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The Connotations of the Suffix *ruswa* in Mirza Muhammad Hadi Ruswa's *Umrao Jan Ada*, and its Cultural Correlative in Arthur Golden's *Memoirs of a Geisha*

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This paper points to the similarities in the courtesan culture in South Asia, particularly, the Nawabi *tawaiifs* and the Japanese *geishas*. The districts of Lucknow in India and Gion in Japan are the centres of entertainment and pleasure. The high gentry youth and the elder patrons keep the districts running, and demand the company and services of the courtesans. These courtesans are not ordinary prostitutes who indulge in flesh trade. The courtesans are the cultured and sophisticated. They are trained in the elaborate art of entertaining: the *tawaiifs* are taught Urdu poetry, classical dancing and singing, while the *geishas* learn the elaborate art of dressing, walking and serving tea in a tea-house to their patrons. The courtesans face similar challenges at being unaccepted and exclusion from the society and remain vulnerable and peripheral in the scheme of things. The paper observes the challenges of the two protagonist- courtesans in the two novels in the context of their culture. It studies the notion of shame associated with women, and how the society treats women who transgress the narrow notions of chastity in the society.

The *Nawabi* culture of Lucknow, in pre-modern India, patronised art and entertainment in the form of music, poetry and the courtesans' performances. Attending a *mushaira*, a social gathering of Lucknow's elite where poetic expressions also led to a battle of wits among the participating poets, was a mark of cultural elitism. The lady- performers known as the *tawaiifs* who learnt to read and write in Urdu. They were also skilled at the classical dance and music. Their company was sought not only for physical pleasure, but also for cultural entertainment. The *tawaiifs*, as represented in *Umrao Jan Ada*, are sought after, and are difficult to win over. They reside in a *kotha* which is different from a brothel. They are educated, well-versed and highly skilled entertainers who uphold the Urdu high culture in Lucknow. The rich migrants to Lucknow send their sons to the courtesans to acquire appropriate social behaviour and sophistication. In the decadent society of Mirza Hadi Ruswa's time, the writer pens the biography of a much renowned courtesan, Umrao Jan, who was abducted and sold into a *kotha*. In the opening chapter, Mirza Hadi Ruswa describes his chance encounter with a highly acclaimed *tawaiif*, Umrao Jan, who after much cajoling, assents to unfold her past to him so that he may pen her memoir. The writer adopts the suffix of *ruswa* to his name which implies being dishonoured. This is intentional, to suggest that he is the author of a dishonorable subject, that of a courtesan, who is much abused in a society that takes pleasure from her services yet refuses to accept and give her the merit that she deserves. Mirza Hadi Ruswa, thus merges with the identity of his

subject and rejects his society's hypocrisy by assuming the suffix of *ruswa* instead of being given one. The suffix to his name suggests that he takes pride in being dishonoured since the societal parameters of honouring an individual seem to be flawed. Mirza Hadi Ruswa is subversive and highly radical in giving voice to a *tawaif* in his narrative. He accords her dignity by immortalising her history. The book is a legitimate heir of a *tawaif* whose biological heirs would never be legitimised in the society.

