CHAPTER 7

Styling Urban Glamour

Courtesan and Poet

Hazāron deviyon ko yahān’ ki pariyo’ ne pachhārā hai
Nahi yah Lakhnau ik Rājā Indra kā akhārā hai
The fairies here have defeated thousands of goddesses
This is not Lucknow but Raja Indra’s arena

—Inshā¹

Chitwan teri bas dekhte hi yād pāre hai
Dilli ki wahī chōhal wahī nahār du-gāna
When I see the way you look at me, I immediately remember
That mischief and merriment of Delhi, that canal, du-gāna

—Inshā²

This chapter examines how poet and courtesan in late eighteenth-century Lucknow collaborate in the public styling and enactment of desire. Jur’at’s romance with a real-life courtesan as its heroine and Inshā’s poems naming particular courtesans, are examples of how poetry at this time reinvigorates and transforms ‘ishq. Poets praise courtesans, and courtesans sing the works of poets.

Such collaboration is attested for several cities and many types of court poetry. Late nineteenth-century rītī poet Lallo Lal Kavi of Banaras praised a courtesan named Saraswati:

Rambhā Rati ki kahānī hai gati, jahān’ āp Saraswati nāch nāhi
What standing do Rambhā and Rati have, when Saraswati herself dances?

Comparing her to the eponymous Goddess of learning, he distinguishes her as a learned woman from nymphs who embody sexual pleasure.

R. Vanita, Gender, Sex, and the City
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Fifty years earlier, poet Benī praised another Banarasi courtesan as superior to nymphs and equal to Tansen:

\begin{align*}
&Til \text{ bhar tult } nahi \text{ n Tillotamā, rang se rāp sawā}\text{'i hai} \\
&Hai Rati kā rūta, Rati kabāri \text{ Urvashi bhi sun sharma}'i hai \\
&Sun tān par hote hain galtān, sur Tānsen ki pā'ī hai \\
&Nāhar ke drīg ki putri, Kāshi menī Tāukhībā'ī hai \\
\end{align*}

Tillotamā can’t compare at all—she’s more beautiful and lovely; As great as Rati, no, not Rati, even Urvashi feels ashamed Hearing that sound, all wallow in bliss—she has Tānsen’s voice The apple of the eye of the lion among men is Tāukhībā’ī of Banaras

This, like early rekhtī, was written before the Urdu-Hindi divide had hardened; Jur’at too compares courtesan Bakhshī to Saraswati and Tansen.

Both in rekhtī and rekhta, poets construct models of glamorous female and male youth and ways to court them. This poetry foregrounds its own urbanity, mapping the city on to the beautiful body whether female or male.

Thus in the rekhtī couplet that forms the second epigraph to this chapter, chahal chōhal conveys the metonymic relationship between the du-gāna’s glance and the canal it recalls. Chōhal means “laughter” and “fun”; chahal, “merriment” or “festivity,” suggests the bustling city, as in chahal-pahal. Alliteration in chuhal and chitwan (“glance”) enacts sprightly eyes meeting on a crowded Delhi street.

The glance is like a canal by virtue of its flowing, sparkling qualities; it evokes a common facial gesture in Indian dance, when eyes simulate a winding street.

The type of beauty celebrated in rekhtī and rekhta is distinctly urban. The person mirrors the city, and the city is embodied in a person. The desirable object projects a uniquely individual style that is imitable because of its excellence within given categories. Her or his good taste is apparent in choice of clothing, jewelry, cosmetics, and furnishings; his or her charm, however, radiates from mischievous ways of looking at, speaking to, and teasing the speaker and other admirers.

This style is necessarily a public one; it is not for private enjoyment by spouse or lover but for consumption by a group of admirers. The desirable person’s charms are on display, simultaneously suggesting availability and inaccessibility. Much rekhta of this time figures desire as collective and thus somewhat different from desire in rekhtī, which tends (with some exceptions) to be private.

The kasbī and the street urchin are less fashionable yet are piquantly desirable. Sharp lines cannot always be drawn between tawā'īf and kasbī; many women might aspire to be courtesans and style themselves such, but few made it to the highest echelons of the profession. While the courtesan may be highly desirable, she is often beyond the speaker’s reach; the kasbī is more easily available. Similar shades of gray may obtain in the case of bānkās; some were from well-to-do families, while others were street boys making their way in the world. The poems rarely classify desirable persons clearly, so the guessing game for the listener is not just about gender but also about class.