Indian courtesans: from reality to the silver screen and back again

Nighttime. The shimmering air is filled with the scent of sweet perfume as the dim figures of visitors are seen in the shadows. Inside, the room is hung with draperies and chandeliers. Velvet cushions litter the floor while customers lie back, perhaps smoking a water pipe, listening to the sweet voices of the mujarewali. Women sing, mostly seated, subtly moving their bodies as the graceful gestures of their hands andsuggestive looks from beneath their veils cast a spell on the male audience. Sometimes eyes meet and wordless messages are sent. Their outcome is easy to guess....

A sk any Indian about courtesans and the answer is something like the picture drawn above. Dancing girls have long been a part of India; courtesans were already mentioned in Vedic times (1000 B.C.). Over the centuries there have been all sorts of prostitutes, from simple whores who provided sexual services (kanyas) to temple dancers who to a certain extent prostituted them- selves (avadasis) to highly-respected courtesans (mujarawi, mujare-per- former) educated in the arts of amuse- ment. Traditionally, a mujara was a per- former by a courtesan (mujarawali) before an audience, where she expressed herself through music, dance and poetry as well as painting and con- versation. Although this tradition had its heyday about 200 years earlier, it con- tinued to be popular until the early 20th century.

People today speak nostalgically about the golden age of courtesans, when their company was much appreciated and an accepted part of aristocratic life. Never- theless, the current practice of this seductive art as found in today’s brothels (kathas) is designed, while its practi- tioners are considered outcasts operat- ing on the margins of society. Of course there is great variety in India’s red-light districts: from child prostitutes to call girls in modern city bars and women who still use the mujarawi tradition of dancing and singing as part of their seductive technique. Their daily lives and their nighttime practices place them in a twilight zone, serving a male clien- tele without regard to caste or religion. Some artists and researchers say that traditional mujarawi no longer exist, as the artistic expressions of today’s cour- tesans are in no way comparable to those of bygone days. Still, although their techniques have changed, these women perform the arts of seduction and their customers visit them not only for their public services, but to return to an earlier time, to leave behind the cares of today and of the future.

Safedabad 2005

In Safedabad, on the outskirts of Luck- now, the capital of Uttar Pradesh, is a group of women still referred to as mujarawi. Safedabad is a very small vil- lage located near Lucknow, a small com- pound called Bagua (lit. garden) hous- ing about 30 dancing girls, together with some family members and musicians. Situated near the busy highway, their customers vary from truck drivers, pas- sengers, and villagers to high-ranking VIPs including government ministers and their entourage: singing, dancing andaffles are protected by the dark and remoteness of the place.

The clients come to the Bagia to enjoy a mujara, but outside the compound the girls perform at bachelor parties, fairs and festivals, using microphones and sometimes mimic singing, while their dances are not supposed to enter and where women are not part of the audience. In this way the anonymity of the cinema hall allows a kind of erotic voyeurism: as the adage has it, contrasting worlds meet over the body of a prostitute.

Courtesan movies and brothel scenes

The Bollywood film industry, with 900 releases annually, is among the largest in the world. Many film producers work to feature both historical courtesans and their present-day representatives. The first Indian feature film, a silent reli- gious movie entitled Baja Harishchandra, was produced in 1913 by Khusro D. Phalke. The introduction of sound in the 1930s gave birth to a tradition of films featuring embedded music and dance sequences. Of these, the courtesan genre includes such well-known examples as Devdas (1935) Pakeezah (1972) and Umrao Jan (1975).

Early courtesan films idealized the beauty and artistic skills of the historical mujarawi and portrayed prostitutes restored to social respectability through marriage. The narratives were inter- spersed with song and dance sequences similar to what we assume to have been traditional mujarawi practices. This style of performance began as a blend of the kathak dance genre and the mujarawi singing style, both part of classical North Indian dance and music traditions. Ini- tially the performer was seated while singing, and used seductive hand move- ments and facial expressions to illustrate the poetry. Used coincidentally at first, these expressive techniques gained importance over time; the dancer later came to perform standing up. Actresses in these early films often came from the brothel culture – they were already trained in singing and dancing, and because they were public women, mat- ters such as family honour or in-laws were unimportant.

Although these movies are about the seductive arts and lives of courtesans, the heroes are the men who save them. These films, then, are largely the prod- uct of the male fantasies of Indian film producers. Even the choreographers and dance teachers (as was the custom in the whole of India) were mostly men who dictated how women should behave and move to depict seductiveness. This was ‘the male gaze’, a term introduced by feminist film theorist Laura Mulvey in her 1975 article ‘Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema’. According to Mulvey, in a patriarchal society the pleasure of looking is split between the active/male and the passive/female. Nevertheless, if in the movies the male gaze determines much of the action, in real life the cour- tesan knows how to play this male gaze to get what she wants.

Another trend involves movies about call girls and forced prostitutes, such as Mandai (1978) and Chaawali (2003). These films portray the harsh realities of women working in the flesh trade; show- ing how they ended up in brothels, the agonies they endure, and the incapaca- bility of their fate. Most Bollywood movies include a bar scene. In a scene in Bunty aur Babli (2005), we find ourselves in a very chic club, with famous film mujarasi as background music. Then, without any relation to the story, the newly-released song ‘Kajara re’ is staged and the audience is treated to the sudden appearance of Bollywood beauty queen Asha Mittal (Asha Rani) dancing in the mujarawi style. This combination allows charac- terization to showcase their ability to com- bine modern Bollywood dancing and old mujarawi techniques. It also gives scriptwriters the opportunity to introduce another world into which decent people are not supposed to enter and where women are not part of the audience. In this way the anonymity of the cinema hall allows a kind of erotic voyeurism: as the adage has it, contrasting worlds meet over the body of a prostitute.

Safedabad: changing art of seduction

Times have changed for the mujarawi of Safedabad and their arts of seduction. The traditional way of singing a mujarewali is nearly forgotten. The older ones, who by now usually sing in small groups, say they remember some of the original reper- toire, but even they are starting to forget the words or confuse the tune (raga). Their technique is to cope with difficult rhythms is also almost gone. Dance techniques have changed as well – only the sound of the ankle bells and the pirouettes remind us of the former kathak-based style. When asked why the

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