Umrao Jan in the first-person informs Mirza that she did not inherit the profession of a *tawaif*. She was abducted by a family enemy, Dilawar Khan, at a young age and sold to a *kotha*. Her superior looks and mind earn her the title of a top *tawaif* at her *kotha*. Umrao, however, never reaps the benefits of her labour, as her earnings are in the hands of the *kotha*-owner, and the little that remains with her is fiddled away by her confidante and childhood-friend, Gauhar Khan. She finds love in Nawab Sultan, but she isn't the mistress of her time, as the *kotha*-mistress restricts her meetings with the Nawab. She resorts to clandestine meetings with her lover, but she is caught, and her relation with the Nawab is finally aborted when an unruly visitor at the *kotha* is slain by him. She knows that she has no right to fall in love or to pursue a relationship. The title of a *tawaif* is the only reality of her life. Traditionally a *tawaif* has no other choice, but to live her title. However, Umrao Jan is a strong-willed woman, who dares to transgress her courtesanhood. She takes risks in her life to achieve true love and happiness. She elopes with her client, Faiz Ali, in the hope of leading a fulfilling, married life with him. However, he turns out to be a dacoit, who is imprisoned during the journey. In such a state of crisis, she discovers the support within the *tawaif*-community, as Umrao is freed on the recommendation of her captor's mistress, the Raja's courtesan, who knows Umrao Jan. Later, when she takes refuge in the household of the *Begum* of Kanpur, her former lover- the Nawab Sultan's wife, Umrao Jan prevents the household from robbery when she forbids Faiz Ali from robbing there. This episode is a high point of Umrao Jan's character, as she doesn't suffer from envy in the company of her lover's wife. She protects the *Begum*'s life and property, although she recognises the *Begum* as the girl who is abducted with her in childhood and is sold to the Nawab Sultan's household as a servant, and who later, by a stroke of good-luck, becomes Nawab Sultan's wife. Umrao Jan's actions proves that the courtesans are a helpful community who safeguard the interests of their patrons and the larger community without hoping for any reward. On encountering Nawab Sultan, Umrao Jan doesn't not endeavour to regain his love and leaves his household with dignity. Later in the novel, she refuses to return to her previous life, and retires with the income earned earlier. She supports an orphan-girl without desiring compensation for herself in later years. She is an example of a philanthropic life led within her limited means. It is surprising and laudatory that although she sells the favour of her company, her love and devotion are free and for everyone in need of it. Mirza Hadi Ruswa has humanised the conventional erotic persona of a courtesan in the narrative to show that the *tawaifs* are not only flesh, but also have heart, and that too, a golden heart.

Historical facts also intervene in Mirza Hadi Ruswa's narrative to show how fragile the existence

of the *tawaif* community is in the mid-nineteenth century India. These courtesans depend on the nobles and the mercantile class for their patronage. Political disturbances in the country like the Mutiny of 1857 shake the nation, and the first to feel the tremors of the political upheaval are these entertainers who experience security only in times of peace and prosperity. The *kotha*, which Umrao Jan belonged to, is abandoned at the time of the Mutiny. All her belongings are looted. There is no safeguard for these women, who define and uphold the Nawabi culture of the city of Lucknow. There is no agency for their rehabilitation after the Mutiny. Umrao Jan has only her singing and dancing skills, and her resourceful nature to see her through her advancing years. It is commendable that she doesn't initiate the young girl whom she adopts into being a courtesan, and live off the girl's income, instead Umrao Jan tries to educate her ward who lacks any interest in learning. Umrao Jan's life journey, from the Amiran of Faizabad, a much loved daughter of a *Subedar* to a highly sophisticated courtesan of Lucknow, and then an independent entertainer in her later years, is a narrative of courage which without sensationalising any event, reveals the fragility of the position of the young, beautiful and skilled *tawaifs* who have no authority over their bodies, their time, and their earnings. They are needed and desired by the elite males, yet they are not accepted into their households as their legitimate wives. When Umrao Jan returns to Faizabad, the refusal of her family to accept her is a telling example of the hardheartedness of the society that blames the victims of the flesh-trade, instead of blaming the perpetrators. It also shows that a woman's worth is equated to her chastity, and her body, instead of her skills, kindness, and her qualities. For the society, Umrao Jan ceases to be a daughter and a sister because her title of a *tawaif* renders her as an object meant for public entertainment. Society deprives her of an entity, a parentage, or any legitimate social relationship. We, thus see that her society is myopic, narrow-minded, regressive and exploitative. Mirza Hadi Ruswa ironically shows that it is a matter of honour to adopt the suffix of *ruswa* in such a hypocritical society than to be respected by its members.

