Confluence: Journal of Interdisciplinary Studies

Confluence: Journal of Interdisciplinary Studies, 2021

https://cjids.in

ISSN Online: 2582-3256

Volume 5

Resurrecting the Courtesan Identity: A Historical Critique

Qandeel Qazi

Symbiosis School for Liberal Arts, Symbiosis International (Deemed University)

How to Cite this Paper

Qazi, Q. (2021). Resurrecting the courtesan identity: A historical critique. *Confluence: Journal for Interdisciplinary Studies*, *Volume V,* 46-68.

Abstract

As an industry that thrives on music and dance, Hindi cinema has often capitalised on the courtesan figure. Known for their artistic abilities, the performing women of North India find multiple reincarnations in Hindi films. However, these depictions do not follow without certain modifications to their identities. The overarching objective of this paper is to put forth a comparative account between the real life and the fictional representations of courtesans or *tawaifs* in Hindi cinema and problematize the reasons underlying the same. In order to decode the personalities of real-life courtesans, the first section traces the general history of North India's *tawaif* culture, followed by an exploration of the biographical accounts of three courtesans, Azeezun, Gauhar Jaan, and Malika Pukhraj, as well as oral testimonies. In the second section, the paper critically analyses the courtesan characters in three Hindi films — *Pakeezah* (1972), *Umrao Jaan* (1981) and *Sardari Begum* (1996)—along with their respective posters. By studying historical accounts of the courtesans' lives, it becomes evident that as opposed to their unconventional and non-compliant persona, Hindi cinema portrays these women as passive and servile beings, devoid of agency. The objectives of popular Hindi cinema to give pleasure and appeal to the audience has compelled its interpretation of the *tawaif* as subservient to the masculine figures in the narrative as seen in *Pakeezah* and *Umrao Jaan*. Nevertheless, alternative cinema's commitment to using films as a means of social-reform has

drawn Hindi cinema closer to an authentic portrayal of the courtesan, as seen in *Sardari Begum*.

Keywords: courtesan, tawaif, Hindi cinema, masculinity, posters, history

Introduction

A historical figure that is often represented in Hindi cinema is that of the courtesan. Referred to as *tawaifs* in North India, these women have for long entertained audiences, through their scintillating dance and musical artistry. Given that music and dance are often integral additions to the narrative in popular Hindi films, the characters of courtesans like Anarkali, Pakeezah, and Umrao Jaan (as the most common examples) have been used to diversify cinematic content. However, her representation as a motif of titillation does not constitute the courtesan's only contribution to Hindi cinema. In the 1930s, at a time when acting in films was not considered a dignified profession for women, some *tawaifs* chose to defy patriarchal forces and became the first few women who chose to enter the industry (Vanita, 2018). Many also contributed from behind the scenes as singers, choreographers, directors and producers. Some of the most popular amongst these women were actresses like Fatima Begum and Jaddan Bai, and singers such as Bibbo (Vanita, 2018). Therefore, it is safe to say that courtesans, through fiction and in reality, have shared a long-standing relationship with Hindi cinema.

Yet, Hindi cinema has subdued the historical relevance of these women. While operating within the conventions of patriarchy, filmmakers have upheld the traditional conceptions of femininity. As a result, the courtesan identity has come to be overshadowed by an exaggeration of the sexual attributes of these women. Even when these women are portrayed at their creative best, which is while dancing, singing, or reciting poetry, the expression of their creativity is made salacious, thereby indicating sex as the final consequence (Vanita, 2018). Complicit in this airbrushing of their identities are the British. The labels of "nautch girls" or the dancing girls, used by the British to describe the courtesans, limited the scope of their (courtesans') versatility and restricted them to their carnal services. On the contrary, in Medieval India (c.1556-1748), what separated the culture of courtesans from prostitution was the very act of sex; while for the latter, the sexual act was the objective, for the former it was incidental — sexual "favours" that could accompany the performance to "heighten pleasure" (Bano, 2009). This is only one criticism of the fictional profiling of courtesans in films. Various other negations of history exist in their fictional portrayal, and that is the concern of this paper.

This paper attempts to historicise the courtesan identity. The endeavour is to separate the manufactured image of the courtesans in films from their lived presence in India's pre-colonial

past. I contend that the courtesans of popular Hindi cinema constitute a fictionalised presence of those women who have otherwise actively engaged in creating a unique *tawaif*identity "outside the patriarchal society" (Chatterjee, 2008, p. 280). In Hindi films, courtesans are used to elicit the nostalgia of a pre-colonial historical era but not without evading their expressions of self, and individual agency. The paper also explores the impact such a portrayal has on the stature of the male heroes in these films. In particular, I argue that contrary to alternative cinema's reformative goals, popular cinema's need to assert specific conceptions of masculinity causes an inadvertent compromise of the *tawaif's* agency.

The typology of popular and alternative cinema deployed in this research is based on the configurations propounded by film scholar Madhava Prasad (1998) in his seminal work*Ideology of the Hindi Film: A Historical Construction.* While considering Hindi cinema as a broad category, he defines alternative cinema as a specific genre of Hindi films that emerged in the particular historical context of the Indian state's decision to intervene in the business of filmmaking. As the state started funding cinema through the National Film Development Corporation (NFDC), films came to be made based on "progressive social goals" which would create a politically conscious audience, away from the popular cinema of "hegemonic formation" which appealed to the bourgeois ideology of post-colonial India (Prasad, 1998, p. 2). The focus of this paper will be on the following films — *Pakeezah* (1972, directed by Kamal Amrohi), *Umrao Jaan* (1981, directed by Muzaffar Ali) and *Sardari Begum* (1996, directed by Shyam Benegal). Although *Sardari Begum* was not a film sponsored by the NFDC, it is one of many films that were made after the Corporation's efforts diversified Hindi cinema by generating a fresh wave of films that chose to challenge the dominant ideologies of popular cinema.

The research uses a qualitative methodology including a comparative study between the courtesan's fictional profiling generated by Hindi cinema and the nature of her existence in historical documentation. The study uses primary sources such as the memoirs of *tawaifs*, travelogues, and oral testimonies collected by scholars like Veena Talvar Oldenburg (1990). The study also draws upon secondary sources like books as well as research articles. Further, the study examines the depiction of courtesans in films as well as film posters.

The word courtesan in English is used as a ubiquitous term to refer to all regional variants of performing women such as *devadasis* in South India, *naikins* of Goa*,* and *baijis* in Calcutta. While parallel categories of such artisan women who were engaged in the profession of selling aesthetic pleasure were predominant across timelines and empires in the subcontinent, for the purpose of this study, "courtesan" will be used as a synonym for the *kanchanis* and *tawaifs* of Mughal India (c. 1526–1761) and Awadh (c. 1722–1856) only. Further, it is instructive to highlight that in all three films the titular protagonists are courtesans, and the narratives are based on their journey.

