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Representation of sex work in literature

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Abstract

This paper tries to represent the role of sex work in the literature. The writing of women into history necessarily involves redefining and enlarging traditional notions of historical significance, to encompass personal, subjective experience as well as public and political activities. This new history would both include and account for women's experience rested on the extent to which gender could be developed as a category of analysis. The core of gender definition rests on an integral connection between two propositions: gender is a constitutive element of social relationships based on perceived differences between the sexes, and gender is a primary way of signifying relationship of power. As Gerda Lerner in her article argued that historians, trained in traditional history, approach women's history is by writing the history of "Women worthies" or "Compensatory history." Who are the women missing from history? Who are the women of achievement and what did they achieve? The resulting history of "notable women" does not tell us much about those activities in which most women engaged, nor does it tell us about the significance of women's activities to society as a whole.

Keywords: Gender, sex work, women, tawaifs, prostitution, history, literature

Introduction

This paper tries to represent the role of sex work in the literature. The writing of women into history necessarily involves redefining and enlarging traditional notions of historical significance, to encompass personal, subjective experience as well as public and political activities. This new history would both include and account for women's experience rested on the extent to which gender could be developed as a category of analysis. The core of gender definition rests on an integral connection between two propositions: gender is a constitutive element of social relationships based on perceived differences between the sexes, and gender is a primary way of signifying relationship of power. As Gerda Lerner in her article argued that historians, trained in traditional history, approach women's history is by writing the history of "Women worthies" or "Compensatory history." Who are the women missing from history? Who are the women of achievement and what did they achieve? The resulting history of "notable women" does not tell us much about those activities in which most women engaged, nor does it tell us about the significance of women's activities to society as a whole. The history of notable women is the history of exceptional, even deviant women, and does not describe the experience and history of the mass of women. This insight is a refinement of an awareness of class difference in history: women of different classes have different historical experiences. To comprehend the full complexity of society at a given stage of its development, it is essential to take account of such differences.¹

If we talk about the different historical experiences of women from different classes here, then two major novels of the 19th and 20th centuries, the first Mirza Hadi Ruswa's *Umrao Jan 'Ada'* (1899), and the second Acharya Chatursen's *Goli* (1972) have been taken as examples to explore it bit further. *Umrao Jan 'Ada'* and *Champa* both the heroines of the novels have been very different from the economic and social background, along with their historical experience. *Umrao Jan* is a Shia Muslim girl and *Champa* (*Goli's* heroine) is a Rajasthani, low caste women who, is called a '*Goli*'.²

¹ Gerda Lerner, Placing women in History definitions and Challenges, Feminist studies, vol. 3, No. ½, 1975, 5-14, 5.

² *Goli* (a term for females, for male it's *Gola*, plural is *Gole*) is a caste/subcaste in Rajasthan. *Golis* are bound to become concubines of kings, they live in king's Rangmahal the same way as queen lives. They get everything except proper respect. Everybody in kingdom knows that who *Golis* are. In nutshell, they get every possible luxury in life but at the cost of dignity. Kings don't marry them, produce children with them and in order to give those children father's name, kings marry these females to some similar caste person or *Gola*. *Gola* takes care of his wife (so called, he cannot even touch her!) and children. Kings play with these females, enjoy, humiliate and throw away, if *Goli* has got some brain then king makes sure that she is killed silently.

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Umrao was kidnapped in childhood, had no control over her own destiny. Champa, who is a *Goli* is bound to be the king's concubine, where Champa calls herself as *Chakar*, which means that the *Chakar* is bound to be slave of the king from Blood. The kings did not marry these *Goli* but made sexual relationships. For the father's name of children born from these *Golis*, they used to marry these *Golis* to other *Golas* or lower caste men. In the other case of Umrao Jan, she is a victim of trafficking and sold to Khanam Jan (brothel owner) where she was taught *talim*, *adab* etc., with the help of good *ustad*, Umrao Jan learned music, dance, Urdu poetry etc. Due to this cultural heritage, she started counting in Lucknow's big *tawayafs* or *randis*.³ Champa was a victim of a bondage system where it was continuing from generations. She was often suffering from exploitation in many forms such as mental, physical, and was a victim of a forced prostitution which was in fact a slave like situation.⁴ Therefore, both Champa and Umrao were stranded in forced prostitution and based on their caste and class, their historical experience was completely different.

