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The Changing Contours of the Indian Public Sphere: Courtesans, Culture, and the British Invasion of Oudh in Kenizé Mourad’s *In the City of Gold and Silver*

By Anurag Kumar, Isha Malhotra, and Rishav Bali

Abstract

The article explores the role of women in the Indian freedom struggle, particularly Begam Hazarat Mahal of Lucknow through Kenizé Mourad’s *In the City of Gold and Silver* (2010). The text explicitly and implicitly foregrounds the role of *tawaifs* (courtesans) in the culture and the literature of the public sphere prior to 1857 or the first Indian freedom struggle. Their participation in the freedom struggle was a response to the British attempt to reduce their role to strictly economic and sexual purposes. The article imbricates the issues of nationalism, gender, and sexuality by mining the invisible contributions of various groups of Indian women throughout the freedom movement. We focus specifically on the case of *tawaifs* whose status fell from being the epistle of cultural manners to the role of a prostitute, partially because they posed a threat to the British expansion and partially because of the patriarchal setup of the *Oudh* society. The political significance of numerous women who contributed within the domestic sphere was completely neglected and unrecorded, while those who actively participated risking their lives and honor, such as the courtesans, were demeaned or given labels such as prostitutes. The writers, journalists, and historians who were mostly men ignored their sacrifices and struggles resulting in a scarcity of literature concerning them. The article references the theoretical framework of the public sphere, proposed by Jürgen Habermas in his seminal work, *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere*, and critiques the imposition of European, patriarchal, monolithic, bourgeois notions on the public sphere. The study concludes that apart from the British intervention, the patriarchal and moral stand of successive leaders of the Indian freedom struggle has also been responsible for the non-representation of women in general and *tawaifs* in particular as freedom fighters.

*Keywords*: Public Sphere, Courtesans, Women, Indian independence movement, Kenizé Mourad, *In the City of Gold and Silver*, Jürgen Habermas, colonialism

Introduction

The nationalist movement for India’s independence from British colonialists has always been portrayed as a masculine endeavor. Women’s roles in social, political, cultural, and economic changes sweeping India during the 1850s have largely been neglected while their participation in the independence struggle has been made invisible through a male-oriented discourse promoted by various media platforms as well as a range of writings dominated by men. However, by digging...
deep into the past and exploring the available records, one can see evidence of women’s presence as well as valuable contributions to the struggle in diverse ways. While much of the writings and research regarding women have centered on their roles within the domestic sphere, some have shown the political significance of their participation in the public sphere. Traces of history reveal how women identify themselves beyond the traditionally prescribed roles of care and are involved in broader cultural and literary spheres. Women controlled some cultural resources and actively participated in the public sphere. Among the various groups of women, the role of tawaifs (courtesans) in the multicultural public sphere in India is particularly interesting. Courtesans were dignified women belonging to the highest strata of contemporary Indian society who were defamed and derided by the British colonialists imposing their Victorian ideals as they expanded control over the Indian territory in the mid-19th century. The projection of tawaifs as prostitutes was further propelled by the patriarchal setup of Indian society with people as big as Mahatma Gandhi, the hero of Indian independence, being reluctant to associate with them or recognize their contributions. This compels us to engage in a renegotiation of the relationship between the Indian public sphere and invading British public sphere, as analyzed by Habermas.

The present article explores the role of women in the Indian freedom struggle and offers a close analysis of Kenizé Mourad’s In the City of Gold and Silver (2010) which depicts the life of Begum Hazrat Mahal of Lucknow. The purpose of the article is to establish the significant contributions of tawaifs during the first Indian freedom struggle in the mid-19th century which continued amidst hostile attempts by the British to reduce their role to merely economic and sexual functions in the contemporaneous Indian public sphere. The article provides a brief background and literature review, discusses the British invasion of the Indian public sphere, and analyzes courtesan culture and the changing Indian public sphere with reference to Kenizé Mourad’s In the City of Gold and Silver.

