

**“Who will listen to the tale of my woeful heart?”  
The portrait of ‘nautch girls’ in early Urdu literature**

**Raza Rumi \***

The opening of Suez Canal ushered in a change in the social life of India. The ‘nautch,’ a highly sought-after art form, slowly took on explicit immoral connotations under the judging eyes of Christian missionaries as well as a colonial obsession with the exotic Orient. Essentially a colonial construct, a nautch girl referred to the popular entertainer, a *belle beau* who would sing, dance and when required also provide the services of a sex worker.

It is not a coincidence that the earliest novels of the subcontinent dealt with the intense and memorable characters of nautch girls. The subaltern accounts of the women from the ‘dishonorable’ profession are nuanced for they concurrently represent the duality of exploitation and empowerment. Perhaps the genre of novel could do full justice to all such nuances.

Long before the feminist discourse explored and located the intricacies of sex workers’ lives and work, male novelists in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries were busy portraying the strong characters of women in the ‘oldest profession,’ who were rarely found indulging in self pity. Through these works we find out that contrary to the perceptions today about the inherent moral inferiority of women associated with this profession, early Urdu novelists of the subcontinent portrayed

em to be sophisticated, defiant of conventional morality, and, paradoxically, socially empowered.

### The Reprepentant Umrāo Jān of Lucknow

Mirzā Hādī Ruswā's *Umrāo Jān Adā* is an early novel written in Urdu.<sup>1</sup> The novel's origins itself are of note as the Lucknow-based poet Ruswā persuaded Umrāo to reveal her life history in several parts. Many critics have inferred that the narrative was perhaps authored by Umrāo herself and the forthrightness of the story suggests that she had a huge part in drafting this classic, semi-documentary. Although to treat it as an historical account—or even a semi-historical account—will have to be done with a pinch of salt, it will be useful for the analysis presented in this paper to consider it an authentic portrayal of the nautch girls' circumstances in that period.

Umrāo's woes originated in a typical patriarchal mould. As a young girl, she is kidnapped by a hooligan in an act of vengeance against Umrāo's father for giving testimony against him. The villain sells her to a Lucknow *kothā* (a high culture space also operating as a brothel) managed by Khānam Jān. There Umrāo receives education and induction into arts and culture by an elderly Mawlvī who recreates Umrāo as a civilised poet-cum-entertainer. Her quest for knowledge and attainment of self-confidence to handle a predominantly male world takes place within this space. Thus the tale of exploitation turns into a narrative of self-discovery.

*Umrāo Jān Adā*, an archetypal courtesan steeped in Avadhi high culture and manners, emerges as a voice far ahead of her times. Her views on the sex work are startling:

... though it may well be one's desire to be loved, a desire that swells as she grows older, it is not given to a whore to live out this desire ... A tart's only friend is her money; she is no one's wife, and if she is foolish enough to give her love to some man,

she does so at the considerable risk of jeopardizing her livelihood.<sup>2</sup>

The empowerment of Umrāo is in many ways linked to her profession. For instance, when asked about 'love' by the narrator, she is quick to clarify that the need to preserve her livelihood is paramount: "Whenever we want to ensnare anyone we pretend to fall in love with him."<sup>3</sup>

The novel by Ruswā is a complex and sophisticated portrayal of human character. Through the vicissitudes of her life Umrāo acquires a deep knowledge of human nature and this brings her wisdom and peace:

Personally, I think that no one is wholly bad, and there is some good to be found in everyone. You have probably heard it said about the thieves of the past that if you make a friend of them, then you will always get along very well. Without some element of goodness, life would be impossible.<sup>4</sup>

Her more complex understanding of moral issues comes out in several places through her defense of her own way of life. When the narrator asks her what punishment she anticipates for her sinful existence which has required hurting many hearts, she says:

There should not be any. In the way that I harmed hearts there was also much pleasure, and the pleasure makes up for the pain.<sup>5</sup>

At a time when women were more or less completely dependent on men for financial and social sustenance, sex work emerged as one kind of a safety-net. Also in line with the inner culture of courtesans, prostitutes who decided to leave the profession were looked down as those who had gone astray. And, Umrāo remains contemptuous of such women who leave their position of power and independence and subject

themselves to the whims of respectable men who may or may not reciprocate in terms of social respect.