Due to the use of certain types of source in history writing, history of limited sections of the society has been written so far. In new trends of history writing historians believe that in order to write unbiased history and real history, we will have to expand the boundaries of our archives, we need to add the past experiences in history writing in a way we can find a new history or total history. In the context of women, history has been written only from the perspective of men and in which the use of the male centric historical sources was common. It is very difficult to get real information about excluded women such as *tawayafs*, prostitutes (sex workers). We should use sources related to women or even produced by women such as their letters, diaries, autobiographies, novels and other oral historical sources in history writing. Amritlal Nagar's *Ye Kothewaliyan* (1950), Ruswa's *Umrao Jan 'Ada'* and Chatursen's *Goli*, these three novels are written from the perspective of marginalized women, especially the *Tawayafs*, prostitutes, *Randis* and other sections of oppressed women. These three novels are based on the personal experiences of women from special categories of the society. While in Ruswa's writing, a Muslim girl Umrao, who was a victim of trafficking in her childhood, forced into prostitution, experienced various complexities of this profession. She was in contact and protection of the *Nawabs* of Lucknow, Kanpur, Faizabad before and after the *Ghadar* of 1857.⁵ She saw and experienced colonial reforms and laws. The colonial reforms associated with prostitution came, which was a part of the British 'Civilizing Mission', such as Cantonment Act of 1864, Contagious Disease Act of 1868 etc.

Chatursen, through his novel *Goli*, talks about colonial India and its princely state, especially Raja Rajwadas of Rajasthan, landlords, *Thikanedar*. He speaks about the oppression of women, their conditions from the women's perspective. As mentioned earlier, that the *Goli* is a lower caste or sub-caste in Rajasthan. Where, the bondage system and slavery has been shown from one generation to another. In this system woman has no authority over her husband and children as they used to be concubine or private property of the kings and princes. This concubine practice shows the

enslavement of women and forced prostitution. Through this novel we get real information even in the context of the *deori*.⁶ In this novel Champa tells that there were more than three hundred women in the *deori*. Therefore, Chatursen through his novel shows the miserable situation of women from certain strata in Rajasthan.⁷

Nagar's novel is an important source which gives vital information about the transition of certain women from the cultural and artistic heritage to harlotry and prostitution. It is based on the interviews of real life *tawayafs* and *kothewaliyan*. The debate about social relations and gender identities are also mentioned in it. Through this source we get information about socio-economic and political conditions of that time. While interviewing prostitutes, *tawayafs* he got know that women from weaker socio-economic backgrounds are more vulnerable to this profession.⁸ Their feelings and mentality towards this profession is visible to an extent as well as laws and reforms related to prostitution such as abolition of prostitution 1958 etc. Prostitutes and people around them were also in the favour of regulation of this profession, not abolition of prostitution solely, because of its continuity from the very beginning of the civilization. But Nagar thinks differently, he considers prostitution as lethal for society. It should be abolished.⁹

Therefore it is not possible to trace such history from conventional sources. History is not just about facts it's about representation, mentality, interpretation also. Literature and history, both may look different, because history is based on facts, sources and evidence, and literature speaks a new perspective beyond all these boundaries, not dependent on these facts but based on memory, oral lectures, folk tales, fictional stories etc. so historians like Hayden White had gone even further almost merged history and literature together. All historical narratives carry an element of interpretation which can neither be reduced nor can be increased. The historian has to use his material in a moving pattern that can be seen in different forms of the historical process. Historian must include an account of some event with plausible interpretation so that the gaps can be filled in the information given by him.¹⁰ Charu Gupta and Antoinette Burton etc. problematize the colonial archives. They use totally different sources as Gupta talks about cheap popular literature, a famous book 'Chaklet' by Pandey Bechan Sharma 'Ugra' in 1927, a commercial sensation and compilation of eight stories written in a very titillating way, this book presents stories related to Sodomy and

⁶ It was a private part of Rang Mahal. It was a mysterious place. There used to be women of all castes. In king's princely state, any of the beautiful women recognized or chosen by Maharaj was imprisoned in *deori* whether it was an unmarried, or a married, a widow (who had become a widow in her childhood due to child marriage). In *deori* these women were trained to sing and dance. *Adab-qayada* were taught and they were forced to give sexual service to the Maharajadhiraj. In *deori*, women's condition was like inmates, they used to get inadequate food and only two pairs of clothes in a year. There had to be a lot of torture, assault and violence on them. Life was utterly hellish in these *deories*. There were probably women who died by eating opium or other kind of poison.

