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The Subversive Woman Speaks: Reading Saba Dewan's *Tawaifnama* Through The Lens of Postcolonial Feminism

Madhurima Neogi
Assistant Professor, Department of English
Tamralipta Mahavidyalaya

Abstract

The paper aims to explore the issue of a tawaif's identity vis-à-vis the changing face of the socio-cultural and economic fabric of colonial and the Nationalist struggle for independence as depicted in Saba Dewan's book *Tawaifnama*. It is targeted to deconstruct the binary classification of the tawaif as an immoral, overtly sexualized female/a helpless victim thereby bringing out her resistance of the patriarchal norms that constrict her to a narrow definition of her existence. Through its exploration of the varied mechanisms of adapting to the radically changing social climate, the paper highlights the tawaif's resilience via her new self-refashioning and evolving in order to keep herself relevant to the India struggling to emerge out of the colonial shackles. The paper also discusses the inner workings of tawaif households in general to show how the power-dynamic is active within that alternate family structure and in the process, highlights the innate subversiveness of the tawaif who needs to survive in a thoroughly patriarchal societal system.

Key words: *gender, identity, tawaif, binary, courtesan, postcolonialism*

In popular imagination, tawaif occupies a liminal space between mundane and the artistic – she is the transgressive figure who has chosen an existence beyond the codes of respectability etched by patriarchal normativity; an artist who is denied the acknowledgement due to her mastery over the art she practiced owing to that very transgressive nature of her identity. She is defined by her sexuality that is overtly glamourized in popular culture. Even when popular culture tries to adopt a sympathetic gaze, she is bound up within the binary of a golden-hearted victim/ homewrecker. This simplistic subject position of the tawaif is largely motivated by colonial morality as well as the nationalist rhetoric that was dominantly patriarchal and reductive in spite of its anti-colonial character. The middle-class morality that informed the nationalist rhetoric was a product of the colonial rule with the colonial period witnessing the genesis and development of the middle-class as a socio-economic category. In Indian English literature, the attempt to dig deeper underneath the populist image of the tawaif has also been markedly absent. There exist references to the devadasis in works like R.K.Narayan's *The Guide* and Mahesh Dattani's *Dance like a Man* but since devadasis form a separate socio-cultural and economic group that was also present in a geographically different space, this paper would not consider them as being even a sub-category of the tawaif. Saba Dewan's *Tawaifnama* (2019) thus becomes a highly significant text as it posits, via its non-structure of oral narratives from numerous female voices, an alternative to patriarchal historiography in which the tawaif is undoubtedly doubly subaltern. Dewan

adds a further flourish to the title of her work by calling it "Tawaifnama" with the "nama" being resonant of the dignified *Babaurnama*, *Humayunnama* and *Akbarnama* that document the lives and reigns of the eponymous Mughal emperors thereby asserting this document to have equal value as that of the autobiographies and biographies of some of the most significant rulers of India. *Tawaifnama* bears the histories of not only a way of life, but also individuals of deep artistic commitments who were much more than victims of any social evil; rather they claimed the agency of their lives and desires and were resultantly viewed as threats by the colonial and patriarchal society finally leading up to the juncture in India's history when the public space had to be "sanitized for 'respectable' women … to step out without being mistaken for tawaifs" (Dewan 14).

In her discussion of the interrelation of image and the native subject, Rey Chow emphasizes on the effort of the postcolonial discourses to negotiate the image-site thereby providing alternative sights and "alternative ways of watching" (Chow 326). She tries to understand the subject position of the native in the context of the unavoidable presence of the politics of image and interrogates the process so that one can write about the native without "ignoring the defiled, degraded image that is an inerasable part of her status". According to her, the challenge lies in avoiding the major pitfall of sanctifying the defiled image with pieties and is precisely a challenge that Dewan's book lives up to. Hers is not a redemptive mission by any stretch of imagination. It is not even a matter of setting the record straight as the record simply does not exist. *Tawaifnama* is an alternative approach to historicizing where the author focuses on the plurality of the voices and avoids any central narrative. Rather she documents the individual experiences of tawaifs from multiple generations as well as the stories of their predecessors that have been passed down mother-to-daughter as ancestral memories. Dewan has tried to capture the diverse and pluralistic space that the tawaif community of Banaras once was.

