



# Ruswa's Umrao Jaan and Lucknawi Culture

Mamta Gupta

Head, Department of English

Arya Kanya Degree College, Prayagraj

The novel is a genre that was given to us by the European colonials and in Urdu we had to wait a long while for it to emerge. Poetry was the dominant mode of writing and the autobiography and travel writing were also popular with the Muslims but not the novel. The great writers of Urdu before Mirza Ruswa were all poets. Mirza Ruswa's *Umrao Jaan* has been hailed as the first novel in Urdu and its privileged position has been disputed by other scholars. Whatever *Umrao Jaan* was it certainly was the most popular single book to be published in the late nineteenth century in the Urdu language. The courtesans were an important part of the late Moghul culture and in Lucknow they gained unprecedented popularity. The Nawabs of Lucknow after the uprising of 1857 had clearly accepted their secondary position in the scheme of things and the domination of the English was complete. Hindustani culture as carried by the Urdu language has had deep roots and these roots could not be shaken by the colonial influences. Courtesans were far above the ordinary people and it was extremely difficult for the common folk to know much about them. This novel claims to be a true story and this claim was made by none other than Mirza Ruswa himself though it has been disputed because it has been argued that Ruswa used his imagination to make things fall in place, especially the meeting of Umrao with Ram Dei and Dilawar Khan's arrest towards the end.

She allowed herself to be fooled by the expensive presents of Faiz Ali and she took his professions of love to be sincere. She elopes with him willingly and is taken to Rae Bareilly where his friend Fazal joins him. Not that Faiz Ali and Fazal were good characters but they were attacked by dacoits and in the encounter some of the men on both the sides were injured. The local raja Dhyani Singh was trying to filter out the dacoits and his troops attacked Umrao's party and captured her. When she is taken to the raja she meets Khursheed Jaan who was kidnapped from Lucknow. In Umrao's profession elopement and kidnapping was common and the outcome depended on the lady's luck. Umrao goes to Kanpur via Mohanlalganj and there she takes refuge in a mosque, takes full advantage of the uncouth Mullah. Faiz Ali tried to hound her even in Kanpur but was arrested. Umrao Jaan tried her sauciness and she collected some musicians and found some programs for herself to make money and at one of these programs when she was busy with the begums the dacoits attacked. Umrao discovers that the leader of this gang was Fazal of Faiz Ali's gang. Fazal spares them after fighting among the gang members and the news travels to Lucknow. Aunty Hussaini and Gauhar Mirza were there to take her.

Umrao Jaan saw the mutiny of 1857 as an insider. She saw houses being looted and massive arrests being made. Umrao Jaan was clever enough to manipulate her own entry into the family of Wajid Ali Shah and maintain her foothold there with her talent for singing and composing poetry. She was a favourite of Mallika Kishwar, Wajid Ali Shah's mother and Mirza Hashmat who was a general in the army of Awadh. Her influence and popularity was such that she was invited to sing the song of felicitation for Nawab Birjis Qadr who was installed as the Nawab of Lucknow very briefly by his mother Begum Hazrat Mahal. When the

British army came to arrest the participants of the felicitation ceremony Umrao Jaan's life was also in danger but the cowardice displayed by the Nawabs upset her more than anything else. She was very annoyed by people who got so scared that they left behind their shoes and shawls. Adrian McNeil has written extensively about courtesan culture and he has argued that their world was socially hierarchical and culturally complex. He has further stated that the contribution of tawaifs to Hindustani music was subverted by the marginalisation of women in a patriarchal society. McNeil has also tried to prove that these tawaifs were “active agents” in the promotion and spread of Shia ideology with the approval of the Awadh administration. When we connect courtesans with religion, we must not forget their contribution to the spiritual health of their admirers and patrons. (McNeil 48).

The scenes which she saw at Qaiserbagh, when they were fleeing for their lives appalled her, some of these Nawabs complained about being forced to travel on foot, others complained about food arrangements, someone wanted his opium dose, another complained that he would die if he was not served is Hookah in time. Begum Hazrat Mahal ran away to Nepal to save her life and Umrao Jaan found her way to Faizabad, where she was born. She recounts how people were looted and there was general lawlessness. She herself handed over all her valuables worth about fifteen thousand rupees, in those days, to her neighbour and when she returned she got everything back. All this jewellery was stolen by Gauhar Mirza later on, even though Umrao was friends with his wife. She was invited to sing for his son's weaning ceremony. In a decadent society it was considered not very wrong for a man to have a relationship with a courtesan and be happily married. There was no contradiction or disharmony between the ladies of the house and of society. All this went on in Lucknow 125 years ago and everybody of some substance knew about it. They were far more open about their relationships and if their indulgences with women were not to be discussed in public they were certainly not meant to be hidden. Umrao Jaan does not approve or disapprove of such practices but merely accepted them as one would accept life as it comes.