⁷ Chatursen, *Goli*, 139-40.

⁸ Amrit Lal Nagar, *Yeh Kothewaliyan* (Uttar Pradesh: Lok Bharti Prakashan, 1960), 23-24, 174.

⁹ Nagar, *Yeh Kothewaliyan*, 157.

¹⁰ Hayden White, *Interpretation in History*, (The Johns Hopkins University Press), 281.

³ Mirza Hadi 'Ruswa', *Umrao Jan 'Ada'* (New Delhi: Rajkamal Prakashan, 1988), 13-19.

⁴ Acharya Chatursen, *Goli* (Delhi: Prabhat Prakashan, 1972), 11-12.

⁵ Ruswa, *Umrao Jan*, 22, 68, 94.

Homosexuality.¹¹ Burton in her book uses these sources such as diaries, autobiographies, private memoirs, generally written by women which were discarded as historical source because of its subjectivity, non-verifiability etc. she argues these kind of sources left by women in addition to serving as evidence to individual's life are very strong sources. She takes up three elite women Janki Majumdar, Cornelia Sorabji, and Attia Hosain.¹² In the same way the three novels discussed above by Ruswa, Nagar and Chatursen play an important role in retrieving hidden history of prostitutes, *tawaifs* etc. Which were not included in the mainstream archives or 'official archives'.

Abdul Halim Sharar a novelist and journalist from early 20th century writes about hierarchies in *tawaifs*, and prostitutes in context of Lucknow that the courtesans of Lucknow were usually divided into three categories. The first was the *kanchis*, women from *kanchi* tribe, who were actually harlots and whose primary and regular profession was to sell their virtue. They were actually inhabitants of Delhi and the Punjab, where they had started to come at the time of Shuja-ud-Daula. Most of the well-known prostitutes of the town belonged to this.¹³

Francois Bernier in his *Travels in the Mogul Empire (AD 1656-1668)* also mentioned about this category of prostitutes. He mentioned that Chah-Jehan was fond of sex and introduced fairs at every festival, though not always to the satisfaction of some of the *Omrah*.¹⁴ He certainly transgressed the bounds of decency in admitting at those times into the seraglio. Singing and dancing girls called *Kenchans* (the gilded the blooming), and in keeping there for that purpose the whole night; they were not indeed the prostitutes seen in *bazaars*, but those of a more private and respectable class, who attend the grand weddings of *Omrahs* and *Mansebdars*, for the purpose of singing and dancing. Most of these '*Kenchans*' were handsome and well dressed and sing to perfection, and their limbs being extremely supple. They dance with wonderful agility, and are always correct in regard to time, after all, however, they were but common women.¹⁵

It was not enough for Chah- Jehan that the *kenchan* visited the fairs, when they came to him on the Wednesday to pay their reverence at the Am-kas, according to an ancient custom, he often detained them the whole night, amused himself with the antiques and follies.¹⁶

In both the novels *Umraro Jan 'Ada'* and *Ye Kothewaliyaan*, categories like *kanchan* tribe or *tawaif*, came into light where *kenchans* were the highest in these categories. As Bernier writes that *kenchans* were not common prostitutes. These prostitutes were given patronage from Mughals but after the end of this patronage from Mughals all these high prostitutes were shifted to cantonments along with common prostitutes. As Veena Talwar Oldenburg (1990) writes that from the Mughal period these high prostitutes were prosperous and rich but in the beginning of 19th century

respect and positions of these women were snatched away.¹⁷ All Rules and Regulations associated with prostitution were imposed on these high prostitutes as well as common prostitutes.

The second category was the *chunawalis*, originally their work was to sell lime but later they joined other groups of *bazaar* women and become well known. *Chunawali* Haidar, who was renowned for her voice, belonged to this category and collected a large group of courtesans of her caste. The third category was *nagrants*, from Gujrat area. These three classes were the queens of the *bazaar* they established themselves and worked in groups, some women who had already gone astray joined these groups.¹⁸

In addition to this these courtesans who sang and danced, another group of similar character developed in Lucknow. This is the group which performs *rahas*. The art of *rahas* belonged to Mathura and Braj and the constant flow of dancers from these areas made it popular in Lucknow.

