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Re-Inscribing the Indian Courtesan: A Genealogical Approach

By Meenal Tula¹ and Rekha Pande²

Abstract

Women historiography has been one of the major concerns of the feminist movement particularly since 1960s. Looking at the figure of the courtesan in India—its histories, representations, repression and re-emergence, the paper seeks to problematize discourses of both Universalist and minority history writing that have been built around these women. In the context of Post-Colonial theory, and in the light of the dynamic nature of the categories of Truth, Power, Knowledge, and Discourse, the paper seeks to salvage Foucault's methodology of writing a genealogical history as opening new avenues within the history of the courtesan in India in particular and women's history writing in general.

Key Words: Courtesans, Women's History, History Writing, Women on the Margins, Indian Women.

The courtesan has been a key figure in the articulation of deep anxieties that have constituted the experience of an 'Indian' modernity. Produced through a complex entanglement of practices and re-significations of social meaning over the course of the 20th century, it is perhaps not surprising that the figure of the courtesan seems to be an enduring object of attention across varied domains of colonial (and now, post-colonial) law, economics and hygiene, from 'canonical' nationalist literature to popular culture. Rather, what ought to be surprising is the relative invisibility of the courtesan in academic discourse, evincing little interest as a subject for critical historical study. Of the few studies that have been done, we find that a number of them seem only to reproduce notions deeply entrenched in the production of 'woman' as a subject/object of colonial modernity, in the process re-affirming the legitimacy of its violence.

We may begin by illustrating this point through a look at two histories of the courtesan and how they replicate a particular logic of containing, disciplining and "silencing" the courtesan subject. Moti Chandra, in his study *The World of Courtesans* (first published in 1976), attempts to provide a compilation of the various kinds of roles played by the courtesan women since the Vedic period. He talks about their sexual, ritual and sacred roles and, citing various sources, catalogues the various terms that have been employed for the courtesans over the ages—*ganika*, *khumbhadasi*—and the hierarchies between these various terms. At the same time, the book is framed by a narrative that sees courtesans as women who "served the baser needs of society but were also a symbol of culture and *arsamoris*."³ At the same time, while Moti Chandra sees these women as morally base and "living the life of shame"⁴, he nonetheless reveals a deep anxiety

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³ Chandra, Moti. *The World of Courtesan: Sensuous Women Who Practiced Love as an Art and Profession*. P 1.

⁴ Ibid, P 13.

towards the “crafty” and “worldly-wise” ways of these women: “...courtesans tempt(ed) their lovers, perhaps depriving the rich Aryans of a part of their possessions in cattle and gold.”⁵ Further, Chandra seeks to configure the courtesan women primarily according to their sexual function, seeing it as the sole aspect that ‘explains’ all dimensions of the courtesan, sexual, cultural and political. In this sense, Moti Chandra’s history of the courtesan women does not explore the complexities of the inter-relationships between these women and the extant patriarchal structures, even though it is a ‘women’s history’.

On the other hand, Vikram Sampath’s *My Name is Gauhar Jan* (2010) produces a narrative that can be traced through time, garnering a sense of gendered community, in its relationship with the newly arrived modern technology, specifically the gramophone, and how it ‘rescues’ the courtesan women from their depravity. While Sampath brings to light some unconventional sources like postcards and match-boxes circulated in Austria with pictures of Gauhar Jan on them, he does so only towards the end of signaling her popularity, with no analysis of the economics of the production and circulation of these goods or the discursive formations within which these practices are embedded. Sampath’s *Gauhar Jan* escapes a life of victimhood that her predecessors led as she is saved by modern technology. Sampath’s account stands as a history of women that garners a voice for the ignored women communities of the past. The important question to ask would be if it is necessary to write a history of women by invoking such a sense of gender community that reproduces the teleology of the not-yet modern woman being saved by modern technology and the social spaces it produces. Such a problematic does not seem to be on Sampath’s agenda, as he seems to miss out on a number of historical questions that cannot but be related to the popularity of Gauhar Jan as a gramophone singer—why are courtesan women like Gauhar Jan the first to sing for the gramophone? What other options in terms of performance venues or audiences are available to the courtesan women singers? Are these two aspects related, and if so, does it necessarily produce the ‘emancipatory’ narrative Sampath reads into his biography of Gauhar Jan?

To summarize, both these histories focus on distinct but partial discourses that have constituted the courtesan subject. Both of them, however, remain blind to the partial character of their own narratives and end up producing a stable, eternally unchanging subject called the ‘courtesan’ whose ‘history’ can be traced unproblematically across historical time. For Chandra it is an exercise in retracing through various religious and ancient literary texts the glory of the courtesans of yesteryears, which has fallen into a decline post-medieval India and is now driven by money rather than ‘the arts’, and for Sampath it is a heritage of women singers (specifically Gauhar Jan) that has been uniquely preserved without distortion because of the marvels of technology.

