

READING *UMRAO JAN ADA* THROUGH THE NINETEENTH CENTURY SOCIO-POLITICAL AND RELIGIOUS RIGMAROLE OF COLONIAL INDIA**Dr. M.A.Afzal Farooq**

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Abstract:

Hadi Mohammad Ruswa, the most illustrious Urdu novelist of the nineteenth century Ruswa wrote more out of financial necessity than to satisfy his inner urge. His maiden attempt at *Afsha-e-Raz* as a fictional piece did not fructify as he had to discard it to complete *Umrao Jan Ada* wherein he salvaged a few character from the incomplete *Afsha-e-Raz*. This paper throws concentrated reflective light on the socio-political and religious milieu of 19th century Lucknow that impacted Umrao's life and profession remarkably. The research paper also attempts to unwind Ruswa's exploration of Umrao's psyche as a courtesan, her life-- pre and post kidnapping and impact on the courtesans in the aftermath of the mutiny of 1857. The culture of the royal patronage to courtesans in Lucknow of the time of the Nawabs whose indulgence in sexual promiscuity and at the same time their taste for refinement are critically analysed and viewed in this paper. An attempt has also been made to understand Umrao Jan's reconciliation with her fate resulting in her resignation to and acceptance of the circumstances as befell her. The paper adopts 'close textual analysis approach' to unearth the novelist's agenda to unravel not only Umrao's personal and public life but also the treatment of the culture of patronizing courtesans in colonial India. Umrao's acceptance of the life of a courtesan and the subsequent waning of the vocation has also been adequately dwelt upon. The novel is a realistic portrayal of the nineteenth century Lucknowi society in its stark naked reality. The socio-cultural and religious practices of the contemporary time find a brutally true manifestation in the novel. This research paper spares no pain to pin down the socio-economic and political developments that led to the waning of the culture of courtesans in Lucknow.

Key words: Cultural milieu, Mutiny of 1857, Colonialism, Cultural lag, Dehumanization.

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Introduction

Hadi Mohammad Ruswa, raised in Lucknow, was educated in the Persian and Urdu tradition. Groomed with multifaceted personality, Ruswa exhibited profound interest in classical education in Urdu, Persian, mathematics, logic and astronomy, English, sciences and medicine. As impoverished he was, Ruswa wrote more out of financial necessity than to satisfy his inner urge. His maiden attempt at *Afsha-e-Raz* as a fictional piece did not fructify as he had to discard it to complete *Umrao Jan Ada* wherein he salvaged a few character from the incomplete *Afsha-e-Raz*. This paper throws concentrated reflective light on the socio-political milieu of 19th century Lucknow that impacted Umrao's life and profession remarkably. The research paper also attempts to unwind Ruswa's exploration of Umrao's psyche as a courtesan, her life-- pre and post kidnapping and the impact on the courtesans in the aftermath of the mutiny of 1857. The culture of the royal patronage to courtesans in Lucknow of the time of the Nawabs whose indulgence in sexual promiscuity and at the same time their taste for refinement are critically analysed and viewed in this paper. An attempt has also been made to understand Umrao Jan's reconciliation with her fate resulting in her resignation to and acceptance of the circumstances that befell her. The paper adopts 'close textual analysis approach' to unearth the novelist's agenda to unravel not only Umrao's personal and public life but also the treatment of the culture of patronizing courtesans in colonial India. Umrao's acceptance of the life of a courtesan and the subsequent waning of the vocation has also been adequately dwelt upon. The novel is a realistic portrayal of the nineteenth century Lucknowi society in its stark naked reality. The socio-cultural and religious practices of the contemporary time find a brutally true manifestation in the novel. This research paper spares no pain to pin down the socio-economic and political developments that led to the waning of the culture of courtesans in Lucknow.

Style and Narrative Technique

Through captivating flashback technique, the novel *Umrao Jan Ada* employs autobiographical narrative style with the effective and powerful narration of Umrao, the female protagonist. However, the novelist intersperses the narrative with dialogue. Though the novel is visibly episodic, its plot is well constructed and coherent. The novel traverses a long distance in the past and Ruswa makes brilliant use of markers such as the protagonist mentioning her age at particular points, historical events, or how many years passed between one event and another to connect the scattered impressions. Meenakshi Mukherjee aptly points out that by the time the plot comes to a close, the "loose threads begin to be tied up" and the novel becomes complete with a well knit plot (1985: 97).