Finally, an analysis of the films above is incomplete without shifting our attention towards the meanings their posters try to convey. According to film scholar Sandra Freitag (2002), cinema is connected to other visual aids which are "immensely important in understanding the interactive relationship between consumers and producers of cinema, and thus, in delineating the active ways that consumers negotiate their way through the choices thrown up before their gaze" (p. 66). Relatively unexplored but still influential visual auxiliaries to films are their posters. They serve as decisive contributors to the audience's perception of a movie before even watching it. The purpose of a film poster is to carry the essence of the story so that the spectator can decide whether or not the film is worthy of their money (Rhodes, 2007). If a film's meaning is dialectically created through a virtual interaction between the characters and the spectators, posters contribute to that process of meaning-making even before the film is released. Therefore, the section on film criticism will also take recourse to some of the most prominent posters of each of these films.

Literature Review

Film scholarship has taken a critical interest in the Muslim aesthetic of films that feature the courtesan as the protagonist. Richard Allen and Ira Bhaskar (2009) curate a separate category of the "Islamicate", to explain the imagined Muslim habitat and lifestyle represented in these films. They perceive the courtesan as both a "debased figure" lending her body for public display and an "emblem" of the glorious Muslim culture (Bhaskar & Allen, 2009, pg. 45). Similarly, Usamah Ansari (2008) argues that within the Indian Muslim narrative, the courtesan is an apogee of the distinct Muslim identity and a reminder of a luxurious cultural past — both fractured by the advent of colonialism. Conversely, within the Hindu nationalist narrative, the *tawaif* is a mere "decadent" Muslim figure who converses in "sultry" Urdu and represents the bygone Muslim era (Ansari, 2008, p. 300).

Other scholars like Faisal Fatehali Devji (1992) and Poonam Arora (1995) interpret her Muslim identity as an extension of the "rape fantasy" metaphor. For Devji (1992), such a representation is a penalty Muslims are charged with, for both existing as remnants of the tragic partition and being perceived as of repeating the harrowing episode. While extending this thesis to Muslim socials, Arora (1995) asserts that the Muslim *tawaif* is not only seducing the audience in the film, but also the Hindu audience in the theatre. She furthers that a veiled *tawaif* is portrayed as sexually charged to the Hindu audience. This is essentially because her existence as a veiled woman from outside the community prevents the man from directly interacting with her.

Nevertheless, because the *tawaif* is portrayed as an embodiment of sensuality, some scholars also view her as an antithesis to the conventional heroine. Historian Mukul Kesavan (1994) believes that the Muslim *tawaif* serves as a precursor to the more advanced character of vamps played by actresses like Bindu, Helen, and Nadira. Further, he argues that the *tawaif's* "lineage" of the vamp

mutates her into a cabaret dancer, thereby further cementing her positioning as the "other" woman (Kesavan, 1994, p. 254). Likewise, Teresa Hubel (2012) recognises a dearth in "courtesan films" which portray these women as the leaders of the narrative. Courtesans are projected as the fetishized women in opposition to the leading woman, usually the wives or "wife wannabe" in the film (Hubel, 2012, p. 214). Finally, an important argument Gregory Booth (2007) raises is regarding the conflict in the narrative of courtesan films in which they are portrayed as passive and chaste females, but also as heroes in pursuit of heterosexual relationships (Booth, 2007).

By reviewing the available body of literature, it is clear that there exists a lack in overturning the tropes of the courtesans in Hindi cinema by questioning the historical rigour in the representation of these women of history. Instead, it is primarily concerned with highlighting the symbolic value of their representation. Although a large body of historical scholarship has sought to retrieve the lives and times of the courtesans, the need remains to employ an interdisciplinary approach to point out the differences and reasons underlying such deviations from reality in Hindi films.

History of the North Indian Tawaif

Within historiography, the *tawaifs* who represented the cultural apogee of pre-colonial India, have maintained silence. Despite having lived as some of the most educated women, very few of them have sought to document their life experiences. Even in 2003, when a courtesan named Malika Puhkraj of Akhnoor decided to document her *Song Sung True: A Memoir*, she chose the identity of a *ganewali* (Kidwai, 2004). Perhaps, it was the renunciation of the title of a courtesan that would have caused the publishers to consider her writings worthy of being published.

My contention is based on the fact that by the end of the 19th century, the term *tawaif* had become a denominator for women of ill-repute (Crooke, 1896). Over the years, *tawaifs* were painted through broad brushstrokes of overt sexuality, promiscuity, and immorality. After Awadh was annexed in 1856, the pessimism was further compounded as the courtly culture of *kothas* or salons inhabited by the *tawaifs* came to be associated with corrupted nawabs and India's fallen Muslim culture. Yet, the ultimate degradation of the *tawaif* ensued when the British clubbed them with other entertainers in the same category as prostitutes, while also imposing the anglicised label of "nautch girls" on them (Crooke, 1896).

The conflation of *tawaifs* with prostitutes not only tarnished their social standing but also airbrushed their distinct identity and culture. Although the identity of the North Indian courtesans will be explored later, it is important to first map in detail the rise and fall of the courtesan lifestyle and culture in North India.

Courtesans Versus Prostitutes

In Mughal India, the term *tawaif* was used to denote the women of the royal court, trained in classical singing and dancing. Out of these, Manucci (1904) documents that the most revered were the *kanchanis*. Clothed in rich fabrics, these women rode in high palanquins and performed in front of an audience of more than five hundred people (Manucci, 1904). Further, Francois Bernier (1916) explains that the *kanchanis* frequented private affairs of the high class for singing and dancing and did not offer sexual favours to even men of a higher class. Even those *kanchanis* who were less-esteemed, he reports, were mainly discussed as singers and dancers (Bernier, 1916).

An important account of the cultural practices in Mughal India is proposed by Abdul Qadir Badauni (1864) in his *Muntakhab –un- Tawarikh.* While dance performances remained popular cultural activities, Badauni (1864) reported strict prohibitions on prostitution imposed by the court. Not only were their quarters pushed to the peripheries of the town, but such areas were also given pejorative labels like *shaitanpura* or devil's abode (Badauni, 1615). These women conducted their business under strict surveillance with inspectors regulating the entry and exit of male visitors (Badauni, 1615). It appears that in Mughal India, while the services of the courtesans were patronised as a popular source of entertainment, the business of women offering sexual services was seen as a corruption of the empire's morals and virtues.

Another equally important source helpful in discriminating the category of courtesans from that of prostitutes is Aurangzeb's *farmaan* from the 17th century. Apart from preventing the inflow of prostitutes in the household, Bernier (1916) mentions that Aurangzeb reduced the scope of the *kanchani's* performance in the court. Unlike his father Shah Jahan's encouragement of her performance, Aurangzeb limited the *kanchani's* presence to offering distant *salaams* (greetings) in front of the nobles gathered in the court (Bernier, 1916).