Women in India’s Freedom Struggle

There have been several instances in the history of India’s freedom struggle where women not only participated in the various movements against the British but also led the fight from the front. Right from the very beginning, there have been some women who valiantly fought against the British colonial forces in the subcontinent. Despite active participation, many women have been left out of representation in the discourse regarding India’s freedom struggle. Although the turning point in the history of Indian women’s progress came in 1917 when Annie Besant took charge as the first woman president of the Congress, Indian women began participating in the battle against the British way back in the year 1780 when Velu Nachiyar, the ruler of Sivagangai, seized the territory back from British occupation. She successfully defeated Mohammad Ali Khan Wallajah, Nawab of Arcot, and a strong aide of the British colonialists. She captured him and exchanged him with the British for Sivagangai’s sovereignty. There are similar stories of valor and sacrifices by other women figures such as Rani Awanti Bai of Ramgarh and Kitturu Rani Chinamma of Kittur who fought until their last breath against the colonists (Chakrabarti, 2018).

Besides these queens, many common women fought against colonial power after breaking the shackles of tradition and culture. These include Swarnakumari Devi, Kadamboni Ganguli, Sarala

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4 A tawaif was a highly successful entertainer who catered to the nobility of the Indian subcontinent, particularly during the reign of the Mughals.

5 A title of respect used for a Muslim woman of high rank or a married Muslim woman.

The participation of Indian women not only fortified the Indian freedom struggle but “additionally gave the discussion to women to deliver the contestation and constrictions of male-centric society” (Kumar & Panwar, 2019, p. 922). Nevertheless, their “participation from latent to dynamic to an activist’s job” (Kumar & Panwar, 2019, p. 922) was overwhelmingly neglected in the male-oriented textbooks and media stories regarding the freedom movement led by Mahatma Gandhi in the first half of the twentieth century. Shehnas Pazhoor (2022) in her study delineates how “the nationalist movement was projected as a masculine endeavor” and discusses the heterogeneous nature of women’s participation through both domestic and public space.” Suruchi Thapar-Björkert (2006) in her book Women in the Indian National Movement: Unseen Faces and Unheard Voices 1930-1942 writes about the dual conceptual optics of “domestication of the public sphere” (Chapter 3) and “politicization of the domestic sphere” (Chapter 5) to focus empirically on the contributions of women from the central provinces in the anti-colonial freedom struggle.

Amongst the neglected women, there was one significant group called courtesans whose contributions were deliberately pushed to the background, for they belonged to a profession that was newly being considered profane due to the misogynist social structure and the rising colonial influence. However, their contribution to the cultural public sphere of court mannerisms and etiquette is evident in that they had previously been considered skilled and dignified women belonging to the highest strata of contemporary Indian society. Royal families would even send their sons to them for classes:

In the subcontinent, *Tawaif* referred to the courtesans who were proficient and highly skilled in both music and dance and were at the center of art and culture in India. They were the entertainers of the royal court and nobility, and only the wealthy and elite could afford to attend their concerts. The *Tawaif* were considered authorities on etiquette, so much so that the noble families would send their sons to them to learn the art of conversation and etiquette. (Inzamam & Qadri, 2021)

Called by different names in different parts of the subcontinent, many of these courtesans played a pivotal role in weakening the imperial power. After seeing the rapid decline of the Mughal Empire, *tawaifs* shifted to Oudh6 in Lucknow where they could still flourish for the *nawabs*7 ruling the region. Following the East India Company’s aggression in Oudh, in 1856, “the *tawaifs* responded by playing an active role in the revolt from behind the scenes. Their establishments called *kothas* became meeting zones and hideouts for rebels. Those who had accumulated wealth provided rebels financial support” (Rao, 2019).

With the strengthening of colonial mores in the first half of the 20th century, their prestige and the public demand for them were lost. It became difficult for them to sustain themselves financially by dancing and singing for their royal patrons and hence, sensing the decline of their *kothas* and dreading a push into prostitution, the multi-talented *tawaifs* began migrating to

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6Oudh was a princely state in North India’s Awadh region which was annexed by the British in 1856. It is the central region of the modern-day state of Uttar Pradesh.

7A *Nawab* is a royal title indicating a sovereign ruler, often of a South Asian state, in many ways comparable to the western title of King.
other professions such as the gramophone industry and Parsi theatre (Bhasin, 2019). Begum Hazrat Mahal, who fought a fierce battle against the imperial power and contributed to India’s journey towards independence despite unfortunate denials by the mainstream society, was also a courtesan who turned out to be the queen of Oudh. The article draws from her story to reflect on the role of courtesans in the freedom struggle despite the attempts of both the British and the Indian patriarchal society to view them as prostitutes.

