose, and complains about the poor workmanship of the household *Mughlani*, or seamstress. She flings it, aiming at the *Mughlani's* head. Chapla and Nafis slip away from this scene, but *Mughlani* comes in with Chapla's bodice, which Chapla tries on, catching and throwing a ball with one hand while tying the bodice strings with the other. Chapla says that the bodice is too heavy with embroidery, and "pricks her," upon which Nafis gives her one of her own, made with *shabnam* muslin, embroidered with stars. *Mughlani* says, "The stars will sink in this one," to which Nafis replies, "Yes, both kinds of stars." (Vanita, *Memory of Light* 96-97) This passage is a clever working together of a number of interwoven texts. Descriptions of women's clothing, especially a beloved woman's clothing, and the presence of a *mughlani* are prominent features of a number of extant *rekhti* poems (Vanita, *Gender, Sex, and the City* 57-69, 97-110.) Every single one of the details described above are present in Insha's poem "Chubti hai yeh nigodi bhari angiya" ("This wretched heavy body pricks me"), a verse made famous as the opening song in Shyam Benegal's *Mandi* (1983). A still from the film, in turn, features on the best known cover for the hard copy of Vanita's *Gender, Sex and the City*, within the pages of which, the full text of the poem has been quoted and analyzed. But even if we limit the number of texts involved here to two, Insha's poem, and *Memory of Light*, we are not allowed to imagine an original text. Was Insha inspired by Chapla and Nafis or were Chapla and Nafis acting out the scenes they had read in Mir Insha's poem?

Reading *Tawaifnama* as a companion text to *Memory of Light*, one wonders perhaps this world of playing with texts is a particularly important aspect of the courtesan's professional practice. As Vidya Rao points out, the *thumri*, the most crucial part of a *tawaif's* repertoire from the nineteenth century onwards, is a genre where the performance of a piece provides a musical space or *jagah* for a feminine voice "by playing with ambiguities, meanings and...use of humour" (WS31). Rao points out how the temporal schema of the performance of a *thumri*, allowing varying reiterations of the same phrases which lend themselves to varying interpretations, create ambiguities about the identity of the audience to whom the speaker addresses her song, allowing for the creation of various kinds of *bhav* even in a single performance, and for a subversive blurring of *raags* that 'purer' genres eschew. Pyaari's older sister Bindo, is instructed about expressing the various moods that the words of the *thumri* can be imbued with:

"While performing *bol banao thumri*, it should be a singer's aim, Jhandey Khan stressed, to evoke as many different shades of meaning as can be read into the text through melodic elaborations and judicious use of ornamentations. He would demonstrate to her how the simple phrases in *thumri* - for instance, *baju band khul khul jaye*; my armband keeps coming undone - could be repeated many times over, each time emphasising different moods, such as amorousness, love, anger and even devotion." (Dewan 261)

Later in the novel, Pyaari shuts her *kotha* to her patrons for a few days to spend time with Zehra, and one evening dresses up and performs a *mujra*, solely for Zehra. When Pyaari sings *baju band khul khul jaaye*, playing with her armband, Zehra takes her in her arms, removes her jewellery, and begins to make love to her (Dewan 493). Zehra had earlier told Pyaari, whose direct audience were mostly male patrons, that most of her radio fans were women (Dewan 493). Pyaari and Zehra's love thus seems offer a glimpse of a queer utopia in which circuits of appreciation, desire, and romance between women are acknowledged.² In doing this, their experiences seem, in a complex temporal scheme, (since Pyaari and Zehra were friends in the early years of Independence,) to take on the contours of the iconic film *Utsav* (1984,) based on the second century BC Sanskrit *Mricchakatika*. In the film Charudutt, the bramhin merchant (played by Shekhar Suman) and Vasantasena, (played by Rekha, a queer icon in her own right,) the famous courtesan, begin their affair when Charudutt helps Vasantasena to take off her jewellery. But with Zehra replacing the male lover, Dewan's narrative also brings to the fore, the unspelt romance between Charudutt's wife, Aditi, (played by Anuradha Patel) and Vasantsena, in the extended sequence in which they sing for each other, and exchange jewellery and clothes, in a closed room.³ *Utsav*, is an interesting parallel text to "Pyaari and Zehra," since both narratives are about a husband, his wife, and a courtesan and about their individual relationships with each other, as well as about the heterosexual couple's negotiation with the sexually transgressive 'public' woman in their lives. Like Vasantasena, in *Utsav*, Pyaari ultimately feels compelled to leave Zehra and her husband Ausaf.

