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Transforming Obscenity into the Sublime:
Hidden Sexuality in Rusva's
Umra'o Jan Ada

THE LAST DECADE OF THE NINETEENTH and the first decade of the twentieth century was the flowering period of novel-writing in Urdu (Oesterheld 2004, 195). Before that, longer prose narratives had appeared in Urdu since the mid-eighteenth century, but were confined to traditional forms such as *qiṣṣa* or *dāstān* (terms often used interchangeably to denote traditional nonrealistic narrative). Another term, *fasāna*, of similar meaning, has been used since the nineteenth century to denote the literary form of the novel. All three terms have been generally translated as “a story” and, much like the European medieval romance, were preoccupied with love and adventure.

During the second half of the nineteenth century, a significant number of Urdu translations and adaptations of English novels started to appear. The phenomenon reached its heyday in the 1890s and pertained especially to sensational and romance fiction by authors such as Marie Corelli, F. Marion Crawford or George W. M. Reynolds. This kind of fiction was often published in England as weekly “penny dreadfuls” or “penny bloods,” inexpensive novels of violent adventure or crime, often issued in eight-page installments, which were especially popular in mid-to-late Victorian England. They were illustrated with lurid engravings and circulated mainly among readers of limited means and education. In the West they have been long forgotten, even by specialists in Victorian literature. In India, however, the books of Corelli, Crawford and Reynolds were regarded as “classics” for decades and remained best sellers well into the twentieth century, both in the English original and in translations into Indian languages (see Joshi, 2002), widely influencing literary tastes and the preferences of readers as well as the form and the substance chosen by Indian writers.

Under the impact of English prose and also in response to a “demand for mimetic truthfulness, labelled ‘realism,’ made by both British critics of Urdu literature and reformers of the late nineteenth century” (Oesterheld

2004, 205–6), Urdu writers began to fashion the form of a novel that transformed traditional “stories” as well as their function in the society. Works of such writers as Abdu’l-Ḥalīm Sharar Ratan Nāṭḥ Sarshār or Nazīr Aḥmad were given the surface layout of what was then understood as a modern novel: closely knit plot, unity of action and definite setting in space and time, even though in many aspects—such as the descriptions of the protagonists’ beauty and virtue, the depiction of love and battle scenes, and the presentation of good and evil in black and white terms—they still bore a resemblance to the earlier *qiṣṣa* and *dāstān*.

One may confidently assume that these attributes, which suited well the *qiṣṣa*-grown taste of an Indian reader, contributed significantly to the immense and enduring popularity of such literature on the Subcontinent. However, now this sensational coating, which was necessary to satisfy the readers’ proclivity for romance, mystery and emotional thrill, also included a social or didactic message, whether criticism of polygamy and segregation of the sexes, agitation for the education of girls and women, or praise of the virtuous life in purdah, often together with the condemnation of sexual promiscuity and wantonness.

This last goal was achieved especially by two types of narrative strategies. The first was to present an opposition between a good girl, who observes purdah and leads a respectable life that brings her prosperity and happiness, and a bad girl (often a sister of the former), whose indecency and rejection of seclusion result in fatal consequences and disgrace. The exemplary story of this type is *Hijābu’-n-Nisā* (women’s veil/modesty), written by the best-selling author Munshī Hādī Ḥusain Hādī and published in Benares in 1908. The other device, chosen very often by authors who aimed at presenting models of proper and improper women’s conduct, was depicting the vicissitudes of the life of a courtesan or prostitute. One of the earliest Urdu novels with a courtesan as a protagonist is *Nashtar* (The Lancet), written in 1893 by Sajjād Ḥusain Kasmandārī (though this authorship remains uncertain). *Nashtar* is worth mentioning because it differs from other stories of that time which undertake the “fallen women” topic. Even though it depicts the misery and disastrous consequences of a courtesan’s way of life, as well as her total dependence on her protectors and wealthy patrons, its author refrains from moralizing and reveals compassion, rather than condemnation. Another important disparity is that the female protagonist dies before being forced into the sexual intercourse typical of her profession, so neither her virtue nor the puritanical feelings of the readers are harmed.

It is possible that Mirzā Muḥammad Hādī Rusvā had read *Nashtar* before he began writing his most famous novel, yet the only similarities

between the two works are the autobiographical technique, weaving verses into a prose story and refraining from intrusive didacticism. *Umrā'ō Jān Adā* (hereafter UJA) tells the story of Amīran, a girl kidnapped in childhood from her home in Faizabad and sold to Khānam Jān, the owner of one of the most famous Lucknow *kōḥās*—an elevated brothel—which exclusively entertained customers from the highest levels of society (*ashraf*). The novel describes not only Umrā'ō's but also other girls' professional and intimate relations with men, portraying in detail the living and working conditions of nineteenth-century Lucknowi sex-workers.

