

KOTHAS AND THEIR FEMINIST CULTURE UNDER COLONIALISM IN THE SHADOW OF 1857 MUTINY

Dr. Shirin Abbas

*Associate Professor, Symbiosis Centre for Media and Communication,
Symbiosis International University, Symbiosis International University,
SCMC, Old Campus, Off Symbiosis Road, Viman Nagar, Pune 411014*

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Abstract: This paper demystifies the enigmatic lives of the courtesans of Lucknow and sifts the facts from the fiction woven around them. The paper sources secondary data to research the role and hierarchy of the courtesans in the early to mid-19th Century in North India. Few have known the true contribution and status of Courtesans of Avadh, not as the exploited hapless heroine that Hadi Ruswa has painted but as empowered women of substance who had the means and the mite to stoke the First Battle of Indian Independence in 1857. Not many understand how the kothas of yore fell silent as the courtesans fell from grace in the eyes of the British post 1857 for supporting the mutineers and contributing towards the First Battle of Indian Independence. This paper excavates the life and times of these subaltern soldiers, cultural ambassadors and apostles of freedom, sidelined to oblivion from Indian culture, literature and history, despite playing a significant role in fuelling the Freedom Movement of 1857.

Keywords: Courtesans, Kothas of North India, 1857 Mutiny, Women & Gender Studies.

Introduction: The ancient tome of Indian erotica, the *Kamasutra* defines the role of the courtesan a pleasure-giver and first broached the subject of erotica as a discourse and the courtesan as one who was consummate in the art of erotica. The courtesan thus exists in the very origin of the *Kamasutra* as the “model and measure in the domain of erotica.” Without the courtesan there would be no credible documentation of erotica in the Indian context. “The question about the nature of Ars Erotica as articulated in the *Kamasutra*, is neither abstract nor theoretical but anchored in the historical figure of the courtesan.” [8].

The lives and times of courtesans and their role in Indian society have been documented by authors like Veena Talwar Oldenburg, Salim Kidwai, Mukul Kesavan, Lata Singh etc. Oldenburg has personally interacted with and extensively worked to document the cultural and political resistance that these women embodied, especially after the Mutiny of 1857. In the words of Oldenburg, “*the culture of the kotha followed strict social strata and displayed a remarkable semi-autonomous hierarchy of daring and independent women operating a domain virtually without male interference*” [10]. Their cultural role too has been highlighted when authors such as Kesavan comment on their role in the social debut of young heirs In other words they, “*catered comprehensively to the complicated needs of the cultivated man-about-town, a more accomplished courtesan, a sort of geisha*” [13].

Life as a Courtesan: Who then were the courtesans of that held sway over the Indian courts?

In Lucknow instead of courtesan / nautch girl the word tawaif was commonly used to for women who dwelt in the kothas of the city. A tawaif's education in Indian literature, arts and politics enabled her to converse intellectually with her male clients as well as showcase her skills in composing and reciting poetry. Moreover, from an early age, these women were instructed in etiquette and provided lessons in cultural refinement to those men who patronized them [12].

As single-earning women, courtesans were exempted from the usual domestic roles. They often pursued a sexual relationship with a lover of their choice, their *kotha* and status freeing them from the social stigma that such a liaison would normally attract. Society identified them as cultured and reputable artists rather than prostitutes, not unlike the *geishas* of Japan. Because of their widespread popularity, these valued entertainers accrued sizeable wealth and lived a life of luxury and indulgence, marked by economic independence that was inherited in turn by future *tawaiifs*—their adopted as well as biological daughters. They played a participative role in the politics of the court owing to their daily interactions with men in positions of political power. As Oldenburg calls it, these women enjoyed a “*lifestyle as resistance, a counterculture to patriarchy characterized by socio-cultural prestige as well as financial, political, and physical independence*” and goes as far as to describe the courtesans of Lucknow as “*an influential female elite.*” [10].

The British rulers probably had an uninvolved perspective on this social paradox within Indian society. They saw the *kothas* not as an institution in charge of transmitting tradition but one that required deft control to ensure colonial dominion. With direct access to the highest echelons of power, courtesans could connect with the rulers, (the Nawabs) in the private sphere and this allowed them their direct access to power [13]. It is likely that the *tawaiifs* were the most fêted performers of North Indian art music from the late Eighteenth century until the beginning of the Twentieth [3].

Lifestyles of Resilience: The early Nineteenth century has been described as the golden age of the courtesan in North India, especially in Lucknow and Hyderabad, successor states to the declining Mughal Empire. While not assigned to any royal court as such, the courtesans enjoyed the patronage of royalty and nobility in these rich cultures where there was respect and adulation for their art and artistry. As part of their training, the sons of wealthy courtiers and nobles (*nawabs*) were sent to courtesans to receive training in literature, culture, etiquette, and, (one can assume) sexuality.