Her writing clearly captures the anxiety that the colonial masters felt at being faced with the religiously and culturally diverse groups of performing artists in colonized India. They tried to cope with this anxiety by painstakingly noting and categorizing these performers – a phenomenon most apparent in the documentation of Buchanan who enumerated the different categories of tawaifs – Domni, Hurkini, Kangchani, Ramjani and the Gondnewalis and the amount of money charged by them for their performances. He even mentions the Nat community to which the lower caste performers belonged. The colonial masters however did not take pains to understand the stratification of the tawaif society that was multi-layered nor did understand the difference between tawaif, the performing artist and the prostitute. The colonizer used his lens of morality to divide the Indian society into the binary of legal/criminal thereby relegating all performing artists alike into the category of the criminal. The Criminal Tribes Act (CTA) of 1871 termed the semi-nomadic and nomadic performing groups under the denomination of the "Nat" as criminal. Dewan's meticulous research reveals how the numerous members from groups who went under the denomination "Nat", converted to Islam in order to free themselves from caste discrimination and finally were assimilated into the tawaif community while yet other female members, not having the talent for the performing arts or the means to educate themselves in those arts, pursued prostitution to support themselves and their families. In fact, the dominant memorial voice of Dewan's book is a tawaif whose familial roots were of Nat origin. Dewan also theorizes that the ancestors of her, the dominant memorial voice's, were forced to migrate to escape being penalized by the CTA.

For the sake of brevity and precision, the diverse groups of courtesans that have existed in India, as per Dewan's research, are presented below in a tabular format.

ANCIENT INDIA *(ARTHASASTRA AND KAMASUTRA)*	**MUGHAL INDIA** *(AIN-I-AKBARI)*	**COLONIAL INDIA**
Ganika	Natin - Female (Domni, Kanchani, Hurkani etc.)	Kanchan
Pratiganika	Natuwa - Male	Gandharva
Rupajiva		Higher Class Muslim Tawaifs
Vesya		Nat (The Nat community were comprised of all the previous non-Muslim factions who converted to Islam in order to escape criminalizaton by the Criminal Tribes Act (1871
Dasi		
Punschali		
Rupadasi		

Dewan herself presents the following groups and sub-groups as being present within the tawaif community:

TAWAIF					
Kanchan (Hindu)	Gandharva (Hindu)	Domni (Muslim)	Kangchani (Muslim)	Ramjani	
				Ramjani from Poorab (East) - Regarded as Khandani or elite Tawaifs	Ramjani from Agra-Bharatpur – Regarded as Prostitutes

The colonial government failed to come to terms with the fact that courtesans, performing artists– both male and female - entertainers and prostitutes have all been a part of the Indian society since ancient times and the heterogenous ethos of the country had never regarded them as criminal before the colonial laws enacted them to be branded so. Moreover, these groups all had their distinctive cultural practices which gave them their individual identities. Furthermore, there were clear differences between tawaifs and prostitutes and the operation of their respective professions – differences that the indigenous population would have easily recognized but the colonial government simply found it convenient to reduce them to a single neat category. The fact that different groups of tawaifs were

clearly identifiable to the native population is manifest in a letter written by Mirza Ghalib in June 1860 where he writes: "*ek baṛī sitam-peshah ḍomnī ko maiñ ne bhī mār rakhā hai*" (Ghalib) [I have been the death of a cruel domni].

The colonial government also wanted to impose a normative patriarchal structure on the social category of family. It could not accept the non-normative constitution that could be found in the tawaif homes, particularly in those of old, established tawaif lineage. The colonial government wanted to cement the structure of the normative, patriarchal family headed by the chief male member of any single family. This configuration of the unit called family was too narrow and parochial thereby excluding the varied combinations of relations that formed families in the tawaif households. Without suggesting that the power structure of the tawaif household did not follow that of patriarchy, it must be foregrounded that in the tawaif families, males were conspicuous by their absence. Dewan's book opens with the reference to a family photograph taken of three generations of female members of one particular tawaif family which is a complete subversion of the normative family portraits of the era – a comparison that the author draws with reference to the ancestral family portrait of her own family.

It was an unusual family portrait, one in which there is no space for the men and the buys of the household. I point this out, but you don't find the omission strange. "This is how it was in our families," you say with finality. (1)

> …Bua-ji, my father's widowed elder sister, had taken out her embossed, leather-jacket album of old family photographs …Three rows of unsmiling men and boys looking straight into the camera. …
>
> Innocently, I asked, "But where are you and the other buas and dadiji in this photo?" She hesitated, perhaps trying to frame a reply that an eight-year-old could understand. And then said, "In our families, women did not go about getting photographs, and certainly never with the men." (12)