The novel also chronicles the disruptions caused by the deepening of colonial rule; and Umrāo is quick to recognize that her survival is linked to the British rule. She witnesses the destruction of Lucknow, which was at the centre of the 1857 war and subsequent crackdown by the British and also records how her *kothā* is destroyed. There is resignation as well as proactive adjustment to political and social changes. Towards the end of this novel, Umrāo is not only a thoughtful woman but also stronger. She is neither fatalistic nor depressed about her life other than the turn of phrase of chaste *Lakhnawī* Urdu which romanticizes the vicissitudes of history. For its robust yet ambiguous portrayal of characters and vivid glimpses of mid-nineteenth century UP courtesan culture, detailing the elaborate conventions and rituals, it remains a modern novel unsurpassed for its truthfulness. For instance Umrāo tells the narrator that “no man ever loved her, nor did she ever love any man”.<sup>6</sup>

The female characters in particular come alive on the page (Khānam Jān, the *kothā* Madame, Buā Ḥusainī, a housekeeper in her old age, and Umrāo’s contemporaries Bismillah Jān and Khurshīd.) As a great novel straddling between the quest for self-realisation as well as being a victim of larger, systemic exploitation, it remains matchless.

In Pakistan, *Umrāo Jān Adā* was adapted for a film in 1972, but it transformed the narrative into a moral framework and Umrāo into a suffering beauty exploited by destiny and men. Towards the end of an otherwise well-made film by eminent Pakistani film director, Tariq Hasan, Umrāo is presented through the middle class lens: a repentant, sinful, hurt woman who ultimately dies for the respectable (middle class) world may not have the space for her. The Indian version of 1979 directed by the legendary Muzaffar Ali gave a better treatment in terms of the ambience and the *Avadhi*

culture but only partially captured the layers of Umrāo’s worldview on her profession and the social commentary on it. Its ending was also melodramatic as Umrāo is rejected by her mother and brother. The last frame of the film however redeemed it as Umrāo clears a mirror and perhaps hints at a new phase of self-discovery.

### Khānam Jān and East India Company

Prior to Umrāo Jān Adā another Persian text *Fasānā-e Rangīn*, translated into English as *The Nautch Girl* in 1992<sup>7</sup> by Qurratulain Hyder (d. 2007), is arguably the first subcontinental novel. Or at least Hyder passionately held this view until her last days.<sup>8</sup> This autobiographical novel by Hasan Shah narrates the story of an East India Company *munshī* (a clerk) and his doomed love for a dancing girl Khānam Jān. The novel was written in Persian around 1790, and was translated into Urdu in 1893 as *Nishtar*.

The young Shāh in the service of the Englishman Ming Saheb, in Cawnpore (Kanpur), spots a beautiful dancing girl in a visiting troupe camping in the town through the patronage of the English saheb. Ming Saheb also lusts after Khānam Jān but she rejects his advances. Ming moves to another member of the troupe but the confident Khānam Jān falls in love with the lowly clerk, Hasan Shah. The story most likely is autobiographical, as Hyder researched into origins of the document.

Both the starry-eyed lovers enter into a secret marriage as both the protagonists’ professional compulsions inhibit their public declaration of love. However, Jān in due course leaves Cawnpore with the employer. The troupe has to move to another city when the English officer is transferred and the patronage ends. The two fantasize about escaping but their plans cannot materialize.