Sampath’s account may be seen an attempt—albeit a poor one—at writing what Dipesh Chakrabarty has called a “minority history”, a history that seeks to retrieve suppressed, subaltern pasts and bring them into the fold of the discipline/mainstream discourse of history, thus seeking to right the wrongs of universal history. Minority history, according to Dipesh Chakravarty—from a collective of intellectuals behind the *Subaltern Studies*— “...express(es) the struggle for inclusion and representation that are characteristic of liberal and representative democracies.” The main agenda for these narratives is to redefine existing historical structures through new practices of inclusion. Minority histories, according to Chakravarty, “do not have to raise any

⁵ Ibid, P15.

fundamental questions about the discipline of history.”⁶ Also, there are many practical, methodological challenges that seem to be side-tracked by such minority history writers: “How do you write the histories of suppressed groups? How do you construct a narrative of a group or class that has not left its own sources?” and the “...discipline of history is only one among the many ways of remembering the past.”⁷ Minority histories can only reproduce the logic of Universal History in its teleological growth map of the subject, that nevertheless cannot capture the subject which is always, already not unified. Thus, one of the key intellectual tasks in attempting to write a history of the courtesan in India will be to dislocate some basic assumptions that underpin the discursive production of the ‘courtesan’ within a disciplinary narrative that can only affirm its ‘modernity’ by emancipating the ‘woman’.

A critique of minority history that aims to problematize the relations between historiography, historian and the voices it claims to represent must begin with a clear account of its own assumptions vis-à-vis some available theoretical positions. The question of the politics of knowledge production has been of central concern in the various re-articulations of the concept of ideology in 20th-century European Marxism. From Lukacs to Althusser, we find under the notion of ideology a struggle to reframe the relation between the categories of subject, consciousness, truth and representation. The theoretical implications of these shifts in the Marxist theory of ideology need to be looked at before we can take up further questions of history writing and the politics of women’s histories in particular.

For Georg Lukacs, “Science, truth or theory...are no longer to be strictly counterposed to ideology; on the contrary, they are just ‘expressions’ of a particular class ideology, the revolutionary world-view of the working class. Truth is just bourgeois society coming to consciousness of itself as a whole, and the ‘place’ where this momentous event occurs is in the self-awareness of the proletariat.”⁸ Further, truth in Lukacs’ historicist perspective, is always relative to a particular historical situation, never a metaphysical affair beyond history altogether. For Lukacs, truth is in this sense ‘absolute’ and can be discovered by the proletarian consciousness. The ‘untrue’ character of bourgeois ideology is also emphasized--“ideology is not untrue to the way things are but true to them in only a limited, superficial way.”⁹ An effect of the process of capitalist reification of the social, bourgeois ideology is ‘structurally constrained thought’¹⁰ that can only reach but never surpass the limits imposed on it by capitalist social transformation. While raising the question of the limits of knowledge in modern capitalist society, Lukacs’ account nonetheless reproduces a number of problems that he himself marks as symptomatic of ‘economism’ in the Marxist theory of ideology. As Eagleton points out, this approach hints towards a kind of economic idealism “which tends to homogenize discourses, structures and effects”¹¹ and points towards some direct correspondence between the economic base and the cultural superstructure.

Many have identified the work of Antonio Gramsci’s writings on the concept of ‘hegemony’ to have been a watershed moment in Marxist thinking on the relationship between the economic base and the political-ideological superstructure. In Gramsci’s work, the notion of

⁶ Chakrabarty, Dipesh. “Minority Histories, Subaltern Pasts”, *Provincializing Europe: Post Colonial Thought and Historical Difference*. P 97.

⁷ Ibid, P 95.

⁸ Eagleton, Terry. “Ideology and its Vicissitudes in Western Marxism”, *Mapping Ideology* (Ed.), Slavok Zizek, P 181.

⁹ Ibid., P 184.

¹⁰ Ibid., P 190.

¹¹ Ibid., P 185.

ideology becomes an element within a broader concept of hegemony, which implies the ways in which the ruling class obtains consent from its subjects and implicates a range of discourses and civil society institutions, including churches, schools, family and the media. Further, hegemony is not static and “has continually to be renewed, recreated, defended, and modified”, and “the institutions of ‘civil society’ now become important sites of contestation and processes of social control.”¹²

Gramsci’s idea of the relative autonomous cultural superstructure is taken further by Althusser. “All action, for Althusser, is carried on within the sphere of ideology...it is ideology alone which lends the human subject enough illusory, provisional coherence for it to become a practical social agent...Ideology adapts individuals to their social functions by providing them with an imaginary model of the whole, suitably schematized and fictionalized for their purposes.”¹³ According to Eagleton, “the subject, for Althusser as for Freud, is the product of a structure which must necessarily be repressed in the very moment of subjectivation.”¹⁴ Marking a break with the Lukacsian understanding, Althusser sees ideology as not just a way of understanding reality but a fundamental process that marks the various moments of subject formation. For Althusser, “To be ‘subjectified’ is to be ‘subjected’: we become ‘free’, ‘autonomous’ human subjects precisely by submitting ourselves obediently to the Subject, or Law. Once we have ‘internalized’ this Law, made it thoroughly our own, we begin to act it out spontaneously and unquestioningly.”¹⁵ What is problematic here, as Eagleton points out, is that “Althusser’s model is a good deal too monistic, passing over the discrepant, contradictory ways in which subjects may be ideologically accosted—partially, wholly, or hardly at all—by discourses which themselves form no obvious cohesive unity.”¹⁶ Althusser’s notion of ideology draws on the psychoanalytic theory of the subject. But in doing so, it produces an inflexible model of subject formation that “expels desire from the subject is to mute its potentially rebellious clamour, ignoring the ways in which it may attain its allotted place in the social order only ambiguously and precariously.”¹⁷ Further, Althusser’s account is unable to explain the gap opened up between ‘ideology’ and ‘science’. The question of the politics of the intellectual again remains unproblematized as Althusser claims that while the workings of the social order as a whole can be known only to theory, the practical lives of individuals are governed by ideology, which provides them with a kind of imaginary ‘map’ of the social totality, so that they can find their way around it.