What strikes us, however, is the fact that the novel—in which the complexity of a prostitute's life and work has been exposed and explored long before feminist discourse took these up—has never been analyzed (at least as far as I am aware) in terms of sexuality. A good deal of research has been done concerning various aspects of Rusvā's masterpiece and its irrefutable literary value, such as its innovative style of narration, its historical exactness, its mimetic realism and the methods used to authenticate Umrā'ō's story to make it convincing for the reader, as well as the author's pioneering role in depicting the inner dimension of a woman's complex personality, and of human nature in general, and in portraying the hypocrisy of the world in which courtesans are given status in public life but are considered to be beyond the pale of respectable society, etc. However, the sphere of human activity that first comes to mind, associated inseparably with sex-workers and their deeds is nothing more nor less than sex and sexual activity. Yet, on this very aspect of the novel both researchers and enthusiasts of Rusvā's book remain conspicuously silent.

Rusvā tackles sexuality and male-female relations in a manner that often leaves the issues oblique and imperceptible on the surface, and practically invisible on the basic textual level. One may suppose that this restraint was exercised on purpose and might have resulted from the generally prevailing attitude toward the Western novels reaching India during his times, which were initially regarded by Indian writers as trivial, unworthy of serious attention and not suitable to be read by women or the young (Oesterheld 2004, 192). The world depicted in early popular novels was filled with sexual lust, intrigue, treachery and utterly audacious ideas, far removed from any higher moral or ethical values. The approach of Indian critics mirrored the common opinions expressed in relation to many Western novels in their homelands, where such literature was labeled as “literature of the kitchen,” pandering to the degraded tastes of the masses—albeit these opinions did not interfere with the tremendous popularity of such fiction, especially among the lower social strata. Some writers tried to counteract this common impression and convince the wide audience of

their work's value. Reynolds, for example, advertised the series of his "memoirs" novels¹ as welcomed guests in the homes of decent readers, books which "would constitute an elegant present from a parent to a daughter, or from a gentleman to a young lady" (qtd. in Law 2008, 210). In a very similar way, UJA has been assessed by an early reviewer to be a work suitable for respectable women, which does not contain "[...] such shameless indiscretions as would make it unfit to be read before one's female family members [*babū bēṭiyōnī*]" (Naim 2000, 287).² To emphasize the decency of his book, Rusvā goes so far as to suggest (more than once) even the prostitute Umrā'ō's embarrassment with her own conduct in the past. When asked to tell him about the secrets of her life and profession, Umrā'ō declares honestly and with no pretense:

"I find it very hard to talk about the subject you have in mind. Women of my calling are usually immodest, but that is only during the time they are engaged in the profession. Besides flesh has its own compulsions and there is some excuse for wantonness in the first flush of youth; with the years one learns to curb these instincts to keep a proper sense of proportion. All said and done, prostitutes are women and have the same feelings and emotions as other women."

(Ruswa 1961, 25)³

¹Reynolds's 'Memoirs' series is comprised of four autobiographical narratives published in sequence during the 1850s. One of them is *Rosa Lambert, or the Memoirs of an Unfortunate Woman* (renamed *The Memoirs of a Clergyman's Daughter* in later editions). According to Graham Law, with these novels Reynolds "was attempting to tone down the salacious reputation" that was attributed to his earlier works and to direct them towards a female readership "understood to be more careful of the proprieties" (2008, 209–10). He did not succeed, however, especially in *Rosa Lambert*, the story of a prostitute, where the sexual impropriety is shown in the most complex and disturbing manner (*ibid.*, 210–12). Rusvā's *Umrā'ō Jān Adā* is supposed to be modeled on this very story of Reynolds (see the following footnote).

²The quotation comes from a short anonymous review published in the Lucknow literary magazine *Me'yār* (1899, no. 8) immediately after the book was out. Its author indicates two sources for Rusvā's inspiration, traditional (*qiṣṣa*) and modern (Victorian novel): "Taken as a whole this tale [*qiṣṣa*; i.e., *Umrā'ō Jān Adā*] is written on the same model that Mr. Reynolds used to write *Rosa Lambert*" (Naim 2000, 287).

