

Lifestyle as Resistance: The Case of the Courtesans of Lucknow

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When, in 1976, I was doing the research for a study on the social consequences of colonial urbanization in Lucknow, I came across its famous courtesans for the first time. They appeared, surprisingly, in the civic tax ledgers of 1858-77 and in the related official correspondence preserved in the Municipal Corporation records' room (see Oldenburg: 1984, Chapter 5). They were classed under the occupational category of 'dancing and singing girls', and as if it was not surprise enough to find women in the tax records, it was even more remarkable that they were in the highest tax bracket, with the largest individual incomes of any in the city. The courtesans' names were also on lists of property (houses, orchards, manufacturing and retail establishments for food and luxury items) confiscated by British officials for their proven involvement in the siege of Lucknow and the rebellion against British rule in 1857. These women, though patently noncombatants, were penalized for their instigation of and pecuniary assistance to the rebels. On yet another list, some twenty pages long, are recorded the spoils of war seized from one set of 'female apartments' in the palace and garden complex called the Kaisar Bagh, where some of the deposed ex-King Wajid Ali Shah's three hundred or more consorts resided when it was seized by the British. It is a remarkable list, eloquently evocative of a privileged existence: gold and silver ornaments studded with precious stones, embroidered cashmere wool and brocade shawls, bejewelled caps and shoes, silver-, gold-, jade-, and amber-handled fly whisks, silver cutlery, jade goblets, plates, spittoons, hookahs, and silver utensils for serving and storing food and drink, and

valuable furnishings. The value of this part of the booty of war was estimated at nearly four million rupees.

These courtesans appeared in other British colonial records as well. They were the subject of frequent official memorandums written in connection with a grave medical crisis that engulfed the military establishment in Lucknow, as well as in all the major cantonments in British India. A greater number of European casualties during 1857, it was discovered, were caused by disease rather than in combat. The shock of this discovery was compounded by the embarrassing fact that one in every four European soldiers was afflicted with a venereal disease. It became clear that the battle to reduce European mortality rates would now be joined on the hygienic front, to ensure a healthy European army for the strategic needs of the empire. It became imperative that the courtesans and prostitutes of Lucknow, along with those in the other 110 cantonments in India (and in several towns in Britain), where European soldiers were stationed, be regulated, inspected, and controlled. The provisions of Britain's Contagious Diseases Act of 1864 were incorporated into a comprehensive piece of legislation, Act XXII of 1864 in India; it required the registration and periodic medical examination of prostitutes in all cantonment cities of the Indian empire (Oldenburg, 1984; also see Ballhatchet, 1980).

The British usurpation of the Kingdom of Awadh in 1856 and the forced exile of the king and many of his courtiers had abruptly put an end to royal patronage for the courtesans. The imposition of the contagious diseases regulations and heavy fines and penalties on the courtesans for their role in the rebellion signalled the gradual debasement of an esteemed cultural institution into common prostitution. Women, who had once consorted with kings and courtiers, enjoyed a fabulously opulent living, manipulated men and means for their own social and political ends, been the custodians of culture and the setters of fashion trends, were left in an extremely dubious and vulnerable position under the British. 'Singing and dancing girls' was the classification invented to describe them in the civic tax ledgers and encapsulates one of the many profound cultural misunderstandings of 'exotic' Indian women by colonial authorities.

These new challenges provoked these women to intensify their struggle to keep out an intrusive civic authority that taxed their incomes and inspected their bodies. Characteristically they responded by keeping two sets of books on their income, bribing the local *dai*, or nurse, to avoid bodily inspections, bribing local policemen to avoid arrests for selling

liquor to the soldiers, or publicly refusing to pay taxes even when threatened with imprisonment. The tactics were new but the spirit behind them was veteran. 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 to a spirited defense of their own rights against colonial politics. Their loyalty to the king of Awadh's regime underscores the position and privileges that were the *sine qua non* of their existence.

In a departure from the conventional perspective on this profession, I would argue that these women, even today, are independent and consciously involved in the covert subversion of a male-dominated world; they celebrate womanhood in the privacy of their apartments by resisting and inverting the rules of gender of the larger society of which they are part. Their way of life is not complicitous with male authority; on the contrary, in their own self-perceptions, definitions, and descriptions they are engaged in ceaseless and chiefly nonconfrontational resistance to the new regulations and the resultant loss of prestige they have suffered since colonial rule began. It would be no exaggeration to say that their 'life-style' is *resistance to rather than a perpetuation of patriarchal values*.

Quite unexpectedly, another set of archival documents led me to a group of courtesans living in Lucknow in 1976, proud descendants of those who had survived first the pressures of a century of systematic harassment by the colonial authorities and then the ban placed on their activities by the government of independent India. These documents were the intercepted letters written by Wajid Ali Shah to some of his wives, whom he had been forced to abandon in 1856. I engaged a young Persian scholar, Chhote Miyan to help me decipher these Persian letters. He not only provided the entree required to visit this group of courtesans but also, quite fortuitously, the key to comprehending their world. He explained why he had only been given a pet name instead of a serious Muslim family name. He was the son of a courtesan and she had never revealed to him the identity of his father. Ironically, his own life story had all the elements of the socialization and upbringing accorded to a girl in a 'normal' household.