Michel Foucault’s essay, “The Subject and Power”, helps us raise useful questions about the way knowledge is created and circulated, how it functions and its relations to power. “The exercise of power is a “conduct of conducts” and a management of possibilities...this power is less a confrontation of adversaries and or their mutual engagement than a question of “government”...the way in which the conduct of individuals or groups might be directed.”¹⁸ Further, “Power relations are rooted in the whole network of social...The forms and specific situations of the government of some by the others in a given society and multiple, they are superimposed, they cross over, limit and in some cases annul and in some others reinforce each

¹² Ibid., P 198.

¹³ Ibid., P 221.

¹⁴ Ibid., P 213

¹⁵ Ibid., P 218.

¹⁶ Ibid., P 216.

¹⁷ Ibid., P 216.

¹⁸ Foucault, Michel, “Subject and Power”, *The Essential Foucault* (Ed.) Paul Rainbow and Nikolas Rose, P 138.

other”¹⁹. For Foucault, the idea of truth (and ideology, which he deems “difficult to use” because it by definition stands in opposition to something else that is supposed to count as truth) is closely connected to Power—“...to see how effects of truth are produced within discourses that, in themselves, are neither true nor false.”²⁰ Rather, “each society has its regime of truth, its ‘general politics’ of truth—that is the type of discourses it accepts and makes function as true.”²¹ Truth in this sense is sustained by Power. But it is important to understand that for Foucault Power is all pervasive but at the same time not simply coercive—“...it doesn’t only weigh on us as force that says no, it also traverses and produces things, it induces pleasure, forms knowledge, produces discourse. It needs to be considered as a productive network that runs through the whole social network, much more than a negative instance whose function is repression.”²²

What emerges from this is a conception of the subject, a point of intersection of various discourses, essentially decentered, and truth as a point of intersection of various channels of power. Further, this new understanding of power enables us to understand the very terrain of history writing as a space of struggle, having thus rendered the very terrain of history writing as a space of struggle that is nonetheless articulated through and by decentered subjects, we may now return to the question of historiography raised at the beginning of the paper via reference to Dipesh Chakrabarty—of the need to make visible the politics of ‘modern’ history-writing and the consequent need to resist the same on its own terrain through the production of counter-narratives that do not end up reproducing the legitimacy of the universal subject of Reason. Or, how is one to narrate a history of the ‘courtesan’ in colonial and post-colonial India? Is looking at women’s writing a way to retrieve a Voice of the woman subject? “Feminist writers, whether writing subaltern pasts or minority histories, often “turn (their) energies onto (their) self.”²³ Susie Tharu and P. Lalitha grapple with precisely this question in their introduction to *Women Writing in India*. They point out, in the context of American feminism, “...all women’s writing, or at least women’s writing that merits literary attention, becomes feminist in the precise mode and to the precise extent that the authors themselves understand and experience feminism their reading gestures towards history.”²⁴ They find the views of Gilbert and Gubar and their feminist “poetics” to be problematic in that “women writers can now set aside their palimpsestic plots and engage directly with their experience, as male writers whose full authority was never repressed have always been able to do.”²⁵ Any effort to rebuild a female tradition, in opposition to the mainstream male tradition, can itself pose a problem. For Tharu and Lalitha, Elaine Showalter’s *The Female Tradition*, reflects a conscious effort on the part of the author to convey the importance of mapping a past tradition in order to both ground the discipline as well her work in substantive theory and amass a knowledge base that will be able to inform a path for future feminist academic pursuit. “The interest (is) in establishing a more reliable critical vocabulary and a more accurate and systematic literary history for women writers is a part of a larger interdisciplinary effort of psychologists, and art historians to reconstruct the social, political, and cultural experience of women.” But this kind of tradition building can be constricting in some ways. “Liberal feminists invented a female tradition that was imaged as lost city, submerged but

¹⁹ Ibid., P 141.

²⁰ Foucault, Michel, “Truth and Power”, *The Essential Foucault* (Ed.) Paul Rainbow and Nikolas Rose, P 307 .

²¹ Ibid., P 316.

²² Ibid., P 307.

²³ Tharu, Susie, and Lalitha, K. “Introduction”, *Women Writing in India 600 B.C. to the Present, Volume 1 and 2*. P 30.