Ruswa's story telling is innovative and convincing. Delineation of character in the novel allows the readers a peep into the novelist's brilliant craftsmanship. While critically evaluating the portrayal of Umarao's character, Amina Yaqin observes:

Umrao Jan herself is a complex character whose story is narrated mostly through dialogic interaction between the biographer Ruswa and herself. Ruswa's use of the personal pronoun allows us to read the novel as Umrao Jan's autobiography rather than a story mediated through a biographer. (2007: 384)

The 'dialogic interaction' creates an atmosphere of active involvement of both the novelist and Umrao in the exploration and exchange of ideas about each other. The readers not only experience an autobiographical reading but also a 'story telling'. However, Ruswa's appearances in different garbs at different points of time are perplexing as Asaduddin puts it, "The discerning reader must distinguish between Ruswa the man and Ruswa the narrator because he appears in different masks at different times" (2001: 95). In this context Morris calls *Umrao Jan Ada* "a polyphonic novel, not in the wider sense in which it is usually used, but in the original Bakhtinian sense as applied to Dostoevsky" (1994: 89-96).

Critics are divided among themselves regarding the standard of the text of *Umrao Jan Ada*. Commenting on the emergence of true novel in the literary horizon of Urdu, M. Asaduddin said, "... it is only Ruswa's *Umrao Jan Ada* that can be called a novel in every sense (2001: 96). The beginning of true novels in Urdu, it is generally agreed, started with Ruswa. Maintaining the same vein, Khushwant Singh and M.A.Husaini, in the translation of *Umrao Jan Ada* said, "*Umrao Jan Ada* was an immediate and thunderous success. Several editions of the novel were sold out" (1970, 10). However, Sadiq was critical of *Umrao Jan Ada*, remarking, "For all the praise lavished on it, *Umrao Jan Ada* does not strike me as a successful novel. The characters are indifferently portrayed, and there are very few gripping moments in the story" (1964: 356). Sadiq's observation seems to be partly answered by Meenakshi Mukherjee when she registers her view that the loose threads of the plot are neatly tied up at the end of the novel.

Impact of Mutiny on Lucknowi Culture and Royal Patronage of Courtesans

Presence of the colonizers in India in the 19th century heavily influenced the political milieu of Lucknow. The British Raj began to strike its roots firmly on the Indian soil thus effecting a gradual transfer of political power from the Rajas and Nababs to the colonizers. The British interference in all matters in India came to be resented and protested and the first war of Independence started with the Mutiny of 1857. As the plot of *Umrao Jan Ada* progresses, Umrao Jan emerges as the cynosure whose mediocre glamour but heroic, dignified exploits as a courtesan becomes an obsession with the readers. The captivating and rapturous details of various occasions and incidents such as the luxury of Khanum's establishment where Umrao was lodged, its noble clientele, visit of the elites of Lucknowi society to her, Umrao's singing at the court during *Muharram*, recognition of her poetry recitation and so on and so forth not only portray the Lucknowi society of Ruswa's time but also its rich Islamic cultural baggage. Ruswa's

depiction of Khanum is at once powerful and significant because, like many opulent, influential and cultured madams of the time, she not only amassed great wealth, but also wielded enormous power. She is the virtual custodian of the prestige, social image and reputation of the girls she keeps as courtesan for entertainment of her high profile clients. Decline in the patronization of courtesans by feudal aristocracy started with the dethroning of Nabab Wajid Ali Shah in 1856. One of the controversial reasons for annexing Awadh with the British territories in India was the existence of courtesans. Umrao also lost the royal patronage though she continued to 'sing songs of lament in the court of Begum Malika Kishvar'. Charu Gupta maintains, "Until 1857 courtesans were a part of society, of life, and were largely accepted and tolerated by people, but after the rebellion the position of the prostitute became increasingly precarious... (2002: 108). The cataclysmic revolt of 1857 seemed to have spelt doom for the vocations of courtesans as a new horizon seemed looming large bringing in turmoil to the entire subcontinent. Her affiliation with the Nabab family ended with Begum Malika Kishvar's departure for Calcutta. Umrao now fled to Faizabad for safety. Bredi offers a more precise description on the impact of the first war of Indian Independence on the courtesan culture of Lucknow, "It was the watershed of the mutiny which irrevocably marked the end of a world in which courtesans had a recognized social role." (2001: 110) The mutiny changed the role and position of courtesans as evidenced by Umrao's own statement made when she comes back to the city after the mutiny, "Once more it was the same *Chowk*, the same room and the same girls" (1970:173) implying that there was still an iota of old culture remaining in the city struggling to come back to life. The forward movement of the plot confirms the decadence that crept into the culture of courtesans. Khurshidul Islam observes that the real hero of *Umrao Jan Ada* is the city of Lucknow and its culture, and that the novel is an elegy on its demise. Post Mutiny Lucknow was to be in conformity with British policy in India. The British administration tackled the issue of courtesan rather ambiguously.