While I love and respect my mother and all my 'aunts' [other courtesans] and my grandmother, my misfortune is that I was born a son and not a daughter in their house. When a boy is born in the *kotha* [salon], the day is without moment, even one of quiet sadness. When my sister was born there was a joyous celebration that was unforgettable. Everyone received new clothes, there was singing, dancing, and feasting. My aunts went from door to door distributing sweets.

My sister is, today, a beautiful, educated, perturbed woman. She will also

inherit what my mother and grandmother own. She will have a large income from rents; she doesn't even have to work as a courtesan, if she so chooses. I am educated, but I have no money or property. Jobs are very hard to come by, so I live in a room and subsist on a small allowance that my mother gives in exchange for running errands for her and helping her deal with her lawyers. [She was trying to evict a tenant from a house she owned.] She paid for my education but a degree is pretty worthless these days. My only hope is that I may marry a good woman who has money and who gives me sons so they can look after me in my old age or find a way of getting a job in Dubai, as my cousin did. Otherwise my chances in life are pretty dim. Funny isn't it, how these women have made life so topsyturvy?

In order to appreciate this rather remarkable inversion in a society that blatantly favours males over females, a brief sketch of the historical background of the *tawaif*, or the courtesans of Lucknow, is in order. At all Hindu and Muslim courts in the many kingdoms that made up the sub-continent before the British began to conquer them and displace their rulers, the courtesans were an influential female elite. The courtesans of Lucknow were especially reputable. They had established themselves at the Awadh court in the eighteenth century, under the lavish patronage of the chief noblemen, merchants, and the official elite of the capital city. Abdul Halim Sharar (1975: 192) tells of their compelling role in court politics.

A cultivated man like Hakim Mahdi, who later became Vazir [prime minister of Awadh], owed his initial success to a courtesan named Piyaro, who advanced her own money to enable him to make an offering to the ruler on his first appointment as Governor of the Province of Awadh. These absurdities went so far that it is said that until a person had association with courtesans he was not a polished man... At the present time [c. 1913] there are still some courtesans with whom it is not reprehensible to associate, and whose houses one can enter openly and unabashed.

While implying that the coming of the British had left these women as a beleaguered community, Sharar was strongly of the opinion that the morals, manners, and distinctiveness of Lucknow culture and society were sustained by the courtesans. Enconced as they were in lavish apartments in the city's main Chowk Bazar, and in the Kaiser Bagh palace, they were not only recognised as preservers and performers of the high culture of the court, but they actively shaped the developments in Hindustani music and Kathak dance styles (see Manuel, 1987). Their style of entertainment was widely imitated in other Indian court cities and their enduring influence on the Hindi film is all too patent. They commanded great respect in the court and in society, and association

with them bestowed prestige on those who were invited to their salons for cultural soirees. It was not uncommon for young sons of the nobility to be sent to the best-known salons for instruction in etiquette, the art of conversation and polite manners, and the appreciation of Urdu literature.

In Lucknow, the world of the tawaif was as complex and hierarchical as the society of which it was part. Courtesans were and still are usually a part of a larger establishment run by a *chaudharayan*, or chief courtesan, an older woman who has retired to the position of manager after a successful career as a tawaif. Having acquired wealth and fame, such women were able to recruit and train women who came to them, along with the more talented daughters of the household. Typically a wealthy courtier, often the king himself, began his direct association 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 and privileged to invite his friends to soirees and enjoy an exclusive sexual relationship with a tawaif. His guests were expected to impress the management with their civilities and substance so that they would qualify as patrons of the women who were still unattached. The chaudharayan always received a fixed proportion (approximately one-third) of the earnings to maintain the apartments; hire and train other dancing girls; and attract the musicians, chefs, and special servants that such establishments employed. Many of the musicians belonged to famous lineages and much of late-nineteenth-century Hindustani music was invented and transformed in these salons, to accommodate the new urban elite who filled the patronage vacuum in the colonial period.

The household had other functionaries beyond the core group of daughters or nieces of the senior tawaif. These women, called *thakabi* and *rundi*, were affiliates of a *kotha* but were ranked lower; their less remarkable appearance and talent restricted them to providing chiefly sexual services in rather more austere quarters downstairs. Another interesting group of women secretly associated with the establishment were *khawgi*, or women who were married and observed strict *purdah*, but who, for financial or other reasons, came to the *kotha* for clandestine liaisons; the chaudharayan collected a fee from them for her hospitality. Doormen, watchmen, errand boys, tailors, palanquin carriers, and others, who lived in the lower floors of the house, or in detached servants quarters, and were also often kinsmen, screened suspicious characters at the door, acted as protectors of the house, and spied on the activities of

the police and medical departments. Pimps or other male agents simply did not exist, then or later.