²⁴ Ibid., P 29.

²⁵ Ibid., P 31.

intact, waiting to be recovered, and they spoke of an essential difference between male and female...and began to think of these significations as natural or constituting some sort of female essence struggling in the work of women writer to express itself...”²⁶ Even though positing a kind of female tradition is a useful exercise, one is faced with the same question we looked at earlier: what of those that have left no writings/sources of their own, or rather, been purged from the official archive? The case in point is the Courtesan women in India.

This question may be seen as the central concern that animates Gayatri Spivak’s essay, *Can the Subaltern Speak?*. Here, engaging with both the Foucaultian theory of the subject and power, and the Gramsci-inspired work of the Subaltern Studies Collective, she takes up a number of problematic questions on the possibilities of writing a history of ‘woman’ as a Subaltern subject. The first important question is, “How can we touch the consciousness of the people, even as we investigate their politics? With what voice-consciousness can the subaltern speak?”²⁷ Borrowing here what she calls the ‘dated’ theoretical vocabulary of the Subaltern Studies Collective, she nonetheless finds this language to keep alive a critical question of *representation* that must be reckoned with in any attempt at writing ‘women’s history’. While she agrees with Foucault that the problem lies in “the slippage from rendering visible the mechanism to rendering vocal the individual,”²⁸ she nonetheless finds his recommended alternative—of looking at epistemes within which are constituted subjects—to be deeply apolitical, and to be a positivist approach that steps back from the perilous act of representation in the face of its constitutive impossibility. According to her, the Marxist emphasis on ‘class interest’ and ‘class consciousness’ that lies behind the impulse to articulate ideology as ‘false consciousness—that appears in the work of subaltern studies via a Gramscian detour—has been productive as it continues to signal the impossibility of complete representation. Further, their conscious emphasis on the discontinuity of imperialism holds the possibility of producing a far more political project that can go beyond a simplistic effort to render visible structures through which power is articulated. Such an approach, according to Spivak, hides beneath its ‘descriptive’ claims an assumption of the transparency of the intellectual as a politically-implicated agent of knowledge. Rather, the Subaltern Studies emphasis on producing a counter-narrative makes clear its own intellectual position, and with full awareness of the politics of knowledge production, proceeds to make the impossible attempt of re-writing of the dominant narratives of that very formation. At the same time, according to her, the group needs to rethink some of its basic assumptions about ‘recovering’ a silenced insurgent peasant consciousness that can reproduce the logic of an essentialized subaltern subject. Rather, they must take the moment of ‘insurgency’ to be an utterance by a subaltern ‘peasant’, which can only mark a pointer towards an irretrievable consciousness.²⁹

She criticizes the group for having arrived at a clear formulation on such questions and, consequently, being in danger of uncritically taking over a number of assumptions—such as the fantasy of the lost origin—that have characterized the phallogocentric intellectual tradition: “Both as object of colonialist historiography as well as subject of insurgency, the ideological construction of gender keeps the male dominant.”³⁰

²⁶ Ibid., P 35.

²⁷ Spivak, Gayatri Chakravarty. *Can the Subaltern Speak?*, P 80.

²⁸ Ibid., P 81.

²⁹ Ibid., P 82.

³⁰ Ibid., P 82.

Spivak goes on to show a possible alternative attempt in writing a counter-narrative of the subaltern (as woman) that can challenge the phallogocentric assumptions of both colonialist as well as subalternist historiography, yet without in the process giving up the question of a counter-narrative. She takes up the example of the history of *sati*—“the Hindu widow (who) ascends the pyre of the dead husband and immolates herself upon it.”³¹—in colonial India and argues that we must reject the colonialist as well as nationalist narratives around the abolition of *sati*, where one saw the legislation as the emancipation of the ‘Indian woman’, and the other saw *sati* as a case of a woman “happy to sacrifice herself” and who “actually wanted to die.”³² Rather, the abolition must be understood as a case of the “white men saving brown women from brown men”³³, a statement that may be ‘analysed’ through Freud’s notion of the history of repression as a history with double origin.³⁴ The history of the Indian *sati* thus has a “double origin”—“one hidden in the maneuverings behind the British abolition of widow sacrifice in 1829, the other lodged in the classical and Vedic past of Hindu India, the *Rig-Veda and Dharmasastra*.”³⁵ Taking up the two instances of colonialist and nationalist responses to the abolition as “white men saving brown women from brown men” and “the women wanted to die”, Spivak argues that the two sentences legitimize each other by purging from their accounts any testimony of the “women’s voice-consciousness”³⁶.