The hallmark of this novel is the portrayal of Khānam Jān who appears as a confident, learned and strong-willed

character. Her ability to say no to a *gora saheb* and her subsequent subversion of her place in the troupe are remarkable for eighteenth century India. Even though Khānam has vowed not to be a courtesan, she does not leave the troupe. Though not as empowered as her successor to be—Umrāo Jān—Khānam Jān is cognizant of her social position. After the Englishmen leave, Shāh has planned to meet Jān by the river but he is fatally delayed by his official commitments. Crossing the river is also a metaphor that runs across the folklore of the subcontinent and Shah employs this device in a subtle fashion. While it remains a simple story of love in times of change in India, the characters and nuances of human behaviour announce the arrival of the Indian novel.

### “My candle burns at both ends”

Avadh (Oudh, later day United Province) state annexed by the British formally in mid-nineteenth century becomes a parable of the political and social transformation of India. Amid these changes, the voice of dancing girls is distinct and individualistic. It is neither pathetic nor morally flawed. In fact, it is reasoned and powerful. As recounted by Hyder<sup>9</sup>, the case of Oudh reminds us of the verse:

*My candle burns at both ends  
It will not last the night  
But, Ah my friends and Oh my foes  
It gives a lovely light*

As Hyder puts it, the Oudh state was India's Camelot, where Khānam Jān becomes the torch bearer of an emerging high culture; and Umrāo Jān—like a burnt candle—narrates its dénouement. These two women represent, as well as are shaped by, their sociological environments. Umrāo in the twilight of Oudh culture relates the realization of empowerment within the patriarchal fold. It should be remembered that Malikā Jān, the

wife of the last ruler of Oudh, was also a dancing girl and she issued a *farmān* (edict) defying the Ordinance of Empress Victoria and declared that state had nothing to do with religion. This extraordinary document is a unique instance in modern subcontinental history. Thus fiction and fact were producing what one may roughly call a proto-feminist stance on the issue of sex-work, as we knew it in Victorian India.

### Towards Gauhar Jān

*Gaisberg eagerly waited for the morning of 11 November, when the woman he was besotted with would arrive at the makeshift studio. Gauhar's entry into the studio on that Tuesday morning in Calcutta was to place her forever in the annals of world musical history. Her imposing persona and her flair in dress and manner had captivated Gaisberg completely...*<sup>10</sup>

Urdu's legendary writer Qurratulain Hyder who translated Hasan Shah's novel in English remained, through her literary career, fascinated by the various permutations of the Indian nautch girl. In her later novel *Gardish-e- Rang-e Chaman*, a semi-documentary novel, she through literary devices blurs the boundaries between the respectable and the non-respectable. Mughal princesses orphaned after the anti-Mughal killings by the British led to a major upheaval in the comfortable zones of Muslim rule in India. The central character of the novel—Nawāb Begum—is a descendent of one such Mughal progeny who later becomes a courtesan and after a long career and several tribulations revels in her status as a powerful woman. In the true tradition of courtesan lineage, Nawāb Begum launches her daughter as a theatre performer in early twentieth century Calcutta. The textual tenor moves between the context set by Ruswā—between the pathos of exploitation and the energy of empowerment.

In this novel, published in 1987, Hyder fictionalized the character of the early twentieth century singer from Calcutta, Gauhar Jān, for the first time. This is decades before the excellent book on Jān by Vikram Sampath hit the bookstands. From Avadh, the deposed ruler Wājid 'Alī Shāh had moved to Calcutta and this is where new converts to Islam, Malikā Jān and her daughter Gauhar Jān, found their performative abode. The mother-daughter duo became the best known *bā'īs* (singing women, singular: *bā'ī*) of Calcutta. Based on this formidable reputation, Frederick William Gaisberg, the Gramophone Company's first India agent, in 1902, selected Gauhar as the first Indian artiste whom he wanted to record. Thus popular culture's interface with modernity in India came about through these empowered and public singing women.