However, like Chapla eluding Nafis' plans to make her wear red to Rangin's house and wearing orange instead ("close enough to red") or the question of whether the two of them ought to be the meeting of the Ganga and Gomti, since they are from Kashi and Lucknow, rather than the Ganga and Jamuna, the commonly used metaphor for harmonious meeting, especially in the context of Hindu-Muslim communal harmony, (Vanita, *Memory of Light* 64, 135) the story of Pyaari and Zehra also departs from *Utsav*. In Karnad's film, after various tribulations involving Vasantasena, Charudutt, and Aditi, the *savarna* couple are allowed to return to their home in peace, following a change of political regime. In *Tawaifnama*, Zehra and Ausaf are always viewed with suspicion by family, neighbours and colleagues for being Muslims and communists, which indirectly leads to Ausaf's death, caused by alcoholism, and Zehra's death soon after, from "unspecified causes" (Dewan 496). When Ausaf turns up to take Zehra back, claiming the Pyaari wanted to traffic his wife into sex work, he breaks up the budding solidarity between two marginalized identities in independent India, the Muslim intellectual and the Muslim tawaif.

These departures from the previous text, I would argue, serve to extend the reach of the previous text as it were, and acknowledge the spectre of the past in the present. Even if Nafis lives in more tolerant times in which her family understands what is going on between her and Chapla, and her friends can openly discuss the reasons why things did not work out between the two, the text also points to factors which the characters fail to discuss, such as the fact that while the courtesan household allows queer relationships to flourish, heterosexual patronage, or at least the company of men is what keeps *kothas* going, providing both economic support as well as heterosexual procreation that ensures that *kothas* survive into the next generation through the birth of girl children. Moreover, even if no one raises any questions about this, Nafis and Chapla both settle down with long term partners from their own religions. If they could compare themselves to the meeting of the Ganga and Jamuna in their youth, as if they were *Ganga-Jamuni tehzeeb*

incarnate, in later years, Nafis stands waiting on the threshold of a temple, while Chapla is inside, praying for a child (Vanita, *Memory of Light* 135, 182). The fictional past, created by a contemporary author, seems to raise the spectre of the 'present' in early nineteenth-century Awadh, with talk of Ahalya Bai rebuilding temples in Kashi, sounding like a very faint echo of bloodier temple-buildings in the early twenty-first century (Vanita, *Memory of Light* 88, 201).

This 'extension' of the text being quoted from, as in the case of *Utsav*, can also be used to critique an existing discourse by quoting from it. 'Pyaari and Zehra,' in my opinion, uses small details to critique an existing discourse about Indian feminist engagements with female sexuality in the mid-twentieth century. In Pyaari Khala/ Saba Dewan's narrative, Zehra is an acquaintance of Ismat Chughtai and Rasheed Jahan, and other Progressive writers. Indeed, her character would seem to be inspired by them, with her roots in an upper class, 'forward looking' Muslim family based in UP, her feminism, her simplicity of dress, her sharing of Rasheed Jahan's communism, and of Jahan and Chughtai's use of a language spoken by women in their writing (Dewan 477-478). Moreover, Zehra's choice in supporting her husband's politics and being a comrade and an equal as well as a wife, is reminiscent of the strong, companionate marriages that Chughtai's and Rasheed Jahan's own marriages appear to have been (Jalil, Paul Kumar and Saadique). This heterosexual but revolutionary departure from the orthodox marriages expected of women of their social background, has played its part in these writers being seen as women whose lives are an inspiring alternative to the lives of other Indian women, who were, in Chughtai's own words, compelled to suffocate under the *lihaaf* or play Holi with their own blood on Faras Road (Chughtai, *A Life in Words* 42).⁴

