

Muzzafar Ali's *Umrao Jaan*: The Life of a Courtesan as a Form of Cultural Representation

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Abstract: Courtesan culture in India is as old as its history. It originated in the courts of Hindu kings and later became the life of the courts of *nawabs*. Muhammad Hadi Ruswa in his novel *Umrao Jaan Ada* (1905) narrates the story of Umrao in the backdrop of rich Muslim culture. The film based on this novel revolves around Umrao, an epitome of beauty and grace. The present paper tends to focus on the her life as a powerful expression of cultural representation.

Keywords: Courtesan, Muslim Culture, Cinema, Customs.

For centuries the authors of fiction as well as cinema directors have been influenced by the cultural aspects of a society and have presented the same in their respective works. Cinema, being a very potent medium represents diverse areas that are closely associated with our lives. It is that aspect of art which concerns its relationship with the world around it and communicates the social and cultural expressions of the time. The films of various kinds have become the archives of cultural records. There have been a wide range of period films that have tried to showcase the culture of the bygone days. One such film is Muzaffar Ali's *Umrao Jaan* (1981), derived from Mohammad Hadi Ruswa's novel *Umrao Jaan Ada* (1885) based on the life of a courtesan Umrao Jaan. It is rightly assumed, "Behind each artist stand the cathedral, the library and the museum. Behind each form is a conquest, a taking over, an incorporation a further development of another previously existing from whose traces it bears"¹. Undoubtedly, behind cinema stands literature whose traces it bears since its inception. Surely there are certain differences in the narration of a novel and the production of a film. But the aim is to present a picture of a society and both are the authentic mediums of representation. In the movie Muzaffar Ali uses the cinematic technique to recount the story of Umrao Jaan, the famous courtesan of Lucknow in the mid-nineteenth century. The movie can be class as one of the most popular 'courtesan films'. With the certain amount of freedom he chooses and selects some of the details that reflect the culture of that time. And it takes the reader to see the life of courtesan in the social and cultural context. To begin with, the first scene of the film is Ameeran's (Umrao's) engagement which brings out the rich Muslim tradition alive. Ameeran dressed in red colour *shalwar kameez*, with traditional Muslim jewellery, head covered, rose garland tied around her wrist. The presentation of the engagement ceremony here manifests the Muslim tradition at large. Firstly the purdah culture that dominates the lives of women of those times is shown, as the house is separated into *mardana* and *Zenana*. The songs sung by the women on this occasion mirror the Muslim tradition and

culture. The rituals related to marriage or child birth or death is not only ways to present culture, there are certain other ways and habits that are the reflections of a particular culture. As culture is what we are and explains what we do. In T.S. Eliot's opinion:

Culture is not single entity which one can aim to achieve. It is the product of variety of more or less harmonious activities each pursued for its own sake... we must look for culture not in any individual or in any group of individuals, but in the pattern of the society as a whole. (1962:22)

In the film Muzzafar Ali depicts certain familiar and conventional customs and games; perhaps the purpose behind this is to make the viewers aware of the Muslim culture. In the free time courtesans in the film are shown engaged in recreation of *Chopar* game. Muzzafar Ali throws light on the game of *kabutarbazi* in detail. *Kabutarbazi* is one of the cultural ingredients like *patangbazi*, *chopar* and other similar games that have contributed to the richness of the Muslim culture at large. The very second shot of the film presents Ameeran's father in the act of releasing his pigeons for some daily exercise. This scene reminds one of Ahmed Ali's novel *Twilight in Delhi* (1940) where the character khwaja Saheb used to exercise this practice. Ahmed Ali in the novel articulates the concept in this manner:

Pigeons have to be trained to fly in flocks, to shoot like arrows, to mingle with other flocks and bring other people's pigeon's home with them. They have to be very fast and quick. They have to learn the sign of the flag and to recognize the sound of the whistle and the voice of the master. (1966:104)

The pigeon flying was one of the passions of Muslims and it is said that it leads to develop variety of species of pigeon². In the movie the pigeon scene is very crucial, not because it presents the cultural slice of that time, but also because it is symbolic of the coming event that will change the life of Ameeran. At this point Dilawar Khan, the villain captures Ameeran's father's one of the pigeons called Shirazi³. The act of capturing the pigeon signifies Ameeran's kidnapping too. The plight of an innocent girl could be well imagined. In the novel *Umrao Jaan Ada*, the novelist explains the situation, "Said the bird to the fowler. It's my first night in the cage; let me beat my wings only against the bars" (2005:33). As the fate of a girl child is always uncertain. The language of fear speaks through the eyes of Ameeran and communicates to the viewers her changed fate through the location of a camera:

As a medium, film needs to be considered as a phenomenon very much like language. It has no codified grammar, it has no enumerated vocabulary, it doesn't even have very specific rules of usage... but it nevertheless does perform many of the same functions of communications as language does. (2009:72)

The proper use of sound, setting and facial expressions work as language. Dilawar sells Ameeran (Umrao) to Khanum Jaan's brothel in Lucknow. Lucknow was one of the great centres of Muslim culture. The city reflects the high standards of dancing, singing, poetry and courtly etiquette. Ashok Mitra states, "Lucknow was a sleepy town of impeccable Mughal

heritage. It was the epicenter of grace in social intercourse, known for its patronage of Hindustani music and Urdu poetry. The *Talukdar* cult defined the place" (2002:IX-XII). This was the city known for its nawabi etiquettes and *tehzeeb*. As the scene shifts from Faizabad to Lucknow, from Ameeran's house to khanum Jaan's *kotha*, the courtesan culture becomes all pervasive. As the birth of a courtesan was again the demand of the Indian Muslim culture of *nawabs*. In the patriarchal society with strict purdah system where household was divided into *Zenana* and *Mardana* sections. Courtesans were the only sources of entertainment to them. Meeting with one's own wife anytime during the day was not appreciated even, as it was considered disobedience towards the elders. The ladies of the house somehow used to adjust themselves in the daily household activities but for men the scope was limited. As a result they turned towards courtesans who used to provide them not only with entertainment and fun but also keep their rich culture alive through their ways and manners. The scene of Ameeran entering the *kotha* with large courtyard decorated with floral designs that are unique to Islamic art and architecture, the *mehrab*s and *minars* and the flock of pigeons all display the rich *Kotha* culture. "The pigeons are significant because they are associated with the refined uselessness of *Lakhnavi* leisure, they symbolise the decadent obsessions of an elite" (1942:252). It is in the *Kotha* that Ameeran is given the name Umrao Jaan. Muzaffar Ali has very beautifully captured and presented the exotic world of *kotha* with the code of conduct, *nazakat* etiquettes, dresses and architecture that are the images of Muslim culture. The flavour of Lafz 'e' haroof is evident throughout the film. Greeting words like *tashrif*, *giloni*, *izzazat*, *adab*, *bismillah*, *mehfil* and the swear words like *nigode*, *Allah kare tumhe hejja ho jaye*, *marjani*, etc. echo throughout in the film. The life of a courtesan is associated with wealth, luxury and refined society. Muzaffar Ali's focuses on the images of the glorious and cultured past, through the courtesan's life. As Rachel Dwyer writes, "it was courtesan, who knew the intricacies of culture and the delicacies of language and poetry" (2002:206). The courtesan became the fascinating center of culture activities. the Muslim community attaches great value to manners, etiquette and refinement:

If *Awadhi* lore is to be taken seriously, it was the courtesan who undertook the social education of the sons of the gentry. She taught them a proper appreciation of the finer things in life: music, dance, conversation and etiquette- the legendary courtliness of *Awadhi* manners, Lucknow's *nazakat* and *tehzeeb* were her stock-in-trade.(1994:253)

One is reminded of Attia Hosain's novel *Sunlight on a Broken Column* (1961) where Lailla the protagonist who comes from the nawabi family reminiscences that in her childhood her father use to take her to Mushtari Bai, a courtesan to learn etiquette and to copy Mushtari Bai's courtly salutations. Apart from this rich even keep them as mistresses. These courtesans were called to perform on certain occasions. For instance, in the film Umrao is called to perform at the birthday celebration of Begum Sahiba's son. The courtesan has been a popular figure, where her attractions give rise to a variety of pleasures to the

audience. In the movies Umrao is given the vigorous training of fine arts especially singing and dancing. The lessons of music are initiated by invoking the name of Allah and tying a thread on the wrist of the newly initiated disciple, Umrao. Through this scene Muzaffar Ali highlights the *Ustad-Shagird* institution, which is common feature of Hindu as well as Muslim culture. The naive looking Ameeran transforms into beautiful Umrao, who is an accomplished dancer and a poet. In the novel Umrao Jaan Ada when asked about her taste for poetry Umrao replies in her poetic manner, "when God decides to give a woman a lovely face/he should add beauty of speech and writing to her grace" (2005:75). Muzaffar Ali chooses Rekha to play Umrao, as the culture demand is that a courtesan has to be beautiful. The combination of beautiful actress and incorporation of music, poetry and dance into the story are important but the viewers also enjoy the spectacle of her body, together with elaborate setting, costumes, that take them back to the disappearance of the courtesan culture. Umrao presents the *ada* and the *nazakat* of a courtesan through her manners and *mujra* songs.

