



THE MAKING OF UMRAO JAAN ADA I

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ABSTRACT

The novel, Umrao Jaan Ada which recounts the life story of a courtesan of nineteenth century Lucknow, is one of the best known and best loved works of early Urdu fiction. Its authors Mirza Muhammed Hadi Ruswa was born in Lucknow around the time of the 1857 'Indian mutiny', which was a significant turning point not only in the life of princely states like Avadh but in the history of the country. After finishing his education, he was appointed as a teacher in the central high school and then in the Christian college of Lucknow. he soon developed an interest in chemistry and other modern sciences such as psychology and logic and gave up his teaching career in order to pursue them. Like many contemporaries he wrote Urdu poetry and seems to have acquired a reasonable reputation for his verse many lines of which embellish his novel. He also turned his attention to Urdu prose fiction, which embellish his novel. he also turned his attention to Urdu prose fiction which in time of youth was something fairly new and produced several short novels. Apart from Umrao Jaan Ada however, the rest of his work is now little read. It is interesting also to note that he is credited with the invention of an Urdu system of shorthand which some would have us believe he used for writing down Umrao's dictated story. But whether Umrao Jaan Ada actually existed or not is something we do not know in his later years, Ruswa moved to Hyderabad, where he worked for translation bureau known as the Dor ut Tarjuma which was founded by the nizams government. He died there in 1931.

INTRODUCTION

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Like many of his fellow citizens, Ruswa had a high regard for the culture of Lucknow, which as he remarks on several occasions in his novel, he felt had greatly declined in the years following the mutiny. Indeed, his admiration for the customs and manners of Lucknow, and above all for the exquisite language of its inhabitants, is shared by many of his contemporary writers, whose works frequently idealize the era of the nawabs which they had not experienced but of which they had not experienced but of which simply by being Lakhnavi they felt they were a part.

The sultanate of Avadh of which Lucknow was the capital was established in the first decades of the 18th century by rulers calling themselves nawabs who originated from the Khorasan province of Iran. The first seat of government was in the town of Faizabad some forty miles to the north of Lucknow. the nawab Shuja Ud Daula (1754- 1775) careful not to waste too much of his money on grandiose architecture, constructed low temporary buildings, known as Bangla – it was here that Umrao Jaan Ada was born and in her first encounter with the procuress Khanam she refers to her birth place Bangla. Shuja Ud Daula’s successor, Asaf-Ud -Daula moved the capital to a site on the river Gomti, which according to some was known as Lakshman Tila, ‘The Mound of Lakshman’, the younger brother of Lord Rama. In time it is said, the Sanskrit name Lakshman developed in to Laknau spelt in English as Lucknow.

Being of Persia origin, the rulers of the Avadh Sulthnate were Shias those Muslims, who having espoused the cause of the prophet’s kinsman, Ali, and his son, Husain, broke away from the orthodox Sunni caliphs, and followed their own leaders the imams. One of the most prominent edifices in Lucknow is the great imam bara. House of the imams, built during the reign of Asaf Ud Daula, where every year during the month of Moharram. Shia’s gather to mourn the death of imam Hussain who was martyred as the battle of karbala in 679 A.D.

The province of Avadh and its capital soon became extremely rich and after nadir shah’s devastating attack on Delhi in 1739, many noble families of that once splendid city moved eastwards to seek their fortunes there. In their wake followed some of Delhi’s most distinguished poets, who in search of patronage brought with them their own language and culture.

Until the fall of Avadh in 1857, Lucknow remained the undisputed cultural center of the Urdu speaking world renowned not only for its sweet language and verse but also for its music and dance, in which the courtesans, known as tawaifs, played an important part.

These courtesans were no ordinary prostitutes and their best were highly skilled practioners of the arts, who could command vast sums for their performances and the other favours. As

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Umrao Jaan notes in the concluding pages of her account, courtesans often caused the ruin of some of the most illustrious Nobel families of the city. Even now many descendants of such families who still cling to the title nawab will recall with some nostalgic fondness how their forbears were impoverished through their extravagance and profligacy.

The courtesan began her training in her childhood with a through grounding in classical Persian and Arabic reading the standard works under the tutelage of a maulvi. The books mentioned in the novel, such as the Gulistan and Buston of the 13th century Persian poet, Sadi, remained on the traditional school well in to the 20th century and many people still alive in India and Pakistan would have been brought up on them.

Maulvis, technically men who have studied the Quran and are qualified to impart religious instruction were far from being dry clerics and were very much part of the fabric of society. They usually married, and as we can see from the novel even formed Liaisons with courtesans. Besides Indian classical music and dance, the courtesan would also be encouraged to develop a taste for Persian and Urdu poetry. The mushaira or poetic gathering to which poets are invited to recite their compositions can still attract large audiences.

However no single feature of the Hindustani popular film baffles serious international critics more than its sound track, especially “those songs” as Satyajit ray had remarks.

REFERENCES:

1. Mirza Asadullah Beg Khan (1797-1869); Ghalib ‘Victorians’ is a pen name.
2. This recent history of the ghzal as a song lyric has been traced by Peter Manuel, 1991.
3. Such as Devdas, Bimal Roy, 1955, and Sahib, bibi aur Ghulam/King, queen and knave, Abrar Alvi, 1861.