Courtesan culture of Lucknow witnessed great deal of changes with Britishers taking over political power. In the colonial period, attitude towards courtesans began to change and the hey days of courtesans when they were almost glorified and exalted came to be viewed first with some mixed reaction and then with contempt calling them 'repository of diseases'. Such demonization of courtesans in British ruled India started to be intensified when British women began to arrive in the country in more numbers. Oldenburg has shown that "change in the status of courtesans in post-Mutiny Navabi Lucknow was linked to British policies and legislation concerned with regulating, sanitizing and cleaning the city" (1984: 132,42). Thus, the courtesans were forced to take to prostitutions and everything about them began to be viewed with contempt and disapproval. The political ambience was ripe for the Britishers to push the courtesan culture to the periphery ultimately installing in the mass mind that such practice did not behove a civilized society.

Journey from Amiran to Umrao: Socio-cultural and Religious Background

Hadi Mohammad Ruswa portrays Amiran's chequered journey into the new found/forced world of Umrao. Social circumstances that led to Amiran's kidnap lodged her with Khanom who christened her as Umrao. Amiran's journey into the world of Umrao Jan assumes tremendous importance as she was merely nine and was not mature enough to understand the drastic change her life was destined for. There is a sense of passive acceptance of the lot on her part. As she

recounts her childhood days, she becomes nostalgic and fondly remembers her younger brother, parents, friends, her habits and also her proposed wedding. She admits that she was good looking though not strikingly beautiful. Umrao's suffering at the hands of the dacoits made Khanum's house a paradise for her. Buva Husaini's affection was another reason for her liking for Khanum's house besides her knowledge that she would not be able to come back to her father's house again.

Resignation to and Acceptance of the Life Destiny Thrust on Umrao

As the novel comes to a close, the readers develop a fairly mature idea about Umrao's chequered journey through thick and thin and her resignation to the lot. She, at times, is nostalgic about her past, her togetherness with her family and the religious background she has left behind. However, the zeal to live and a desire to carry life overshadow her glamorous life as a courtesan as well as her blessed, peaceful, contented middle class life with her family. As an adult, Umrao feels that her profession as a courtesan is sinful, but that she could not make out the same in the all pervasive and all pervading alluring, embalming atmosphere at Khanam's establishment. Umrao's positive outlook and ability to acclimatize herself to her surroundings and the prevailing atmosphere, rendered her comfortable in the world of the courtesans. Umrao's approval of the general atmosphere and different provisions at Khanam's household to pass the courtesans off as cultured, hospitable and attractive young women reflects her adoptable and accommodative nature. Therefore, it is no surprise when she appreciates the education she received from "the maulvi who, paid special attention to her and taught her with love and care" (1970:42) and thus she capitalized on the opportunity to hone her skills in dancing, singing and poetry. The description of her singing lessons in particular reveals that she is not only someone who has a good voice, but who also loves classical music and has a real desire to learn.

The penultimate phase of Umrao's life when courtesan's profession was on the wane and she went into seclusion, endangered in her love for the aesthetic world of singing and poetry. Devoid of the royal, Nawabi affiliations with the aristocrats, Umrao embraced friends, books and newspapers for a peaceful, contented life. Referring to her male friends with whom she could still enjoy poetry, music and conversation Umrao says, "I like them from the bottom of my heart. Unfortunately none of them desires to live with me permanently. So why should I hanker for it? It would be like wanting one's youth to return (1970: 222). Thus Umrao is presented as a character who has surrendered herself completely to her lot. The same attitude comes to the fore when Umrao remembers her parents only to forget them the next moment. This is perhaps because Umrao is adept in adaptability and therefore, she strives to make the best use of the little time she has at her disposal. Umrao is able to look back on her life with equanimity and even with a certain amount of nostalgia. Her attitude is one of resignation and acceptance rather than cynicism.