Badauni's account along with Aurangzeb's *farmaan* are indicative of an active distinction between the prostitutes and courtesans in Mughal India. Even though Aurangzeb rejected both forms of *pesha* (or business), care was taken to account for them as two explicit categories. It also appears that to a great extent, a *kanchani* enjoyed societal consent for her profession. It was the state's assumption of a moral responsibility that caused her profession to be proscribed. Therefore, one can also argue that even though the fall of the courtesans had begun long before the British annexed Awadh, initially it was only the moral agenda pursued by the state which imposed breaks on their profession. However, in the years after the Revolt of 1857, as we shall see, proscription by the state was coupled with a drastic shift in the local perception towards these women.

Awadh's Cultural Repository

The business of consorting with the elite re-emerged in the days of Awadh's third Nawab, named Shuja-ud-Daula. Lucknow's chronicler Abdul Haleem Sharar writes that no other town in the world could compete with the elite culture of 18th-century Awadh and what embodied its sophistication was the courtesan culture (Sharar, 1975). At a time when the East India Company had usurped the Great Mughal Empire, the *tawaifs* of Awadh served as the final remnants of its *ganga-jamni tehzeeb*, marked by a rich syncretism of the Doab region's cultural and religious diversity.

Their riveting performances were attributed to extensive training in three genres of classical music namely *thumri*, *dhun* and *ragini* and the dancing variant called *kathak* (McNeil, 2009). Apart from the extended training in performing arts, under the tutelage of an *ustad*, these women also received education in philosophy, literature and behavioural ethics, thereby ensuring finesse and poise in their conduct (McNeil, 2009). Given that these women served as the repositories of culture and behavioural ethics, it became a popular practice amongst the men of Lucknow to associate with these women. A poet named Niaz Fatehpuri (as cited in Ansari, 1990) attributes the induction of his career in literature to the company of a courtesan in Lucknow. He recollects that aspiring writers and poets honoured these learned courtesans as their *muallims* or teachers (Ansari, 1990). He writes, "for further literary refinement and a training in etiquette, young men were also, in some cases, advised and encouraged to sit at the feet of courtesans" (Ansari, 1990, p. 129). Therefore, in young men, the *kotha* also found regular visitors seeking to transform into polished gentlemen. By conversing with the courtesans, men were expected to vicariously learn the decorum typical to nobility.

Apart from the preeminence *tawaifs* enjoyed in the society through their contribution to Awadh's elite lifestyle, their connection to the Shi'ite community is an equally intriguing facet of their significance in 19th century Lucknow. In pursuit of attaining sovereignty from the Sunni court of the Mughals in Delhi, Nawab Asaf-ud-Daula, the fourth Nawab of Awadh made serious endeavours to consolidate India's Shi'a capital in Lucknow. The most prominent manifestation of such attempts was the creation of Imambaras or the house of Imams in Lucknow (McNeil, 2009). These were the complexes where Shi'a congregations could be organised on occasions of mourning. On such days, *tawaifs* like lady Haidar were hired to chant in obeisance of Imam Hussein and his fellow martyrs who died at Karbala (McNeil, 2009). In return, not only did these women receive patronage, but they also enjoyed higher standing and greater social acceptance in Lucknow.

Dubbed as Prostitutes

After 1857 however, as author and historian Abdul Haleem Sharar (1975) writes in his book, *Lucknow: The Last Phase of Oriental Culture*, the *kanchanis* appear to have fallen from grace.

He describes them as women who sold their "virtues" (p. 145). An explanation for this fall could be the loss of a loyal audience in the royal court and therefore the loss of lavish patronage in the form of jewels and estates. Yet, the fall of the courtesan figure was not restricted to the loss of financial security. A systematic censuring of her thriving presence in the capital followed post-1856. In particular, two incidents corroded the grandeur of the *tawaifs*.

To begin with, the British justified the annexation of Awadh by claiming that Nawab Wajid Ali Shah was doing very little to administer the court. Instead of attending to state affairs, he was consumed with the courtesans in the apartment of Kaiserbagh (Joshi, 2001). As a result, the courtesans came to be portrayed as lecherous obstructions in the way of governance, and laws were enacted to sack them. Apart from unwanted police inspections, the Cantonment Act was passed in 1864, followed by the Contagious Disease Act of 1965. While the former deployed groups of courtesans to fixed regiments within which they could only consort with the soldiers, the latter subjected them to intrusive medical checkups to ensure no venereal disease was spread (Joshi, 2001). In this regard, the *tawaif* of Lucknow was no longer an artist par-excellence, but a commodity offering sexual pleasure. She was dubbed as a sex worker, living solely for the entertainment of British soldiers.

What served as the final blow to the already depleting status of the courtesans in Lucknow was the reorientation of the population's psyche, particularly the men's. Partha Chatterjee (2003) comments that as the British started making changes to the socio-political fabric of the country, the immediate reaction of the Indian man was to protect his private life; because to compete against the material superiority of the coloniser (exhibited in the public) would be a battle in futility. A man's private life was represented by a woman, who was at any cost to be protected from the wave of vicious Westernisation which had begun in the public realm (Chatterjee, 2003). As a result, the Indian middle-class started endorsing a chaste, maternal and domesticated "new woman" (Chatterjee, 2003, p. 321). The Muslim *tawaif*, through her sexual and economic independence, stood in direct contradiction to this newly emerging concept of femininity. If Chatterjee's "new woman" was an embodiment of the authentic Indian nation, the courtesan was a shameful remnant of the decadent Muslim past dominated by the lewd Nawabs.

Biographies and Testimonies

The Revolt of Azeezun

The central figures of the revolt of 1857 have always been men like Mangal Pandey and Kunwar Singh with few exceptions of women like Rani Laxmibai and Begum Hazrat Mahal. Yet, history evidences significant political agency on the part of courtesans in the events leading up to the rebellion, especially in Kanpur. One such woman was Azeezun Nisa who is said to have allied with the sepoys of the 2nd Cavalry. Lata Singh (2007) contends that Azeezun's association with

the cavalry was due to her intimate relations with a frontline sepoy named Shamsuddin Sawar. Yet, the narrative surrounding Azeezun reveals that her presence in the cavalry was not restricted to such conventional expectation from courtesans. Singh (2007) also reports that Azeezun's house served as a hangout spot for the sepoys, and she herself used to be "armed with pistols" while also wearing masculine clothes. Moreover, Singh contends that Azeezun was complicit in the massacre of Bibighar, wherein a large number of British mothers and their children died.

As Oldenburg (1990) writes, unlike the "pecuniary assistance to the rebels" (p. 259), a closer look into Azeezun's story reveals that courtesans were not mere informants working within the realm of gendered stereotypes. Women like Azeezun, apart from entertaining the audience through their dancing talent, were also trying to defend the occupation of their land through utmost alacrity. Not only does this gesture towards their defiant nature and the possibility of political agency, but also a subversion of the gendered division of labour in the colonial struggle.