As Sampath records faithfully, Gauhar recorded close to 600 records in over 10 languages during her stint as a playback singer. The vast repertoire, husky and flirtatious voice encapsulated myriad musical forms: *khayāl*, *dhrupad* and light genres such as *thumrī*, *dādrā*, *kajrī*, and *bhajan*. With her cosmopolitan vision and command over several languages, Gauhar was a trendsetter as a flamboyant star long before Bollywood adopted glitz as a policy. Jān's extravagant party that cost Rupees Twenty Thousand was infamously publicised. The purpose of the party was to celebrate the birth of several kittens by her favourite cat. Gauhar Jān gained much attention for flouting government regulations for gallivanting in a four-horse-driven buggy. She had to pay a fine of rupees one thousand per day to the viceroy.

This was the colourful character that made Hyder's novel inimitable for its mixing of fact and fiction; and also for redefining the status of courtesan—moving it away from the well-defined zones of morality. The universe of South Asian literature, especially in the regional languages, has been ignored as a tool to understand the evolution of our sociological attitudes towards dancing girls, courtesans and sex workers.

## A century of confusion

*ibtidā' āwāragī kī josh-e wahshat kā sabab  
hum to samjhe hain magar nāsih ko samjhāyeñ ge kyā*

(I know fully well about the wild times when I started going astray—  
But Oh! Advisor! How do I make you give up finding faults and understanding my plight?)<sup>11</sup>

Urdu's celebrated short story writer Sa'adat Hasan Manto has explored the societal attitudes to sex workers with a surgeon's precision. Prior to 1947, he was writing about the hypocrisies but the mayhem of 1947 gave him an additional perspective when he saw ordinary sex workers as finer human beings than the religious *shurafā'* (the honourable people—usually from the upper middle classes). One such memorable character is that of a Jewish sex worker in Bombay called Mozail. In the backdrop of 1947 riots, Manto portrays vacuous religiosity of a Sikh character in sharp contrast to the innate humanity of Mozail as she parades naked and gets killed to distract attention of a rioting mob to rescue individuals. Mozail emerges as a towering character in this story. Manto chronicles the socially fallen—the pimps, prostitutes and the brothel-keepers—and by removing them from the rigid moral framework, elevates their humanity. Thus Manto refuses to judge his characters, otherwise viewed as the subaltern dross.

The new nation-states since 1947 (Pakistan and India) and 1971 (Bangladesh) have been unable to set clear approaches towards sex-related professions. The whole gamut of male sex-workers, not a recent phenomenon either, remains relegated to relative ignominy. If anything, the inherited—Victorian—colonial state has defined public morality and 'righteous' conduct. Offences concerning public display of affection and obscenity remain on the statutes across South



Asia. The sad part is that the voice of the sex-worker is lost in the regulatory framework imposed from above.

In postcolonial, morally charged societies, courtesans of yore have found other avenues. For instance, due to the late President Zia-ul-Haq's 'Islamisation' policies in Pakistan—during much of the 1980s—and brothel-focused cleaning up in South Asia, sex workers have moved and integrated into the mainstream social fabric. In Pakistan specifically, Lollywood has absorbed a large number of these individuals and after the decline of the film industry in recent decades commercial theatre is the new playground for the exploited-empowered courtesan. One such theatre company in Pakistan's cultural centre, Lahore pays Rupees Two Million per month to a theatre actor whose identity as a sex worker is now blurred with other labels. The rise of massage parlours and private services via the internet and the advertisement chain has further complicated matters.

### The blame game

Ghulam Abbas' Urdu short story *Ānandī* (also translated into a film *Mandi* by Shayam Benegal) remains a parable for all times to come. The moralist municipality of an imagined city expels sex workers and brothels to improve public morality. The wilderness of sex workers' new abode soon turns into a new city—*Ānandī*—and the land mafia, the trader-merchant class, *dargāhs* and temples spring up in a short span of time. The story ends with another irony!