Having greater access to the public sphere, these women were relatively independent, clearly not contained by caste, class, gender or a demarcated space. It was perhaps these factors that contributed to their willful consignment to oblivion by historians and litterateurs “*for bringing them out into the open would unsettle the respectable middle class discourse and upset the balance of propriety in the conservative, patriarchal society of those times*” [16]. The unprecedented influence and agency baffled the colonizers because a similar system did not exist in their own society, and because, under colonial logic, Indian women were supposed to be backward in consonance with the image and condition of their nation [2]. There is also evidence that *nautch* girls put up a fight against colonial rule, especially when it interfered with their profession. The *tawaiifs* had enough political clout and financial resources to handsomely, sometimes openly, support the Indian Rebellion of 1857 [10].

Citing entries from the Civic Tax Ledgers of 1858-77 and in related official correspondence preserved in the Municipal Corporation records room, classed them under the occupational category of 'Dancing and Singing Girls.' The courtesans of Avadh "placed in the highest tax bracket, with the largest individual incomes of any in the city...Their 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 [11]." Courtesans of Lucknow were brazenly independent and all too consciously involved in the clandestine subversion of a male-dominated world. They celebrated womanhood in the privacy of their apartments by resisting and inverting the rules of the male-dominated society that they catered to. "Their lifestyle was a resistance to, rather than a perpetuation of, patriarchal values" [11].

These were the least talked about women in Colonial India but in their own right, standard bearers of a unique and exquisitely refined culture rooted in the fabled city of the Nawabs of Lucknow. "Most nobles of the Nawabs' court preferred these women instructing their sons at the *kothas* in courtly etiquette, poetry and music, the art of conversation and manners, and the appreciation of Urdu literature" [15].

These women were trained for years, learning multiple languages, musical composition, poetic composition and the art of dance. The greatest of the courtesans in the residential area of the Nawab's palaces, were often given a pension for life. A cultivated man like Hakim Mahdi, who later became Vazir (Prime Minister of Awadh), owed his initial success to a courtesan named Piyazo, who advanced her own money to enable him to bid for his as Amil (Collector of Taxes of the state).

The coming of the British left these women as a beleaguered community. Courtesans were influential female elite; those of Lucknow were especially reputable. Abdul Halim Sharar, an early-Twentieth-century novelist and journalist constructed a remarkable history of the Nawabs of Awadh, based mainly on the oral testimony of the survivors of the events of 1857 in Lucknow. Sharar talks of their compelling role in court politics and was also strongly of the opinion that the morals, manners, and distinctiveness of Lucknow culture and society were sustained by the courtesans. "Handsomely enthroned in their lavish and appointed apartments in the city's main Chowk Bazaar and the Parikhana of Qaisar Bagh palace, they were not only recognized as preservers and performers of the high culture of the court, but they actively shaped the developments in Hindustani music and Kathak dance styles. 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 soirées" [14].

Hierarchy of the Kotha: In Lucknow, the world of the *tawaif* enjoyed a hierarchy and a culture as sophisticated as the society of which it was a part. Courtesans all owed allegiance to their *kotha* run by a *chaudhrayan*, (madam or chief courtesan). This was a position always held by an older woman who retired to the position of manager after a successful career as a *tawaif*. "The *chaudhrayan* 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." [14]. North Indian musicians and dancers especially courtesans of this era are of considerable interest to wider historical study in this period because of their unusual liminality in the highly segregated world of Mughal society: their ability to transgress social boundaries and enter well-defined social spaces that men and women of their social rank ordinarily could not. "Like North Indian court musicians,

the Bhats' low social status was matched by their high cultural importance and they therefore possessed a similar liminality" [4], [17].

Moreover, every single European traveler in the Seventeenth century who described music in his published travels mentioned these female performers at least once. *"The simultaneously fascinating and threatening figure of the 'exoticised' female musician came to signify the essence of Muslim India in the European imagination from this point forward" [5].*

In her descriptions of the status of the *tawaiifs* in Lakhnavi society, Veena Talwar Oldenburg pointed out how the lifestyles of these courtesans subverted the hierarchies of caste and class, because people from both groups –the lower caste and economically disadvantaged – found refuge in this culture. In the *kotha* it was sheer talent and artistry that ruled, creating a *"secular meritocracy"* accepting Hindus and Muslims alike. *"Like the ascetics, they too held positions of respect in society at large, and both counter-cultures existed by maintaining vital links to the overarching patriarchal culture, while consciously inverting or rejecting its values" [10].*

Retaliation of the British post 1857: There is a view that the courtesans participated in the 1857 Revolt because they were under the control of the Nawabs, who, in turn, opposed the British as Colonial rule had eroded their power. However this argument goes against the grain and denies these women their rightful role in history and muffles their political role.