It is popularly believed that the chaudharayan's most common mode of recruitment has always been kidnapping; that the tawaif were linked to a large underground network of male criminals who abducted very young girls from villages and small towns and sold them to the *kothas* or *nishatkhana*s [literally, pleasure houses]. This belief was fuelled, if not actually generated, by Lucknow's famous poet and litterateur, Mirza Hadi Ruswa, in his *Umrao Jan Ada*. The novel first appeared in 1905, was an immediate success and was translated into English in 1961 (Ruswa, 1982). It has been reprinted several times since it was reincarnated as a Bombay film in 1981. The influence this novel has exerted on the popular imagination is enormous; it is the single most important source of information on courtesans of Lucknow, and by extension, the entire profession as it was practised in the nineteenth century, in northern India. Set in the second half of the nineteenth century, it is a melodramatic story of a tawaif, Umrao Jan, who as a beautiful child of five, is kidnapped and sold to a tawaif in Lucknow, where she trains and becomes, after a few complicated twists and turns in the plot, a renowned and much-sought-after courtesan. Ruswa uses the classic ploy of writing an introduction wherein he explains that he is merely recording the true story of Umrao Jan, told to him by the protagonist herself. His use of the first person in the 'memoir', in which the courtesan frequently addresses him by name, makes it all the more convincing.

Ruswa was a regular participant at several salons and the glimpses he provides of the rigorous training and the world view of the courtesan are quite accurate historically. What is less known is that Ruswa had a keen interest in crime and several of his translations and adaptations were of contemporary Victorian and Urdu potboilers. He published a then-popular series of *khuni* novels some of whose titles, such as *Khuni Shahzada* [The killer prince], *Khuni Joru* [The killer wife], *Khuni Ashiq* [The killer lover], betray his predilection for the sensational. One of the older courtesans I interviewed, who had known Ruswa personally, gave the book a mixed review. She commended Ruswa for understanding the mentality of the courtesan but blamed him for inventing characters such as the 'evil kidnapper' and the exploitative madame who became the stuff of later stereotypes.

The greatest harm was done to the reputation of the *kotha*, however, by British political propaganda. The older courtesans I interviewed, who felt keenly about contemporary politics, and had connections among the

local power elite, were impressively knowledgeable about the history of their city. In their view it was official British policy to malign the courtisans and the culture of salons, in order to justify the British role as usurpers of the throne of Awadh in 1856. British high-handedness in this and other policies unleashed a widespread rebellion in north and central India in 1857, which raged for ten months in Awadh. To consolidate their rule in the Province of Awadh, the British turned their fury against the powerful elite of Lucknow, of which the tawaif were an integral part. Yet, when it came to matters such as using these women as prostitutes for the European garrison, or collecting income tax, the eminently pragmatic British set aside their high moral dudgeon. It became official policy to select the healthy and beautiful 'specimens' from among the kotha women and arbitrarily relocate them in the cantonment for the convenience of the European soldiers. This not only debased the profession, stripping it of its cultural function, but it also made sex cheap and easy for the men while exposing the women to venereal infection from the soldiers.

Kidnapping may have been (and perhaps still is) one of the methods by which girls find their way into the tawaif households, but it is certainly not the most common. From my interviews with the thirty women, who today live in the Chowk area of Lucknow, and whose ages ranged from thirty-five to seventy-eight, a very different picture emerged. In recording the life stories of these women, who spanned three generations, I found that the compelling circumstance that brought the majority of them to the various tawaif households in Lucknow was the misery they endured in either their natal or their conjugal homes. Four of these women were widowed in their early teens, two of whom hailed from the same district and had lost their husbands in a cholera epidemic; three were sold by their parents when famine conditions made feeding these girls impossible. Seven were victims of physical abuse, two of whom were sisters who were regularly beaten by their alcoholic father for not obliging him by making themselves sexually available to the toddy seller. Three were known victims of rape and therefore deemed ineligible for marriage; two had left their ill-paid jobs as municipal sweeper women, because they were tired of 'collecting other people's dirt'; two were battered wives; one had left her husband because he had a mistress; and one admitted no particular hardship, only a love for singing and dancing that was not countenanced in her orthodox Brahmin home. Three said they had left their marriages without much ado; they saw the advantage of

earning their own living and being at liberty to use their resources as they wished, and they did not want to have children. Only four of them were daughters of other tawaif. 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. The problem, according to Saira Jan, a plump woman in her early forties, who recounted her escape from a violent, alcoholic husband at length and with humour, was that there were no obliging kidnappers in her mohalla (neighbourhood). 'Had there been such *farisbie* [angels] in Hasanganj I would not have had to plot and plan my own escape at great peril to my life and my friends, who helped me.'

This catalogue reflects the wide range of miserable circumstances from which these women had escaped. Desertion has been traditionally resorted to by those trapped in situations they had no other effective means of fighting or changing. Gulbadan, who was a chaudharayan from her late thirties (she claims she was born in 1900 and initiated when she was thirteen years old) had been the niece of a tawaif and was raised in the household she now managed. She spoke of the kotha as a sanctuary for both women and men; women found in it a greater peace and freedom than in the normal world; men escaped the boredom of their domestic lives. She reminded Saira that she was a miserable, underweight, frightened wretch when she had first appeared at her doorstep. 'She was thin as a stick, her complexion was blotchy, her eyes sunk in black holes, and she had less than two rupees tied to the end of her sari. Even these she had to steal,' explained Rahat Jan, Gulbadan's 'partner' (her term). 'Now look at her, we call her our *hathini* who eats milk and *jalebi* to keep her voice dulcet.'

Most women told their stories with enthusiasm. They had wanted to escape 'hell' (the word *jahannum*, the Islamic hell, was frequently used to describe their earlier homes) at any cost. Learning professional skills and earning their own money helped them develop self-esteem and value the relative independence they encountered in Rahat Jan's kotha. It may well be that some of the women exaggerated the horrors of the past, but the kernels of their stories were embedded in the reality of the gender bias in society. Here they could be women first, and Hindus and Muslims in a more mutually tolerant way, because the culture of the kotha represented elements of both and was acknowledged as a truly syncretic tradition.