Gauhar Jaan's Civil Disobedience

Born in the city of Azamgarh in modern-day Uttar Pradesh, Armenian Christian Gauhar Jaan was a phoenix who rose from the ashes of the 18th-century culture of *tawaif baazi* (or the prolific presence of *tawaifs*) in 18th century Lucknow. She was the supreme vocalist of colonial India and the most favoured courtesan in the royal courts. In Sharar's (1975) book, she is referred to as Munsarim Wali Gohar, who could perform on a single theme for three hours and amuse children as well as dignitaries present in Calcutta's Matiya Burj. Due to her popularity across regions, she had the privilege of travelling and learning from the different musical *gharanas* in India (Sampath, 2012).

Gauhar Jaan lived in the times when the courtesan culture was besieged by the coloniser's onslaught. Their profession was stigmatised and many were forced into the exploitative nexus of prostitution. However, Gauhar's bold and fearless personality introduced her to opportunities greater than the flimsy patronage from North India's elite. In 1902, when Gramophone Company's agent, Friedrich Gaisberg was on a search for local artists willing to record Hindustani classical songs, Gauhar Jaan was one of the first few who agreed to burn her voice on the shellac disc (Sampath, 2012). Unlike her contemporaries, including the male artists, she was willing to exploit the new technology of screaming into a "crane-like horn" attached to the wall, an experience her biographer Vikram Sampath regards to be a "musician's worst nightmare" (Sampath, 2012, pp. 159). That one step of fearlessness, however, led her to a recording career spanning over a decade. Her melodious voice garnered international fame as she also became the face of matchbox companies in Europe (Sampath, 2012).

Gauhar Jaan was also known for her eccentric personality and opulent lifestyle. Sampath reports that in Calcutta, she was infamous for being the woman who spent 20,000 rupees for a party to

celebrate the birth of her kitten's litter (Sampath, 2012). Yet, an incident that immortalised her dauntless personality and a sense of pride in her courtesan identity took place in the streets of Calcutta when a British Sir mistook her for being a *begum* (Muslim woman of the nobility). As a mark of respect, he doffed his cap at the supposed *begum*, but later when he found that she was just a *tawaif*, he banned her buggy from going around in the streets of Calcutta. However, the audacious Gauhar Jaan responded by choosing to pay a fine worth 1000 rupees each day, while continuing to go around in her Victorian buggy driven by six horses (Sampath, 2012).

Malika's Commentary

Through her biographical account, *Song Sung True: A Memoir*, Malika Pukhraj of Akhnoor appears as a woman trained to become a star. Hailing from a broken family, Malika and her mother relocated to her maternal home only a few years after her birth, as the details about her father's gambling business were revealed to the latter. Nevertheless, her mother's conviction to raise a star out of Malika and for that, provide her with the best education, pushed her to reconcile with her husband in Jammu (Pukhraj, 2003). Not only was she trained in classical music, but in Delhi, her mother ensured that Malika was trained in Kathak and sophisticated Urdu diction, especially because her mother tongue was Dogri.

Malika's family background is especially instructive in recognising the one-dimensional narrative of courtesans furthered in popular culture. As discussed earlier, various scholars have argued that in popular culture they are more often than not projected as Muslim women (Devji, 1992: Arora, 1995: Ansari, 2008). Most if not all *tawaifs* in these films are Muslims. However, Malika's identity as a Dogri Hindu from Jammu illuminates that not all courtesans in North India were Muslims and the profession was also undertaken by non-Muslim women of the region.

At the age of nine, Malika was inducted as a court performer in Dogra Ruler Maharaja Hari Singh's *durbar*. According to her, she was the "only" woman he picked to sing at his coronation ceremony (Pukhraj, 2003, p. 84). From the detailed accounts in her biography, one realises that as a courtesan, she was far from testifying the stereotypes of being lewd, salacious and sultry. Not only was her career managed by her mother, but Malika would also attend to her clients only in the presence of family and relatives. As opposed to providing sexual favours for monetary benefits, she read to them poetry, and at times even heard their poetry, while receiving gifts like lavish jewels, pet dogs, etc. (Kidwai, 2004)

Yet, what reveals deeper insights into her layered identity as a female professional, working during the peak of "colonial modernity" (Chatterjee, 1986, p. 24) is a close reading of her commentary, not only about her personal life but also the socio-cultural norms of 20th century India. At the very beginning of her book, she satirises the moral pretensions of the upper class. In a humorous incident, she recalls the eclectic wisdom of Mirpur's renowned sage Baba Roti

Ram's advice to one of his followers to wait for his wife who had eloped with a lover. Baba told this man, "She is not going to spend the rest of her life there. Let the fat one relax and indulge herself for a few days. Her appetite satisfied, she will be back in a few days. She will return" (Pukhraj, 2003, p. 2). She finds it amusing how contrary to the upper class' parochial concerns for respectability and morality, the Baba as well as the husband consider the woman's adultery as not so much of a moral transgression.

Similarly, she describes the women of Delhi's aristocracy as "strange" and "amusing" (Pukhraj, 2003, p. 47). Contrary to the hard-working women of her household, she notes that the elite women were indifferent to the household. In her description, they come across as indolent women who sit on *takhts* all day, while the maids serve them with *paan* (Pukhraj, 2003). She also finds the dramatic reactions of these women to be rather incredulous. "Completely healthy women were obsessed with convincing others that they were ill. It was fashionable to have palpitations or get headaches for the slightest of reasons," writes Pukhraj (2003, p. 47).

In her feminist reading of Malika's auto-biography, scholar Fawzia Afzal Khan (2017) regards the ending of the book as an implicit challenge to "masculinist propriety and Muslim ashrafi discourse" by refusing to label the singer Reshma's male companion as a *mehram* or the "only permissible male relations in whose company a respectable Muslim woman may be seen" (p. 57). In her book, he is identified as only a "man" who accompanied Reshma and her child to Malika's house in Lahore.

Oral Testimonies

Marriage

In popular culture, the *kotha* is often depicted as an exploitative institution with most of the *tawaifs* being conscripted via kidnapping and trafficking. A major inspiration for this trope comes from the 1899 novel *Umrao Jaan Ada* (Rusva, 1899). Serving as perhaps the most popular writing on the *tawaif* figure, Mirza Hadi Ruswa's novel is set in the bygone socio-culture opulence of Lucknow and is based on the life and trials of the enigmatic courtesan, Umrao Jaan. Oldenburg (1990) argues that the novel is not entirely biographical. Her interview with one of the courtesans named Gulbadan (who claimed to be personally associated with Ruswa), revealed that the characters of a kidnapper and an authoritarian *chaudhrayan* (or head courtesan) were works of pure invention. Besides, testimonies from her research report that various other courtesans in Lucknow have claimed reasons other than kidnapping for being in the business of consorting. These reasons are primarily related to dysfunctional marriages and atrocities at the hands of their in-laws. In various cases, courtesans have found *kothas* to be safe havens from wife beaters, alcoholics and repressive norms imposed on them due to widowhood (Oldenburg, 1990). It is important to clarify that these cases in no way dismiss kidnapping as a medium

through which the *kothas* were filled in Lucknow. Yet, what they do indicate is that kidnapping was not the only medium, and that various *tawaifs*had, through volition, chosen to embrace this lifestyle.

