

## The Courtesan and the Indian Novel

a review-article by Vinay Lal

Mirza Mohammad Hadi Ruswa. *Umrao Jan Ada: Courtesan of Lucknow*. Translated by Khushwant Singh & M. A. Husaini. Reprint ed., Hyderabad: Disha Books, 1993. xiii + 158 pp. Paperback, Rs. 70.

Hasan Shah. *The Nautch Girl: A Novel*. Translated by Qurratulain Hyder. New Delhi: Sterling Publishers, 1992. 104 pp. Paperback, Rs. 45.

**Originally published under the same title in *Indian Literature*, no. 139 (September-October 1995):164-70. Copyright: Author.**

The novel in India is conventionally thought to have emerged in the middle of the nineteenth century. The year of the Rebellion, 1857, also saw the publication of *Alaler Gharer Dulal*, upon which Bankimcandra Chatterji, who himself holds a lofty place in the development of the novel in India, lavished praise as a "beautifully written" work. The contemporary assessment of the merits of this work has been more restrained, but nonetheless *Alaler Gharer Dulal* is thought to occupy a unique position in the history of Indian, and certainly Bengali, literature as "the first work in Bengali which can be described as a novel." As in England, where the rise of the novel is associated with the industrial revolution and emergence of a new sensibility, so in India the novel's beginnings are said to be linked to the penetration of the market economy into the countryside, the emergence of a middle class, and the advent of other forces of 'modernization' and 'Westernization'. The growth of the novel", Humayun Kabir was to write in his monograph on the Bengali novel, "is associated with the development of the scientific temper and the emergence of the middle class." With the consolidation of British rule, and the transition of authority from the East India Company with its errant ways to the Crown, supposedly the very embodiment of the 'rule of law', both the rulers and the ruled could devote more attention to the much vaunted ethic of 'improvement', and "life became more settled and conventional". Kabir ventured on to say that "the new middle classes stress individuality and human dignity", and presumably meant to indicate that in India, as in England, the novel would be a carrier of these values.

There is a great deal in the conventional account of the emergence of the novel in India that one could dispute. Life may indeed have become more "settled" with the passing of the Rebellion of 1857-58, insofar as deviations from stated policy were rendered less erratic and the administration assumed a more even (though perhaps more evenly oppressive) note. However, as Veena Oldenburg has shown in her study of the making of colonial Lucknow, the post-Mutiny period was characterized by the

emergence of British control over the most intimate aspects of the everyday lives of ordinary Indians. The relative indulgence with which the 'natives' had been allowed to continue with their customs, lest they should take umbrage at the interference in their modes of living, was to be rendered a thing of the past. The 'civilizing mission' was now pursued with a greater vigor, and in Lucknow this led the British to introduce legislation affecting the most private aspects of the lives of Indians, such as the manner and mode of defecation and the burial of the dead. So just how "settled" could life have become when the rule of the colonizers was to infiltrate the interior and private spaces of Indians? Similarly, with respect to the thesis that the growth of the novel owed a great deal to the development of a market economy, while one can scarcely doubt that new forms of commerce arose with the advent and expansion of British rule, giving rise -- especially in the port cities of Bombay, Calcutta, and Madras -- to a whole new class of shipping agents, customs officials, middlemen, and merchants, it has been argued that colonialism may in fact have retarded the growth of Indian industry.

Whatever the force of the sociological explanation in helping us to understand the growth of the novel in India, it has also been argued that by the mid-nineteenth century English novels were widely available in India, and for this we have the testimony of writers like Bankim himself. The novels of Walter Scott and Edward Bulwer Lytton may not have been as eagerly awaited in India as they were in Great Britain, but they were nonetheless to leave an indelible mark on the Indian novel. In short, the novel in India must, on the conventional view, be an alien import. However, Qurratulain Hyder, who is thought by some to be the foremost novelist of Urdu in the world today, and has now made available into English what she describes as the "first known modern Indian novel", appears to have little use for this argument. She states in her foreword to *The Nautch Girl*, a translation of *Nashtar*, literally "Surgeon's Knife", that her "research" revealed to her "an astounding fact": Hasan Shah, the author of the novel, "wrote this original story uninfluenced by English novels" (p. 5). Hasan Shah, who was apparently a young man when he wrote the novel in 1790, is stated to have "not know[n] any English", for "otherwise with his penchant for detail he would have mentioned it" (p. 8). It is not clear what the nature of Qurratulain Hyder's "research" has been, but one hopes that it is more than inference.