There were many stories, each with its own flavour of horror, and of courage, and none that did not have a relatively happy ending. Comparable employment opportunities for women simply did not exist then and are few and far between even now. Gulbadan explained that not all women in need can make the kotha their refuge; some are not talented enough to become courtesans, and some are too anxious about their moral standing. Women, particularly from the higher strata of Hindu and Muslim society, fear violent reprisals if discovered by their families or shrink from exposure to strange men. She went on to say that many women flee their homes in the villages and come to the anonymity of the city to work as domestic servants, as *ayats* [nannies] or maids or cooks. Some join road gangs run by government or private building contractors only to break bricks into small pieces with a hammer, all day in the sun, and earn in a month what we make in a few hours of passing the time in civilized company. To make ends meet they have to sleep with their employers and the *datalal*, or middlemen, who found them their jobs, and get beaten up by their husbands when they find out. Gulbadan explained that 'a woman compromises her dignity twenty-four hours of the day when she has no control over her body or her money'. This response was unanimously endorsed by the other courtesans.

The women who said that their own parents had sold them when they were unable to feed them, much less pay for a wedding and a dowry, felt that their parents were forced by circumstances to make such a hard decision. Yet they sent money home every month to take care of their impoverished families, which was gratefully received, and whatever resentment they may have felt for being abandoned as children had dissipated through understanding the limits imposed on women in this world. Gulbadan, who spoke more aphoristically than the others, explained that even fifty years ago, there was very little scope for women to change the lives they grumblingly led:

What they couldn't change they called their *qismat*, their fate. Here, in our world, even though things are not as good as they were before the British came, women changed their *qismat*. Even philosophers and poets will tell you that no one can change their *qismat*. Ask these women, who have lived and worked together for more than twenty years, whether or not they think that I taught them how to mould their own fate like clay with their own hands.

I did, and they agreed, with laughing nods, while they celebrated Janmashrami and Id on the third floor of Gulbadan's impressively large building. And this was the very essence of their world view.

Gulbadan had tossed this off as she sat on the large platform covered with an old Persian rug and velvet and brocade bolsters that propped her up. Watching her deft fingers prepare a *paani*, I felt I was in the presence of an alchemist who had transformed base fortunes into gold. She, along with her septuagenarian friends, had inherited a way of life and struggled to preserve it, quite selfishly, in the face of an increasingly hostile future. Their business was neither to exploit women, nor to transform the lot of the generality of womankind, but to liberate and empower those with whom they were associated. The high level of camaraderie, wit, teasing, and affectionate interaction that I observed and participated in on several visits to the apartments of the older women over ten years affirmed this impression repeatedly. The process of 'changing one's fate' (*qismat badalna*) is, under closer scrutiny, a psychosocial process through which the social construction of gender (and sexuality, as we shall see) is stripped bare. The chaudharayan act in several capacities, the most challenging being to inspire, in the women who come to them, a confidence in their own ability and worth, restore shattered nerves, set about undoing the socialization they had received in their natal homes. This delicate and difficult task, at one level, is not unlike the task modern psychotherapy purports to perform in Western society. The problem, according to Rasulan, was to forget the expectations inherent in the meaning of the word *aurat*, or woman, as it obtained in the larger society.

The process of rehabilitation for these women is rapid since they generally arrive young and are plunged into a welcoming environment. The self-affirming ethos of the kotha makes it possible for them to assimilate their newly revised perceptions and behavior patterns while living among a host of nurturing and supportive women and without the fear of men. Freedom from the pressure of the 'marriage market' where grooms were 'for sale' to the woman with the largest dowry, they unanimously agreed, gave them the inner courage to develop their skills and treat men as equals, or even as inferiors.

There are other therapeutic devices invented over the ages that are still in use in these salons. Novices are introduced to a secret repertoire of satirical and bawdy songs, dances, informal miming, and dramatic representations, aimed at the institution of marriage and heterosexual relations. These entertainments are privately performed only among women. These 'matinee shows' as they jokingly call them, are not only crucial for the solidarity and well-being of the group, but they also help the newcomers to discard the old and internalise the new meaning of being an *aurat*. I recognized this, when in answer to one of my early (and

very naive) questions I was treated to a vignette on the 'joys' of marriage.

The women pointed out that those who dare to hold 'moral' objections to the life of a tawaif should first examine the thankless toil of an average housewife, including her obligation to satisfy a sometimes faithless or alcoholic or violent husband for the sake of a meager living. Such an existence is without dignity, and was not the situation of the housewife tantamount to that of a common prostitute, giving her body for money. It is we who are brought up to live in *sharafat* [genteel respectability] with control over our bodies and our money and they who suffer the degradation reserved for lowly [*reech*] women.'

Such vivid reversals of social perception and logic are stock idioms in the courtesan's speech and song. Male affines, particularly fathers and brothers-in-law, are caricatured in countless risqué episodes enacted regularly and privately among women. They mock the repressive relationships and male sexuality in the conjugal home, even as they amuse, educate, and edify the denizens of the *kotha*. The routines, studded with subversive and irreverent jokes and obscenity gestures, are performed like secret anti-rites which have been carefully distilled and historically transmitted from generation to generation, to form the core of their private consciousness and oral heritage.