At this point we may take a brief look at Foucault’s own proposed historical model, that of “genealogy”. According to Foucault, the writing of a genealogy entails that one must “look at the problems of constitution in a “historical framework, instead of referring them back to a constituent object...but this historical contextualization needs to be something more than the simple revitalization of the phenomenological subject...it cannot be solved by historicizing the subject...that evolves through the course of history...genealogy is a form of history that can account for the constitution of knowledge, discourses, domains of objects, and so on, without having to make reference to a subject that is transcendental in relation to the field of events or runs in its empty sameness throughout the course of history.”³⁷ Further, more important than what is scientifically true or not in a given discourse is to investigate “how the effects of truth are produced within discourses that are in themselves neither true nor false.”³⁸

But Spivak points out that Foucault’s problematic position on the question of representation creates a divide between theory and practice and renders the intellectual transparent. Further, Foucault insists that it is “important to study the relations or power, not relations of meaning...semiology is a way of avoiding its violent, bloody, and lethal character by reducing it to the calm Platonic form of language and dialogue.”³⁹ But this encounter with language and meaning, as Spivak has argued, is unavoidable. And this must be articulated in both the theorization of the intellectual, as well as in the methodological treatment of the relation of the domain of practice to that of its meaning. Thus, we would argue that in any genealogical approach, studying the constitution of the subject is implicated in discursive practices, relations of production and construction of meaning.

³¹ Ibid., P 93.

³² Ibid., P 93.

³³ Ibid., P 93.

³⁴ Ibid., P 92.

³⁵ Ibid. P 93.

³⁶ Ibid., P 93.

³⁷ Foucault, Michel. “Truth and Power”, *The Essential Foucault* (Ed.) Paul Rainbow and Nikolas Rose, P 306 .

³⁸ Ibid., P 307.

³⁹ Ibid., P 304.

So, to return to the construction of the courtesan as subject, we must challenge the politics of ‘minority history’ by locating the courtesan as a point of intersection of multiple discourses at a given moment without trying to trace its growth through time or to assume that there is a stable courtesan subject but to see it as a dynamic category whose composition changes. Further, in addition to a renewed attention to material practices through which this subject position of the courtesan is being constituted, we must also pay attention to particular formal representational models/structures that may be shown to hold clusters of practices together in an unstable cohesion, and which in their durability are central to the transference of particular representational premises across seemingly disparate discursive spaces. With these key questions in mind, in the rest of the paper, we may now make a shorthand attempt at tracing a genealogy of the courtesan in colonial India.

The courtesan figure in historical narratives is variously referred to as the dancing girl, *natch girl*, *tawaif*, *kothewali*. These categories, each with their own significance, were read within a broad category of ‘prostitute’ with the advent of the colonial government and administration in India. Accounts of pre-colonial India show that a number of courtesan women lived under the patronage of a king/nawab and were, economically, relatively independent. Tamkeen Kazmi, in his book *Hyderabad Aisa Bhi Tha* (translatable as *Hyderabad As It Was*), points out that, in the Deccani context, the word *tawaif* was coined for singing and dancing girls and not for prostitutes. These women were trained in a long standing tradition of skilled entertainment. During any happy occasion, it was these *tawaiifs* who provided entertainment and performed, especially on marriage and birth of male child among aristocrats and elites. Hence they were known to be artists with skills. The Nizam, from early years of the 18th Century, patronized *tawaiifs* by establishing a separate office known as ‘*Dafter-e-ArbabNishat*’ (Offices of Head of Pleasure). In the Asafjahi court, during the period of Nizam Ali khan, in 1730s, “a sum of rupees twelve thousand per month was spent towards salaries of *tawaiifs*.”⁴⁰ The *tawaiifs* held a very respectable position in Nizams society, they were looked upon as artists. It was compulsory for *tawaiifs* to sing in the marriage functions, and after the *nikah* a group photo was taken for the sake of remembrance. The invited *tawaif* was also given place. *Tawaiifs* were an integral part of various festivities—marriage celebrations, Bismillah ceremonies and *Urs* (death anniversaries of Sufi saints). Tamkeen Kazmi argues that there were two kind of professional women in this period—prostitutes and *tawaiifs*. He says that latter were usually, “highly cultured women, very disciplined and trained in etiquettes and mannerisms...they were also teachers in mannerisms...”⁴¹ While this account clearly marks its modernist imperative by creating a demarcation between the sexual and cultural functions of the courtesan, what remains useful is its detailing of a whole range of social functions of the courtesan, which can be shown to contest the contemporary equivalence between ‘courtesan’ and ‘prostitute’.

Over the course of the 19th century, British imperialism, and its assault on the ruling aristocratic elites, had a profound effect on courtesan culture, whose fate was indelibly linked with the same. Veena Oldenberg, in her essay, *Lifestyle as Resistance: the Case of the Courtesans of Lucknow, India*, provides one of the few histories of courtesan which delve into the complexities of subject formation and perceives it as a two way process of repression and resistance. She shows how, despite attempts to exclude them from social and civic life, courtesans under the colonial rule wielded significant power and owned large amount of property and paradoxically to colonial designs commanded considerable ‘respect’ in social circles. “In the

⁴⁰ Kazmi, Tamkeen. *Hyderabad Aisa Bhi Tha*, P 25.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, P 25.

