

Fiction as Custodian of Facts: Courtesan Literature and Depiction of an India Secreted by Bourgeois Squeamishness

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Abstract

For generations, the tawaifs of north India and the devdasis of southern India functioned as the performers, preservers and protectors of the classical Indian dance and music. They were erudite women of learning and were embodiments of grace and finesse. This paper studies Hadi Ruswa's novel Umrao Jan Ada to discover a world of art, culture and refinement that has since been obliterated from the Indian consciousness.

Keywords: Courtesan, Indian classical music and dance, Umrao Jan Ada

The Sepoy mutiny of 1857 was a watershed event not just in the history of the Indian freedom struggle but also in the history of Indian classical music and dance. The tawaifs or Baijis, who participated in the 1857 mutiny by providing pecuniary assistance to the rebels and actively working as their spies, became the targets of the British ire. Their wealth was confiscated, kothis declared illegal and the tawaifs forcefully relocated to British garrison towns to serve as sex-workers for the British soldiers. The British policy of arbitrarily selecting healthy and beautiful women from among the kotha residents and relocating them for the 'convenience' of British soldiers not only dehumanised the tawaifs but also stripped them of their cultural function. These women who were repositories of hundreds of years of development and advancement of Indian music and dance were reduced to a mere sexual function.

Situation did not improve for these artists post-independence. With the power passing into the hands of the bourgeois Indian, Victorian prudery and morality received a fillip. The process of sanitisation of the Indian society from the so-called 'corrupting influences' gained momentum. The tawaif and devdasis, instead of finding their rights reinstated and their lot restored to the pre-mutiny times, found themselves marginalised and ostracised with a renewed vigour. Marked as 'dancing girls' who used their overt sexuality to seduce clients, and often conflated with the prostitute, the tawaifs found themselves looked upon as 'fallen women' from the world of flesh trade. The British onslaught on the

lives and art of the tawaifs and devdasis had led to a decay in their traditions, training and learning systems. Their desperate struggle for survival in the post-mutiny era had indeed made sex-work an important source of their income. Thus, the perception of these artists as prostitutes did not have to struggle much to find a foothold in the Indian middle-class mind.

Indian film industry owes a considerable debt to the tawaifs of yore for its establishment, survival and progress. The earliest women in the film industry from actresses to singers, from the first female music director to the first female producer of films, were all from the tawaif gharanas. Thus, the film industry could have played a redeeming role in the lives of the courtesans by redefining them as artists instead of prostitutes. Unfortunately, it only perpetuated the stereotype. The filmi tawaif was almost always a woman involved in flesh trade, willingly or unwillingly. While at times she was the temptress waylating decent men and destroying families, at others she was a helpless victim who had been forced into the murky world of prostitution.

It is in a scenario such as this that literature plays a crucially important role in the preservation and exposition of the realities that would otherwise struggle to find a voice. It serves to bring to light an India which would otherwise remain buried under the burden of bourgeois squeamishness.

In 1970, UNESCO and the Government of India jointly sponsored the translation in English of Mirza Mohammad Hadi Ruswa's Novel, Umrao Jaan Ada for the Indian series of UNESCO Collection of Representative Works. The translation was undertaken by Kushwant Singh and M. A. Hussaini. This paper studies the above-mentioned work to discover an India that dwelt in Lucknow of yore but has since been obliterated from the Indian cultural landscape. Ruswa's novel serves as an important document in correcting the representation of Indian courtesans from prostitutes to highly accomplished women of learning, art and literature.

Ruswa's say in the introduction to his novel, Afshai Raz: We should not give ourselves unnecessary trouble by

trying to base our novels upon the lives of persons about whom we cannot know anything in detail. In our own circle of friends and relatives there are bound to be many whose experiences are truly strange and fascinating. (Quoted in Singh and Husaini, 8)

This is evident in his subsequent work *Umrao Jan Ada*. Ruswa's novel does not perpetuate an outsider's perspective of courtesan's world; it is a piece of fiction which is grounded in an insider's experience of the *kotha* culture. Ruswa was known to be frequent visitor of the *kothas* of Lucknow. In fact, two of the courtesans that Veena Talwar Oldenburg interviewed during her decade long study of the lives of Lucknow *tawaifs* claimed to have known Ruswa in their youth" (Oldenburg, 285). It is this familiarity with the mysterious, exclusive realm of sex, art and culture that he employs in his masterpiece, *Umrao Jan Ada*.