I had also seriously questioned the courtesans' use of the *burqa*. It was, at first, inexplicable why tawaif not only used the burqa to move around when they went visiting or shopping, but actually insisted that I too should wear one as they led me to other *kothas* in the vicinity, because injunctions about female modesty did not apply to them. It was precisely because they were not expected to be in *pardah*, they reasoned, in another classic reversal of patriarchal logic, that they chose to block the gaze of men. It was an extension of the autonomy they enjoyed in their living space and their *jism* (bodies), unlike 'normal' women whose bodies were the property of their husbands and who were secluded but lacked privacy in their own homes. The latter were kept in *pardah* to maintain (and increase) *khandani izzat*, or family honour; 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 in which 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.' I would have disputed this had I not experienced the

freedom the burqa gave me to walk along the winding alleys in a very old-fashioned and gossip-filled city, where I formerly never passed without being accosted with vulgar taunts from the idle youths who mill on the streets. These women had appropriated the power of the gaze while eluding the leer of sexually frustrated men.

A great deal has been said and is known about the rigorous training and education courtesans undergo to ultimately please and entertain their patrons. What has never received discursive treatment, because of its very nature, is their secret skill—the art of *nakhra*, or pretense, that courtesans have to master in order to spare no opportunity of coaxing money out of their patron and his friends. Their avowed and unabashed purpose is to amass a tidy fortune as early in their careers as possible, so that they can invest the surplus in income-producing properties or enterprises and retire comfortably at the age of thirty-five or so. To achieve their material ambitions, they use, in addition to their exorbitant charges, an arsenal of devious 'routines' that make up the hidden text of an evening's entertainment. These are subtly deployed to bargain, cajole, and extort extra cash or kind from their unsuspecting clients. Some of these are learned, some invented, some even improvised, but nuances are refigured with care to suit the temperament of a client, or the mood of the moment, to appear 'spontaneous'. Repeated rehearsals by the trainee are evaluated by the adept tawaif, until no trace of the pretense is discernible.

These well-practiced ploys—the feigned headache that interrupts a dance or a song, feigned anger for having been neglected, a sprained ankle, tears, a jealous rage—have beguiled generations of men to lose thousands of extra rupees or gold coins to these women. The tawaifs refuse, at a critical juncture, to complete a sexual interlude with a favorite patron in a particularly profitable device, because feigned coital injuries or painful menstrual cramps involve expensive and patient waiting on the part of the patron. Gulbadan said she often carried the game a step further by 'allying' herself with the patron against the 'offering' courtesan to set the seal of authenticity on the scene. She would scold and even slap her till the patron begged her not to be so harsh. Gulbadan was the privately acclaimed champion of these more serious confidence tricks and others cheerfully confessed to having blackmailed, stolen, lied, and cheated for material gain as soon as they acquired competence in this art. This may sound more like self-enrichment than resistance, but because society has virtually denied women control over wealth or property, it is essential to establishing a countercultural way of life.

The formula, Gulbadan confided, is to win the complete trust of the

man. This they do by first mastering all the information about the man—his public reputation, his finances, his foibles and vanities, his domestic life, and the skeletons in his closet.

Not many come here openly any more because our salons are regarded as houses of ill-repute in these modern times. Most come to drink and for sexual titillation. We know how to get a man drunk and pliant, so that we can extort whatever we want from him: money, even property, apologies, jewels, perfume, or other lavish gifts. Industrialists, government officers, other businessmen come here now; they have a lot of black money (undeclared cash) that they bring with them, sometimes without even counting it. We make sure that they leave with very little, if any. We know those who will pay large sums to insure secrecy, so we threaten them with careless gossip in the bazaar or with an anonymous note addressed to their fathers or their wives.

We do not act collectively as a rule but sometimes it may become necessary to do so. We once did a drama against a money lender who came and would not pay us the money he had promised for holding an exclusive soiree for him. So when a police officer who had fallen in love with me came by, we all told him tales of how the wretched man would not return jewels some of us had pawned with him. We filed a police report, he was arrested, and some of the pawned items (which the jeweler had taken from some of our recently straitened noble patrons) were made over to us by the love-lorn officer; others of his debtors sent us sweets and thanks for bringing the hated Ram Swarup to justice. But our biggest gambit of all is the game of love that makes these men come back again and again, some until they are financially ruined. They return every evening, like the flocks of homing pigeons, in the vain belief that it is *we* who are in love with *them*.

In Ruswa's 1905 novel about Lucknow's courtesans, this particular *nakhra* is insightfully described by the protagonist, Umrao Jan:

I am but a courtesan in whose profession love is a current coin. Whenever we want to ensnare anyone we pretend to fall in love with him. No one knows how to love more than we do: to have deep sighs; to burst into tears at the slightest pretext; to go without food for days on end; to sit dangling our legs on the parapets of wells ready to jump into them; to threaten to take arsenic. All these are parts of our game of love. But I tell you truthfully, no man ever really loved me nor did I love any man.