Courtesans, a loose translation of tawaif, were professional singers and dancers who catered to the nobility in the Indian subcontinent. Courtesans hold a greater significance in the history of independence and transcend the profane position in which they are placed. The word tawaif is derived from the Arab word tauf, which means “to go round and round,” which refers to the circumambulation of the Holy Kaaba. According to Safvi, “Tauf was used for a band of itinerant musicians and as tawaifs were highly skilled musicians, singers and dancers. It was a term of respect, not derision” (Safvi, 2018). The tawaifs were artists of the finest superiority and stature, considered to be the epitome of grace and poise. They were deemed as an essential asset central to Mughal court culture. Tawaifs “lived under the patronage of Nawabs/Kings and were, economically, relatively independent” (Tula & Pandey, 2014, p. 74). They were regarded as artists who had discreet offices known as Daftaer-e-Arbab Nishat and were part of various festivities. These non-domestic and non-married women were powerful, independent, subversive, and wielded significant power. Veena Talwar Oldenburg posits, “Tawaifs established a counterculture to patriarchy—a lifestyle of resistance” (Oldenberg, 1990) in the domains of patriarchy. Oldenburg, in her article “Lifestyle as Resistance: The Case of the Courtesans of Lucknow,” examined the power and dominance these tawaifs exerted. She mentions:

It was not surprising enough to find women in the tax records, it was even more remarkable that they were in the highest tax bracket, with the largest individual incomes of any in the city. The courtesans’ names were also on lists of property: (houses, orchards, manufacturing and retail establishments for food and luxury items) confiscated by British officials for their proven involvement in the siege of Lucknow and the rebellion against British rule in 1857. (Oldenberg, 1990)

Saba Diwan in her book Tawaifnama details the contribution of courtesans to the nationalist movements during colonial rule (Dewan, 2019). The book, by combining personal and cultural histories, not only uncovers the contribution of courtesan Dharmann Bibi in the Revolt of 1857 (Anasuya, 2019) but also brings to light the patriarchal hints that are embedded in traditional narratives; she highlights the fact that Bibi’s lover Kunwar Singh is recalled as the champion of the cause while her memory is not given the same regard. The book also dismantles how deep stigmatization has willfully masked and wiped out the courtesan’s record of participation in the nationalist cause.

The play San Sattavan Ka Kissa: Azizun Nisa (Sharma, 2013) focuses attention on the life of Azizun Nisa, a courtesan disguised as a man, who revolted against British rule from Cawnpore (Kanpur) in the 1857 mutiny. Her abode (kotha) was a place for meetings of the soldiers. But Azizun Nisa’s story has always received less attention than men’s. Lata Singh posits that it is never the women but only the men that conventional narratives stress when they focus on the contribution of ordinary people in the revolt (Singh, 2007). The play also problematizes the argument that the courtesans revolted against the British in the revolt of 1857 as they were under the influence of nawabs which invisibilizes the role of women in the freedom struggle. In the 19th century, British
imperialism and its atrocities against the elite classes had a profound effect on the courtesan culture. To control the mortality rate, the British linked courtesans with poor hygiene (Tula & Pandey, 2014). They regulated, inspected, and controlled their bodies. Colonial discourse reconstituted courtesans and arbitrarily relocated them to a military cantonment for the convenience of European soldiers. Colonial discourse excluded them from the domain of culture and limited them to the domain of economics.

In the twentieth century, Gandhi was keen on involving women in the freedom struggle as he believed it would bring wholeness to the cause. The Gandhian phase was based on social reform movements and the principle of *Ahimsa* and morality. Therefore, the nationalist discourse tried to purify the nation of bad influences like the courtesan culture. The nationalist discourse was not simply premised on inclusion/exclusion (Tula & Pandey, 2014). Gandhi rejected the participation of courtesans in the Non-cooperation Movement in 1921 on moral grounds as he held the view that these women were living a life of shame. But he mistakenly associated contemporary courtesans with another aspect of courtesan culture in a different place and time (Tula & Pandey, 2014). Vikram Sampath in *My Name is Gauhar Jan* (2010) details how Gauhar Jan was approached by Mahatma Gandhi to organize a fund-raising concert for the Swaraj Fund and contribute to the freedom struggle. Many courtesans also supported Gandhi during the Non-Cooperation Movement from 1920-1922 by forming the *Tawaif Sabha* (Barua, 2019). The courtesans also wanted to join the Indian National Congress to support the freedom struggle, but Gandhi urged them to give up their life of shame and spin *charkha* (Indian fiber-spinning wheel) instead as he could not accept donations earned from sex work.