It is in Persian, which then was still the language of the literati, that Hasan Shah penned his tale of a dancing or nautch girl. The book remained unpublished until 1893, when it appeared in an Urdu translation, and it is from this version, the original now being extinct, that Qurratulain Hyder has given us an English translation, thereby rescuing from oblivion this sadly neglected work. The translation, however, is abridged, all the more surprising in view of the importance that Hyder ascribes to the *Nautch Girl*. Hasan Shah was, as he himself says, a man of respectable even noble

birth, although the family's fortunes had suffered somewhat in the political turmoil following the invasions of Nadir Shah and Ahmad Shah Abdali, the Rohilla and Sikh wars, and the decline of the Mughal empire. He took up a position as aide-de-camp to "Ming Saheb", described as "a nephew of the celebrated General Coote" (p. 11). Also in Ming's employ was a troupe of dancing girls and musicians, and it is with a member of this troupe, the nautch girl Khanum Jan, that Hasan Shah fell in love. His love is reciprocated, and though there is an enormous gulf between the courtesan and the clerk from a bourgeois Muslim family, they have a secret wedding. Such a transgression would have been unthinkable, but for the fact that the entire atmosphere of the camp was already conducive to the flaunting of social norms; even then, Hasan Shah is unable to inform Ming of the union he has contracted with Khanum Jan, and eventually the terms of his employment lead to their separation. When at last Hasan Shah is able to effect his departure from Ming's camp, so that he can join his wife, who had left with her troupe to seek employment elsewhere, he finds upon his arrival that Khanum Jan, unable to endure the pain of separation, has succumbed to her sickness.

Hasan Shah had available to him an indigenous genre, the *masnavi*, for the expression of romantic love and the pain of lovers, but *The Nautch Girl* goes far beyond the confessional mode. What makes *The Nautch Girl* an arresting work, in the first instance, is the mode in which it is written. The boat journey which Hasan Shah takes to join his wife is the flight of one soul in search of a like soul, the journey of the lover in search of the beloved, and as we know from the use of such imagery in bhakti poetry, a journey of this kind is fraught with hazards: the sea can be stormy, the navigator may be unskilled, the boat may sink from a leak; and when at all the boat appears to have reached the shore safely, at the very last moment it hits a rock. The path of love is just as tortuous as the road to God. All this is there, one might say, in *The Nautch Girl*, but Hasan Shah invests his account of the journey with fictional devices that have a most poignant effect. There is the love letter from Khanum, tied to a bit of driftwood (p. 74); then there is the loss of a shoe at Khanum's tombstone, where Hasan Shah, having gone into a frenzy, fell into a pit (p. 87); and finally a conversation between Hasan Shah and his dead wife (p. 88). Hasan Shah certainly appears to have understood some of the possibilities of the novel: dialogue assumes a centrality in *The Nautch Girl*, and the narrative is pushed forward by having incidents which took place in the narrator's absence recounted by other witnesses.

The figure and characterization of Khanum Jan, however, are what eventually make *The Nautch Girl* a compelling work. It is not insignificant that the heroine of the first Indian 'novel' should be a dancing girl, a member of a disreputable profession. In that capacity, Khanum Jan could indulge in behavior denied to women of other classes, and most emphatically to upper-class women. She did not, for instance,

observe *purdah*, while admitting that she found it "distressing to go about unveiled" (p. 63). She is more compelling still as a woman of considerable wit and irony, resolute in her determination, mindful of her dignity and independence. Of course Hasan Shah places her squarely within the framework of patriarchy: thus Khanum Jan appears as the exponent of the view that men cannot be held to promises of fidelity, "because it is almost impossible for a man [and only a man] to remain monogamous all his life" (p. 44). As an Indian woman, she will tolerate such lapses on her husband's part as might take place. But Khanum Jan is not hereby compromised, for clearly Hasan Shah did not intend to depict her as a feminist; rather, she evokes certain possibilities and limits, and appears as the embodiment of a love that is freely chosen.

However, a nautch girl's freedom to choose her lover can never have been unambiguous, as Mirza Mohammed Hadi Ruswa's novel on Umrao Jan, the famous courtesan of Lucknow, amply suggests. Ruswa himself described the circumstances under which *Umrao Jan Ada* came to be written: one evening, at a gathering of his friends where poetry was being read and discussed, a woman from the next door apartment was heard to voice her appreciation of a couplet that Ruswa had recited. Ruswa then had a word with her; she was persuaded to join the group, where she recited a verse whose last lines were:

Who will listen to the tale of my woeful heart?

Far and wide have I wandered on the face of this earth

And I have much to impart.

At Ruswa's prompting, Umrao related her life to him over several sittings, and those narratives Ruswa committed to writing; it is even possible, as Susie Tharu has suggested, that Umrao Jan herself authored the work, but allowed its appearance under Ruswa's name. It is in Umrao's words, in any case, that the narrative was to find shape.

Whatever the authorship of the work, there is scarcely any doubt that Umrao had a large hand in the characterization of her own life. She had a command over words and her easy facility with poetry won her a following among the aristocratic literati of Lucknow: with her couplets she stole their hearts. Kidnapped by a ruffian who sought to exact revenge for the term he had served in jail on the strength of testimony given by her father, Umrao was brought to Lucknow, and eventually sold into the establishment of Madame Khanum Jan. It was at this house of prostitution that she was to live out the greater part of her life; it was there that she was transformed from Ameeran to Umrao. Luckily, her education was entrusted to a Maulvi who combined

his refined tastes and not inconsiderable learning with a real affection for Umrao. "From the shapeless log of wood that I was," Umrao was to say, "he chiselled out a civilised being"; it was the Maulvi who endowed Umrao with the confidence that allowed her not merely to sit with cultured company but to "command the respect and attention of wealthy aristocrats" (p. 19). Most significantly, the Maulvi nurtured her interest in poetry until it had "developed into a passion", and that was the passion with which she was to etch the story of her life indelibly onto the social and cultural imagination of Lucknow.