In the tawaif household, women were the ones in charge of decision-making and the general running of the everyday life by dint of the simple fact that they were the breadwinners. Their profession, so vilified by the Victorian morality, was what gave them their extraordinary agency and independence exercising which they could remain the mistresses of their desires as well as economic positions. This independent woman, freely exercising her sexuality and generating her own politics of desire and securing herself through her own income, was indeed a threat to the patriarchal structure and morality. The agency of the tawaif was so powerful that she could decide and adopt a child all on her own without the community raising an eyebrow to it. In fact, it was a common custom of all tawaif households to adopt girl-children even if they had biological daughters. The tawaif communities had their own ritual feasts that marked such an event of adoption. This freedom ran in direct opposition to the non-tawaif Muslim woman having no right to adopt and the non-tawaif Hindu woman being able to adopt only on behalf of their husbands. Through the exercise of this right to adopt, Dewan's book documents how Dharmman Bibi adopts a girl she names Umrao and is resultantly, made a target by the British police as the white master's law had already criminalized such adoptions. Despite such criminalization, the tawaifs refuse to

abandon their age-old practices and it is testified by Bullan and Kallan's adoption of Dharmman's twin biological daughters. They risk severe punishment from the British police in taking the twin newborn babies as their own and keeping their identity of being the rebel Dharmman Bibi's daughters secret from everyone. They set up their own family unit with themselves as twin mothers to little Gulshan and Sadabahar. Gulshan showing little aptitude for the dance and music, only Sadabahar, with her hauntingly tuneful voice and eyes of otherworldly beauty is groomed for becoming the tawaif to be famous as one of the greatest *gaanewalis* of Banaras.

In fact, the tawaif household formed a direct inversion of the way a traditional, non- tawaif Indian household functioned; it was a space where women held the purse-strings as well as the reins of the house, a space where girl-children were desired as ones who would carry forth the legacy of the family, a starkly contrasting system where the birth of a daughter occasioned joy and relief as opposed to the prevalent norm of celebrations only at the birth of a son. Regarding this point, marked similarity can be drawn with the geishas of Japan as stated by Lesley Downer in her description of life within the flower district of Kyoto – "It was in many ways the looking glass image of real Japan. All the usual rules were subverted. …Like Japan, it was a hierarchical, stratified society. But, within the small confines of the geisha communities, it was women, not men, who wielded power; and everyone hoped for girl children, not boys, so that they could carry on the line of geisha." (Downer introduction) This desire for girl children is manifest in the desperation with which Shakuran - not herself a tawaif but wed to a tawaif family - is expected to give birth to a girl-child failing which she would be thrown out by her grandmothers-in-law; not unlike how married women were expected to have sons or be abandoned in traditional Indian homes. So, the power-dynamic of a tawaif household was still operating within the structure of patriarchy specifically in the way it nurtured and foregrounded the breadwinning female but the women asserted their individuality and claimed their agency in spite of it.

The pluralist, non-conformist character of the tawaif household makes itself most evident in the instance of the tawaif Tara and her daughter Chanda's family in this text. Theirs is a family vowed to follow Islam in the female line and Hinduism in the male i.e. all daughters borne in the family would be Muslim while all sons would be Hindu. In this extraordinary display of mutual respect and harmony, this family's lived reality stands head-and-shoulder above any discourse on communal harmony. But as their narrative shifts to the present, the reader finds refusal from the later generation i.e. Chanda's sons to continue this practice thereby manifesting the pluralistic nature of this family being destroyed under the hegemonic burden of homogeneity.

Dewan's work is a veritable tour de force particularly because she has presented the histories of the tawaif community in the context of the highly problematic, puritanical and patriarchal nationalist rhetoric of the freedom movement of India. By contextualizing the lives of the tawaifs of Banaras against the rise of Arya Samaj, valourization of Sanatan Dharma as well as the Gandhian philosophy of absolute rejection of the tawaif community, Dewan has effectively depicted not only the hypocrisy of the society that prided itself on its musical heritage but derogated and marginalized the performers of that music, but also the sheer ability of the tawaif to survive this moment of historical crisis by a most excellent form of self-refashioning. The tawaif community of Banaras, which had been marginalized by