These instances exhibit the participation of courtesans in the rebellion yet little space is given in academic discourse to account for their influence. The courtesans were politically conscious beings and were women of great wealth and agency. But many stories of these women were lost as it seemed *tawaifs* were not perceived as important enough to be documented. The universal history silenced the courtesan subject, which is problematic. The dominant narratives robbed these courtesans of everything by merely limiting them to their one role and never giving them the respect they deserved. Therefore, courtesans are an important site in contestation between patriarchal, colonial, and nationalist discourse (Tula & Pandey, 2014).

**Habermas and the Public Sphere**

The article employs Jürgen Habermas’ theoretical concept of the public sphere which propagates the idea of a realm of social life that guarantees the participation and the freedom of expression and public opinion to all the members of society. The membership in this public sphere “meant that no one person was above the other and all arguments were similarly treated and scrutinized” (Habermas, 1989, p. 85). While Habermas’ concept of the public sphere provides useful insights into the early modern period, it fails to provide an influential theoretical framework for understanding the structural changes of the public sphere in modern societies and cultures. It is often categorized as an ideal public sphere, a concept that raises some serious questions. It is frequently critiqued for being rationalist and ignoring a few sections of society. Simon Susen in “Critical Notes on Habermas’ Theory of Public Sphere” criticizes Habermas for promoting the patriarchal character of society and marginalizing women. Divya Dwivedi and Sanil V note that the public sphere’s “historical specificity and normative ideality is merely concomitant with a

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8 Buddhist concept of respect for all living things and non-violence toward others.

9 Tawaif Sabha refers to a group of courtesans in Varanasi that was formed to support the Gandhi-led Non-cooperation movement from 1920 to 1922 during the Indian freedom struggle.
certain image whose title is ‘the West’” (2015, p. 02). Therefore, “any consideration of the public sphere outside of Europe, and particularly in postcolonial countries such as India, needs to take its historical foundations into account” (Harindranath, 2014, pp. 168-169).

The article explores the changing contours of the Indian public sphere, particularly that of the Oudh region through Kenizé Mourad’s novel In the City of Gold and Silver. The text celebrates the inclusiveness of tawaifs in the Indian public sphere. The British imperial authorities find it difficult to accept the participation of tawaifs in the cultural, literary, and political domain of the public sphere because it is outside the Habermasian imagination of the British public sphere. Therefore, they made every effort to reduce their roles to mere economic and sexual purposes, conforming to the Habermasian patriarchal, bourgeois public sphere.

**British Invasion of the Indian Public Sphere**

Courtesans or tawaifs have often been excluded from the Indian public sphere since the expansion of colonial power in the subcontinent in the 19th century. The British deemed Indian cultures and traditions as barbaric and considered it their moral duty to civilize the native population. Through a similar lens, they identified these courtesans as mere prostitutes thus undermining the tehzib10 (Jones, 2015) they were known for. The Indian public sphere during the second half of the century metamorphosed given the increase in territories conquered by the East India Company. The British deployed a clever strategy by thwarting the oppressive tax regime of taluqdar11 and introducing land reforms in favor of the poor peasants only to benefit the company later by instilling distrust between the native rulers and those being ruled. Kenizé Mourad’s novel In the City of Gold and Silver depicts this shift in Oudh’s public sphere where people fell prey to such imperial treacheries and shows through the journey of Begum Hazrat Mahal how the role of courtesans were reduced from cultural and political domains to the economic and sexual.

**Begum Hazrat Mahal**

The novel portrays the life of Begum Hazrat Mahal, an unsung courtesan who becomes the queen of the kingdom of Oudh and leads a fierce resistance against the British imperial forces. Hazrat’s mother died while giving birth to her, and her father was an artisan who died of tuberculosis when Hazrat was twelve, following which she “was taken in by her uncle who had a reputation as the city’s finest topi [cap]embroiderer” (Mourad, 2014, p. 10). With mesmerizing green eyes perfectly contrasting with her fair skin complexion, she was selected by Amman and Imaman, former courtesans, to be groomed as a courtesan for the aristocratic harems. She was sixteen when she impressed Wajid Ali Shah, the king of Oudh with her extraordinary beauty and poetic talent which earned her a spot in his harem. She then rose to become the queen mother with the enthronement of his eleven years old son Birjis Qadir as the new king under the critical circumstances erupting due to the absence of Wajid Ali Shah and the eventual decay of the administration. Amidst a crisis, her troubles were yet to increase for she was a woman, and moreover a woman who “[came] from nowhere” (Mourad, 2014, p. 157). Despite all obstacles, she managed to consolidate her position with her skills and strategies, organize her allies, and lead a fierce resistance against the British forces. After Oudh was captured, she along with some companions left for Nepal where she lived in exile until she died in 1879 at the age of forty-eight.