As Khushwant Singh and M. A. Husaini, whose endeavors have brought *Umrao Jan Ada* to readers of English, point out in their introduction, Umrao Jan Ada conveys "a flavour of all that was Lucknow -- its language, its poetry and music, and the way of life of its citizens" (p. xi). This was the city that perfected the culture of the *pan* and where everyone aspired to be a poet. The very decadence of Lucknow was not merely aristocratic but inimitable: as Premchand was to suggest this culture in his short story, "The Chess Players", two *nawabs* continued to indulge their mad passion in chess as Lucknow fell to the British and their own wives became altogether disaffected with them.

*Umrao Jan* undoubtedly evokes some of the ambience for which Lucknow was renowned, but it is the complex characterization of Umrao and the life that she led which makes the novel memorable and significant. In Ruswa's rendering of Umrao, the courtesan is most candid about her profession: though it may well be a woman's desire to be loved, a desire that swells as she grows older, it is not given to a whore to live out this desire (p. 38). A tart's only friend is her money; she is no one's wife, and if she is foolish enough to give her love to some man, she does so at the considerable risk of jeopardizing her livelihood (p. 56). When Ruswa interrogates Umrao about the place of love in her life, she is quite forthright in her pronouncement of the view that in her profession "love is a current coin. Whenever we want to ensnare anyone we pretend to fall in love with him." As she adds, no man ever loved her, nor did she ever love any man (p. 59). While Umrao's relations with the Nawab Sultan appear to belie her own profession of indifferent engagement with men, her surrender could not have been complete lest her very livelihood should have been endangered, for where was the man who would openly risk his lot with her? A 'respectable' man had a home to which he could return, and a wife to embrace, but what was the net of safety around Umrao? Whatever her fame as a singer of laments and as a dancer who could entrance men as much by the style and substance of her poetic deliveries as by her movements, she would perforce be judged by the refinement of the pleasures that were hers to offer in bed. God might well forgive streetwalkers who repent, Umrao was to reflect, but "good women never" do so. They are "suspicious and contemptuous of women who go astray", for "however lovely a character" these good women may have, and

however good housekeepers these women might be, they find to their great chagrin that men "will fall for a street woman who may have nothing in the way of looks, and may be wanting in all other qualities as well" (p. 119). Loathed by "good women", and reduced ultimately by their patrons and clients to tools of their pleasure, what could these courtesans, howsoever beautiful and talented, hope for by way of some secure place within the socio-economic and cultural fabric of Indian society?

Ruswa's novel takes us, then, through the turbulences of Umrao's life. Although the dislocations in Indian society created by the advent of British rule, and later by the penetration of this rule into the countryside and the consequent resistance, have been the subject of innumerable studies, the impact of such developments on subaltern classes like nautch-girls and courtesans has scarcely received any attention. As Khanum Jan in Hasan Shah's novel was to find that her livelihood was largely dependent upon the British, so Umrao comes to the recognition, as Lucknow became the imaginative and symbolic centre of the Rebellion of 1857, that the patronage of her clients had a considerable relationship to the rise or decline of British fortunes. Umrao was to become a victim of the "grand catastrophe" (p. 101), and though the establishment which had been her home was to be looted and become rather dilapidated over the next few years, the anarchy of the times could not dull Umrao's spirits or diminish her zest for life. Umrao emerges finally as a woman with formidable reservoirs of strength, almost ponderously reflective, as she slips into old age, about the strange twists of destiny that carried her from the confined world of the hearth to a realm where, though the regimes of power were just as portent, she could experience herself as an agent. It is this wild horse of ambiguity that Umrao Jan, the novel as much as the character, rides with admirable candor.

It is to the question of the relationship of the emergence of the novel to the evocative and strong characterization of women, to what might loosely even be termed a proto-feminism, that we must finally turn our gaze. Is it merely coincidental that what has been described, perhaps with considerable license, as the first novel in any 'Indian' language, and also that one of the earliest novels in another Indian tongue, Urdu, should both have been centred around strong women characters, all the more compelling in view of the fact that they are shown pursuing a 'dishonorable' profession? Or is it arguably the case that the novel, the preeminent form of the social narrative, is less hostile than other genres of literature, not to mention traditional social science, both to women and the marginalized? The latter supposition at least provides a more forceful basis for interrogating the social origins of the novel. If the Indian novel mirrors the socio-economic and cultural dislocations induced by colonialism, it also struggled to map the place of certain subaltern classes within the new dispensation. By according women a voice, in howsoever attenuated a form, the

novel, as both the *Nautch Girl* and *Umrao Jan Ada* suggest, may well have contributed to the reformulation of important social questions.