
Beyond the Veil: Exploring Courtesan Life in *Umrao Jaan Ada*

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Abstract

This paper delves into the lives of courtesans as depicted in the literary work *Umrao Jaan Ada*. It aims to illuminate how they transcended societal expectations to become guardians of high culture during their time and subverted the prevailing gender norms. By examining the protagonist, Umrao, within the backdrop of twentieth-century India and contrasting her with Moll, the central character of Daniel Defoe's *Moll Flanders* set in nineteenth-century Britain, the paper explores how Courtesans defy the stereotypical portrayal of prostitutes. Through these comparative analyses, the paper seeks to highlight the resilience and complexity of these women, showcasing their agency in shaping their destinies and challenging societal constraints. Finally, this exploration sheds light on the multifaceted identities of courtesans, portraying them not merely as prostitutes but as influential figures who navigated and redefined cultural norms in their respective contexts.

Keywords: Courtesan, 20th century Lucknow, Prostitute, Kotha.

"Who will hear the sadness of my heart, Ada?

In wandering, life's journey took us near and far" (Ruswa xix).

Umrao Jan Ada, published at the dawn of the twentieth century, is generally regarded as the first true novel in the Urdu language. The work revolves around the life of Amiran, who later takes up the name Umrao. The book is imbued with thought-provoking verses, delightful natural scenes, vividly described public entertainments and fairs, narratives of sufferings (at home) and travails in exile, and accounts of true love. However, the striking part of the work is the refinement with which the complexity of a courtesan's life and work has been unclothed and examined- long before feminist discourse took them up.

Women in nineteenth-century Lucknow saw themselves strangled by the tradition that desired them to sacrifice everything for their husbands. As Abdul Halim Sharar noted in his book *Lucknow*, "The women considered their existence to be incorporated into his" (192). At those times, women followed purdah, and only the immodest and immoral ones defied it. The women of best character were those whose shadow "not even the sun" (192) would see. The education of women was scarce.

Women who knew how to read were the oddity, and writing was discouraged, if not straightforwardly prohibited. The prevalent belief about women was that they were of low erudition and were capricious and wayward. It was also particularly challenging and unusual for a woman to make a living, support herself, and live independently of men. Women were almost always financially dependent on their fathers, husbands, or other male relatives. Like how an exception exists with every law, here, too, were exceptions. These were, in actuality, the tawaifs or the courtesans of Lucknow. Where, on the one hand, the women of the times lived within the confines of patriarchal norms, the courtesans, on the other hand, defied and subverted these norms. They lived life outside the four walls. They found their independence there. "It is true that I still live like a whore, and whether I live or die, I could not let myself be suffocated by observing purdah" (Ruswa 199).

They received rigorous schooling and were well-educated. The protagonist of the novel, Umrao, herself was well-read. She excelled in the art of poetry and music.

In Khanum's house, the girls learned not only how to dance and sing but also how to read and write. For this purpose, she had set up a school, and there she employed a maulvi... Emphasis was put on reading and writing; our spellings were checked, and we were given letters to write (25-27).

They were patronized by the nobility and the most affluent men in the area. In a society where wives were generally uneducated and not allowed to leave the confines of their own homes, courtesans provided intellectual company to elite men. In the words of Umrao:

"they all were highly skilled practitioners of the arts, who could command vast sums for their performances and other favors" (123).

They subverted the patriarchal norms in yet another way; where in the case of the general public, man controls and finances the household, the courtesans, on the other hand, provide finances to their 'man.'

"In the meantime, Gauhar Mirza's father had died, and so his source of income dried up. Therefore, I became responsible for Gauhar Mirza's expenses" (49).

Where men had a wife to care for their needs and desires, courtesan had a man for the same.

"All courtesan, as a rule, keep a man for themselves and may derive many benefits from him. I had Gauhar Mirza. Amir Jan was once mad about Kazam Ali, and for years, he was in her pay. Khurshid fell for Pyare Sahib. Not to mention the others, Khanum Sahib herself, even when she was over fifty" (49-50).

However, even with all the independence and agency, one finds Umrao lamenting throughout the narrative. She remembers that the price for her lifestyle was exclusion from the world of virtuous and honorable women. This exclusion implied a presumption of duty and the capability to relinquish an everyday emotional life. She frequently warns other courtesans to "never entertain the false hope that any man will

ever love them with a true heart because only the virtuous, who see one face and never turn to another, will have the pleasure of true love" (200).

It is important to note that the world of the courtesan was not as simple as it seems but was "as complex and hierarchical as the society of which it was part" (Oldenburg). As shown in the novel, the courtesans were part of an organization called a *kotha*. It was run by a chief courtesan, who had retired and now governed all the younger and novice girls. In this book, it was Khanum's house. Khanum provided schooling, shelter, and food for all the girls there. She managed their clients and their expenses and earnings. The nawab, or another wealthy man, usually began his affiliation with a *kotha* by "bidding for a virgin whose patron he became, with the full privileges and obligations of that position. He was obliged to make regular contributions in cash and jewelry" (Ruswa 40). The courtesans' guests were then supposed to impress the *Kotha's* management with their manners and substance to become regulars. It was the courtesans who had the authority and autonomy over their clientage.

In the novel, it is depicted that the courtesans were commonly induced by force. However, this view is contested by many. Honest courtesans vehemently oppose this. According to them, this depiction shows them as mere victims, not someone who might have chosen to do this. For most of the populace, it is unthinkable that a woman would, out of her own will and desire, choose this life; consequently, they are portrayed as victims of their situations, just like Umrao.

During her research, Veena Talwar Oldenburg interviewed thirty courtesans and found that most of them had fled their earlier lives as modest women. They became courtesans because of the nightmare they had to endure at their parents' or husbands' homes. The *kotha* was a sanctuary for them. At the *kotha*, they explained, they acquired self-esteem by learning professional skills and making their own money. They were free and independent, a far cry from the respectable lives of *purdah* ladies.

