

A CULTURE OF SUBVERSION: COURTESANS IN THE HISTORY OF INDIA

Introduction:

In modern usage, a Courtesan is a euphemism for a “kept” mistress or a prostitute. During the Awadh Dynasty, however, they held an important position in society. The courtesans of Lucknow, also known as ‘Tawaifs’, were highly skilled dancers, musicians, singers, and poets. They were independent women who owned properties and were among the highest taxpayers of Lucknow, with the “largest individual incomes of any in the city”. They enjoyed power, prestige, and wealth, and were considered to be the authorities of etiquette; and to be associated with them was considered to be a symbol of status and sophistication. “Tawaif” was a term of respect, not derision. They might be considered proto feminist figures, subverting patriarchy at a time when women covered themselves in purdah to maintain ‘khandani’ izzat, or ‘family honour’.

Historical and Cultural Context:

In pre-modern societies, women were confined within the four walls of the house, as it was considered ‘improper’ for women to step out into the world and earn a living. Few women came to public space by crossing the boundaries of private, and they were not regarded as ‘respectable women’. In rural societies, women would participate in the agricultural fields along with the men, whereas in urban centers, ‘courtesans’, ‘tawaifs’, ‘annas’, and ‘mamas’ – who were zanana servants – came to the public domain to earn their bread. The Indian prostitute was thus by tradition inseparably associated with professional entertainers, and the terms Nati, Ganikaor, Barangana were considered synonymous in ancient India with the accomplished courtesan. This did not stretch to peasant women since they usually catered to their husbands, or to the Dasi – meaning slave or servant – who catered to the sexual needs of their masters. The tawaifs, for centuries, were intimately bonded with the performing arts. They always remained at the focal points of the pre-Mughal folk cultures of India, as well as the sophisticated culture of classical music in the Mughal courts. The courtesans were a part of the rich heritage of Indian classical music, but the fact, however, remains that they were nonetheless marginalized in India’s patriarchal society. Concepts of honour, chastity, and occupational propriety, with which patriarchy regulates a woman’s individual choices, constrained the tawaif to a limited space—alluring, yet isolated, and infamous.

Representation in Media:

The world of cinema has often portrayed the life of the courtesans, familiarising the audience with the idea of the tawaif for generations. Films have often epitomized tawaifs as women of great artistic talents and as sensuous women involved in erotic activities with rich lords. The Kotha culture portrays ‘poetry’, music, and ‘dance’, focusing more on the talents of the courtesans, but the talents of these women were pathetically stigmatized by prostitution. “Cinema has portrayed them as a stock character whose lives are intertwined in a morality tale.” They were often portrayed as sensuous vamps or artists stigmatized as prostitutes, an ironic epitome of purity with a golden heart, more like tragic figures who are doomed to stay unmarried and achieve redemption through death. The films, thus, have successfully diluted the richness of the tawaif’s contributions to society.

One of the films that has reinvoked the character of courtesans or tawaifs is the iconic *Mughal-e-Azam*, which showcases the story of Anarkali, who was also known as Nadira Begum and was a tawaif in the court of Mughal Emperor Akbar. In *Muquaddar ka Sikandar*, Zohra Begum's thought of sacrificing her own life rather than defaming Sikandar's family by her presence put forward the idea of how wretched the status of the Tawaif was. We find a more complex presentation of the courtesans in films such as *Umrao Jaan* (1980) and *Shyam Bengal's Mandi* (1983). These movies highlighted the precarious existence of the courtesans. [SLIDE 8] *Umrao Jaan*, who was forced into the business, showcases the hardships of the woman to be recognized as a poetess through the power of her ghazals. It is a tragic story of a courtesan abandoned by her brother and depicts the struggle to reclaim her chastity and dignity by being a poetess.

Shyam Bengal's Mandi features legendary actresses of the time, including Shabana Azmi, Smita Patil, Ratna Pathak, and Soni Razdan. It portrays the everyday life of the courtesans, embracing mujras, thumris, and kathak, showing their talents as well as the superficial respect they earned from people. It also showcases their unstable life, for they would have to relocate their Kotha every time a political issue was raised, which threatened the 'respectability' of the localities by their presence. "Yahan jism zaroor bikta hain laikin ruhun ka sauda nae hota". Sahir Ludhianvi's lines are chilling, as they reflect the reality of the life of a Tawaif whose art and culture eventually get soiled by the unfaithful society. "Aurat ne janam diya mardo ko, mardo ne use bazar diya, Tulati hain kahi dinaro me, bikti hain kahi bazaron mein"

Tawaif, the 1985 movie, depicts a courtesan who enacts the role of a wife and lives in a civil society without revealing her past profession. The intricate plot involves the protagonist Dawood accepting Sultan as his wife under certain circumstances while he is already in love with another woman. The significance of this movie lies in the fact that Dawood found himself falling for a Tawaif, which depicts the dichotomy of a Nobleman welcoming a prostitute into his life.

Madhuri Dixit's iconic role of Chandramukhi is unforgettable in the movie *Devdas* (2002), which depicts the fate of the Tawaifs, as merely the candle that is only remembered when one is in the darkness, but is extinguished as soon as they find brighter light again. Chandramukhi's iconic dialogues will forever be the incarnation of the millions of emotions these tawaifs underwent. When Paro says, "Tawaifon ke taqdeer mein shauhar nahi hote," Chandramukhi responds, "Tawaifon ki taqdeer hi nahi hoti."

Conclusion:

The tawaifs held on to their high positions until the Revolt of 1857. The Sepoy Mutiny and its aftermath proved devastating to their lives and craft. The then Britishers with Victorian knowledge along with some Indians scorned their craft. The British government equated kothas with brothels and used these women as prostitutes for European garrison or collecting income tax. They became the victims of punitive measures under laws such as the Contagious Diseases Act and the Cantonment Regulations and later by the anti-naught campaign – a movement against the courtesans and performers, which looked at their work as polluting the "Indian culture" and they were further shunned to the margins of society.

From being esteemed and admired throughout, their lives turned into those of exploited prostitutes. Even after all the disrespect, they kept practising their art in the Kothas or brothels. Slowly and painfully, these highly skilled artists have been dragged down the social ladder. Even

to date, very few of them remain active. In May 2014, Zareena Begum, though partially paralysed, performed in a red Benarasi for ninety minutes straight. Her voice melted hearts even then. She smiled throughout her performance. She, along with many Tawaifs, dedicated their life to their craft, but instead of their stories being told to all, their struggle remains kept away in the lesser-known history books in the corner of the library, seldom read by anyone.