³There exist two English translations of UJA, the first by Khushwant Singh and M.A. Husaini, originally published in 1961 and reissued since then several times, and a newer one by David Matthews, brought out simultaneously in India and Pakistan in 1996. The latter is definitely more faithful to the original, although not entirely free of errors and omissions, while the Singh and Husaini version, with its resections

Rusvā defends himself in front of his protagonist by claiming that educated people should not be unnecessarily prudish: “If you were not a woman of culture, these excuses would be acceptable and I would not be so insistent” (*ibid.*). But his *bē-sharmī kī bātēñ* (disgraceful questions), as Umrā’ō calls them, are never asked directly and a reader can only guess their contents from her reported answers. On the other hand, we must not forget that the autobiographical technique chosen by Rusvā to tell the story was not conducive to direct and personal confessions on intimate topics.

Is UJA then so blameless and devoid of any salacious and obscene elements? A closer look at the deeper layers of the text contradicts any such assumption. Rusvā was conversant with Western prose, having adapted some of the cheap English potboilers into Urdu—among them at least three by Marie Corelli, including her play *Wormwood, a Drama of Paris*, which Rusvā published under his own name with the meaningful title *Khūnī ‘Ishq* (Bloody Passion) (Naim 2001, 291); and two other titles, *Khūnī Bhēd* (Bloody Mystery) and *Rūs kā Shahzāda* (Russian Prince), are mentioned by Suhrawardy (2003, 173). But Rusvā was also well-versed in Persian and Arabic and had received a classical education in various fields including literature. Thus, he was familiar with the traditional literary methods and conventions that allowed Urdu authors to avoid an open expression of erotic feelings and to write about love, lust and desire in a veiled, metaphorical manner. Consequently, in UJA he used the whole range of stylistic and linguistic tools, from allusion and connotation to euphemism and metaphor, which allowed him to speak even about obscene subjects in an elegant and apparently innocent way.

Rusvā draws naturally from the Urdu poetic tradition, interspersing his prose with numerous lines of poetry, usually fragments of *ghazals*, which by definition are voluptuous and bacchanalian in character and associated in the public mind with the amorous as well as the erotic (Rahman 2013, 203). This allows him to express amatory feelings and sensual desires in a way sanctioned by tradition and commonly accepted even by the South Asian Victorians (Pritchett’s term; 1994, xvii). Throughout the book there are many such fragments, which reveal more or less overt sexual meaning. For example:

of some portions of the text (including one whole chapter) as well as often free interpretation of other fragments, should be treated as a rewriting of the story rather than as its accurate translation. In this article I use both English versions as well as my own translations (hereinafter: AKF) based on the first edition of the novel in the British Library collection, provided online by the Columbia University Libraries (Rusvā [1899]).

Her sweet young breasts will be my death, their charms my sure
demise;
See how they rise when as she walks her shawl becomes awry
(Rusva 1996, xxvii)

or:

In the winter when you meet me, I'll not fear the icy gale;
If your locks are on my shoulder, blankets are of no avail.
(*ibid.*, xxxii)

Sometimes the erotic undertone is subtler, hidden in metaphors or suggestions, as in the following couplet:

He is still of tender years, fighting kites is all he longs for;
But he got a small stringed kite instead of the plaything desired
(AKF)

in which Rusvā indulges in a critical allusion to a certain Navāb Ṣāhib who gave his permission for the child marriage of a boy so young that his only desire was to play with kites, and who even arranged the boy's wedding procession with great pomp. (Rusvā himself explains in UJA the hidden meaning of this *she'r*.) The equally young wife of the boy is metaphorically described as "*tuklā dōr*" (a small stringed kite).

However, erotic overtones appear not only in the verses but also in the main narrative. Many of the verses clearly suggest Rusvā's own unconventional past, his familiarity with the world of Lucknow's brothels and his close connections with many courtesans, including Umrā'ō and other girls belonging to the Khānam's establishment. Already on the first pages of the novel, during the poetic gathering, Rusvā's friends are amused to note that the lady next door (who later, incidentally, will appear to be Umrā'ō Jān Adā) knows Rusvā well enough to recognize him by the sound of his voice. It seems also that he knew personally every prostitute mentioned by Umrā'ō in her story, as is shown in the following dialogue:

"Aha! So you saw Banno as well."
I smiled: "Yes, you may assume that to be the case."
"Mirza! You are a dark horse, hiding your secrets under a veil."
"Well, you've torn the veil now."
(Rusva 1996, 32–33)

At the same time he does not seem to be in the slightest embarrassed by this fact. On the contrary, he declares quite boastfully:

"Umrao Jan, whenever your eye beholds a beautiful woman, think of me.
And if it is possible, have my name entered in the list of her suitors."