"Not one claimed that kidnapping had been her experience, although they had heard of such cases. This assortment of refugees from the *sharif*, or respectable, world gave a completely ironic slant to the notion of respectability" (Oldenburg).

They also elucidated that, unlike ordinary women, they did not cower in fear in front of men because they were constantly complimented and marveled by them. The latter were kept in *purdah* to maintain (and increase) *khandani izzat*, or family honor; for them to show their faces in public would bring disgrace to their families. 'Ah, but our case is just the opposite,' said Saira, 'men long to see our faces. If they could brag among their friends that they had seen Gulbadan or Amiran in the bazaar without a covering, they would go up in the esteem their friends hold them. We are not in the business of giving them cheap thrills. While we walk freely and anonymously in public places, looking at the world through our nets, they are deprived because we have blinkered *them*. We do not, as you know, bestow anything on men without extracting its price' (Oldenburg).

It is significant to note that the falsities and stereotypes surrounding prostitution, in all its forms, commonly impede any thorough understanding of what it means or entails. Consequently, it is a lot simpler to brush aside courtesans or other prostitutes as either victims or irredeemable women than to strive to fathom their vantage point and challenge our opinions and inferences.

It is interesting to draw parallels between Moll Flanders of nineteenth-century Britain and Umrao Jan of twentieth-century India. Daniel Defoe's Moll lived the life of a prostitute. She transcended female dependence upon men. Both Umrao and Moll, in this manner, were among the few female characters who subverted the norms imposed on them by society. Both were coerced into doing what they did because of situations that were not in their hands. They asserted their independence; they held their own in front of men; they had financial autonomy. However, they differ too. Moll's actions are motivated by her thirst for money. According to her:

"if a young woman has beauty, birth, breeding, wit, sense, manners, modesty, and all these to an extreme, yet if she had no money, she is nobody, she had as good want them all, for nothing but money now recommends a woman" (Defoe 21).

Unlike Umrao, all she ever wanted was to be a wife. She had no religious inclination, and the only time she felt repentance was when she was about to be persecuted. Umrao, on the other hand, had no intention of "letting herself suffocate by observing Purdah" (Ruswa 199). However, she "repented of her sins with a true heart (every day), and did her best to say her prayers regularly" (199).

However, it would be remiss if one observes for similarities and fails to notice that the significant difference between Umrao and Moll was that of the Courtesan culture of nineteenth Lucknow. Umrao was no ordinary prostitute. She was an exceptional poet, and patricians paid large sums for copies of her creations, as well as for her society. She mesmerized the audience not just by her singing but also by performing classical dances, sometimes for hours. Even the youngsters who caught these performances were captivated.

"The whole audience now seemed to be in a state of ecstasy. Everyone was overjoyed and cheered every word I sang. I had to repeat each verse eight or ten times. Even then, they could not have enough" (Ruswa 53).

Courtesans commanded respect as artists. Categorizing them as mere dancing and singing girls or prostitutes is debasing and dehumanizing an institution by stripping it of its cultural function.

"Living in lavish apartments in the bazaars of the Chowk, these courtesans were seen as not only the preservers and performers of the high culture of the court but also the shapers of developments in Hindustani music and Kathak dance styles. They dictated the laws of fashion, etiquette, music, and dance; they enjoyed the court's regard; their receptions were eagerly-awaited social occasions. Thus, the courtesans were a pillar of the culture and society of Lucknow" (Fazal 4).

Not only that, Umrao and the other courtesans of contemporary times differed from Moll Flanders in another way. Nineteenth-century India was under British rule,

and the courtesan culture was severely affected by it. The British rule and their laws caused the degeneration of their respected positions. The courtesans, who were once greatly esteemed and viewed as the holders of high culture, to such extent that it noted that a man was not a polished person until he associated with courtesans (Sharar 192), had been reduced to regular prostitutes. The British underscore it through laws like The Contagious Diseases Act of 1864. However, to this intrusion and disregard, courtesans reacted strongly. They responded by conceiving methods to keep the intrusive British officials away from their bodies and assets.

"These methods were imaginative extensions of the ancient and subtle ways the courtesans had cultivated to contest male authority in their liaisons with men and add up to a spirited defense of their rights against colonial politics" (Oldenburg).

Therefore, the courtesans of Lucknow, unlike prostitutes of the West such as Moll Flanders, defied not only the patriarchal norms but also the colonial powers. Hence, dismissing them within the category of a prostitute and universalizing their position and their life would be an ignorant mistake.

In conclusion, the courtesans of Lucknow emerged as formidable figures who not only upheld but also preserved the high culture of their contemporary society. Despite existing within an era where societal norms stifled the existence and voices of women, these courtesans deftly navigated their circumstances, subverting prevailing norms and asserting their agency. Mirza Hadi Ruswa's *Umrao Jan Ada* beautifully and unpretentiously captures their lives in all shades and hues. By juxtaposing *Umrao's* experiences with those of Moll Flanders from Daniel Defoe's novel, the paper has illuminated the parallels and contrasts between the role of courtesans of Lucknow and mere prostitutes. Ultimately, this study underscores the legacy of the courtesans of Lucknow and their profound impact on shaping the cultural landscape of their time.

It is significant to note that though the paper has attempted to delve deeply into the life of courtesans, it has yet to be able to do so in its entirety due to paucity of time. As a result, several angles were left unexplored, which can be investigated in further studies. Furthermore, the works chosen were the products of men's imaginations and perspectives; it would be an intriguing focus of study regarding how female writers treat these issues and how their treatments differ from those of their male counterparts.

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