Umrao Jaan says that when she arrived in Faizabad she had become stone-hearted because she had seen the destruction of princes and kingdoms. She couldn't forget Lucknow and the sorrows and suffering which had been inflicted on that city and its people. However much she may have thrived on the generosity of the Nawabs, her dispassionate eyes favoured the colonials as against her own wasteful patrons.

During the monarchy, morons who did not know the first letter of the alphabet were appointed to high posts. One wonders how they did any work. Even more laughable were the appointments of eunuchs as commanders of platoons and cavalry. In the end fate outplayed its hand and brain won the day. Now it is personal merit that counts. Since merit is largely a matter of reputation, it often happens that men of ability and learning are ignored because no one knows about them. (Ruswa 180)

Umrao never gave up independent thinking and called a spade a spade. Umrao Jaan remembered Faizabad as the place of her birth and she was naturally tied up to the place and its memories. She finds out about her father's death and meets her mother who identifies her from her birthmark on her ear. The mother and daughter embrace each other tightly, share their joys and sorrows which had been their lot in the intervening years, and are separated from each other by the social prejudices which they had to obey. For a courtesan there was no way to return back home and even if she did return, as Umrao had done, she had to be ejected for shame. Her once most loving brother felt that the family honour had been compromised. After the mutiny, life changed for the tawaifs and the courtesans because many of the patrons had left for Calcutta and business was slack.

Umrao knew that the fate of the courtesans was to suffer emotional distress and voids. She had understood that the social mores dominated the lives of the people to such an extent that rationality and personal tragedies did not matter, rules had to be followed even if they brought distress and suffering and her talent lay in her capacity to recover from these setbacks. Her experiences had hardened her to take on life and there was always a tendency in her to choose life over death in life. She triumphed over all her misfortunes. When she returned to Lucknow she observed that under the British administration civic amenities had improved and that it had become a much cleaner place— even the Imam Baras were well maintained. After her disappointment with her own family, she had developed an intimate relationship with Nawab Mehmood Ali Khan who paid her a monthly salary possessively but courtesans are free souls and Umrao Jaan wanted to

break free. The Nawab claimed that he had married her and filed a lawsuit against her. Umrao went into hiding and spoke through her own lawyer. She lost at the lower court but eventually won at the High Court level. Umrao won by coaching false witnesses to prove her truth and the Nawab's two false mauvis broke down in the cross-examination. Umrao knew that to prove herself in the right she had to take the support of falsehoods. But patriarchy can be terrible. Her lawyer, Akbar Ali Khan, proved to be a good friend, and knowing well that he was crafty Umrao befriended him because she believed that even thieves can be good friends and are capable of being kind. She has chance meetings with his wife and mothers and realises how sordid family life can be. This was reason enough to escape and get away from the lawyer.

Umrao Jaan's heart may have wandered but her spirit was always with God and she listened to the odes dedicated to Imam Hussain, the Prophet's grandson, who was killed at the battle of Karbala. She herself sang songs of mourning in his honour at the Queen Mother's palace which made her quite a celebrity. Several women from influential families new and held her in high esteem. Umrao Jaan's narrative falters frequently; it is after all a flashback and a recounting of her experiences. As she relives, memory wanders in zigzag ways and at times she struggles to put things together. All of a sudden she starts talking about Khanum's falling ill and her own moving into an old room which has been gathering dust. There she accidentally finds gold sovereigns which Nawab Sultan had given her. Then she talks about the mother who had paid her to entertain her son. The Begum turns out to be Ram Dai, the girl who was kidnapped along with her. Through the Nawab, Umrao has a child whom she calls Nabban, and thereafter wishes to have a grandson, playing with whom she wants to die an old woman.