tax ledgers from 1858-77...they were classed under ‘singing and dancing girls’, and were under the highest tax bracket, with the largest individual income of any in the city...they were also in lists of property and...the value of this part of this booty from war (spoils seized from ‘female apartments’) was estimated to be worth 4 million rupees.”⁴² Besides tax ledgers the courtesans also appear in the medical records: “The battle to reduce European mortality rates was to be joined at the hygienic front...it became imperative that courtesans and prostitutes of Lucknow...be regulated, inspected and controlled.” Colonial discourse reconstituted courtesan culture by re-locating them within the state’s revenue relations, the expansion of a discourse of disease and moral rehabilitation, and the reorganization of urban space. Oldenberg points that “it became official practice to select beautiful and healthy specimens from among the *kotha* women and arbitrarily relocate them in the cantonment for the convenience of the European soldiers...It made sex cheap and easy for the men and exposed the women to venereal infection from the soldiers.”⁴³ Kenneth Ballhatchet, in his book, *Race, Sex and Class Under the Raj: Imperial Attitudes and Policies and their Critics 1873-1905*, points out that “British soldiers seemed to need protection from the dangers of mercenary love,”⁴⁴ and before the end of the eighteenth century, the Governor-General in council had authorized the building of ‘hospitals for the reception of diseased women’ at Behrampur, Kanpur, Dinapur and Fatehnagar. Prostitutes admitted to these institutions were not allowed to leave till they had been ‘certified’ as cured. The question then is, if the courtesan/prostitutes posed such a threat, why were their establishments not shut down? Ballhatchet points out, “In satisfying the soldiers’ masculine needs, prostitutes are seen as playing a positive role, helping their clients to remain manly” As a result, there is “no condemnation of prostitutes on moral grounds nor is there any attempt to persuade them to change their occupation...prostitutes were not denounced as sinners, but society permitted them no alternate occupation. Rehabilitation was precluded both by Indian realities and by British necessities.”⁴⁵ Thus, the relations of power did not comprise of simplistic relationships of oppression. Oldenberg also talks about the struggle of the courtesans against an intrusive civic authority that taxed their incomes and inspected their bodies. To circumvent the various intrusions by the colonial authorities, the courtesans devised ingenious ways like keeping two sets of books of their incomes or bribing the local nurse to avoid health inspections etc. “The tactics were new, but the spirit behind them was veteran. These methods were imaginative extensions of the ancient and subtle ways the courtesans had cultivated to contest male authority...and added to a spirited defence of their rights against colonial rule.”⁴⁶ Within the altered political economy of colonial rule, the multi-faceted life of the courtesan was reduced to their being located within the frame of the market—be it in their continued existence as sources of high revenue, or as commercial sex workers, for “(the new social structures) dehumanized the profession (of the courtesans), stripping it of its cultural function.”⁴⁷ Colonial discourse thus attempted to constitute the courtesan woman within a changed discursive formation, constituted on their exclusion from the domain of “culture”, and re-constitution within the domain of the economic.

⁴² Oldenberg, VeenaTalwar. “Lifestyle as Resistance: The Case of the Courtesans of Lucknow, India”. P 259.

⁴³ Ibid., P 266.

⁴⁴ Kenneth Ballhatchet, *Race, Sex and Class Under the Raj: Imperial Attitudes and Policies and their Critics 1873-1905*.P 10.

⁴⁵ Ibid., P 20.

⁴⁶ Oldenberg, VeenaTalwar. “Lifestyle as Resistance: The Case of the Courtesans of Lucknow, India”. P 261.

⁴⁷ Ibid., P 266.

The nationalist movement in its Gandhian phase was geared towards involving women into the freedom struggle. Interestingly, while it seems that colonial discourse situates the courtesan outside the domain of culture, the constitution of the woman subject in nationalist discourse seems to simultaneously constitute the woman subject around cultural markers, repeatedly. The depictions of womanhood in this period are many in poetry, prose and journals. An editorial published in *Chaand*, a popular women's journal, defined the ideal woman as "...she should be free from the present ignorance, bad influences and ill feelings...she should not observe purdah but this does not mean that she should go out laden with jewels, unnecessarily attracting men's attention...she should know how to fight oppression and to defend herself with her own hands, singing and keeping merry are her ornaments, but only songs that become a respectable woman, she should be as virtuous as a heroic wife and as courageous as a mother of lions and bear sons who will free India from servitude"⁴⁸. Partha Chatterjee in his essay, *The Nation and its Women*, has argued that the inner (domestic) domain of women became invested with the urgency of preserving the sanctity of national culture. At the same time, the nationalist discourse was trying to purify itself of bad influences like the courtesan women. The nationalist movement found its early expressions in the form of social reform programmes, such as the anti-*natch* campaigns, through which the richly diverse and stratified group of courtesan women was reduced into a homogenous group which was a threat to the wellbeing of the society. The clarion call for an abolishment of the *natch* was first given in Madras in around 1892-93. The government also came up with an official decree whereby all *natch* girls were branded as mere prostitutes. This branding also extended to *devadasis*. This also led to the rise of efforts to sanitize the themes and forms of various performing arts to make them accessible to the general public and at the same time giving them a new, modern base. People like Rabindranath Tagore, Madame Menaka, Rukmini Devi Arundale, Pandit Vishnu Bhatkhande all played a major role in this project. Further, while, on the one hand, the early 20th century found an increasing prominence of women from a courtesan background in the cinema and gramophone industries, David Lelyveld, in his essay, *Upon the Subdominant*, talks about the role All India Radio played in "integrating Indian Culture and raising 'standards'": One of the first acts of the interim government of 1946 was to bar singers and musicians from the "courtesan" culture—anyone whose private life was a public scandal."⁴⁹ Thus to an extent the nationalist discourse seems to replicate certain logics of exclusion, like in the case of courtesan women, that are to be found in colonial discourse, which thus undermines the nationalism of a higher political community created around the idea of a national culture.