[...]

“[...] I have only one principle in life, and that is to look upon a woman of virtue, whatever her faith or creed, as I would upon my own mother or sister. [...] But I see no wrong in receiving favours from women who are inclined to be generous with them.”

(Ruswa 1961, 121)

Rusvā reveals the erotic secrets of other people in a similar way. In the opening chapter of the book, during the *mushā‘ira*, a servant brings a note with an excuse from one Mirzā Šāḥib, saying that he would not be able to join the gathering. Asked by Rusvā about the reason for the absence of his master, the messenger makes a clear allusion to Mirzā Šāḥib’s amorous appointment:

I asked the reason for his absence, and the gentleman told us that he had received a consignment of English saplings, which he was planting on the edge of the pool, known as Gol Hauz. The gardener was watering them.

(*ibid.* 1996, xxvi)

The servant’s explanation and the ironic remarks made by the participants of the *mushā‘ira* relating to Mirzā Šāḥib’s excuse may suggest that the reason for his absence was a tryst with his mistress (maybe even an English woman). The *ghazal* he has sent, in which he describes the sufferings of a lover awaiting his beloved who is late, also speaks in favor of such a supposition:

Last night when somehow she came late to me,
The world grew dark; I lost the power to see.

[...]

Today I asked her: “Swear that thou wilt come.”
I almost died when she came late to me.

My wish to sin was covered like a cat;
By fondling it became a lion born free.

Today’s mushaira is not graced by Mirza.
It’s growing late. No need to wait for me.

(*ibid.*, xxviii)

Additionally, the Gōl Ḥauz, on the bank of which the Mirzā Šāḥib is supposedly busy, may have a hidden meaning. Generally it would be translated as “Round Pond” or the like. However, since the Urdu homonym *gōl* means both “anything round, a circle” and “blockhead, booby, idiot” (Platts 1884, 926), the name could also be understood as “Idiot’s Pond”

(even though it would not fully follow the rules of grammar), and might connote that Mirzā had lost his head over a woman. Furthermore, the mention of a *mālī* (female gardener), who according to the messenger is helping Mirzā Šāḥib, clearly indicates the reason for the man's absence at the *mushā'ira*.

Besides the idioms used in the Urdu literary milieu, references and devices typical for the broadly understood South Asian tradition, reaching to the roots of Sanskrit poetic imagery, are found in UJA. They are particularly evident in the descriptions of nature, aimed at creating an erotic mood in such scenes as the picnic in the countryside or the night concert in the Bēgum's garden. In creating these scenes Rusvā successfully employs the connotative power of words and phrases used in the centuries-old tradition to evoke sexual or sensual implications and passionate feelings in a receptive reader. For instance:

It was the rainy season, the skies had opened, and it was pouring down. The season of mangoes.

[...]

The fresh green fields drenched in the rain that cascaded from the dark clouds; the boughs of the trees dripping into the swollen streams; peacocks dancing; koils calling.

(Rusva 1996, 181–82)

In India the rainy season is culturally thought of as a time for amusement and romance. Nature in the form of heavy clouds, the cry of peacocks (the vehicle of Kamadeva, the Hindu god of human love), and bird songs symbolizes sensuous love. The whole atmosphere of this scene is filled with sensuality and overflows with lust and desire, enhanced by the ubiquitous water, the preserver of life, circulating throughout the whole of nature in the form of the rain, which itself bears an erotic connotation (Damsteeg 2001, 729ff.). During the rainy season swinging is an important and symbolic activity. In some parts of northern India (Uttar Pradesh and Bihar) it is accompanied by folk songs called *kajali*, which are erotic in content (Martinez 2001, 341). In UJA the popular *kajali* song “*Jhūlā kin dārū rē amaraiyān*” (Who put up the swing in the mango grove?), recalling the passionate love of Krishna and Radha, sung by Bēgā Jān, completes the picture perfectly.