A discussion of the feigning of love for men (a discussion which occurred only after several visits) brought perhaps the most startling 'hidden' text to light. It was difficult to imagine that these women, even though they were economically independent, educated, and in control of their lives, would spurn the opportunity for real intimacy and emotional stability. Everyone agreed that emotional needs do not disappear

with success, fame, or independence; on the contrary, they often intensify. Almost every one of the women I interviewed during these many visits claimed that their closest emotional relationships were among themselves, and eight of them admitted, when I pressed them, that their most satisfying physical involvements were with other women. They referred to themselves as *chapat bazi*, or lesbians, and to *chapti*, or *chipti*, or *chapat bazi*, or lesbianism. They seemed to attach little importance to labels and made no verbal distinctions between homosexual and heterosexual relations. There was no other 'serious' or poetic term for lesbianism, so I settled for the colloquialisms. Their explanation for this was that emotions and acts of love are gender-free. 'Serious' words such as *mohabat* or *prem* or 'love' are versatile and can be used to describe many kinds of love, such as the love of man or woman, the love for country, for siblings, parents of either sex, so there was no need to have a special term for love between two women. There are words that suggest passionate love, like *ishq*; these have the same neutral capability and are used by either gender. Although their lesbianism is a strictly private matter for them, the absence of a specialized vocabulary makes it a simple fact of life, like heterosexual love, or the less denied male homosexual love. The lack of terminology or the scrambling of pronouns may also be interpreted as the ultimate disguise for it; if something cannot be named it is easy to deny its existence. In Urdu poetry, ambiguity about gender is not uncommon, and homosexual love often passes for heterosexual love.

The frank discussions on the subject of their private sexuality left some of my informants uneasy. I had probed enough into their personal affairs, they insisted, and they were not going to satisfy my curiosity any further; they were uncomfortable with my insistence on stripping their strategic camouflage, by which they also preserved their emotional integrity. Their very diffidence to talk about their lesbianism underscores the thesis that they believe in a quiet, but profound, subversion of patriarchal values. It became clear that for many of them heterosexuality itself is the ultimate *nakhra* and feigned passion an occupational hallmark. My ardor for precise statistics faded as the real and theoretical implications of their silences and their disguises began to emerge. And it is to these that I now turn.

What do all these stories signify? Does the courtesans' presentation of their life-style add up to a subversion of existing gender relations in heterosexual marriage? Can their beliefs and behavior be seen as 'feminist' by modern standards, or are they just another example of that allegedly widespread affliction, 'false consciousness'? How do we reconcile

the horizontal stratifications of class with the vertical divide of gender and their anomalous position in either group? Do they qualify as a subaltern group as women or as an elite group by virtue of their power and connections? Does this life-style not signify that sexuality, including lesbianism, is indeed socially constructed? Let me begin to hack at this thicket by citing Romila Thapar's perspective on Hindu ascetics. In talking ascetics (an equally unlikely-seeming group of rebels) both as individuals or in organised groups, as dissenters, she sees in their rejection of the *grabhastā-ashrama*, or the householder stage the essence of their rebellion.

An aging *grabhastā* [householder] taking to *sannyāsa* [the ascetic life] was merely conforming to the ideal *vita* . . . The negation of the family as a basic unit of society is evident from the opposition to the *grabhastā* status and specially the insistence on celibacy. [Inherent in] the act of opting out of the existing life-style and substituting it with a distinctively different one . . . [is that] the characteristics of the new life-style be seen as a protest against the existing one. To this extent such movements may be regarded as movements of dissent. But the element of protest was muted by the wish, not to change society radically, but to stand aside and create an alternative system. (Thapar, 1978).

The life-style of female ascetics could not be reckoned as a true counterpart because, as Thapar points out, female ascetics, with few exceptions, were always subordinate to the authority of males. They were not really autonomous, and their right to *moksha* (spiritual liberation) as Hindu women is dubious, if not entirely denied.

I would argue that the true female counterpart of the rebellious ascetic, and perhaps the far more daring, is the tawaif. By listening carefully to the stories the courtesans tell, it becomes undeniable that they, too, are rebelling, all the more explicitly, against the housewifely stage, since this is the *only* 'stage of life' implicitly mandated for all women in both Hindu and Islamic cultural systems. It is in this stage that the woman must achieve total fulfillment, because she does not graduate, as the man does, to a more mature level. The informal 'student stage' for a girl used to be, and still is for the majority, the acquisition of practical experience in housework and childcare. Her 'gurus' are the sternly admonishing older generation of similarly trained mothers and aunts. Modesty, obedience, and other subordinate behavior patterns are drilled into her until she comes to hold the single-minded belief that her eligibility for marriage is the only index of her worth. It is the 'normal' woman's social and sexual regimen that courtesans-in-the-making must unlearn and supplant by undergoing a radically different socialisation process and

adopt the life-style that gives them the liberation they desire, without jerking the reflexive muscle of a repressive system.

Although life-styles of the male ascetic and the female courtesan are both modes of social dissent, the sexual differences, and the social prescriptions on which they are predicated, produce interestingly contrasted strategies and ideologies. The former emerges from a religious interpretation of *grahastā* with the *denial* of sexuality, lineage, and property ownership, as its strategic thrust to gain spiritual liberation. The latter, on the other hand, emerges from the secular and domestic context in which women's lives are enmeshed. The courtesans seek material and social liberation by reversing the constraints imposed on women's chastity and economic rights and by establishing a female lineage of selected and ascriptive members who make up their *ghurana*. The male becomes celibate, renounces property and the privileges of his gender in this world of 'other-worldly' rewards; the female becomes sexually active and aggressively acquisitive, prefers autonomy to 'virtue', and seeks this-worldly 'women's liberation'.