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10Tehzib is an Urdu word meaning “respect” or “manners.”
11Taluqdar or Talukdar were aristocrats who formed the ruling class during the Delhi Sultanate, Bengal Sultanate, Mughal Empire, and British Raj. They were owners of vast lands, passed down power through inheritance, and were responsible for collecting taxes.
Courtesan Culture and the Changing Indian Public Sphere

Courtesans enjoyed a life of freedom, dignity, and comfort in their glorious days. Kenizé Mourad mentions, “In Lucknow, courtesans enjoy a very high status, quite unlike prostitutes. Renowned for their elegance and sophistication, they usually have a wealthy patron and every evening welcome aristocrats and artists into their salons to share art, music, dance, and conversation” (Mourad 2014, p. 12). Mourad depicts the active participation of the courtesans in the contemporary public sphere contrary to their image of that of a prostitute. They were well-trained dancers, musicians, and poetesses who “were at the center of art and culture in India” (Rao, 2019). Their culture rose to its peak during the Mughal era when they received a distinct prominence in the contemporary Indian public sphere and even had strong political ties with kings, nawabs, and taluqdar. As Nevile points out, “To be associated with a tawaif was considered to be a symbol of status, wealth, sophistication, and culture. . . no one considered her to be a bad woman or an object of pity” (Nevile, 1996, p. 98). They enjoyed wealth, power, prestige, and political access, and were considered authorities on culture (Rao, 2019).

The journey of Begum Hazrat, or Mauhammadi as she was called before entering the harem, has to be traced from the house of Amman and Imaman, former courtesans where she was to be trained to achieve the finest level of skills required to become a courtesan. Mourad explains their daily routine:

Lessons in comportment, dance, and singing began after a light breakfast and continued until two in the afternoon. Music lessons were also a must; each girl had to know how to play at least one instrument: the sitar, the sarangi, or the tabla. After a frugal lunch, the afternoon was spent learning Persian, the language of the Court, and poetry. Muhammadi loved these moments when her imagination could run free, within the limits of the precise codes of classical poetry, of course. (2014, p. 12)

Their status could be assessed by the fact that the Chawk12 where the house was located had its “real fame lay in the fact that it was the courtesans’ district” (Mourad, 2014, p.12). Chanda et al. (2021) explain the training process in their article:

The girls born within the community received specialized training in performing arts and inherited tangible properties from their predecessors. Women from non-hereditary backgrounds wanting to escape their oppressive pasts were also inducted into the community. Such women were placed under the tutelage of senior courtesans to hone their skills as future performers. (p. 199)

They would not take more than ten boarders at a time in order not to compromise the quality of their training while “religion and morality were a fundamental part of their education” (Mourad, 2014, p. 12). Since they were so accomplished in their language and etiquette, as already mentioned, people from prominent families would send their children to learn tehzib from them.

The Mughal Empire was in a rapid decline by the time courtesans shifted towards Oudh. But soon the East India Company exerted its full control over Oudh. With the arrival of the British, who deemed them as no more than prostitutes, the culture started deteriorating particularly as they moved forward to capture Oudh. During the tussle between the company and the Oudh state, the

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12 A main street or bazaar
The public sphere of Oudh, which consisted of various private spheres such as the local people, religious groups, British forces, aristocrats, women, and courtesans, was witnessing a transition in its attitude towards the courtesans. How the colonists’ private sphere saw the courtesans and the harem culture is beautifully depicted in the small play within Mourad’s novel performed in Wajid Ali’s Parikhana where young actresses dressed as British soldiers and officials discussed and compared the courtesans to British or European counterparts. A girl wearing a crinoline dress comments that “these natives have no moral sense. They have innumerable wives and concubines!” (Mourad, 2014, p. 5). While continuing to criticize polygamy and the courtesan culture, one of the actresses dressed as a British official indignantly links courtesans with prostitutes, “Whores or not, these Indians are lucky to have at home what we have to go looking for elsewhere, with all the risks—and expenses—involved!” (Mourad, 2014, p. 5). Although the Oudh’s public sphere and the authority still valued the culture, the discussions in the colonists’ private sphere about its moral legitimacy began making their way into the other private spheres constituting the general “public sphere.” The public sphere is a term coined by German philosopher Jürgen Habermas who also defined it as “made up of private people gathered together as a public and articulating the needs of society with the state” (Habermas, 1989, p. 176).