It is worth noting that while Rusvā exploited various possibilities, offered by both the classical Urdu and the indigenous Indian literary traditions to deal with sexuality, love and desire, he clearly despised these literary forms that were considered obscene and vulgar. Nor does he allow his protagonist to use *rekbtī* (the feminine style of poetry), believed to be often employed by prostitutes, and, at the same time, commonly considered

to be trivial, even misogynistic and meant only for male excitement (Naim 2001). Umrā'ō considers composing poetry in *rekbtī* beneath her (see, for example, her indignant remark: “*Tō kyā Khān Ṣāhib maiñ rekbtī khatī hūñ!*” (Why, Khan Sahib! Should I then have adopted the language of women?; Rusva 1996, xx). In one of their conversations, Rusvā and Umrā'ō criticize in unison the custom of women singing bawdy songs during various wedding ceremonies:

“Isn't it more disgraceful when women sing bawdy songs at weddings?”
 “Higher class prostitutes don't sing bawdy songs any more in Lucknow. That's the job of *domnis*,⁴ though prostitutes have to sing them in villages, even in male company.
 [...]
 [...] I've seen with my own eyes just how much pleasure the most upright nobles of our society get out of slipping into the women's quarters and hearing those songs. They listen to their mothers and sisters, and grin from ear to ear. [...] And not to mention the scurrilous things that the most respectable ladies sing on wedding nights and the morning after.”
 (*ibid.*, 39)

Umrā'ō's maturation and approach toward her own sexuality are among the most important and interesting topics of the novel. As the story progresses the reader can observe how, from an innocent child, she transforms first into a young girl, anxious, but still nescient of her own carnality; then into a young and powerful courtesan, fully aware of how to use her body and her charms to obtain what she wants; and, finally, into a faded woman, whose life is filled with peace and resignation but who still retains some traces of her previous attractiveness and dignity. Rusvā describes this multi-stage metamorphosis with a great deal of honesty and realism, thus proving not only his mastery in the art of storytelling, but, above all, the extraordinary skill of empathy and an ability to understand the opposite sex.

Umrā'ō was about ten years old when she was abducted and thrown into Khānam's establishment. And “[a]lthough young in years, I was a woman with a woman's intuition and knew what was best for me” (*ibid.* 1961, 16). Thus, at Khānam's, she is quick to perceive the necessity of learning the skills of dancing and singing and works very hard to catch up with other girls, but after some time she begins to yearn for something different, unidentified, unnamed: “When I was about thirteen,” she recalls, “and he [Gauhar Mirzā] fourteen or fifteen, I began to get a strange pleasure out of

⁴As Christopher Shackle explains, *ḍōmnīs* and low-grade courtesans sang before mixed audiences, while in the better circles of the city *ḍōmnīs* performed before women alone ([1970?], 55).

his rough ways” (*ibid.*, 21). She becomes painfully aware of her blossoming femininity when her previous companions start their professional lives. For instance:

After the deflowering of Bismillah, I witnessed similar ceremonies for Khurshid and Ameer. I had a strange curiosity and impatience to know what it meant. All I knew was that after their deflowering, Bismillah became Bismillah Jan and Khurshid, Khurshid Jan. [...] They began to receive men and have fun and laughter with them.

(*ibid.*, 27)

She describes how the lives of the girls changed—how beautifully their rooms were decorated, how many gorgeous pieces of clothing and jewelry they owned, how they received men who loved them and were ready to do anything they wanted. All of which made her both curious and envious:

But only I can tell what passed through my mind when I saw this pantomime. There is no limit to a woman’s envy. I am ashamed to admit it, but the truth is that I wanted all these girls’ lovers to love and admire me and be willing to lay down their lives for me only.

(*ibid.*, 29)

Finally her turn came as well. However, the story of how she lost her virginity is told in a very indirect way. We read that one evening, during a raging storm, she was sitting all alone and frightened in the room in which she lived with Bū’ā Ḥusainī. Finally she fell asleep. Then, suddenly, she felt someone gripping her hand and out of fear she lost consciousness. Nothing more is said explicitly, but there are some hints later in the text which indicate what was stolen by the mysterious *čōr* (thief). Khānam was furious and disappointed; she had just lost all hope of selling the girl’s virginity for a good sum. That makes Umrā’ō laugh even many years after the incident took place, at which Rusvā remarks bluntly: “*Unkī to sari umīdēñ kbāk mēñ mil ga’īñ aur āp kā mazāq hō gayā*” (All their hopes had been dashed and you had all the fun; *ibid.* 1996, 46). But Khānam was one cunning and crafty madam. She managed to keep the matter quiet and make what was damaged good (Rusvā uses an equivocal noun *iltiyām*, which literally means “healing or closing the wound,” but here, in a figurative sense, stands for “maidenhead-faking”) by finding a very stupid but filthy rich lad whom she is able to successfully entrap and make to pay a sum of five thousand rupees for Umrā’ō’s alleged “first time.” Only a few paragraphs further we find a clear allusion to Gauhar Mirzā as the real culprit, “The ‘first to pluck the rose,’ Gauhar Mirza, frequently saw me at that time” (*ibid.*, 49), she recalls.