The first *mujra* song of the film presents Umrao as an epitome of beauty. As the need and demand of the country culture she is dressed in a traditional red colour costume. The Anarkali costume again depicts the Muslim culture. As Anwar Huda writes, "Costume tells the time of the story and suggests its genre. The perfect and the beautiful costume decorates the actors and they embellish the screen" (2004:157). In the *mujra* Umrao's head is draped, she is wearing traditional courtesan jewellery and her hands and feet adorned with *altash* which enliven the Muslim culture on the screen. Her manner and ways present the courtly culture of Lucknow. The *kotha* replete with culture artifacts is a reminder of a dominant Muslim culture, nurtured and preserved through certain societal norms. The chandeliers, the carpets, the big dancing halls, alluring interior decoration, lamps, burning candles with velvet curtains, paintings displaying Mughal culture, *hookas*, *pandaans* and the musical instruments like *tabala* and *sarangi* all bring up Muslim setting alive. On the one hand the film romanticizes Umrao's life with the glamour, glitter and luxuries of courtly pleasures. On the other presents her as a pathetic, lonely figure. She falls in love with Nawab Sultan, her chief patron but he leaves Umrao, as he is forced to marry a girl of his mother's choice. The condition of the lovelorn Umrao is reflected through the *ghazzals* and *mujras*. Dishearten Umrao seeks solace in the arms of Faiz Ali, the highway robber, and finally elopes with him. But on their way he is shot dead. Again Umrao is left all alone. Her condition is like the peace of land on which everyone climbs for sustenance, but which is condemned as barren afterwards and abandoned⁴. Then the movie presents personal and national turmoil through which Umrao Jaan undergoes before she proceeds to Lucknow. In the due course of time Umrao reaches her ancestral home in Faizabad. The last *mujra* in the film, *Yeh kya jageh hai dostoon, yeh kaun sa dayar hai*, is performed nearby her house, which is now in a dilapidated condition. Every *mujra* or *ghazzal* in the film reflects identical emotions and establishes the culture of a courtesan's profession. In the last *mujra* camera focuses on Umrao's eyes looking for

her lost family. The mother, now a widow recognizes Umrao, she wants her daughter to stay but the brother, now the patriarch stops her. The entire scene presents the patriarchal culture and a social system. However the son reminds her that there is an unbridgeable gap between the life of a courtesan and the life of respectable common girl. The lively courtyard of the first scene of the film stands contrasted to the dilapidated condition of the *kotha* of the last scene. It is covered with dry leaves, symbolic of the dead past of Umrao. The last shot in the film is very effectively presented. It projects Umrao clearing the dust from the cobweb covered mirror in the *kotha*. Both dry leaves and the mirror could be taken symbolically. The dry leaves could be seen as the end of the autumn of Umrao's life and the beginning of the spring. The scene is silent but speaks through the image. The reflection in the mirror, looking back the memory and new beginning Umrao sees herself as a matured, self controlled woman with the identity as a poet. The story of Umrao, in the backdrop of culture is par excellence, and will remain in our memory fresh. Muzaffar Ali's intense research on the Mughal culture, the ways and manners of the particular society presents the rich Muslim culture. Thus the setting is an integral part of the basic fabric of the film and serves to highlight the director's aim and purpose in the tragic story of Umrao Jaan as well as the courtesan community against the background of Lucknow. The timeless and changeless spirit of Lucknow like Thomas Hardy's Wessex brood over the film as Muzaffar Ali has immortalized the city and its rich culture through his presentation.

Notes :

1. Andra Malraux quoted in B.D.Garg's *The Art of Cinema: An Insider's Journey Through Fifty Years of Film History*, Penguin, 2005.
2. Species of the pigeons used in *kabutarbazi* were 'Golay,' 'Nisavray' and 'kabuli'. kabuli pigeons were said to be the best.
3. Many centuries ago, this species of pigeon was actually brought from Shiraz, the city of Iran so the species is known as Shiraze.
4. As quoted in Ismat Chughtai's *The Crooked Line*. 1945, (2005:299).

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