Additionally, Oldenburg's eyewitness accounts gesture towards the courtesans' pessimism regarding the practice of marriage. Through a skit performed in front of her, Oldenburg claims that the courtesans of Gulbadan's *kotha* rebuked the condition of the otherwise respected housewives (Oldenburg, 1990). In a courtesan's view, the existence of a housewife is deprived of dignity as her financial dependence compels her to tolerate the perils of an abusive marriage. As opposed to the housewives, the courtesans claimed to be proud owners of both, their bodies and their money (Oldenburg, 1990). These accounts therefore suggest that for courtesans, leading their lives as sex workers was better than those being led as "respected" slaves within the household. To them, a sense of ownership over oneself appeared to be paramount and this power they felt was jeopardised once women entered the domestic realm.

Sexuality

Another recurring trope in films is related to the courtesan's desire for a heterosexual union. However, what serves as the most important source for us to analyse the position of courtesans on their sexuality is the genre of Urdu poetry called Rekhti. It is "a form of erotic Urdu poetry which depicts female-female relationship as institutionalised in various ways, including in marriage like unions" (Srivastava & Shrivastava, 2007, p. 965). Ruth Vanita (2004) has illuminated rather unconventional connections between married women and courtesans in these poems. Since most of the literature that has survived is written by men, it appears that courtesans were confiding in male poets about their sexual desires regarding other women (Vanita, 2004).

However, it is argued that the content of Rekhti is not authentic enough. Katherine Schofield (2012) calls it "ventriloquism," (p. 153), i.e., reflections on women written by men for self-entertainment purposes. Yet, testimonies of courtesans from Gulbadan's *kotha* in Lucknow also show that many of them referred to themselves through the colloquialism of *chapat bazi*or lesbianism (Oldenburg, 1990). These courtesans also claimed that amongst themselves, they had found not only the closest emotional connection, but also satiating physical involvements (Oldenburg, 1990). One can argue that to assume all *tawaifs* had a queer identity only based on these conversations is a gross oversight. However, these along with other clues from Rekhti do indicate that perhaps all courtesans in North India were not necessarily dependent on involvement with men to explore their sexual desires.

By reviewing the lives and times of certain real life *tawaifs*, what remains the most striking attribute of their identity is the spirit of resistance. Whether it was Azeezun's participation in the revolt, Gauhar Jaan's disobedience against the British policies, Malika's unique backdrop and

forward thinking, or the free-spirited *tawaifs* of Gulbadan's kotha, each one of them, in their individual capacity, challenged the status quo of British rule and the resulting "bourgeois modernity" (Chatterjee, 1986, p. 24) in India.

At this juncture however, it is important to point out that these are only examples of those courtesans who have shown a non-conformist attitude. Many others may have succumbed to the onslaught of changes made to their status in the public sphere. Yet, these examples are indicative of the fact that some were professional women who chose the business without perceiving themselves to be debased and depraved. These also gesture towards some degree of individuality intrinsic to the courtesan identity. All courtesans did not have the same stories, and these stories differed from the ones disseminated through popular culture.

Film Criticism

Before proceeding to a specific enquiry into the profiling of courtesans in Hindi cinema, it will be useful to delineate the social context in which these films were made. In the section titled "History of the North Indian *Tawaif*" while borrowing from Partha Chatterjee (2003), I have briefly discussed the association between nation formation and the eviction of women from the public realm. However, a new moral dimension emerges when gender roles are studied in tandem with the rise of India's middle-class. Kumkum Sangri and Sudaish Vaid (2003) implicate the role of a self-defining middle class in the process of disempowering and subjugating Indian women. The middle-class identity was analogous to the issues of respectability particularly amongst the women and exerted hegemonic influence on their sexuality (Sangri & Vaid, 2003). The "new woman" (Chatterjee, 2003) as a preserver of middle-class morality was to remain in the inner courtyard of the house and participate in only conjugal sex.

Film scholar Neepa Majumdar (2009) notes similar anxieties regarding the presence of female performers in the public sphere. The Indian masses were convinced that the industry could not function as a heterosexual workplace due to the voyeuristic ideology it thrived on. As a result, when female actors made their way into the business, it would have been binding on the directors to surround them with narratives upholding the middle-class norms (Majumdar, 2009). The courtesan character posed a two-pronged challenge to such interests of Hindi cinema. Apart from being a woman, she was also a public entertainer who was, by the onset of the 20th century, regarded as an icon of promiscuity. Therefore, in order to depict a character like this and appeal to middle-class conventions, various reconfigurations of the courtesan figure had to be ensured.

In Kamal Amrohi's *Pakeezah* (1972), the reconfiguration is secured through the very name of the character. While carrying the warrant of purity in her name, Pakeezah (Meena Kumari) is a *pak* or pure soul entrapped in the debased and vile *kotha*. Despite being the most famous performer in Lucknow, she fails to take pride in it. When a colleague in the kotha expresses her desire to

swap lives with Pakeezah, she says, “Do take it. Even if you don’t return it”. Even though other women envy her, she knows better than the others that her life is not worthy of envy. Pakeezah is portrayed as a woman with the complex of being a *tawaif*. Her feelings of inferiority reach the zenith after lecherous men recognise her in the streets, causing her to run away even from her lover Saleem (Raaj Kumar). Unlike Pakeezah who has an inferiority complex, Umrao Jaan is a self-assured courtesan who takes pride in her singing and dancing skills. Filmmaker Muzaffar Ali dismisses Amrohi’s critique of a debased *kotha* by replacing it with Khannum Jaan’s (Shaukat Azmi) haven-like *kotha*. For a five-year-old Umrao, Khannum’s *kotha* not only serves as a solace from the trauma of abduction but also from the alienation a grown-up Umrao feels after her family disowns her. In the end, after being abandoned by the men, family and society, the music, dance and poetry of the *kotha*, appear to soothe her wounds.