But just as colonial practices did not simply do away with the courtesan, the place of the courtesan in nationalist discourse was not premised on simple inclusions/exclusions. Vikram Sampath cites an incident in which Gandhi himself approached Gauhar Jan and requested her to organize a concert and help raise money for the freedom movement in 1920. Notwithstanding this, when courtesan women organized themselves into groups and wanted to be a part of Gandhi's non-cooperation movement in 1921, the proposal was rejected as being morally objectionable. While Gandhi seems to exclude courtesans of one kind, he is willing to associate with another aspect of courtesan culture, in a different place and context. Thus, we can see how the figure of the courtesan becomes an important site in contestations around the constitution of

⁴⁸ Orsini, Francesca. *Hindi Public Sphere (1920-40): Language and Literature in the Age of Nationalism*. P 303.

⁴⁹ Lelyveld, David. "Upon the Subdominant: Administering Music on All India Radio", *Consuming Modernity and Public Culture in a South Asian World*. P 57.

the modern woman in and between colonial and nationalist discourse, where positions are constantly negotiated.

We may return here to Spivak's notion of history of repression with "double origin". Where in the case of the *sati* we saw that the colonial moment was framed by the interlocking sentences 'white men saving brown women from brown men' and 'they actually wanted to die', in the case of the courtesan, we find a similar situation in that, while colonial practices seek to save these women from diseases and delimit their spatial boundaries, nationalism saw them as embodying everything that a modern, educated, Hindu woman would not do. And it is between these two positions that the possibilities of the conduct of the courtesan women are circumscribed.

The moment of arrival of the ideas of modernity, along with the colonial rule and a coherent rise of the sentiments of Indian nationalism is a fertile ground to investigate the composition/construction of the modern courtesan subject. The legal, cultural, medical, political and national discourses and how they individually construct the courtesan subject have been discussed at some length already.

The arrival and growth of the new imperialism and the establishment of the colonial government brought about a change in the relationship of the courtesan subject to the state. The erstwhile patronage and benevolence was replaced by the desire to control these women's bodies and restrict them spatially. Through various decrees, such as the Contagious Disease Act of 1864, the courtesan women, grouped as prostitutes, were brought into the fold of state control. The white man saved the brown women from diseases and unhygienic living conditions in return for their services—domestic, sexual and other entertainment. These women are desired both by brown and white men. At the same time, there is a simultaneous decline in the cultural aspects of courtesan performance, due to increasing standardization of music and dance and codification of moral conduct for women in general and women performers in particular. But new media, like the film and gramophone industry, become alternate career options. While there have been women like Jaddan Bai, who made a successful transition into the film industry, or Gauhar Jan, whose was the first Indian voice to be recorded for the gramophone, these opportunities were not available to most. The relationship of the courtesan subject and modernity is not a simple one. While the gramophone recordings were made for western consumers to begin with, they also made their way into the Indian market. As Amanda Weidman argues in her book, *Singing the Classical, Voicing the Modern*, the new medium of gramophone recording essentially disassociates the voice from the body and makes it available for repeated and personal consumption. And while this enables the survival of a number of courtesan-centric cultural forms, it also opens the way for the rise of classical performers like M.S. Subhalakshmi, whose persona and musical career have been shown by Weidman to be articulated around this dissociation of the body of the performer—which was no longer part of the performance—and the voice⁵⁰. Even dance performances become highly codified and structured, devoid of the interactions and flirtatious *adaa*, *themehfil* that characterized the gatherings of the courtesan performer and her audience.

One new avenue where the body of the courtesan re-emerges, quite literally, is colonial photography. Eleanor M. Hight and Gary D. Sampson, in the Introduction of their book, *Colonialist Photography: Imag(in)ing Race and Place*, state that, "photography functioned as a cultural and political medium intricately tied to the establishment and support of colonialist

⁵⁰ Weidmann, Amanda, "Gender and the Politics of Voice", *Singing the Classical and Voicing the Modern*, P 127.

power. Photographs operate as complex discursive objects of colonial power and culture.”⁵¹ By colluding with constructions of racial stereotypes and prejudices, the photographs are seen to contribute to a picture of the “colonial cast of conventional characters that could enable the colonizer to navigate through unfamiliar territory—the problem was “not just to make a picture of the East but to setup the East as a picture.”⁵² The photograph freezes and makes available for consumption the subject, and they can be seen as “substantiating imperialist rhetoric that essentialized both people and places.” Photography “has no identity itself, but yields to the power of the apparatus of the local state which deploy it and guarantee the authority of the images it constructs to stand as evidence to register the truth.”⁵³ Originally, colonial photography could have been seen an exercise in familiarity and classification of ethnic groups in turn reinforcing stereotypes related to the colonized subject.