Yet some consequences of these divergent paths are strikingly similar. Both life-styles subvert the hierarchies of caste and class, because in both groups lower caste and economically disadvantaged persons find refuge. The tawaif have created a secular meritocracy based on talent and education, accepting Hindus and Muslims alike. They too, like the ascetics, hold positions of respect by the society at large, and both counter-cultures exist by maintaining vital links to the overarching patriarchal culture, while consciously inverting or rejecting its values. Although neither group has the pretension of changing the entrenched notions of the householder stage, both serve their own personal ends by elaborate strategies of avoidance. By opting for the institutional security of a monastery or a brothel, both groups wielded political power in the past through the powerful heads of sects in ancient Hindu kingdoms in the subcontinent or through the chautharayan in pre-colonial Lucknow and other court cities, such as Hyderabad, Rampur, Banaras, Bijapur, and Golkonda. In unfavourable historical circumstances, both groups lost political power, but their patented life-styles still remain viable modes for women and men to elude the shackles of patriarchy and seek their own brands of liberation.

During the reign of the nawabs of Awadh, these women could manipulate powerful courtiers and the nawabs themselves, and even the most powerful patron did not have any authority over the women's lives. The executive authority and managerial functions were the exclusive preserve

of the chaudharayan and her appointees. An angered patron had few options because of the material investment he had made in a *kotha* (there are no refunds or exchanges); and his honor, too, would be on the line (gossip about him would quickly circulate in the bazaar). It is therefore not the patron who is ultimately significant but the matron, *who* creates the ethos, reputation, and the quality of life and services in her establishment.

The courtesan's position is of course much diminished by the events and reconfigurations of power in the colonial and post-colonial periods. Fully aware of this history, these women find hope in other educational and employment opportunities that have recently opened up for women, for their basic goal is to free themselves from direct economic dependence on men. They already had daughters or nieces competing for and obtaining posts in the banking system, or as pleaders in the local courts, but these professions were not, as Chhote Miyan, the Persian-speaking son of one of the courtesans and my first informant, pointed out, a way of life. Women might become financially independent but without the refuge of the *kotha* they would again be forced to marry and possibly suffer the degradation at the hands of unsympathetic husbands. Amiran's daughter, a banker, chose to marry. 'We were wary of this alliance,' Amiran recollected, 'and sure enough her husband took up with another woman and my daughter and granddaughter are back with us. She looks after our investments and bank work, so that she does really contribute to the household with her labor just as we all do.' In other words, they shrewdly recognized that while financial independence was important, it did not solve the central problem of the gender inequality inherent within marriage in a patriarchal society.

The courtesans have uniquely combined the elements of struggle for their material *needs* with those of an ideological struggle against patriarchal *values*, by creating and hiding behind their many masks. They live in outward harmony with male power and male sexuality, for the struggle can only be effective if their subterfuges are mistaken for compliance and their true intentions as collusion with men against *other women*. Their cooperation with some women outside the *kotha*, such as the *khangi*, or the married women to whom they rent space, so that they too can earn (undisclosed) extra money is also little known, as it would be no longer politic or possible if it were uncovered.

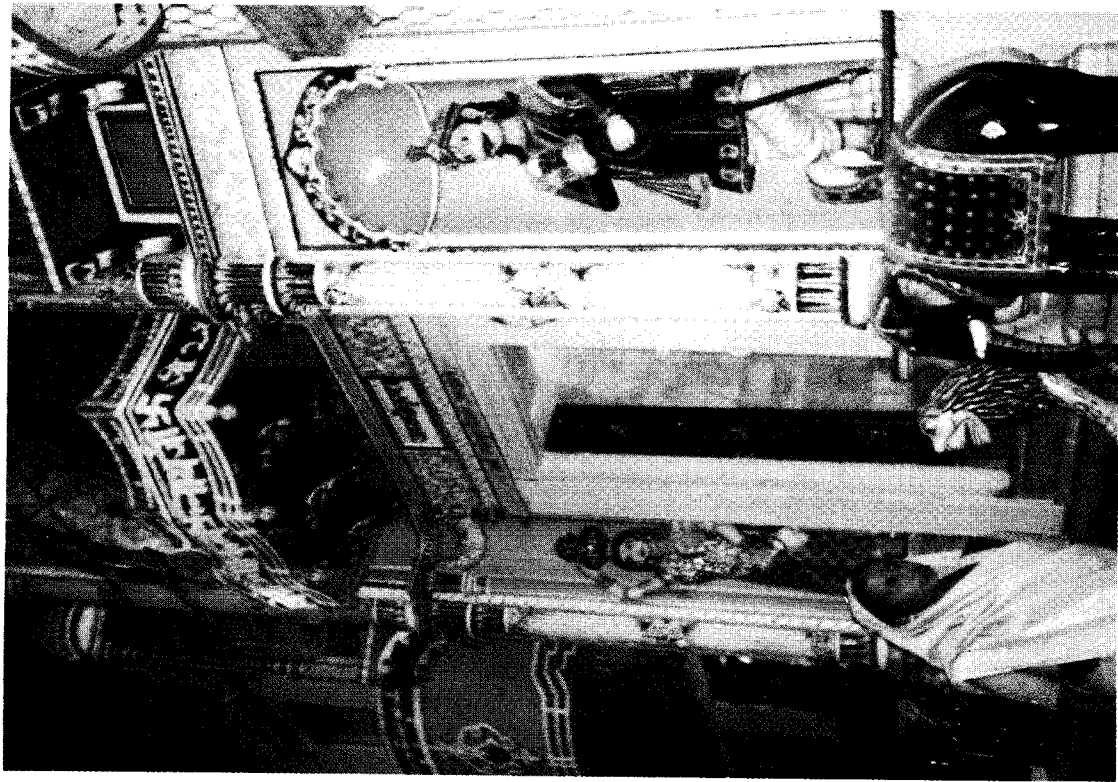
It is for these reasons that courtesans have had to resort to outward conformity and the 'partial transcript', as Scott calls the off-stage behavior of Sedaka peasants: 'That the poor should dissemble in the face of