William R. Pinch examines the narratives of the "Sepoy Mutiny of 1857", specifically taunts levelled to humiliate soldiers of 3rd Light Cavalry and 20th Native Infantry by women of the "Sadr Bazar" in Meerut. By putting this kind of narratives forward Pinch tries to argue that events of 9-10 May, 1857 indicate a kind of "Emotional Topography" constituted in cantonments which is hard to understand.¹⁹ In order to understand the reasoning behind this emotional topography Pinch not only argue for the importance of women but also to reflect on how the wider questions of gender that shaped the uprising and continue to animate its remembered meanings. Pinch uses Dehalvi's memoir of rebellion 'Dastan-e Ghadr' and J. Cracroft Wilson's similar tale told in December 1858 for the explanation behind the mischief and mutiny. In Dehalvi's memoir reason behind the explosion of a cry of manliness and a fire of masculinity was the insulting language and taunts used by veiled women (whose men had been imprisoned) at cavalymen.²⁰ Wilson in his report based on oral sources indicating the crucial role of bazaar women in Meerut in 1857. He described the women as "Frail ones" was a common euphemism for prostitutes in 19th century, along with "public women"²¹

1857 may be understood thus, via emotion, as a proto-nationalist expression of a "felt" patriotism couched in terms of fear- fear of the loss of caste and religion. The initial, decisive explosion of violence at Meerut had ironically little to do with patriotism, caste and religion. Rather it had everything to do with gender and humiliation or rather a fear of humiliation in terms of gender inversion.²² There are two major debates related to sex work one is the Neo-Abolitionist view and second is the Neo-Regulationists view.

Neo-Abolitionist: Neo-Abolitionist feminists believe that sex trafficking and prostitution are interchangeable, that the issue of consent is irrelevant, and that the sex industry should be entirely eliminated because of its objectification and oppressive treatment of women. For neo-abolitionists,

¹¹ Charu Gupta, Writing Sex and Sexuality, Archives in Colonial North India, Journal of Women's History, vol. 23 no. 04, 2011, 18.

¹² Antionette Burton, Dwelling in the Archive, "Memory Becomes Her", (Oxford: University Press, 2003), 4-5.

¹³ Abdul Halim Sharar, Lucknow: The Last Phase of an Oriental Culture (London: Paul Elek, 1975), 146.

¹⁴ Omrah were the orthodox Moslims at the Mughal court were always oppose to these fairs.

¹⁵ Francois Bernier, Travels in The Mogul Empire AD 1665-1668 (New Delhi: S. Chand & Co. Pvt. Ltd., 1891), 273-74.

¹⁶ Bernier, Travels in The Mogul Empire, 274.

¹⁷ Veena Talwar Oldenburg, Lifestyle as Resistance: The Case of the Courtesans of Lucknow, India, 260.

¹⁸ Sharar, Lucknow, 146.

¹⁹ William R. Pinch, Women, Gender, Emotions: Rethinking Meerut in 1857, (NMML: 2015, Occasional Paper History and Society New Series.83, 1.

²⁰ Pinch, Women, Gender, Emotions, 3-4.

²¹ Pinch, Women, Gender, Emotions, 5, 7.

²² Pinch, Women, Gender, Emotions, 42.

prostitution is inherently an institution of male domination and exploitation of women and therefore cannot be given the status of work. Neo-abolitionists make several arguments to prove the fundamental equivalence of sex trafficking and prostitution. Both, they believe, are part of a system of gender – based domination that makes violence against women and girls profitable. Both prey on woman and girls made vulnerable by poverty, discrimination and violence, and leave them traumatised, sick and impoverished. Both reward predators sexually and financially, strengthening the demand and criminal operations that ensure the supply. Prostituted and trafficked woman suffer identically: post- traumatic stress disorder, severe depression, damage to reproductive systems, damage from sexual assault and beatings, and sexually transmitted diseases.²³ As Nagar in his novel demands or in a way suggests abolition of prostitution. He considers it as a heinous crime and supports government's abolitionists' laws.²⁴ The abolition of prostitution is not possible till the best possible change in economic system regulated by governmental or non-governmental efforts along with the spread of consciousness in society towards it. He also considers prostitution as slavery where women have been subjugated through power, stratagem and money and become the means of pleasure for men.²⁵

Neo-Regulationists: - Neo-Regulationists believe that trafficking and sex work are different. They view trafficking as forced prostitution involving coercion, deceit and exploitation; and they contend that sex work is legitimate labour- based on women's use of their bodies as sources of income involving their own decision and consent. If we see Ruswa's novel, Umrao was kidnapped, trafficked and forced into prostitution. She considered trafficking a heinous crime because she didn't have control on her own destiny. If we see Nalini Jameela's autobiography, being a sex worker she herself considers trafficking, child prostitution, and forced prostitution as punishable crime where sex work is a legitimate form of work. Voluntariness and agency both are there, so there is a need to regulate and decriminalisation and legalisation of sex work.²⁶ Here both Umrao and Jameela are looking at trafficking and sex work separately.