The meeting of *Ānandī*'s Municipal Council is at full boil, the hall is packed nearly to bursting, and contrary to normal not a single member was absent. The issue under debate in the Council is the expulsion from the city of the women of the marketplace, for their very presence has become an unsightly and intolerable stain on the skirt of humanity, nobility, and culture. One eloquent scion of society is holding forth: "It is

simply not known what the policy might have been on the basis of which this polluting class of people was given permission to live in the precise center of this ancient and historical city of ours...." ... This time, the area selected for the women to live in was twelve kos from the city.<sup>12</sup>

*Ānandī* was written in mid-twentieth century. Little seems to have changed; at least in real terms.

### NOTES

\* Raza Rumi has been serving as an editor for *The Friday Times* (Pakistan) and a contributing editor for *Himāl Southasian* (Nepal). A slightly shorter and journalistic version of this paper appeared in the August 2010 issue of *Himāl Southasian*.

1. Mirzā Muḥammad Hādī Ruswā, *Umrao Jan Ada: Courtesan of Lucknow*, trans. Khushwant Singh & M. A. Husaini, reprint ed., (Hyderabad: Disha Books, 1993).
2. Vinay Lal, "The Courtesan and the Indian Novel," *Manas*, accessed Jan. 26, 2012, [www.sscnet.ucla.edu/southasia/History/British/Umrao.html](http://www.sscnet.ucla.edu/southasia/History/British/Umrao.html).
3. Ibid.
4. Ruswā, *Umrao Jan Ada*, 151.
5. Ruswā, *Umrao Jan Ada*, 152.
6. "The Courtesan and the Indian Novel."
7. Hasan Shah, *The Nautch Girl: A Novel*, trans. Qurratulain Hyder (New Delhi: Sterling Publishers, 1992).
8. The author interviewed her in 2005 and Hyder forcefully argued why *Fasānā-e Rangīn* had all the elements of a modern novel.
9. Asif Farrukhi, comp., *Dāstān-e 'ahad-e gul* (Karachi: Maktaba-e Dāniyāl, 2002).

10. Vikram Sampath, *My Name is Gauhar Jaan! The Life and Times of a Musician* (New Delhi: Rupa Publications, 2010).
11. Qtd. in Sampath, *Gauhar Jaan*, 183.
12. Ghulam Abbas, "Anandi," trans. G.A. Chaussée *The Annual of Urdu Studies* 18 (2003): 338-339.

## REFERENCES

- Abbas, Ghulam. "Anandi." Trans. G.A. Chaussée. *The Annual of Urdu Studies* 18 (2003): 324-339.
- Farrukhi, Asif. Comp. *Dāstān-e 'ahad-e gul*. Karachi: Maktaba-e Dāniyāl, 2002.
- Lal, Vinay. "The Courtesan and the Indian Novel." Manas. Accessed Jan. 26, 2012, [sscnnet.ucla.edu/southasia/History/British/Umrao.html](http://sscnnet.ucla.edu/southasia/History/British/Umrao.html).
- Ruswā, Mirzā Muḥammad Hādī. *Umrao Jan Ada: Courtesan of Lucknow*. Trans. Khushwant Singh & M. A. Husaini. Reprint ed. Hyderabad: Disha Books, 1993.
- Sampath, Vikram. *My Name is Gauhar Jaan! The Life and Times of a Musician*. New Delhi: Rupa Publications, 2010.
- Shah, Hasan. *The Nautch Girl: A Novel*. Trans. Qurratulain Hyder. New Delhi: Sterling Publishers, 1992.

## ABSTRACTS

### Shamsur Rahman Faruqi

In this text of a lecture delivered in India, the author rehabilitates Mīr's poetry squarely into the framework of classical Urdu poetics. Demonstrating a historical continuity of a robust tradition to which such great poets as Walī, Nāsikh, Ghālib and Mīr all belonged, it is pointed out that for a piece of poetry to be "valid," one does not need to seek explanatory principles by harking back to poet's actual life experiences and biographical details, political context of his times, or external historical factors in general.