The courtesans used two ledgers to dupe the British regulations, an imaginative extension of the subtle ways they had cultivated to contest male authority within the *kothas*. This could also be termed 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 essence of their existence...These women, though patently non-combatants, were penalized for their instigation of and pecuniary assistance to the rebels" [10].*

Another controversial aspect in the Colonial eyes was that as a social institution the courtesan, *"created a secular domain open to both Muslims and Hindus alike, which was obviously an aspect that had to be deconstructed."* It was official British policy to malign the courtesans and the culture of salons, in order to justify the British role as usurpers of the throne of Avadh in 1856. British came down heavily on the *kothas* of Lucknow for supporting the Mutiny of 1857 which raged for ten months in Avadh until Lucknow was recaptured by the British. *"To consolidate their rule in the Province of Avadh, the British turned their fury against the powerful elite of Lucknow, of which the tawaif were an integral part" [6].*

Kenneth Ballhatchet in his book *Race, Sex and Class Under the Raj: Imperial Attitudes and Policies and their Critics 1973-1905*, points out that *"British soldiers seemed to need protection from the dangers of mercenary love."* and before the end of the Eighteenth century, the Governor-General authorized the building of 'hospitals from the reception of diseased women' at Behrampur, Kanpur, Dinapur and Fatehnagar. Prostitutes admitted to these institutions were not allowed to leave till they had been 'certified' as cured [2]. One would question why, if the courtesan/prostitutes posed such a threat were their establishments not shut down?

Conclusion: Courtesans of Avadh played an important role in the Rebellion of 1857. The advent of British power marked the erosion of the cultural power of the courtesan. British rule had marked the loss of the protection and patronage of the royal courts, their main patrons.

The British government overlooked their artistic and creative element by equating their *kothas* with brothels.

The usurpation of the Kingdom of Avadh in 1856 and the forced abdication and exile of Nawab Wajid Ali Shah to Matiaburj, near present day Kolkata along with a posse of courtiers rang the death knell for the courtesans who had thrived under noble patronage.

After the Mutiny, there was a conscious move to put an end to the influence of the courtesans. Their name had spread in the annals of ignominy as well. They appeared in other British colonial records as 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. The number of European that fell to disease, far outnumbered those that died in the Mutiny of 1857. More embarrassingly this discovery was further compounded by the fact that one in every four European soldiers was afflicted with venereal disease. It thus became clear that some drastic measures would need to be taken to reduce European mortality rates in order to keep the British soldiers sated and yet free from disease. Thus began a double-edged revenge of the British on the courtesans of Avadh. The best ‘specimens’ from 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, were regulated, inspected, and controlled by shifting them to brothels reserved exclusively for the use of the British soldiers [10]. Strict regulations were enforced through Britain's Contagious Diseases Act of 1864 that were incorporated into a comprehensive piece of legislation, Act XXII of 1864 in India; which required “*the registration and periodic medical examination of prostitutes in all cantonment cities of the Indian empire*” (Britain's Contagious Diseases Act of 1864). In order to punish them for their role in stoking the Revolt of 1857, the Colonial masters worked to ensure “*the gradual debasement of an esteemed cultural institution into common prostitution*” [2].

Women who had once thrived in the company of kings and courtiers and manipulated men in power twisting them around for material and political means were now reduced to mere residents of houses of ill repute. These custodians of culture were left vulnerable and exposed under the British. The appeal of *tawaifs* to post-Colonial and gender history can be seen both as an alternative (past) models of Indian womanhood existing in a state of some resistance to patriarchal norms of ‘respectable’ femininity; and as valuable barometers of the dramatic changes that first colonialism and then independence wrought upon notions of gender, space and nation in India [7].

“By the end of the 19th Century, *tawaif* had become an impolite word not used in genteel conversation ; in the popular mindset, the *tawaif* was equated to a whore... Unfortunately little remains of the writings of these women, considered the most educated women of their times. Many did write poetry, but even this seems to have been censored out of literary canons. Compounding the silence of these women has been the silence of the scholars, thus leaving gaping holes in social history” [9].

Post-Independence the newly-formed Indian government passed the Immoral Traffic (Prevention) Act 1956, dealing the last and final blow to the institution of *kothas* and the courtesans of Lucknow. The famous lanes of Chowk that resounded with music and the synchronistic tap work of delicate feet to the resounding praises of patrons fell silent and the famous culture of courtesans slunk away into the dark recesses of the city's serpentine *gullis*,

never to raise its head ever again. The mystique and enigma of the courtesan, however, continues till date bringing many a visitor to Lucknow's door, still requesting a tryst with a *tawaif*, a *mujra* (dance) or a *mehfil* (musical evening), alas, mostly in vain.

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