Mekhala Sengupta says in *Courtesan Culture in India: The Transition from the Devdasi to the Tawaif or Boijee*:

The domain of the courtesan is described as an oasis of refinement, pleasure and contentment that the wealthy gravitated to, while the rulers of native Indian states sent their sons to imbibe both etiquette and culture. The courtesans were known for their graciousness, impeccable manners, refined customs, proficiency in singing and dancing, extending to sophisticated literary realms. (124)

Ruswa's novel takes the reader on a fascinating voyage through the schooling in art and literature, etiquettes and graces that dotted a courtesan's journey as she was groomed for her profession. It documents the expression of these of these skills that marked her trajectory as she rose into the upper echelons of her profession. In charting the life of *Umrao Jan Ada*, one of the most famous courtesans of Lucknow, Ruswa also highlights the plight of women in pre-mutiny India, especially women like the courtesan-prostitutes who, despite their wealth, had few social rights. It offers an account of the social milieu of northern India in the early nineteenth century.

At the very outset of the novel, Ruswa throws his reader in at the deep end of Lucknowi culture. In the preface to his novel Ruswa describes a *Mushaira*, a gathering of poets, each reciting his compositions before fellow poets. Beautiful poetic verses in Urdu follow in quick succession which Ruswa intersperses with the traditional ejaculations of *Wah! Wah!* and *Mukarrar Irshad* (words of praise and encouragement for the reciting poet). The atmosphere of the gathering is described in great detail. Minor features such as the '*shama*' or the candle placed before the poet whose turn it is to recite, the pan and the

hookah without which no cultural gathering of Lucknow was complete, are all incorporated in the creation of the cultural milieu. Thus, the reader enters the novel with expectations of a work rooted in cultural context and Ruswa does not disappoint.

The reader's first introduction to the life and lifestyle of the *kothas* is in *Umrao Jan's* words:

This was an utterly different way of life. I got food the like of which I had never tasted before. And I wore clothes the like of which I had never even dreamed of....The days and nights were filled with dancing and singing, shows and concerts, fairs and picnics in pleasure gardens. No form of luxury was denied to us. (Ruswa, 40)

Those courtesans were women of immense wealth, was common knowledge but the extent of their fortune was a matter of conjecture till Veena Talwar Oldenburg found them listed in the tax records of 1857-1877. She says:

They appeared, surprisingly, in the civic tax ledgers of 1858-77 and in the related official correspondence preserved in the Municipal Corporation records' room.² They were classed under the occupational category of "dancing and singing girls," and as if it was not surprise enough to find women in the tax records, it was even more remarkable that they were in the highest tax bracket, with the largest individual incomes of any in the city. The courtesans' names were also on lists of property (houses, orchards, manufacturing and retail establishments for food and luxury items) confiscated by British officials for their proven involvement in the siege of Lucknow and the rebellion against British rule in 1857. (259)

Ruswa describes the wealth of the courtesans in great detail. There is frequent mention of the jewels that the courtesans possess, which are often better and more valuable than those owned by women from wealthy aristocratic families. Courtesans wear the finest of clothes and live the lives of luxury normally reserved for wealthy aristocratic women. In the novel *Umrao Jan* often speaks of besotted wealthy men turning over fortunes amassed by their families over generations to the courtesans.

The wealth of the courtesans can also be gauged from the frequent mention of money that is charged for various services. At a time when an erudite *maulvi* who is in the employ of *Khanam* for educating her girls is paid ten rupees a month, the courtesans charge their patrons hundreds of rupees merely for their company. Even after the mutiny and the collapse of the *Nawabi* culture, when *Umrao Jan* performs at *soirees* in *Kanpur*, a much smaller, poorer town she charges fifty rupees for an evening's performance. Ruswa talks of courtesans routinely being

paid a monthly salary of hundred and fifty to two hundred rupees a month by men to provide them company.

The lavish weeklong ceremony that accompanied Bismillah Jan's deflowering is another example of the wealth owned by the tawaifs. The deflowering of a young courtesan was considered as important a milestone in her life as is marriage for a girl in normal society. Bismillah Jan's initiation is auctioned for twenty-five to thirty thousand rupees. This amount can be put into perspective when we consider that Rakkhan Mia mortgaged two villages for twenty thousand rupees. It is no exaggeration, then, when Umrao Jan says of the courtesans, "They were like queens holding court, with young handsome noblemen about them as courtiers to keep them amused. They reclined on their couches and held the silver pipes of their hookahs to their mouths" (Ruswa, 258).