In Arthur Golden's *Memoirs of a Geisha*, we can trace a parallel in the subjugated position of the *geisha* in Japan and their Indian counterparts. My purpose is not to represent the courtesans as a homogeneous entity, however there are major overlaps in the role of the South Asian courtesans. A *geisha* in Japan is the equivalent of a *tawaif* in Northern India. These women are skilled entertainers who serve influential Japanese men at the tea-houses. They are trained at making an elaborate hairstyle; they wear a white paste on their face, and dress in an exquisite silk kimono. They master a particular style of walking which is very dainty and sophisticated. A *geisha* differs from an ordinary prostitute because the former is a highly sophisticated and skilled entertainer, who is inaccessible to ordinary men except for their patrons (*danna*); while the latter are considered brash and solely provided sexual gratification to anyone who pays a meagre sum of money. A *geisha's* boarding house is called an *okiya* which differs from a brothel. The house has a mistress, usually a retired *geisha*, a reigning *geisha* and a few young girls who train at becoming a *geisha*. The house has a collection of silk *kimonos*, the traditional Japanese robes. A *geisha* is a beautiful and highly skilled entertainer, who is the property of an *okiya* until she acquires a patron, who is called a *danna*, and secures her independence from the *okiya*.

In *The Memoirs*, a little girl called Chiyo is taken from her home along with her elder sister on a false pretext of securing them a job, and is sold into an *okiya*, a Japanese correlative of a *kotha* in Northern India. Gion, the geisha district in Japan can be seen as a correlative of the flourishing Lucknow of the pre-mutiny, nineteenth century. Chiyo can be understood as the counterpart of the young Amiran. Both these little girls do not inherit the profession of a courtesan, and have never imagined the glamorous yet lonely and exploitative life of a courtesan for themselves. The young Chiyo struggles to escape from the *okiya* but fails. She is severely punished for her impunity. Chiyo is also troubled by the young geisha, Hatsumomo, who feels insecure because of Chiyo's promising good looks. The courtesans are competitors of each other. They face hostility from the other courtesans who attempt to foil an upcoming *geisha* from becoming renowned and thus, earning well. Chiyo is trained by an independent and kind *geisha*, Mameha. Chiyo adopts the name Sayuri just as Amiran is called Umrao Jan once she becomes a courtesan. Sayuri has to fight against the false rumours of her affairs which are circulated by the rival *geisha*, Hatsumomo. The *geishas* are highly sought after and their company is difficult to obtain. Any rumour against their character would affect their popularity. They have to maintain an air of inaccessibility in order to increase their appeal. The selling of their *mizuage*, that is, their virginity is a public matter. Their *mizuage* is auctioned to the highest bidder. They can't exercise any personal choice. Sayuri's *mizuage* is sold to the highest bidder, Dr. Crabb, who is so called because his face resembles a crab. Sayuri does not know anything about intercourse before her *mizuage*. She is informed that something resembling an 'eel' will intrude her body. This 'eel' like intrusion can be read as a metaphor of the intrusion of others in all aspects of a courtesan's life. This may suggest that a courtesan is a commodity for public intrusion. She is not a private entity who has the agency to exercise her private choice of loving or marrying someone of her choice. Similarly, Amiran in *Umrao Jan Ada* attains the suffix *jan* once she loses her virginity to her patron, and becomes a full-fledged courtesan. In this context, when Sayuri in *The Memoirs* catches Hatsumomo red-handed with her proletarian boyfriend, and informs the same to the owner of the *okiya*, Hatsumomo is prohibited to meet her clandestine lover. Hatsumomo flouts the *geisha* code because the geishas are not allowed to exercise their choice of partners independently. They have to consider the social position of their sexual partner and his financial ability to enjoy their favours over a long period. The *geishas* are the property of their *okiya*. Their money is kept with the *okiya*-owners. This episode juxtaposes with Umrao Jan's prohibition from meeting her lover, Nawab Sultan, and how she meets him secretly with the help of Gauhar Khan. Another point of similarity is that the Lucknow's courtesans have to hand over their earnings and gifts to the *kotha*-mistress, and very little was left with the courtesans to meet their expenses. Umrao Jan secretly keeps Faiz Ali's gifts under her mattress to avoid them from being confiscated by the *kotha*-mistress. This practice reveals that once the courtesans age, they have no savings for their old age. In the youth, they would not be able to establish themselves independently because all their funds are hoarded by the mistress of the *kotha*. Similarly, the geishas hand over all their earnings to the mistress of the *okiya*. When the courtesans' age, they would have to continue their dependence on their *okiya/ kotha* for food and