Ali’s *Umrao Jaan* (1981) is a perfect example of the “Muslim courtesan” genre articulated by Bhaskar and Allen (2009). The fundamental motivation underlying this genre is not to explore the journey of the courtesan so much, but the historical era that she represents (Bhaskar & Allen, 2009). The artistic potential of the *kotha* is emphasised through lavish sets, rich costumes and precious jewels. Umrao serves as a repository of the glorious Muslim culture, whose purpose in the narrative is to take the audience on a nostalgic trip to Awadh before 1857. She has agency in so far as it represents the cultural significance of the *tawaif*. Therefore, the men are also attracted to her artistic capabilities before anything else, as opposed to Pakeezah, whose relationship with Saleem has idiopathic roots.

A film that takes a leap in the realistic representation of a courtesan is Shyam Benegal’s, *Sardari Begum* (1996). Benegal’s portrayal of Sardari (Kirron Kher) is intricate and layered. It is both metaphorically and literally (through her niece Tehzeeb’s (Rajina Raj Bisaria) investigative journalism) a search for the courtesan identity in a post-1947 India, hegemonized by middle-class standards of morality. Unlike Pakeezah and Umrao Jaan, Sardari’s identity is not about complying with the existing social norms. She is an icon of that female autonomy which continues to operate in a sexually imbalanced socio-political milieu, and in the process constructs its niche of rights and freedom. Sardari’s identity as a courtesan is so important to the narrative that it lives on even after her death. In what seems like an export of her agency to her niece, Tehzeeb, refuses to rewrite Sardari’s life in a communal context, implying the supremacy of Sardari’s identity as a *tawaif*.

Unlike, the marital teleology of narrative pursued in Pakeezah and Umrao Jaan, Benegal’s pursuit is not to redeem the courtesan figure through a heterosexual union. On the contrary, Sardari is written as against the institution of marriage. Sardari’s relationship with her daughter is strained especially because of her disapproval of romantic love and marriage. Sardari mirrors the courtesans from Gulbadan’s *kotha* (Oldenburg, 1990), who likened the household with a life of

captivity and indignity. In what seems like her open proclamation against the institution of marriage, she says to an admirer, “It is not in me to be a loyal, obedient and subservient wife.”

Therefore, the question to ask is if a realistic portrayal of a courtesan like Sardari Begum is possible, why have the identities of Pakeezah and Umrao Jaan been sacrificed? Resulting from the Indian nationalist discourse of the 20th century, the norms of modern patriarchy came to redefine not only conceptions of femininity but also reconfigured the role of men in the country. While women were forced into the inner sanctum of domesticity, middle-class men emerged first as protectors of these women and also, as heroes who would reverse stereotypes of “non-martial” men (Banerjee, 2003, p. 171). Apart from the physical strength required against the omnipotent coloniser, the renewed disposition of a man was rooted in a resilient moral positioning (Banerjee, 2005). With its objective of gaining popularity, Hindi Cinema of the years post 1947 sought to champion such configuration of gender. Jyotika Virdi notes how Hindi films “circulated notions of national identity” and constructed a “collective consciousness of nationhood” by making both literal and metaphorical socio-cultural references (Virdi, 2003, p. 7). Thus, if the motivation was to elicit the imagery of an Indian utopia, it was impossible to depict the female figure as resisting hegemonic male control. Violation of such gender roles would not be appreciated by the national population. As a result, the introduction of men in Umrao’s life, and the accompanying quest for love, compounds her courtesan identity. Even though Umrao is given agency in terms of her artistic clout, when aspects of her life are juxtaposed against the Nawab’s (Farooq Sheikh), the narrative is shifted to the masculine.

Consider the official poster of Umrao Jaan in Figure 1. Given that it is a still from her performance in the song *“In Ankhon ki Masti,”* the courtesan is depicted in a moment of self-indulgence and vanity. She looks bold while radiating confidence and artistic finesse. While being dressed in immaculate fabrics and precious jewels, she is also positioned under an opulent chandelier made of glass. With such elements in place, Umrao is made to appear as the emblem of aristocratic Lucknow’s sophisticated and rich culture. However, the agency she enjoys through her talent is immediately transferred as Nawab Sultan’s gaze falls upon her in Figure 2. Film scholar Laura Mulvey (1999) contends that popular cinema is conceived for the entertainment of the male spectator only. Through spectatorship, as the masculine audience ensures narcissistic association with the male characters, he comes to virtually control the female body. As a result, females are portrayed as passive entities, while men wield maximum power and agency (Mulvey, 1999). Therefore, in Figure 2, Umrao’s juxtaposition against the Nawab is coterminous with her loss of the individual self. She is no longer Lucknow’s famous *tawaif*, but a woman who is in love with the Nawab.

Similarly, in Pakeezah, although she starts as a lively *tawaif*, alluring the audience by performing to songs like *Inhi Logon Ne*, as soon as she falls in love with Saleem, each subsequent song in the film projects her diminishing pride and spirit. The 1972 film also stars Ashok Kumar and

Raaj Kumar in pivotal roles. Although Ashok Kumar as Shahabuddin has a cameo of a little over thirteen minutes, his character is shown to be unable to fulfil roles which Hindi film heroes are conventionally expected to. As Shahabuddin fails to marry Pakeezah's mother Nargis (also Meena Kumari), the task of rescuing love is passed on to Saleem in the form of his commitment to marry Pakeezah. It was imperative on the part of Saleem (the hero) to marry and rescue Pakeezah from the degraded lifestyle of the *kotha*. Thus, in all popular posters of Pakeezah, Saleem is omnipresent. Although both characters are adequately represented in the posters, in Figure 3, the film's protagonist, Pakeezah, is placed in the middle ground with Saleem's face in the foreground gazing upon her. The still which is from her performance to *Inhi Logon Ne*, gives some degree of agency to Pakeezah. However, as soon as Saleem's presence is recognised, she is stripped of her agency. Saleem appears to be conveying feelings of fright and dilemma. As the hero of the film, he carries a weight on his shoulders, to rescue the *tawaif* from the lecherous gaze of the men sitting in the *kotha*. Similarly, in Figure 4, Saleem again appears to be the person in power. While seeming distraught by her own existence, Pakeezah takes refuge in Saleem's arms. His hand on her head implies the support and protection she seeks from him. It also conveys Saleem's conviction to reclaim her lost dignity by accepting her. In a melodramatic narrative like Pakeezah therefore, not only is a woman's morality ironically brought out through a *tawaif's* lack thereof, but the narrative adequately manifests the moral righteousness expected from the Hindi film hero as well.