The wealth and power possessed by the tawaif's did not, as is often believed, rest on the foundation of their sexual services. They were distinguished from the common prostitutes by their erudition and by their training in arts and culture. "The tawaif of the kothas acquired such a reputation for finesse and refinement that the scions of wealthy families were sent to them to learn manners, grooming and etiquette" (McNeil, 4). These women entertainers were considered the embodiments of grace and learning. "Thus as women who combined feminine graces and sensual charm and etiquette with the arts of singing and dancing, the tawaif were valued manifestations of the nazakat and nafasat (delicacy and finesse) of Lucknow tehzeeb" (Singh, 180).

Men who sought their company did not so much for the sexual pleasure they offered (most of these were men who had harems of women at their disposal); they sought it for finesse and quality of the entertainment the tawaifs offered not only through their music and dance, but also through their conversation, literary knowledge and scholarship. Amaresh Misra writes of the Lucknow tawaif:

Her salon was also not simply a place of dance and music, becoming a centre of sukun (peace of mind), humour, manner and letters. Her thumris were fashioned out of difficult raags like Jhinjhauti and Jaunpuri and the Daadra became a vehicle of sophisticated speed.....Salons disseminated culture, educating children of well-born families in the etiquette of zabaan (language), behaviour and the correct attitude. (139)

The ethereal grace and finesse that these women possessed did not come naturally; it was a result of years of rigorous education grounded in Persian literature and Urdu poetry. Their schooling in dance and music would be at

the hands of hereditary musicians who also provided musical accompaniment for their performances. The training usually started at the age of five years and lasted for ten or more years. Ruswa expends a lot of ink in describing the training of Umrao Jan and other courtesans at Khanum's kotha as they were moulded into women who could become both, the refuge and the fantasy of wealthy men.

Umrao Jan describes her training in music as very methodical and exact with focus on the finest nuances of the art of classical singing. Having started with the scales she is allowed to progress to the compositions only after she has mastered the scales. Even the minutest gradation and subtlety in a note is focussed upon for as Khanum reminds the Ustad (teacher), she would be performing in front of the connoisseurs of music who would notice the slightest flaw in her performance. "He made me memorise the distinctive features of all the different ragas and made me sing them exactly as prescribed in the texts" (43).

A courtesan's training did not stop with dance and music but extended to reading, writing, poetry and literature. "From the early hours to eleven o'clock in the morning it was the teacher's birch and from early evening to nine o'clock at night it was the music master's scolding and laying out with the bow" (60). Umrao Jan's training under Maulvi saheb which lasted for eight years typifies of the training girls received at the kothas.

After teaching me the alphabet, Maulvi Sahib started me on books of elementary Persian like Kareema, Mamakeema and the Mahmud-nama. After going through them quickly he made me memorise the grammatical tables of the Amad-nama. After that we took up Saadi's Gulistan. (46)

Along with reading Persian texts, Umrao Jan learns Arabic, reads a couple of tracts on logic and is taught poetry till it became her passion. This cultivation of the mind is as integral a part of her preparation for the profession of a tawaif as is music and dance. It is this intellectual development of the kotha girls that differentiates the courtesans from common prostitutes (as also from the wives) and makes them capable of providing enjoyable, intellectually stimulating company to the well-born men.

Ruswa's novel, while devoting itself to the opulence and grandeur of the Kothas, does not ignore the status of women in the India of the nineteenth century. The debased position of women in the so called 'respectable society' is evident throughout the book. The writer dwells at some length on the life of Advocate Akbar Ali's mother, a wealthy, aristocratic woman and her treatment at the

hands of her husband. While the novel focusses on the power that courtesans exert over men who visit them, the subtext is clear: the wives, 'respectable women' have no familial, conjugal rights or property rights. While they live in luxury provided by their husbands' wealth, they must make peace with the fact that they will have to spend their lives living in emotionally barren relationships and be forever at the mercy of their husbands.

The abduction and sale of girls is another appalling reality that the writer does not gloss over. He describes in great detail Ameeran's (and of many other unfortunate girls like her) journey from a happy girl living with her parents to a courtesan of Lucknow, unmasking with candour the attitudes and ethics of certain sections of the society. *Umrao Jan Ada*, though described as a work of fiction, is a document that faithfully renders the exotic - as well as the wretched - world of the Lucknow gentry and the Lucknow courtesans in the years before and after the sepoy mutiny. It is a testament to an India of that existed in the kingdom of Avadh in the nineteenth century but has since been obscured to the modern world.

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