Umrao Jaan was one of those who wanted to live life to the very lees, she never gave up even under extreme difficulties as they came for the better or worse. She was at the core a courtesan who belonged to everyone who could afford to pay for her extravaganzas and she belonged to no one because the principles of her profession demanded it. She had a heart and she loved Nawab Sultan Mirza only to part company with him and reunite later. The glories of Lucknow were dwindling and the lamps before dying were bursting forth in some of the brightest and highest flames of most aesthetically refined hedonism. In Freudian language it was the pleasure principle that was the driving force which sought gratification of all its urges, including the most basic and primitive ones. The unconscious impulses and drives dominated without any qualms and were celebrated without any guilt. With all its failings and strengths it made up for the splendour that was Lucknow. Even as it was declining, it produced a cultural richness of life and liberty, even libertarianism, of ripe and unadulterated artistic excesses. Umrao emblemized its epitome along with the patrons who knew that in their resplendence was their decline and destruction. Their counter-parts in London of the naughty nineties were no less artistic but the glory of Lucknow was far too rich in comparison—courteous, well-mannered and urbane in its majesty. In Lucknow the ruling class made all the difference, they were being gradually destroyed by the white colonials but even in their last vestiges an unmistakable order of high culture was visible. Feudalism was crumbling under its own weight and the English authorities were forever too keen to lay their hands on their wealth and lands. It was an intoxication which had found its sources in our cores and emerged in the mundane world in regal exquisiteness, grandeur and ostentatiousness. Such indulgences can be called frivolous but never coarse or crude because elegance was their defining feature. It was a culture which had its shortcomings but those who were a part of it did not mind its extravagances, euphoria and excesses, so fine tuned to the arts and poetry that they were. It was in such a Lucknow that Umrao Jaan once again ran into Nawab Sultan and his wife was no less pleased to meet her. Nawab Sultan and his wife express their gratitude to Umrao Jaan for having saved the family from being looted by the dacoits in Kanpur. It is again the pleasure principle which prevails and the Nawab Sultan takes her out on a wet day along with other courtesans at Bakshi's lake. It is while the inebriated fun and frolic is going on in the rain that Umrao comes face to face with Dilawar Khan, the same man who had abducted her as a child and sold her to Khanum. Due to the efforts of the Nawabs, Dilawar is caught by the police and later sentenced to be hanged till death. A poetic justice now attends the life story of Umrao and one feels much lighter in the mind.

In the last chapter of the novel we find the protagonist arguing with the novelist about all that he has written. Thus, this 19<sup>th</sup> century novel takes a post-modern turn, aspires to become meta-fiction, if only through its self-reflexive nature. Umrao Jaan is angry with Mirza Ruswa because she finds his narrative often faulty—that which encourages and incorrect understanding of her personality. Umrao is so worked up that she wants to tear up the manuscript which Mirza Ruswa had handed her over for perusal and suggestions. Umrao allows Mirza Ruswa to proceed further with its publication because she realises that nothing is hidden from God, say what one might about oneself. The novelist records whatever Umrao had to say in the first person and she talks about ‘virtuous and evil women.’ Umrao is bothered by a deep sense of guilt in the end, and is of the opinion that had she not been kidnapped by Dilawar Khan, she would have led a virtuous life. Once sold to Khannam she did what went around and did it most successfully. She confesses that even though not extraordinarily beautiful she succeeded as a courtesan because of her great knowledge of music, poetry and literature. It was with the passage of time that she realized that her profession itself was immoral and that it was best given up. She considered herself very lucky to have made some really good friends in a cut-throat world. She said in the final analysis all courtesans who for entertainment’s sake must sing of love, are deprived of it all their lives. Men know that courtesans have many patrons, there are rivalries among them and the younger courtesans try to siphon off all their money. By the time Umrao Jaan and Ruswa confront each other, the kingdom of Awadh was securely in the hands of the British and none of the whimsical generousities of the great Nawabs were to be seen and personal effort and labour had become necessary. The feudal lords were finding it difficult to thrive on their inheritances. The downfall of Nawabi Lucknow was a major preoccupation with Umrao Jaan. She blames the decline on ignorant morons who had been placed on high positions, and on eunuchs who held high ranks in the imperial army. She regrets that there was no way to find out about true merit because of fake reputations. While taking stock of her life, Umrao says that there was no point in doling out advices because people do what they want to do, and learn by mistakes. The dialogues between Ruswa and Umrao Jaan end on a timid note with Umrao speaking about her preference for reading books and newspapers. There is a little feminist assertion which she makes in passing about her not wearing the veil. While she does this, she does not comment adversely about those women who wear it, and, she is satisfied with saying her prayers regularly, for in God she trusts. Be as it may she continues to be bold enough not to lead a cloistered life till the very end.

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