### Tabassum Kashmiri

This paper argues that Sir Syed Ahmad Khan was one of the pioneers of critical historical research methodology in Urdu, working around the last quarter of the nineteenth century. His major work *Āthār al-ṣanādīd*, and his edition of *Ā'in-e akbarī* and *Ta'rikh-e fīroz-shāhī*, are presented as milestones in the Urdu research tradition. The author also argues, with a certain degree of speculation, that the research methods which Sir Syed Ahmad Khan employed may have been learnt by him from British scholars and officers of the Raj who had an interest in historical investigation.

### Mubin Mirza

Beginning with a discussion about the revolutionary aspect of Josh's poetry, Mubin Mirza argues that apart from contingent and external factors that have influenced this poetry, it is Josh's understanding of the concept of a human being that plays the most important role in this regard. The author argues that according to Josh, the concept of an ideal human leads down to a real human. Similarly, the ideal of revolution in his mind leads down to something very real in his poetry. In Josh's view, a revolution is not a break from the continuity of life—it is a tool of steering that flow of life in a new direction. The author also argues that it is the passion and romance in Josh's poetry that binds together the substance of his poetry, namely the concept of God, of humanity, and of life.

### Zia-ul-Hasan

After elaborating on the general received view about Faiz's poetry—namely that his style of romantic expressions was soft and light-hearted and his style of realistic poetry was rough and comparatively straight-forward—the author argues that on a closer analysis this view cannot be sustained. He states that although initially Faiz did seem to be operating subconsciously on this loose dichotomy, as is visible in his first collection entitled *Naqsh-e faryādī*, he

quickly distanced himself from this binary style. His later poetry is many a time an expression of realistic issues in soft and romantic tones and symbols.

### **Mahmood-ul-Hasan Bazmi**

This article is an exposition of the major Urdu translations—with a focus on the Urdu verse translations—of Bulhe Shah's Punjabi poetry. Ranging from Shafqat Tanvir Mirza's translation to those of Shafi Aqeel and Ali Akbar Abbas, the author subjects these renderings to a critical evaluation, offering many clarifications in the original verses along with corrections in their various renderings.

### **Muhammad Saeed**

This short work brings to light, along with a brief introduction, an exciting find—a rare and generally unknown work of Sa'adat Hasan Manto. This is his English to Urdu translation of Sir Arthur Conan Doyle's thriller "The Brown Hand." 2012 is Manto's centennial year.

### **Imran Zafar**

Presenting a survey of the parodies of Allama Iqbal's poetry, Imran Zafar examines parody (*tahrīf*) tradition in Urdu verse and analyses it. His article discusses parodies of some of the famous poems of Iqbal such as "Hamdardī," "Parinde kī faryād," "Shikwah" and "Juwāb-e Shikwah," carried out by Akbar Ilāh Ābādī, Shaukat Thānvī and Sayyid Zamīr Ja'farī among others.

### **Umar Farooq**

This article is a philological discourse on the meanings of "ghazal"—a denotation of a sub-genre of *qaṣīdah* in the Arabic poetic tradition. After a detailed analysis of the various meanings of the Arabic triliteral root word (arising out of gh-z-l) and its relation to the word and the concept of *ghazal*, it provides an Urdu translation of the concerned sections on *ghazal* in two authentic works on Arabic *lughah*.

### **Raza Rumi**

The author presents a commentary on the portrayal of 'nautch girls' in Urdu novel. In a discussion on Mirzā Hādī Ruswā's *Umrāo Jān Adā*, Hasan Shāh's *Fasāna-e Rangīn*, Qurratulain Hyder's *Gardish-e Rang-e Chaman*, Sa'adat Hasan Manto's "Mozail", and Ghulām 'Abbās' "Ānandī," Raza Rumi analyzes these major fiction works by rehabilitating them in a continuum of an important theme in Urdu literature—the theme of confident, empowered, and highly intelligent female characters who appear in the public sphere.