As Priyamvada Gopal has pointed out, an important aspect of the work of prominent feminist writers associated with the progressives, Rasheed Jahan, Begum Hajrah, and Chughtai, is the exploration of interactions between educated middle class women, with some access to the position of the citizen-subject, and women who constitute the Other for them. Gopal, in her analysis of Rasheed Jahan's works such as "Woh" and "Mera Ek Safar," points out how the texts often contain internalized misogyny to what is perceived as feminine ignorance unrelieved by education, as well as moments of rupture in which the voice of the often physically repulsive Other, can be heard over and above a narrative woven with the strands of the educated woman's experience, so that educated woman's as well as the reader's assumptions can be sharply challenged (Gopal 39-64). Saba Dewan's text is at once a critique of the oversimplifications about women who cannot be co-opted into a narrative of modernity, that even women writers have made about women like Pyaari and her nieces, as well as a furthering of Rasheed Jahan's project of critiquing her own position as the harbinger of knowledge and liberal values.

Chughtai's most famous short story *Lihaaf* is popularly celebrated as *the* first Indian text that boldly spoke about lesbianism in respectable homes and occasioned Chughtai's courageous defence of her right to write openly about the truths she felt patriarchy had chosen to ignore, when she was charged with obscenity in 1945. If the text itself operates in a darkly comic, almost amoral universe without judging, or perhaps even understanding what Begum Jaan does, or what makes her a frightening figure, Chughtai's recollections about the short story would seem to suggest that while she refused to apologize for writing about what she saw as the dark truths of a patriarchal society, a happy marriage was, in her eyes, far better than sexual relationships between women. Writing many years later, in the essay 'Un Byahataon ke Naam,' a chapter of her

autobiography, Chughtai would reminisce that the woman upon whom Begum Jaan had been based had, in later years, come up to her and told her that she was now happily married, and the mother “of a pearl of a son.” Chughtai, in her reflections upon this incident, writes about her own happiness, that the fate she had wanted for the Begum, had come true: “I felt fully rewarded when I saw her flower-like boy. I felt as if he was mine as well- a part of my mind, a living product of my brain, an offspring of my pen” (Chughtai, *A Life in Words* 21-42, 40). This narrative, for all the queerness of the pen-wielding woman author assuming a parental position as the ‘creator’ of the child (the child’s father is barely mentioned in the narrative) would seem, in its celebration of the resumption of heterosexual procreation and the birth of a male heir, to elicit the same comment that sums up the last story of hers that Zehra reads aloud to Pyaari: “Surprisingly conventional in its resolution for a story written by Zehra, it was redeemed by interesting characterisation and language” (Dewan 496). This last story, written after Zehra returns to her husband, about a man torn between his wife and another woman, who finally chooses his wife, is Zehra’s way of seeking closure for her relationship for Pyaari, and is thus similar to Chughtai’s use of her pen in “Un Byahataon Ke Naam” to delineate a distance between the writer and her experience of desire between women, testifying to her own ‘preference’ for the realms of conjugal heterosexuality.

Pyaari’s narrative of her heartbreak upon Zehra’s leaving, is thus a narrative that refuses to comply with Zehra’s or Chughtai’s need to diminish love between women to an ‘episode,’ that can be left behind. Along with being the brave descendant of Dharmman Bibi who fought in the *ghadar* of 1857, Pyaari also resembles the plucky, generous, women found in several of Chughtai’s stories who cannot afford to, or deliberately refuse to, tailor their relationships with men according to middle class standards of sexual morality and modesty. She continues to take male lovers, including the devoted Shambhu Lala who continues to visit her even on her deathbed. None of these ‘facts’ are allowed to detract from the importance that Pyaari gives to her relationship with Zehra, even as she continues to live with her usual resilience:

... you described your aunt as the quintessential tawaif - a survivor in love and life. Zehra had been the love of Pyaari’s life. Her betrayal left a deep mark, but it did not erode Pyaari’s faith in living. She lived fully and was open to love whenever it crossed her path, unlike Zehra who gave up on life after the death of her love, Ausaf. (Dewan 497)