The most obscene and overtly nasty fragment of the novel is undoubt-

edly the story of Ābādī. Umrā'ō bought the girl from her desperate mother during a famine for one rupee and took her into custody with the intention to bring her up and initiate her eventually into the profession of a *ṭawā'if*. But when the girl came of age, she appeared to be exceptionally wanton, even though at the same time remarkably beautiful. She started running crazily after men and flirting even with Umrā'ō's clients. Ultimately, she was thrown out into the Chowk (literally, "market or main street of a city"; in Lucknow the name was used for a part of the city known as the "amusement center" or "red-light district"). There she took up with another slattern, Ḥusnā, and lived for some time as a common whore. She passed from man to man until, finally, she contracted syphilis and—disfigured and terminally ill—was admitted to a hospital and probably died there.

Rusvā describes the story of Ābādī in a very direct and realistic way, contrasting both her and Ḥusnā's characters with other prostitutes depicted in his novel. Ābādī and Ḥusnā differ enormously from high-class, cultured courtesans such as Umrā'ō, Khurshīd or Bismillāh. The former are primitive, uneducated and vulgar, able to entice men only by their sexual profligacy. They sell themselves for a pittance to the worst kind of ruffians and, ultimately, they end their miserable lives in destitution and disease. The story of Ābādī is dissimilar to the rest of the book both in form and content. By representing the reality of the lowest social strata with an almost naturalistic approach, her story brings Rusvā's novel closer to its Western counterparts and, at the same time, seems to be an early harbinger of the controversy regarding obscenity in Urdu literature, which burst into full force four decades later.

The theme of sexuality as one of the main driving forces of human actions, prompting people to behave in absurd ways and cause dire consequences, is omnipresent in UJA. There is no other power, but the triumphant and magnetic physicality, the irresistible desire, sometimes not fully conscious, yet insatiable and overwhelming, that drives Navāb Čḥabban to attempt suicide when he can no longer afford the desired woman. The same stranglehold makes the old, venerable Maulvī Ṣāḥib endure the worst humiliation and ridicule from his mistress, and impels Navāb Maḥmūd 'Alī Khān to make false statements and get entangled in a long, grueling trial with only one explicit aim: to possess the woman he lusts after. Meeting the needs of the flesh was seen as a cure for youthful melancholy. When sixteen years old, the Navāb Ṣāḥib fell ill and the "doctors advised that he should be given a wife immediately or he would become deranged" (*ibid.* 1961, 133). Seeking pleasure and physical satisfaction in the company of prostitutes was not regarded as a reprehensible practice in the society that sanctioned polygamy; quite conversely, keeping a prostitute in one's pay

was a question of fashion among aristocrats, even those advanced in years like Navāb Ja‘far ‘Alī Khān, remembered by Umrā’ō with great esteem.

Yet the official culture, approved by the majority of participants, hardly tolerated eroticism expressed as affirmative and allowed it only sporadically, in certain situations sanctioned by custom, such as at wedding parties or performances given by courtesans (*mujrā*) during cultural gatherings devoted to music, poetry recitation and dance. Apart from such rare and specific occasions, sexuality and sexual issues, especially when expressed in a straightforward way, resulted in charges of obscenity. All aspects of carnality, physical contact, touching and even looking at a person of the opposite sex were inadmissible and considered indecent. Indo-Muslim society, which was deeply divided in terms of gender and in which women were assigned a highly restrictive sexual and social role, used to view as obscene everything that was open, unobstructed, and unveiled—such as courtesans, who moved freely in the public space and mixed freely with men.

But the need for freedom of expression was strong, stronger than the moral restrictions and customary limitations. Therefore, art became the convenient solution for those who felt the need to express their sexuality and to talk about various sexual issues, carnal desires, sensual love, lust, longing, etc. The artistic device allowed a reforging of “obscene” earthly sensuality and hiding it under the sublime cover of exquisitely crafted words, sounds, pictures and motions. This strategy of transforming the obscene into the sublime, of which Rusvā’s *Umrā’ō Jān Adā* is an undeniable part, has continued to this day, having manifested itself over the years in many aspects of South Asian art: Hindustani music, dance and creative writing (especially Urdu poetry and prose), and later also in theater and film. □

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