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Courtesans in the Living Room (Review Article)

IN SPRING OF 2003, the new private television channel in Pakistan, Geo TV, created some controversy by telecasting with much fanfare Mirzā Hādī Rusvā's early-twentieth-century Urdu novel, *Umrā'ō Jān Adā* as its first serialized television play. *Umrā'ō*, one of the most expensive TV series produced in Pakistan, with lavish sets and costumes, depicts the life and times of a mid-nineteenth-century courtesan in Lucknow, which was the seat of power for the Nawabs of Awadh in North India. Courtesans in Lucknow were recognized as the preservers and performers of high culture of the court.¹ Courtesans held respect within the Nawabi court and young men of noble lineage were sent to their salons to learn etiquette, polite manners, and the art of literary appreciation. Yet they also provided sexual services, albeit to specific patrons, and were, therefore, not entirely considered part of the *ashraf*, the Muslim respectable gentry.

The politics: The courtesan (*tavā'if*) has been a stock character in popular South Asian literature and movies. Indeed the "fallen woman" is universal in its appeal among readers of pulp and highbrow fiction. Yet in Pakistani films and literature the courtesan's character remains intertwined in a morality play and almost always achieves a tragic end (mostly commits suicide), repents for her "wayward" behavior or, extremely rarely, becomes a *sharif bibi* (respectable woman), which for a courtesan

¹V. Oldenburg, "Lifestyles as Resistance: The Courtesans of Lucknow," in *Resistance and Everyday Social Relations in South Asia*, ed. Douglas Haynes and Gyan Prakash (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1991), 23–61.

may be akin to a social death. In contrast, in Rusvā's novel the protagonist not only survives, she also becomes a respectable poet and a wealthy patron of art without renouncing her past profession. In this sense the novel is unique in its empathetic treatment of courtesan culture.

The last few years have seen the proliferation of several texts and documentaries that relate the stories and condition of courtesans and sex workers in present-day Pakistan. Two among them are noteworthy: *Taboo*, a detailed ethnography of sex workers in Lahore's red light district by Fouzia Saeed (2002), and *Tibbi Galli*, a documentary about the same district produced by Feryal Gauhar. Both are sympathetic portrayals and explicitly expound a feminist sensibility in their handling of their subjects. To allow for a wider readership, *Taboo* was recently translated from English into Urdu. Yet it primarily remains an academic text. Gauhar's film has, however, not been widely distributed and has only been shown at select gatherings. These interventions do put forward an argument for reevaluating the space of sex workers in contemporary Pakistani society; Geo TV's initiative can be understood as an extension of this thematic interest in courtesan life by liberal intellectuals. This opening allows Geo to produce *Umrā'ō* in a country where extramarital sex legally remains a crime against the state and where memories of severe punishment for sexual liaisons under the Hudood Ordinance of the Zia-ul Haq era in the 1980s still resonate among the populace. Unlike the modest reach of the above-mentioned academic works, Geo's production brought courtesan life into domestic spaces (50 million of 150 million Pakistanis have access to TV) as it also intervened into a debate on morality, sexuality, and gender politics in present-day Pakistan. Why, one might ask, have Pakistan's liberal intelligentsia and feminists chosen at this juncture to depict the life-world of the prostitute and the figure of the courtesan as metaphors to argue for sexual freedom and women's autonomy?

The narrative: *Umrā'ō*, set in mid-nineteenth-century northern India, is the story of a young girl who is kidnapped and sold to a *kō hā* (lit: roof or household, the courtesan's salon) in Lucknow.

Umrā'ō grows up learning the skills of the trade with rigorous training in music, singing, dancing, poetry recitation, and the various etiquettes and idioms of courtesan life. The novel is written in the first person to create the illusion of an autobiographical narrative. This technique is retained in the TV serial by the director Raana Sheikh, a veteran TV producer and ex-managing director of the state-owned Pakistani TV, and the

scriptwriter Zehra Nigah, a famous poet and literary personality.

As Umrā'ō grows up accomplished in the various skills of courtesan life, she is much sought after by many members of the élite that frequent the *kō hā*. She is eventually “given” for the first time to a respectable Nawab who retains the exclusive right to her company and maintains her through gifts and cash. This man becomes the first of many with whom Umrā'ō is shown to, within the parameters of Pakistan's censors, have a sustained sexual relationship. There are many twists and turns in the story, but Umrā'ō is always characterized as an extremely sympathetic person—a victim of circumstances beyond her control—with whom the audience can empathize and identify. Periodically the play does remind us that Umrā'ō is a courtesan (with its contemporary connotation of a prostitute) and hence allows for the audience to create a distance from her guilt-free sexual relationships. Yet despite the techniques that the director uses to distance us from the protagonist's assertive sexual practices—perhaps to satisfy the censor—the audience is constantly exposed to and remains engrossed in Umrā'ō's various relationships.

In addition, life in the *kō hā* itself is portrayed in extremely women-friendly terms. There is camaraderie among the younger women in the household and the audience gets the sense of a caring family. The strongest person in the entire household is the chief courtesan, Khānam, who rules over the household as a deft diplomat who has the power of coercion always at her disposal. The interesting aspect of this household is the secondary and dependent nature of the men. In traditional *kō hās*, as depicted in the serial, men occupied the more subservient roles of servants, doormen, musicians, and instructors. Men, of course, were also wealthy patrons and benefactors. But even they, within this domain, deferred to the immense power that these women wielded in their own space and treated the courtesans as equals.

