



On Female Muslim Bodies and Morality:

The *Tawaif* in the Indian Subcontinent

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Abstract

This paper examines the historic role of the *Tawaif*, or courtesan in the Indian subcontinent through the analysis of “Umrao Jaan,” the first popular novel written in Urdu in South Asia. Through the biographical account of Umrao Jaan, I explore themes of female empowerment, gender roles and the representation of the female Muslim body in the Indian subcontinent. A further broader theme is the role of women in religious conflict. Through my analysis of “Umrao Jaan,” I discuss how *Tawaif* does not fit into the mold of a decent Muslim woman in colonial and contemporary India.

Keywords

Prostitution,
Literature, South
Asia, Politics,
Religion

Tawaif is a fluid term, one which has changed over the years in terms of both meaning and context. Doris Srinivasan (2006) describes the *Tawaif* as “[t]he keepers of culture in pre-colonial India”, who were revered as such before British colonization introduced the court system which degraded the status of the *Tawaif* in Indian. Today, the descendants of the *Tawaif* who popularised and carried on the performance traditions remain stigmatised and are synonymous with ‘prostitute’ for most Indians (especially in the Northern regions) and Pakistanis (Maciszewski, 2006). The word *Tawaif* in Urdu comes from the Arabic word *Tawaf* which refers to the ritual of circling the Ka’aba in Mecca (Waheed, 2014). The link between the *Tawaif* and *Tawaf* becomes even more interesting when one realises that both refer to an action that involves frequent visits. This essay will analyse the importance of the *Tawaif* in the historic Indian novel, *Umrao Jaan*, as a case study to highlight the role of the *Tawaif* in debates around chastity, *purdah* (veiling) and communal identity; issues that continue to be relevant in the Indian subcontinent today.

Towards the end of the nineteenth century, South Asian literary culture experienced a crucial change (Shandilya, 2016). The issues addressed in novels shifted from themes of foreign travellers and supernatural encounters to a serious interest in questions of social reform, mainly regarding women. This is related to the introduction of colonial laws in India such as the Abolition of Sati Act (1828), the Widow Remarriage Act (1856), and the Resolution on Native Female Education (1868) as these laws raised the question regarding the status of women in Indian society. The Abolition of Sati Act banned the practice of Sati while the Widow Remarriage Act legalised the remarriage of all Hindu widows, and the Resolution on Native Female Education Act allowed girls to seek education. These laws changed the vernacular meanings of gender and sexuality as

women now began to be seen as independent of their association with men. A nineteenth century novel that brings together all these debates and raises even more questions is *Umrao Jaan*. *Umrao Jaan* was written by Mirza Mohammad Hadi Ruswa and was first published in Lucknow in 1889. The novel centres around the life of an esteemed Muslim courtesan named Umrao Jaan and it is written in the form of a first-person account as Umrao Jaan shares the story of her life with Ruswa during a *Mushaira* (poetry gathering) in Lucknow. The novel is considered to be first of its kind in Indian literature mainly due to its usage of poetry and prose in storytelling.

The story is that of a young girl, Amiran, who is kidnapped by Dilawar Khan in Faizabad and taken to Lucknow in 1840 after her father testifies against him in court. She is sold to a brothel where she changes her name to Umrao Jaan and begins to court Nawab Sultan, a man of high status in the Indian society. Eventually, the Nawab leaves her after being disowned by his father and Umrao Jaan falls in love with someone else who turns out to be a fraud. During this time, Umrao Jaan flees to Lucknow during the mutiny of 1857 and as Lucknow is captured by the British, she gets the opportunity to revisit Faizabad where she is rejected by her family because of her profession as a courtesan. When Umrao Jaan returns to Lucknow after the revolt, she finds the city in ruins and, ultimately, she sells her gold and uses her savings to live a comfortable life and finally gives up her career as a *Tawaif*.

There are several aspects of this novel that render it to be a classic to this day. Firstly, the writer, Mirza Hadi Ruswa seems to speak to the reader in an indirect way. The novel is a performance that develops the character of Umrao Jaan through a double narration as narrated by Ruswa who portrays himself as a writer while the Umrao Jaan uses the art of self praising. Ruswa includes a detailed description of her physical features, her character, lifestyle, and visitors. The novel plays with the contrast regarding her innocence and virtue and her profession as a courtesan (Faheem et al., 2020).