In contrast, despite living in a patriarchal environment surrounded by assertive men, Sardari's relationship with each one of them is contingent on her will. Not only does she eschew her familial ties to fulfil her musical ambition, but her decision to consort with Hemraj (Amrish Puri) also follows from volition. Sardari is a courtesan completely intolerant towards external authority. As soon as she realises that Hemraj's affection towards her was more or less physical, with minimal regard for her musical talent, she leaves him. More so, she chooses to move to Delhi, only after Sadiq bribes her with career prospects and a broader audience, appreciative of her artistic worth. Benegal's portrayal of Sardari is rooted in critical interaction with what constituted the monolithic nationalist conception of independent India. He attempts to criticise the status-quo perpetuated by the moral concerns of India's middle-class, and create avenues of representation for women excised from society. Therefore, in Figure 5, Sardari is portrayed free from the male gaze, not only while performing but also in conversation with the chief courtesan Ittan Bai (Surekha Sikri). In Figure 6, while Hemraj is seen to be watching Sardari, his masculine gaze is compensated by another woman's gaze upon her as well. Both posters depict the courtesan's conception of self in isolation. She is engrossed in her performance with no regard for the people watching.

However, as expounded by Benegal himself, it was difficult to offer an alternate depiction of women when cinema itself reflected the "traditional view……acceptable for the audience" (Deshpande, 2017, p. 25). While it was hard for alternate depictions to get advocates amongst the

Indian masses, Benegal along with some other filmmakers like Mrinal Sen and Satyajit Ray received impetus as their movement for an alternative cinema conflated with the reformative concerns of the state-run National Film Development Corporation of India (Prasad, 1998). As the government came to sponsor these films, a new wave of cinema seeking to question and, in that process, subvert hegemonic social perceptions emerged. Since alternative cinema was not concerned about the audience's entertainment, it never attracted a mass audience (Prasad, 1998). Needless to say, therefore, *Pakeezah* and *Umrao Jaan* went on to make huge profits and become the exemplars of the courtesan figure in Hindi cinema, while *Sardari Begum* charted out a different niche for itself, much like the *tawaifs* in history.

Conclusion

An overview of the courtesan culture in India reveals that these women comprised a dominant female elite occupying the Muslim courts of North India. As exceptional singers and dancers, the courtesans had managed to stay relevant for centuries and amass substantial court patronage along with socio-cultural clout. Due to their erudite personalities, they were sought after by Awadh's noblemen, as any form of association with them was considered a mark of social prestige. While such descriptions in history suggest that the courtesans were preservers of culture and etiquette, this is only a thimbleful of what these women comprised.

The *tawaifs* do not only configure as a separate category from the prostitutes but also from any other brand of women they coexisted with. As India's nationalist consciousness grew increasingly anxious about the purity of its women, immediate measures were taken by the natives to push women further inwards. However, the story of the performing women of North India is not one of horizontal surrender to the combined forces of middle-class nationalism and the accompanying moral standards. History reveals instances of *tawaifs* like Azeezun and Gauhar Jaan who defended their identities against the onslaught of unsolicited moral regulations and in that process, created a niche of defiance against external authority. Malika Pukhraj's memoir reveals her own insights on India's post-colonial society and especially the incomplete project of bourgeois modernity. Besides, the testimonies from Oldenburg's (1990) essay show that they conceived their identities different from the other so-called "respected" women. Their identities as courtesans lay separate from the gendered role of a "housewife". Moreover, as evidenced by accounts of lesbianism, it appears that some courtesans did not define themselves in opposition to the other sex. In other words, their conceptions of self were not necessarily derived from the male gaze.

However, despite having enjoyed such a multifaceted existence in her real life, the courtesan figure has been dubbed by Hindi cinema as a stereotypical Hindi film heroine. In pursuit of making cinema palatable for the national population, the popular industry seeks to uphold the norms of hegemonic masculinity. For this reason, every instance of Umrao and Pakeezah being

juxtaposed with the male figures in the film follows the sacrifice of their agency. The *tawaif* finds scope to express herself only through her cultural attributes of song and dance, but as soon as she is subjected to the male gaze, her existence is relegated to passivity. Moreover, the tropes of marital teleology and social redemption are also deployed to favour the hero's portrayal. Since the Hindi film hero is expected to be morally upright, it is binding on him to marry the courtesan and redeem her in the eyes of the people (as seen in Pakeezah), for if he cannot marry her, the courtesan will lead a life of suffering like Umrao Jaan.

Nevertheless, a new wave of alternative films enabled a portrayal that was closer to the realities of these women. As discussed earlier, the history of these *tawaifs* was dominated by themes of defiance and resistance. Such themes prove befitting for Hindi cinema's alternate variant, as it seeks to use the medium of films to challenge the social status-quo with limited concern for pleasure. Benegal's depiction of a courtesan named Sardari Begum, therefore, explores the non-compliant facet of her existence, while also devolving maximum agency to her. The initiative is not to overturn the social norms and cause a revolution. Instead, much like the courtesans of history, the film portrays Sardari as a figure resisting the monolithic conceptions of morality in her limited capacity, only to preserve her distinct identity and lifestyle.

Acknowledgements

I extend my gratitude to Professor Afshan Majid and Professor Suchetana Banerjee for guiding me throughout the process of documenting this research.

References

Afzal-Khan, F. (2017). The respectable courtesan: Malka Pukhraj, music and the postcolonial nation. *Performing Women, 6*(1), 41-59. https://doi.org/10.1386/pi.6.1.41_1

Ali, M. (Director). (1981). *Umrao Jaan* [Film]. Integrated Films.

Amrohi, K. (Director). (1972). *Pakeezah* [Film]. Kamalistan.

Ansari, K. H. (1990). *The emergence of socialist thought among North Indian Muslims.* Shirkat Printing Press.

Ansari, U. (2008). "There are thousands drunk by the passion of these eyes". Bollywood's Tawa'if narrating the nation and "The Muslim". *South Asia: Journal of South Asian Studies, 31*(2), 290–316. https://doi.org/10.1080/00856400802192929

Arora, P. (1995). Sanctioned and proscribed narratives in India cinema: A bicultural reading of the courtesan film. In K. Myrsiades & J. Mcguire (Eds.), *Order and partialities: Theory, pedagogy and the "postcolonial"* (pp. 59-85). State University of New York Press.

Badauni, A. Q. (1884). *Muntakhab-ut-Tawarikh* (W.H. Lowe, Trans., Vol. II). Baptist Mission Press. (Original work published 1864).

Banerjee, S. (2003). Gender and nationalism: The masculinization of Hinduism, and female political participation in India. *Women's Studies International Forum, 26*(2), 167–179. https://doi.org/10.1016/S0277-5395(03)00019-0

Banerjee, S. (2005). *Make me a man: Masculinity, Hinduism, and nationalism in India*. State University of New York Press.

Bano, S. (2009). Women performers and prostitutes in Medieval India. *Proceedings of the Indian History Congress*, *70*, 251-265. http://www.jstor.org/stable/44147673

Benegal, S. (Director). (1996). *Sardari Begum* [Film]. Plus Films.

Bernier, F. (1916). *Travels in the Mogul empire: A.D. 1656-1668* (I. Brock, C. Archibald George. & V. A. Smith, Trans.) Oxford University Press.