the Nationalist movement that clamoured for shutting down the tawaifs plying their trade, sought to claim their own kind of participation and in the process demonstrated a patriotism just as deep as that of the so-called moralists. The elite tawaifs of the city, under the leadership of Vidyadhari Bai, frequently assembled at the home of Husna Bai to discuss their participation in the Non-Cooperation Movement, the fervour of which had gripped Banaras even more firmly after Mahatma Gandhi's visit to the city on November 25, 1920. Vidyadhari Bai herself performed nationalist songs at every mehfil she was invited to as well as choosing to wear only Indian hand-spun clothes eschewing the foreign fabrics that had been used hitherto. She also composed a nationalist song that has been quoted in its entirety by Dewan in her book. As Dewan describes how the young girls of the tawaif community were deeply moved by that song, she clearly states – "In one voice, led by Vidyadhari, the tawaifs laid claim upon the nationalist agenda of the Congress-led non-cooperation movement." (297) She describes how, when faced with the very real threat to their existence, the tawaif community of Banaras came together to project themselves in a new and what they hoped would be a more acceptable light, to the society of moral polices. They went to the extent of reworking the lyrics of the traditional thumris sung by them for generations, in order to neutralize the sexual connotations of the words. A prime example of this is the two versions of the same dadra sung by Asghari and her sister where the former adheres to the lyrics used passed down generations while the latter uses a more sanitized version that refrains from directly referring to the physical aspect of man-woman relationship. Dewan notes,

Asghari leads:

Ek mahal do raniya ho balam

Kavan raniya tu soiba ho balam, kavan raniya? …

There is one palace with two queens

Which queen will you sleep with, my love? Which queen? …

You follow: ["You" refers to Asghari's sister]

Ek mahal do raniya ho balam

Kavan raniya tu jaiba ho balam, kavan raniya? …

There is one palace with two queens

Which queen will you go to, my love? Which queen? … (311)

In order to survive in the growing puritanical climate of the country, the tawaifs of Banaras formed the Gayinka Sangh thereby recasting themselves as primarily musicians and not courtesans. This was a particularly significant move as it was the age of recording; by this conscious and new self-refashioning, the tawaif entered the recording studio for gramophone records and radio. Even there, the stigma of sexual promiscuity attached to the tawaif was so great that the singers were made to use the

rear entrance of the studio and the schedules were chalked to prevent the meeting of the tawaif singers with the non- tawaif women working at the radio stations. The extent of puritanism is evident from the fact that greats like Siddheshwari Devi, Rasoolan Bai among others were subject to the same ignominy all for the fear of safeguarding the chaste Indian women entering the urban workforce from the "corrupting" influence of the tawaif. But on the eve of independence, this puritanical moral vigilance too was found to be inadequate as the Indian Government effectively banned the tawaif from the radio. Even in classical music societies like the renowned Kashi Sangeet Samaj, the tawaif, in spite of her life-long dedication to music and possessing a wealth of musical knowledge handed down through generations, was blatantly excluded. The agenda and actions of the Kashi Sangeet Samaj clearly demonstrated religious fundamentalism whereby they sought to establish how the shastra-based musical pedagogy of North India has been corrupted by Muslim rulers and musicians. (341) This idea, upheld by Hindu middle-class intelligentsia with its middle-class morality, ran in direct contrast to the effortless harmony of Hindu and Muslim lifestyles as well as traditions and cultural markers that had so easily been nurtured in the tawaif community till then. Despite such marginalization and exclusion, the tawaif endured and evolved in order to survive. The resilience of tawaifs found expression in multiple ways of which one was marriage. Hoping marriage would secure the stamp of respectability strongly enough to appear before the radio microphone, tawaifs married either their long-time patrons or male accompanists thereby converting the suffixes of "Bai" and "Jaan" to "Begum" or "Devi" (Siddheshwari Bai became Siddheshwari Devi, Akhtari Bai became Begum Akhtar and so on).

According to Hélène Cixous's theorization, women do not have "the" Power since men exercise control over it "But when they do have It, so often there pops up a drifting away of their sufficiently masculine desire, a moment of distraction, of hunger for love and The Power gets away from them…" (57). The tawaifs of Dewan's book negotiate with this complex relation with power and their excellence lies in their manipulation of their powerlessness; they manage to convert their powerlessness, be that at the moment of sexual assault or insult from the hypocritical society, into determination that gives rise to strategies of overcoming the situation. Be it Sadabahar's spiritual quest or Bindoo's frankly metaphysical disappearance into the world of Raags and Raginis or the entire tawaif community's grit in facing the patriarchal exclusivist rhetoric of nationalism, the tawaif never projects herself as the victim. The tragedy of tawaifs can be described in terms of what Cixous calls "Unhappiness" – "Unhappiness is having no one to weep with. No one to remember with, no one to tell." (60) It is precisely this unhappiness that perhaps Dewan's book seeks to address as she provides a space to understand and remember the tawaif against the background of a nation's conscious erasure of the true identity of the tawaif from its history.

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