The gradual deterioration of the culture in Lucknow began after the British annexed Oudh in 1856, but it finally eroded after the Sepoy mutiny of 1857. Between this period, aristocrats who provided patronage were weakened both politically and economically thereby pushing the tawaifs toward the margins. They snatched their powers, seized their lands and wealth, and captured most of the palaces and forts of the kingdom. In Mourad’s novel, the eunuch reports to the Begum about the common people complaining about the absence of the king and his parties. He later reports:

The resident had cried foul and had complained to Governor General Lord Dalhousie about the state of “debauchery” in this Court, where the sovereign neglected his responsibilities, concerned only with his pleasure. The governor had threatened, and … to forget the constant humiliations, he had again plunged into a whirlwind of parties. (Mourad, 2014, p.20)

The company made the best use of this opportunity by taking measures to convert the discontent among the public into their favor. How they tried to mold public opinion can be understood through the clever strategy they employed by redistributing the land from the taluqdars to the local peasants but later buying the same land at a much cheaper price due to Oudh’s crumbling economy under the company’s rule. This left many landless once again. Similarly, luxury, comfort, and entertainment by courtesans were all a feature of the aristocracy, and many aristocrats indulged in these activities instead of looking after the common public that forms most of the public sphere.

Despite the anger of the public toward the British treatment of the aristocracy and the way their kings’ wives were thrown out of the palace, people were fed up with the aristocratic lifestyle and the ignorance they showed toward the plight of the common people. This helped the British to advance their agenda and to infuse Victorian thoughts and ideas regarding land, polygamy, courtesan culture, and other systems.

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13In the past, if a man, especially a Muslim, had several wives or sexual partners living in his house, they were often referred to as his harem. In royal Muslim households, the mother, sisters, and other women were also a part of the king’s harem besides his several wives.

14The word “pari” is taken from Urdu vocabulary meaning an angel or fairy. The Parikhana was the home to numerous courtesans, who were categorized as Paris. Young and beautiful females, who were the descendants of courtesans, lived at the Parikhana.
The fall of the aristocrats had a direct impact on the courtesans as they were the source of income. This is depicted in Mourad’s novel when Amman and Imaman express their concern for the deteriorating culture and traditions as the British consolidated their control of the state:

Since the government confiscated the taluqdar’s villages and raised taxes, our clients, the cream of Awadh's aristocracy, have been ruined. And the few who have something left are so worried, they do not have the heart to enjoy themselves. All the respectable houses in Chowk have closed. Only a handful of second-class establishments remain to cater to the Angrez military or the nouveaux riches, who made a fortune buying up for a song the land distributed to the farmers. (Mourad, 2014, p. 67)

Following the weakening of the aristocracy which was the main source of their income and wealth, the tawaifs were pushed toward the margins. It became difficult for them to survive under the turmoil, and thus many of them were forced to leave their profession and became prostitutes. This was accompanied by the destruction of their houses, palaces, and other properties, and the plundering of their wealth and treasure by the British forces. The British authorities “discredited the nobility,” who were associated with the tawaifs, “as dissolute and immoral” while “launching a campaign…against them to reduce their influence” and assuming “control over much of the prime real estate given to them by the Nawabs” (Singh, 2007, p. 73).