Most importantly, *Umrao Jaan* lays emphasis on the portrayal of the Muslim body in particular and Muslims in general. With the Revolt of 1857, colonial Indian society underwent a social change which is reflected in the literature from that era (Shadilya, 2016). While the Muslim elite had once been respected and accepted, after the Revolt of 1857 Muslims were blamed excessively for the revolt. In this context, Muslim reformers attempted to regain their lost respect and two opposing movements were formed. The first was the Aligarh movement which aimed to educate Muslims whereas the second one was the Islamic revival movement which attempted to educate Muslims regarding Islamic teachings (Mufti, 2000). Although these movements had different aims, they presented a united front with regards to the rights and depiction of women in India. Both movements supported the notion that women should be taught codes of conduct that would enable them to become pious Islamic subjects.

It is worth noting here that the *Tawaif* was questionably absent from this discourse of education and honor as they were educated in literature and music and were thus regarded as immoral. Even though the reformers and novelists described in great detail the education of housewives and the enforcement of the practice of veiling, they openly avoided defining the role of the *Tawaif* because the wife was supposed to be everything the *Tawaif* is not. This is why *Umrao Jaan* is considered groundbreaking because writing within such a specific cultural context, Ruswa depicts a *Tawaif* who is neither a 'chaste housewife' nor a 'shameless prostitute' but instead offers a third unique mode (Shandilya, 2009).

As a *Tawaif*, the restrictions that applied to housewives in terms of limited mobility, less access to the public sphere and restricted interaction with men did not apply to Umrao Jaan. However, Umrao Jaan recreated the rules of seclusion for herself by giving up her profession. By doing this, she not only gave up the freedom given to her by the Indian

society but also the luxuries and comfort that were considered perks of being a *Tawaif*. Hence, a *Tawaif* dangles between the desire to be admired and the desire to be respected and Umrao Jaan highlights this tension in various powerful ways. By establishing herself in a profession that requires her to seek validation from the male gaze, Umrao Jaan uses her literary knowledge and poetry to be at par with what was considered a decent Muslim woman.

Throughout the novel, Ruswa analyses this tension between morality and respect and sheds light on the conflict between voice and silence (Shandilya, 2009). Ruswa uses a layered first-person narrative voice to give agency to his protagonist's experiences, but also inserts himself as an interlocutor for her to hide her from the direct gaze of the reader. Umrao Jaan's narrative voice is thus doubly controlled and mediated; first by Ruswa the author and then by Mirza Ruswa the narrator. She is shielded from the prying gaze of the reader which is an irony as Umrao Jaan is a prostitute and an entertainer and yet Ruswa wants to protect her from lustful eyes. This once again points towards the tension between the female Muslim body and its association with morality.

Not only does Umrao Jaan elucidate the prejudice in provision of education for females and the hypocrisy that existed in the Indian society towards courtesans, but its literary features also highlight the role of Muslims in India; a theme that is poignant even today. This can be seen in the use of poetic couplets. The ghazal couplets figuratively throw a veil over the actual truth which remains concealed. In the case of Umrao Jaan, she uses her performance of the ghazal to give us a glimpse of her complicated relationship with her society and her sexuality.

Umrao Jaan describes the meaning of her life as a *Tawaif*, and also tells the reader about her failures and disappointments whereas in the second part, she expresses her admiration for the women in *purdah* but also claims at the same time that she can never return to that life. The novel ends with her exclaiming that even though she regrets her career, it was her only means of establishing a career but having collected enough savings, she has now resigned to a life of chastity. Thus, Umrao Jaan belongs neither to the world of the *zenana* (traditional women quarters) nor to the world of the *kotha* (prostitutional abode) because she lives on the periphery of both worlds.

Ruswa captures these intense debates in poetic couplets. When Umrao returns to the ruins of Lucknow after the revolt of 1857, she can barely recognise the city and asks "Yeh *kia jaga hai, yeh kaunsa dayar hai* (What is this place, what is this locality?)" (Ruswa, 1889). This can be compared in painful contrast to the contemporary slogan of "*Jao Pakistan ya jao qabristan* (Go to Pakistan or go to the grave)" that echoed during Prime Minister Modi's election campaign in India (Van der Veer, 1997). Umrao Jaan's inability to recognise Lucknow mirrors this difficulty of belonging and of situating one's culture in an ever-changing hostile environment. It also mourns the loss of home, a sentiment that is shared by thousands of people that migrated from India to Pakistan and vice versa in 1947.

Overall, Umrao Jaan is timeless and a novel that provokes nostalgia (Jhala, 2011). The discrimination between Hindus and Muslims, between career-oriented women and housewives, and the demarcation of religious issues on political lines are all themes that are applicable in India and Pakistan even today. It also points towards the multiple identities that South Asian women possess and the role of literature in presenting these identities in a meaningful way. Much like South Asian heritage itself, Umrao Jaan paints a colourful yet multi-layered picture of Muslim women in pre-colonial India and establishes a legacy that continues to win hearts of those who seek to learn more about the history and culture of colonial India.

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