Photo 1 (see Appendix) below, for instance, is a colonial postcard that depicts a *natch-party*—comprised of both male and female musicians (presumably seated) and dancers (standing, as they are wearing *ghungroos*). The salutary *salaam* of the dancers produces a particular power relation between the *natch-party* and the viewer, specifically that of a colonizing gaze and a colonized subject. But the photograph tells us few other things about these kind of troupes. The women stand at the core of these groups in terms of the performance as well as possibly the management of the group. The men, standing on the periphery are only musician accompanists. Also, the instruments that they are holding, *sarangi* and *tabla*, are associated with popular performances. But all the subjects in the photograph gaze back at the viewer with expressionless faces, a sign of non-familiarity with the photographer and, by extension, the viewer of the image. At the same time, it remains significant as to why these photos, despite the lack of ‘expression’, nonetheless became popular enough to be circulated widely and preserved for posterity in the archive. We would argue that this lack of expression is significant in that it produces a ‘dehumanizing’ of the subject of the photograph, a reiteration of the earlier idea that they function only as types within the discourse of colonial government, especially because the photos have been used on postcards. Photo 2 (See Appendix) is a photo of a young *Natch Girl*, frozen and framed between the two pillars, much like a photo within a photo, while the two musicians look up at her. She looks off into the distance, and the viewer can look at her body without having to meet her gaze. The torn sleeve of the musician on the left side and the dark edges of the photo add a sombre character to the photo and further articulate a difference of class along with race that frames the colonialist gaze.

Eleanor M. Hight, in her essay, “The Many Lives of Beato’s Beauties”, talks about another function played by colonial photographs of Japanese courtesans and *geishas*—the construction of desire, which, in turn, fuelled colonial travel. “They (American and European men) were lured by the thrill of the unknown, as well as the possibility of adopting a lifestyle freed from the restrictions of Victorian society.”⁵⁴ As she shows, the primary aim of these prints and photographs was to present sexually available women in aesthetically pleasing manner.” And “women were portrayed as servants, entertainers, and providers of sex and were thus subjugated to male (both Japanese and Euro-American) sexual fantasies and behaviour.”⁵⁵ But, Hight points out, it is also possible to raise questions about the women in the photographs, the

⁵¹ Hight and Sampson. *Colonialist Photography: Imag(in)ing Race and Place*, P 1.

⁵² *Ibid.*, P 5.

⁵³ *Ibid.*, P 8.

⁵⁴ Eleanor M. Hight, “The Many Lives of Beato Beauties”, P 129.

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, P 152.

circumstances under which the photo was taken, their social/economic circumstances, the operative market forces at the time of production, etc. But these details, in most cases, are not available. In Photo 3 (See Appendix), the two *natch* girls sitting cheek to cheek, laden in jewelry and fine saris, are likely more affluent, moneyed performers/entertainers, for a high-class clientele. Besides the eroticized nature of the pose, both the women are staring into the distance, possibly in longing or sorrow—an invitation to the viewer. Besides these, images of the better known courtesan singers like Gauhar Jan and Hira Jan were also in circulation—as possible souvenirs from performances for listeners and/or as objects within discourses of desire and construction of the Orient. This image of Hira Jan (Photo 4: See Appendix) for instance, in a relatively relaxed pose, leaning on her couch, in her private space, with what looks like a *divan* behind her, creates a sense of intimacy and invites the viewer to look at her without having to meet her gaze.

In the cursory outline detailed above, the effort has been to produce a genealogy-in-miniature of the courtesan in the colonial moment, tracing her insertion into new discursive spaces and regime of practice. At the same time, we have also tried to show here that even as the courtesan comes to be excluded/included from various colonial spaces—be they medicine, law, revenue, or new cinema and music—we still find that a number of representational paradigms seem to subsist across these spaces and across time; and are often constitutive in the very mobility/blockage of the figure of the courtesan. Thus, we would argue that it is the relative continuity of these representational paradigms that constantly seems to problematize the narratives of rupture that these various discourses would like to produce for themselves. In this way, I believe, a genealogy that looks at both new domains of practice as well as the level of representation that sustains them will be able to bring out the true complexity of the construction of the figure of the courtesan, without making any pompous claims of emancipating the oppressed (brown) woman or of consolidating a ‘female tradition’. While the above account has been, given the limitations of space, extremely cursory, we may perhaps still find it productive in that it is willing to take up problematic methodological, political and ethical questions that cannot be settled by the length of the exposition, or the variety of its sources/arguments. Or perhaps it may help us to rethink what it means, in the disciplinary domain of history, to be ‘productive’ in the first place.

Appendix

Photo 1



A Natch Party. 1900. Postcard. © Images of Asia

Photo 2



Natch Girl. 1903. Postcard. Calcutta. © Images of Asia

Photo 3



Hindoo Natch Girls. 1897. Mumbai. © Images of Asia

Photo 4



Hira Jan. 1910. Meerut. © Images of Asia

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