The neo-abolitionist view for the criminalisation of all actors (pimps, clients, brothel owners, traffickers) except prostitutes. They oppose legalization because they believe the disappearance of legal barriers to treating women as sexual commodities and serve as a magnet for increased sex trafficking. In his novel, Nagar also suggested Vocational training institutes such as embroidery-stitching, weaving etc. To put an end to sex trafficking, they insist on legal reforms and strict laws as well as job training, and assistance and rehabilitation for women who have been prostituted.²⁷

The neo-Regulationists, on the other hand, call for more effective and non-discriminatory enforcement of laws, and focus on participation and promotion of self-representation of those affected in claim and realise their own interests. The pro-sex work/pro-legalisation groups argue that there is no clear evidence of the causal link between legal

prostitution and trafficking. Legal prostitution, they point out, rather than acting as a magnet attracting illegal migrants into a country, may help reduce trafficking due to enhanced government regulation and oversight of the legal sector. Pro-sex work researchers argue that instead of preventing trafficking, criminalisation will actually force sex workers underground, making it more difficult for them to access appropriate services and increasing the livelihood of their exploitation. Legalisation of sex work, they argue, helps sex workers, protect their rights and helps as well in combating trafficking.²⁸

Ruswa's novel, opens with a picture of "feudal Lucknow" in which "values of an earlier age" continued into a decadent milieu of *nawabs* and *tawaiifs* in a glittering and fragile texture of music and poetry. As the novel continues, we see the decay and near-demise of this "decadent" culture.

British attitudes towards courtesans of India had always been at best ambiguous. Whilst the old system of patronage continued they chose not to interfere, but the takeover of princely states, the loss of this patronage and the arrival of more British women saw a hardening of their attitudes and, after 1857, the colonial state embarked on a series of "reforms" as part of their "civilizing mission". As Oldenburg has shown the change in the status of courtesan in post mutiny *Nawabi* Lucknow was "linked to British politics and legislation concerned with regulating, sanitizing and cleaning the city".²⁹ once renowned for their aesthetic accomplishments, courtesans now became "demonised" as repositories of disease (especially venereal or contagious diseases). In a move to provide prostitutes for soldiers, but also to ensure that the army stayed as diseases-free as possible, the British insisted on prostitutes being registered and undergoing regular inspections. Those who contracted venereal diseases were sent to lock hospitals, something we can see with Abadi in Umrao jan 'Ada'. As a combined result of the British "clean-up", which ignored their traditional hierarchies, and the decline of the urban aristocracy "courtesans now found themselves mostly inhabiting the same space and *bazaar* as regular prostitutes". In this essay I examined Gender as an analytical category to understand sex, sexuality and sex work. This essay tries to trace the history from various historical times and events from the perspective of Gender and sex in various societies. "Sex work" is a modern phenomenon, to get more clear understanding of it; first we have to understand the background of sex and gender categories, prostitution and policies related to this. When we look these fields of enquiry such as sex, gender, sexuality and sex work etc., the archives is limited so there is a need to juxtapose official archives and literature, myths, memories, and oral traditions. In this case sources like autobiographies, novels, diaries, and letters etc. become important. In the same way I took up novels, autobiographies, and travel accounts produced in different historical times and events. We should try to find such hidden pasts, mysterious history, history of 'silence', history of 'margins', which do not get place in the "official records" whose archives is zero in context of its history.

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²³ Kotiswaran, Sex Work, 82.

²⁴ Nagar, Yeh Kothewaliyan, 150.

²⁵ Nagar, Yeh Kothewaliyan, 172.

²⁶ Nalini Jameela, The Autobiography of a Sex worker (Translated and A Foreword by J. Devika) (New Delhi: West Land Books, 2007).

²⁷ Nagar, Yeh Kothewaliyan, 175.

²⁸ Kotiswaran, Sex Work, 101-103.

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