1. Colonel Jean-Baptiste Gentil.

power is hardly an occasion for surprise. . . . No close account of the life of subordinate classes can fail to distinguish between what is said "backstage" and what may be safely declared openly (Scott, 1985: 9). If it can still be argued that no matter what the tawaif's self-perceptions, actions, goals, and ideology are, they were and are still complicitous in perpetuating patriarchal relations in society, it is to insist on the ideal instead of the possible in a struggle for power. As Gulbadan, the oldest courtesan I interviewed, responded to this question: 'I know we are blamed for enabling men to perpetuate their double moral standards and dominating women. Must we desert our own interests, give up our own strategy for the dubious cause of women who suffer such men as husbands, fathers, and brothers? Today we are silent, we are despised and the law has cracked down on us; has that helped the cause of women or only made life harder for us?' In fact, their silence is so complete that, for all official intents and purposes (such as taxation), this category of women is no longer acknowledged in post-colonial India. This for them is a mixed result. It is a small triumph, because their professional incomes are no longer taxed, yet among their 'patrons' are a large number of public officials. It is a larger defeat because officialdom can piously claim that they have banned female sexual exploitation while converting their once-proud profession into a species of 'vice'.

And finally I return to the question of sexuality, as reality and as a nakhra, because there is the larger question, that of the social construction of sexuality, that may well be illuminated by analyzing the world view of courtesans of Lucknow. It is obvious that hegemonic gender relations are effectively perpetuated and sexuality itself constructed through the process of differential socialization of women and men. I would [tentatively] argue further that by systematically reversing the socialization process for females, in order to combat the disabilities inherent in women's existing social and sexual roles, the courtesans have logically 'constructed' lesbian existence as a legitimate alternative, just as much as Indian society at large constructs and enforces, through the institution of compulsory marriage, heterosexuality as 'normative' behaviour. Heterosexual relations for most of the courtesans was work, not pleasure. Right from birth, if we recall the testimony of Chhote Miyan, the female is celebrated, empowered, cherished; those who arrive as adolescents in the kotha are methodically reeducated within the context of this parallel and exclusive society of women, and its 'women-centered' vision of power relations. Their relationships with men in the kotha are congenial but businesslike; except for kin, only very few ever become emotional



12. A Hindu temple in the centre of the Chowk.

bondsmen. Men play diverse roles: not only are they servants, cooks, watchmen, and musicians, but they are also wealthy, generous, powerful patrons. The latter relate on equal terms with the courtesans precisely because power is genuinely shared in that cultural setting. Arguably, it is therefore in the *kotha*, rather than in the 'normal' world, that female sexuality has the chance of being more fairly and fearlessly constructed by women.

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Sayyid Karamat Husain and Education for Women

GAIL MINAULT

Karamat Husain Girls' College in Lucknow, founded in 1912, is named after Sayyid Karamat Husain (1854-1917), an early champion of Muslim women's education in North India. Karamat Husain was one of the benefactors of the college from the time of its founding as a girls' school. It was named for him after his death and remains a monument to his memory. Who was Sayyid Karamat Husain, and how did he come to be remembered as a champion of women's education?

Sayyid Karamat Husain was in many ways a typical member of the *ashraf* service gentry of upper India, descended from immigrant Muslims who had come to India in the time of the sultans or the Mughals, seeking to serve the rulers and make their fortunes. His family were Sayyids, descendants of Shi'ite imams, with a tradition of Islamic learning. They had served the nawabs of Awadh as teachers and religious functionaries, and in return had received revenue assignments in the small towns or *qasbas* of northern India (Bayly, 1983: 189-93). Karamat Husain's family lands were in the *qasba* of Kantor, in Bara Banki District, not far from Lucknow.¹

As the British established their dominance in the area, the minor service gentry gradually transformed themselves into a Muslim middle class, utilising their knowledge of local administration and law to serve the new rulers or the remaining native princes (Bayly, 1983: 354-6). Karamat Husain's grandfather, Mufti Sayyid Muhammad Quli Khan, was—as his title indicates—learned in Islamic law. His knowledge of Arabic and the Islamic sciences was respected among Shi'ite religious circles in Lucknow (Hamid Ali Khan, henceforth; HAK: 124).