The Socio-political and Religious Rigmarole

Umrao's picturization of the circumstances that led to her kidnap and subsequent erasure of her identity as a tender aged girl from a cultured and respectable family throws ample light on the

social milieu of the time. The root cause of Amiran's kidnap by Dilwar Khan consists in a petty social grudge between Amiran's father and Dilwar Khan. It becomes clear as Umrao narrates:

Dilwar Khan had a strong grouse against my father. When he was arrested in Faizabad, people from our locality were summoned to testify to his character. My father was amongst them. He was a simple and honest person. The Queen's magistrate had placed the Holy Quran in his hand and asked, "Well Jemadar, tell me the absolute truth, what sort of a man is Dilwar Khan?" My father stated truthfully all he knew about him. It was on his testimony that Dilwar Khan was sent to prison. He nursed this grievance in his heart and when he came out of jail, he decided to take revenge. (1970: 27-28)

Jemadar's (Umrao's father) witness against Dilwar Khan in the court and his consequent imprisonment prompted the latter to contemplate revenge. Dilwar fulfills his desire by kidnapping Amiran, the only daughter of Jemadar. The cunning with which Amiran was trapped and sold to Khanam Jan is detailed in the novel thus:

One evening before my father had returned from his work, I happened to go out of the house and saw Dilwar Khan standing under the tamarind tree. 'Come child! Your father has settled the matter of money with me' he said to me. 'You can take back your pigeon.' I walked into the trap. I went with him to his house. As soon as I entered he bolted the door from the inside. I wanted to scream but he gagged my mouth by thrusting an old rag in it. He tied my hands with a scarf and threw me on the floor. He opened the back door and called for one Peer Bakhsh. Two men picked me up, put in a bullock-cart and drove off. (28)

The nineteenth century Lucknow was yet to see the full bloom of science, technology, industrialization and other modern achievements. Systematic education was still a far cry. Amiran was sold to Kahanam Jan for a scanty amount of one hundred and twenty rupees (37). Modernity and industrialization was yet to strike its root in India when Umrao was kidnapped. Umrao says, "Those days there were no railway trains and it used to take four days to travel from Faizabad to Lucknow." (34)

Umrao's depiction of the socio-political and religious life of nineteenth century Lucknow and its vicinity forge convincing ground to assume that capitalist and feudal lordship was the order of the day, the gap between the 'haves and havents' was still remarkably prominent. The Nababs exploited their subjects and then the colonizers took that exploitation to the zenith. However, there seems to be a passive longing in Umrao for her mother and siblings as she found herself forced to seclusion in the absence of the Nababs and their authority being taken over by the British masters. A sense of guilt haunts her. She shows no craze for home, because she tainted herself as well as her parents. Therefore, in a tone of passive resignation and acceptance, Umrao says:

I met my mother once. But that was a long time ago. God alone knows whether she is still alive. I have heard that my younger brother has a son who, by the grace of Allah is now fourteen or fifteen years old. He also has two daughters. I have a strong desire to see

them all. They live in Faizabad which is not very far. One wretched rupee will get there. But my hands are tied. (33-34)

Umrao is undoubtedly from a deeply religious background which is evidenced by her reminiscence of her past life before being kidnapped. She calls back to her memory, “After we had finished [the evening meal] we gave our thanks to God. Father said the prayer for the night and we went to bed. He rose early to say his morning prayers. After the morning prayer, father told his beads” (18,19). Umrao’s statement makes it evident that she comes from a family where religious practice is an important part of daily life and such background exerts its influence on the later part of her life. Shia Islam was a major part of the culture of the court of Awadh and Umrao was closely involved in this with her singing of the *soz* and the *marsiya* during Muharram. Umrao confesses that while she was involved with the lawyer Akbar Ali Khān, she began saying her prayers regularly (175). Therefore, Umrao’s later repentance and piety sound genuine and Hadi Mohd. Ruswa, thus portrays Umrao’s convincing return to her religious and cultural roots.

Conclusion

Hadi Mohammad Ruswa’s depiction of nineteenth century Lucknow and its details via *Umrao Jan Ada* is realistic and life-like. The socio-political ambience spurred by the rise of capitalism and feudalism find echo in the novel. The religious, particularly, Islamic way of life, culture, and behavior pattern find explicit manifestation in Ruswa’s portrayal of Lucknow. The Nababs and aristocrats who visited Umrao regularly avoided public gaze and desired Khanam Jan to keep their visits secret. Khanum was the virtual custodian of the prestige, social image and reputation of her high profile clients for which she used to receive due favour from the visitors. Thus, *Umrao Jan Ada* faithfully records the socio-political and religious rigmarole of nineteenth century Lucknow in colonial India.

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