Pyaari thus appears to partake of a ‘timeless’ ideal of the tawaif, an ideal handed down by the family of Dewan’s interlocutor, herself a survivor in love and life, as Dewan’s text lovingly chronicles. At the same time, Pyaari’s youth is carefully located in its precise historical circumstances. Yet, as Dewan’s narrative, by juxtaposing the stories narrated to her alongside a narrative of the present-day context in which she pieces together this history, shows, past and present cannot be demarcated along a linear trajectory. Aijaz, who interrupts Pyaari’s narrative, saying she is blaspheming as she lies on her death bed, has, like Ausaf, who interrupted the Pyaari-Zehra romance many years ago, had to negotiate with his religious identity in order to grasp where he stands in the world of Indian politics (Dewan 238). The politics of this haunting of the present in both novels is significant if we return to Wendy Brown’s reading of Derrida, cited at the beginning of this paper. As Brown points out, for Derrida, being haunted by the past is a condition that enables us to attempt to live more “justly”: “Justice demands that we locate our political identity between what we have inherited and what is not yet born, between what we can only imagine and the histories that constrain and shape that imagination” (Brown 147).

Both Dewan and Vanita's work involve an investigation of the inheritance that shapes our identities, as well as the limits of that inheritance, in the form of the silences that the writers cannot or will not redeem. On being interrupted by Aijaz, Pyaari Khala turns her face to the wall and refuses to go on with her story, despite the affectionate urgings of her niece and Dewan, who try to say encouraging words about "the beauty of the human spirit embodied in love," and how love between women is to be found among ladies in respectable *zenanas* as well as in *kothas* (Dewan 494). Although her niece gives Dewan further details of how the affair finally ended, out of Pyaari's earshot, Pyaari's version is left incomplete, never to be finished.

In *Memory of Light*, the interpretations of lived experience that are crucially missing are the texts of Nafis and Chapla's poems. As the feminine voice articulating same-sex love, Nafis, the one who, going by the logic of the plot of the novel, 'lives' what we know of as a world created through *rekhti*. As Vanita's scholarship has explored, while a number of *rekhti* poets have been neglected, others have made it into the canon of Urdu letters due to more 'respectable' contributions- Insha's reputation for instance, depends largely on his work on grammar and vocabulary, *Darya-e-Latafat* (Vanita, *Gender, Sex, and the City* 20-24). However, there exists only one extant text which may perhaps be written by a woman (Vanita, *Gender, Sex, and the City* 6-7). Nafis' experiences might be enshrined in Insha and Rangin's deathless verse, but her own verse, the unmediated expressions of her love for Chapla, and her own name, remain hidden, perhaps because it is not possible two centuries later, to presume to put words in her mouth. Insha's couplet, reflecting on the decline of his world, says:

Āwāz bujh rahi jo du-gāna kī āj hai
Inshā se ko'ī kah de ab is ka gilā kare

The *du-gāna's* voice is getting quenched today
 Tell Insha, someone, that he should lament this now (Vanita, *Gender, Sex and the City* 143)

Acknowledging the past is perhaps also an acknowledgement that the spectre of the past can manifest itself in the form of an absence that cannot be recovered, that there may once have been texts articulating loves that dared speak their names, but who live on now as silences.

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Notes

- ¹ All *Rekhti* poems have been cited from Ruth Vanita's *Gender, Sex and the City: Urdu Rekht+ Poetry 1780-1870*.
- ² The term queer utopia has been taken from José Muñoz, *Cruising Utopia*.
- ³ For a detailed analysis of the scenes between Vasantsena and Aditi, please see Gayatri Gopinath, *Impossible Desires: Queer Diasporas and South Asian Public Cultures* 104-105.
- ⁴ *A Life in Words* is the Urdu translation of Chughtai's celebrated biography *Kaghazi Hai Pairahan* (1988). 'Lihaaf' was first published in 1942 in *Adab-i-Latif*, a journal based in Lahore, the text cited for this paper is a Devnagari text found online on Abhivyakti.org.

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