lodging or they could run a okiya or a kotha by encouraging buying of young and naive girls, and continue with the tradition of training and keeping courtesans. This vicious cycle has no escape route. The courtesans never marry because their patrons refuse to marry them. They have children with their patrons who are brought up in their *okiya/kotha* and become courtesans or procurers according to their gender. The courtesans are an outcast for the bourgeois society which refuses to allow them to marry and live a life of a householder. Even, Sayuri after contriving and successfully securing the Chairman as her *danna*, remains unmarried. At the end of the novel, she informs the readers that she lives in New York and runs a tea-house there. She has a son by the Chairman, who is illegitimate. Sayuri's son would have become a legal heir of the Chairman's property and business had the Chairman married her. To avoid this, she decides to live with the Chairman without marrying him. Thus, she ensures that her son is not a threat to the Chairman's legal heirs. Sayuri proves that her love is emotional and not material. Even Umrao Jan's dreams of marrying and becoming a householder are never realized. The Nawab Sultan already has a wife; her other suitor, Faiz Ali, the robber is imprisoned; while her childhood friend, Gauhar Khan fleeces her money and she is happy to be rid of him. Although both the protagonists, Sayuri and Umrao Jan, long to get married, their wish is never fulfilled. The happiness of being a wife is denied to them because of their being courtesans.

The pleasure districts of Lucknow and Gion enjoy the protection of the men in power, and are considered necessary for society. In Japan, the *geishas* and the prostitutes are needed for providing pleasure and entertainment to men. While in Lucknow in India, the *tawaiifs* are the cultural icons of the Persian-Arabic Muslim culture in Northern India. They are secular educators who teach the elite and the rich, rural youth to imbibe the sophistication of attending a social gathering in Lucknow and behave in a sophisticated and refined way. Under the tutelage of the *tawaiifs*, the youth learn to appreciate music and dance. They learn the art of participating in a *mushiara* and sharpening their wit. Similarly, the Japanese pre-world wars government officials and the rich businessmen take pleasure in the company of the highly sophisticated *geishas*. They take them on tour for relaxation and enjoyment. It is only at the time of depression that the *geishas* are left without a patron, and they have to work in factories. Similarly, at the time of mutiny in 1857, the *kothas* in Lucknow are looted and the *tawaiifs* are forced to flee from the pleasure district. These incidents prove that the courtesans are able to earn a living only at time of peace and material prosperity. Their economic condition is fragile and depends on factors that are outside their control. They also cease to be desirable once they age. Their patrons begin to favour young courtesans, as in the case of Mameha's *danna* (patron) who lusts after Sayuri, and undresses her without her consent. This episode emotionally scars Sayuri, who feels defiled by such an action. She is also loyal to her guide, Mameha and abhors such a vile act. Sayuri is loyal to her tutor, Mameha. Sayuri abhors the thought of deceiving Mameha. Similarly, Umrao Jan doesn't try to regain the favours of Nawab Sultan at his home once she meets his wife, the Begum of Kanpur, who is her childhood friend. In these narratives, we find that the courtesans are falsely considered as a threat to the householders. They were accused of trying to deviate the men from the path of morality and duty. Both Umrao Jan and Sayuri are fiercely loyal to their

friends and do not create any disquiet in the household of other women. However, they have to bear the brunt of their profession and their beauty. When Umrao Jan stays at a lawyer's house for a while, the lawyer's wife and her neighbours continuously taunt and torture her. Similarly, Sayuri has to face accusations of trying to steal other geisha's patrons while she has no such intention. Sayuri longs only for the Chairman whom she admires since childhood. These courtesans are not emotionally promiscuous and yearn only for a man who loves them sincerely. Bowing to the pressures of their profession, they have to regularly entertain many men, but their heart belongs to a single man. Their love is chaste, but their bodies are the possession of their profession. They become *ruswa* or infamous in the hypocritical society that demands their favours, but condemns their activities. Umrao Jan, very rightly, chastises the gathering, at her hometown- Faizabad, who wickedly taunt and ostracize her, but relish her song. Umrao Jan is happy to leave her hometown, and returns to Lucknow. Similarly, Sayuri abandons Japan for America where she finds more liberty and dignity to live. These courtesans are not avaricious, vile women who keep devising plans to break households and rob the men of their money and morality. They are helpless victims of the society that traps them in the profession of entertaining while continuing to stereotype them as evil.

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