Further, in contrast to Pakistan's recent history of rising Islamic radicalism and the Islamization process of the Zia era, the play seeks to display a much more tolerant atmosphere not only in terms of gender relationships, but also in its depiction of Islamic authority. There is a retainer in the *kō hā*, Maulvī Şāhib, who is married to the main female servant in the household. Maulvī Şāhib teaches Umrā'ō the Qur'ān and religion, literature, and morals. He is portrayed as a man of religion, yet accepts the lifestyle of his surroundings with ease and grace. Similarly, in one episode Umrā'ō runs away with her paramour and ends up in an unknown village after being abandoned. Here she finds the Sheikh of the local mosque who generously gives her shelter and then helps her to

establish herself as a local courtesan with her own *kō hā* and clientele. These portrayals use the mid-nineteenth-century Muslim society in North India, and its imagined tolerant social space where religious leaders and courtesans could coexist, to implicitly critique the moral and theological extremism of contemporary life.

Gender, religion, and ethnicity: The choice of *Umrā'ō Jān Adā* to argue for women's liberation and religious tolerance is an intriguing one. Historically, modernist Muslim reformers of the late nineteenth century opposed Nawabi culture, of which courtesan life was an integral part. Post-1857 Muslim reformers like the author Nazīr Aḥmad, Sayyid Ahmad, the founder of Aligarh Muslim University, and the poet Alḥāf Ḥusain Ḥālī (including Deobandi religious reformers) in their writings argued against the extravagance, impiety, and ignorance of the Nawabi era, which according to them was the cause of Muslim backwardness. In contrast they advocated the pursuit of knowledge, piety, and restraint. Describing this transformation among the late-nineteenth-century Muslim middle-class households, Gail Minault rightly points out that the emphasis was on being noble rather than high born. A sharif gentleman was "pious without being wasteful, educated without being pedantic and restrained in his expression of emotion."² This ideal was in sharp contrast to the Mughal Nawabs and the wealthy landowning aristocracy, those that are depicted in *Umrā'ō* and who sustained the lifestyle of the courtesans themselves.

It appears that the female director and scriptwriter of *Umrā'ō* sought to make an implicit argument against those tendencies of Muslim reformist thought, whether secular or religious (Deobandi), that asked women to distance themselves from the realm of custom which was deemed superstitious, un-Islamic, and irrational. This reformism indeed aided some women to gain more rights within the emerging middle-class household. For example, literacy skills along with modes of reformed behavior did open spaces for women to articulate their rights in marriage and property. Yet, these gains were at the cost of losing separate spheres of female activity that were condemned by the modern reformists as the realm of the *nafs*, the area of lack of control and disorder.³ The creators of this play

²*Secluded Scholars* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1998), 5.

³Afsaneh Najmabadi eloquently details similar processes in turn of the century Iran, where processes of social modernity linked to new schools for girls and

through their depiction of female spaces, use the mid-nineteenth-century milieu to invoke this sense of disorder/sexual themes and link it to an older oral tradition of women's narrative construction and other forms of popular performances—the arena of reformist attack—to make a more contemporary case for women's emancipation and equity.

In invoking this past the producers present an alternative narrative of custom, traditional space, and Muslim religious practice. This move to reinvent the past as tolerant and inclusive is linked to a liberal political agenda that is in opposition to an earlier generation of modernist thinkers. Using late-nineteenth-century North India as a backdrop, this serial confronts the more homogenizing elements of Islamic politics in Pakistani society; a major political task for liberals in present-day Pakistan. The play's implicit portrayal of a more tolerant and inclusive national entity interestingly enough also relates to President General Musharraf's propagated rhetoric of a modern, moderate, and Muslim Pakistan. This resonance perhaps allows liberal intellectuals the space to use media outlets to promote agendas of diverse freedoms and tolerance without the fear of state censorship.

The long-term implications of this tentative cultural alliance between liberals and the Military junta require a detailed discussion and analysis that cannot be provided here. However, in conclusion I would raise another politically important question that the liberal intelligentsia rarely confronts. As issues of gender equity and tolerant Islam are emphasized in the play, the idiom of this discussion remains within the parameters of high Urdu culture. In this play as in others, the depiction of late-nineteenth-century North Indian life is depicted as Pakistani Muslim culture and in doing so remains oblivious to extremely vital issues of cultural and linguistic diversity within Pakistan.

Since Pakistan's independence in 1947, Urdu's dominance of the cultural center has bred a sense of exclusion among other linguistic groups (Pashtun, Sindhi, Punjabi, Baluch, among others) hindering the emergence of a national culture that democratically includes the diverse voices and languages present in the Pakistani cultural spectrum. Where Geo's *Umrā'ō Jān Adā* tackles the issue of female emancipation using North Indian *ashraf* (respectable Muslim elite) culture, it addresses an audience that is also culturally steeped in other traditions, vernaculars, and cultural

the new press transformed women's language and the domestic sphere in "Veiled Discourse, Unveiled Body," *Feminist Studies* 19, no. 3 (1993): 487–518.

ethos. The imposition of nineteenth-century high Urdu culture, though in this case ostensibly well meaning, retains within it the hegemonic aspect of centralizing state projects of cultural homogeneity which have continued to undermine the rights of the various linguistic and cultural groups that constitute Pakistan. In this sense the liberal feminist agenda in its attempt to reinterpret “tradition” and Muslim social practice in South Asia, may still be entangled in modernist projects where experiences of specific linguistic groups who have a longer urban history (as in the case with Urdu speakers) takes precedence over practices of other ethnicities. A more inclusive cultural politics may yet require a sensitivity toward the diverse histories of the various peoples who inhabit Pakistan. □

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