Bhaskar, I. & Allen, A. (2009). *Islamicate cultures of Bombay cinema*. Tulika Books.

Booth, G. D. (2007). Making a woman from a Tawaif: Courtesans as heroes in Hindi Cinema. *New Zealand Journal of Asian Studies, 9*(2), pp. 1-26. https://pdfs.semanticscholar.org/4f25/47d3351d3676f96afe94edfa965e75bde5b6.pdf

Chatterjee, P. (1986). *Nationalist thought and the colonial world: A derivative discourse?* Oxford University Press.

Chatterjee, P. (2003). The nationalist resolution of the woman's question. In Kumkum S. & Sudesh, V (Eds.), *Recasting women: Essays in Indian colonial history* (pp. 306-333). Zubaan Publications.

Crooke, W. (1896). *The Tribes and Castes of the North-Western Provinces and Oudh* (Vol. 4). Calcutta: Superintendent of Government Printing.

Deshpande, R. (2017, November 16). Interview with Shyam Benegal. *Harvard Business School.* https://www.hbs.edu/creating-emerging-markets/interviews/Pages/profile.aspx?profile=sbenegal

Devji, F. F. (1992). Hindu/Muslim/Indian. *Public Culture, 5*(1), 1–18. https://doi.org/10.1215/08992363-5-1-1

Figure (1). Bollywood Movie Posters. (n.d.). Pakeezah Poster. [Online Image]. Retrieved February 8, 2021, from https://bollywoodmovieposters.com/shop/old-indian-movie-posters-for-sale/pakeezah/

Figure (2). Shenoy, G. (2006). Vintage Bollywood Movie Poster: Pakeezah (1970's). [Online Image]. Retrieved February 8, 2021, fromhttps://www.flickr.com/photos/37044676@N00/259410269/in/set-72157594311129200/

Figure (3). Tallenge. (n.d.). Umrao Jaan – Classic Hindi Movie Poster – Tallenge Bollywood Poster Collection – Framed Prints. [Online Image]. Retrieved February 8, 2021, fromhttps://www.tallengestore.com/products/umrao-jaan-classic-hindi-movie-poster-tallenge-bollywood-poster-collection-framed-prints

Figure (4). Bollywoodirect. (2019). 'Umrao Jaan', A Ghazal on Celluloid. [Online Image]. Retrieved February 8, 2021, from https://bollywoodirect.medium.com/umrao-jaan-a-ghazal-on-celluloid-182d86cd01b0

Figure (5). IMDB. (n.d.). Sardari Begum (1996). [Online Image]. Retrieved February 8, 2021, from https://www.imdb.com/title/tt0286942/

Figure (6). Osianama. (n.d.). Sardari Begum. [Online Image]. Retrieved February 8, 2021, fromhttp://osianama.com/indian-film-cinema-publicity-memorabilia/lobby-window-cards/sardari-begum-1997-0814982?mastid=55420

Freitag, S. B. (2002). Visions of the nation: Theorizing the nexus between creation, consumption, and participation in the public sphere. In R. Dwyer & C. Pinne (Eds.), *Pleasure and the nation: The history, politics and consumption of public culture in India* (pp. 35-76). Oxford University Press.

Hubel, T. (2012). From Tawa'if to wife? Making sense of Bollywood's courtesan genre. *Department of English Publications, 137,* 213-233. https://ir.lib.uwo.ca/englishpub/137

Joshi, S. (2001). *Fractured modernity: Making of a middle class in colonial North India*. Oxford University Press.

Kesavan, M. (1994). Urdu, Awadh and the Tawaif: The Islamicate roots of Hindi cinema. In Z. Hasan (Eds.), *Forging identities: Gender, communities and the State in India*. (pp. 244-257). Westview.

Kidwai, S. (2004, August). The singing ladies find a voice. *Seminar*. https://india-seminar.com/2004/540/540%20saleem%20kidwai.htm

Majumdar, N (2009). *Wanted cultured ladies only: Female stardom and cinema in India, 1930s–1950s*. University of Illinois Press.

Manucci, N. (1904). *Storia do Mogor: Or Mogul India 1653-1708* (W. Irvine, Trans., Vol. IV). John Murray. (Original work published 17th century).

McNeil, A. (2009). Tawa'if, military musicians and Shi'a ideology in pre-rebellion Lucknow. *South Asia: Journal of South Asian Studies, 32*(1), 46-42. http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/00856400802709276

Mulvey, L (1999). Visual pleasure and narrative Cinema. In L. Braudy & M. Cohen (Eds.), *Film Theory and Criticism* (5th ed, pp. 57-68). Oxford University Press.

Oldenburg, V. (1990). Lifestyle as resistance: The case of the courtesans of Lucknow, India. *Feminist Studies, 16*(2), 259-287. https://doi.org/10.2307/3177850

Prasad, M. (1998). *Ideology of the Hindi film: A historical construction*. Oxford University Press.

Pukhraj, M. (2003). *Song sung true: A memoir.* (S. Kidwai, Trans.). Zubaan Publications.

Rhodes, G. D. (2007). The origin and development of the American moving picture poster. *Film History, 19*(3), 228-246. https://www.jstor.org/stable/25165429

Ruswa, M. H. (1899). Umrao Jaan Ada. Lucknow: Gulab Munshi & Sons Press

Sampath, V. (2012). *My name is Gauhar Jaan: The life and times of a musician.* Rupa Publications.

Sangari, K & Vaid, S. (2003). Recasting women: An introduction. In Kumkum S. & Sudesh, V (Eds.), *Recasting women: Essays in Indian colonial history* (pp. 1-34). Zubaan Publications.

Schofield, K. B. (2012). The Courtesan tale: Female musicians and dancers in Mughal historical chronicles, c.1556-1748. *Gender & History, 24*(1), 150–171.https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1468-0424.2011.01673.x

Sharar, A. H. (1975). *Lucknow: The last phase of an Oriental culture* (E. S. Harcourt &, F. Hussain, Trans.) Paul Elek.

Singh, L. (2007). Courtesans and the 1857 Revolt: Role of Azeezun in Kanpur. *Indian Historical Review, 34*(2), 58–78. https://doi.org/10.1177%2F037698360703400204

Srivastava, M., & Shrivastava, M. (2007). Lesbianism in nineteenth-century erotic Urdu poetry "Rekhti". *Proceedings of the Indian History Congress, 68*, 965-988. http://www.jstor.org/stable/44147904

Vanita, R. (2004). "Married among their companions": Female homoerotic relations in nineteenth-century Urdu Rekhti poetry in India. *Journal of Women's History, 16*(1), 12–53. https://doi.org/10.1353/jowh.2004.0038

Vanita, R. (2018). *Dancing with the nation: Courtesans in Bombay cinema*. Bloomsbury.

Virdi, J (2003). *The cinematic ImagiNation: Indian popular films as social history*. Rutgers University Press.