While the public sphere was breached by such campaigns generated through the British private sphere, the British, putting their morals aside, defied their own rules by using these women as prostitutes for their troops. Lata Singh writes about this hypocrisy in her article:

It became official policy to select the healthy and beautiful “specimens” from among the kotha women, and arbitrarily relocate them to the cantonment for the convenience and health of the European soldiers. This not only dehumanized the profession, stripping it of its cultural function but made sex cheap and easy for men while exposing women to venereal infection from the soldier. (Singh, 2007, p. 73)

There have been hardly any accounts where courtesans were known to be engaged in sexual activities before the British took over, but it was true that those courtesans who could not become proficient in dance and music or who were “not gifted or dedicated enough to reach the required level of perfection [found] themselves relegated to the poorer part of the Chowk as second-rate courtesans, or even reduced to the status of mere prostitutes—a prospect that terrifie[d] these women” (Mourad, 2014, p. 12), although this too involved freedom of choice. But ever since Oudh was annexed, the feudal lords were destroyed as a result of which even the most talented and skillful courtesans were marginalized and were forced to choose the unwanted profession since the two private spheres were deeply related to each other. Habermas et al. (1974), while commenting about the representation of power in an absolutist state, state “The status of the feudal lord, at whatever level of the feudal pyramid, was oblivious to the categories “public” and “private,” but the holder of the position represented it publicly: he showed himself, and presented himself as the embodiment of an ever-present “higher” power” (p. 50).

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15The Kothas or bordellos were like finishing schools for the arts, where respectable girls came for etiquette training in aadaab (politeness) and tehzeeb (refinement). See https://www.livehistoryindia.com/story/people/the-tawaifs-of-shahjahanabad
In Oudh’s situation, this representation continued despite the change of authority, and the tawaifs’ fortunes turned even worse without clients and under mistreatment by the Company’s troops. An interview with historian Danish Iqbal revealed that the role of the private sphere, specifically the jealous and tormented wives of the aristocrats, added to the misery of courtesans as he explains:

One of the reasons was many noble and royal men would spend most of their time in Kothas, entertaining themselves with the courtesans’ performances and singing and they would come home either only to sleep or rarely. The reason was they were not happy in their marriages. It was these women, who felt abandoned and ignored by their husbands, who began spreading canards against the courtesans and called them mistresses, and concubines, thus relegating their status from highly skilled dancers and singers to the ‘other woman.’ (as cited in Inzamam & Qadri, 2021)

All these factors coalesced together leading many of these young girls and women to join the rebel forces during the Sepoy Mutiny and stretching beyond the Gandhian era. It was not easy to choose between warfare and bloodshed by participating in the revolt. Still, their residences and kothas became the meeting point for rebels. In meeting places, crucial tactics were devised to counteract the advances of the colonial forces. Additionally, confidential information and strategies of the colonizers’ plans for the city were elicited through the cunning act of enticing British officials with sexual encounters, entertainment, and inebriation. The courtesans’ involvement so irked them that their “names were also on lists of property confiscated by British officials for their proven involvement in the siege of Lucknow and the rebellion against British rule in 1857. These women, though patently noncombatants, were penalized for their instigation of and pecuniary assistance” (Oldenberg, 1990, p. 259). Despite their active role in the independence movements, their stories were invisibilized for their “immoral” profession, and “from then on down to the present day they struggle to retain their validity and some of the tangible benefits of a professional group” (Singh, 2007, p. 73). The same kothas which used to be the locations where strategies against the colonist forces were planned became brothels in today’s common parlance.

The British regime tried to reconstruct the public sphere in Colonial India based on Victorian morality. The harm to the reputation of the kotha was instigated by British political propaganda (Oldenberg, 1990). The culture once inclusive of tawaif started questioning her moral purity. The colonizers viewed everything from what Habermas calls “the bonds of economic dependence” (Habermas, 1989, p. 33), and as a result, they reduced and limited tawaifs to sexual and economic domains.

Mourad also creates, as mentioned above, what Nancy Frazer names as an alternative public sphere (Fraser, 1990) in the narrative through Hazrat Mahal’s character and provides the reader with an unconventional dialogue. The protagonist was given the title of “Iftikhar-un-Nisa,” or “the pride of women,” by the king as he was certain that she was a woman imbued with a sense of individuality. Besides, she also wrote satirical plays that were performed in the Parikhana. The conversations between the characters dressed as British officials present colonial views on Mughal Court’s tradition and their subsequent efforts to degrade and eradicate a rich culture by questioning their morals.

Further, as the nationalist movements gained momentum, “a Gandhian Public Sphere” (Kalpagam, 2002) emerged and dominated the discourse. It further damaged the credibility of the courtesan culture by connecting it with Hindu religious metaphors (Haynes, 1991). It laid focus on
the refinement of the character, and as a result, did not appreciate any support from the *tawaifs*. It restricted the courtesan within the boundaries of immorality and labeled them as flesh trade. Thus, the discussions generated out of the British private sphere intervened in the contemporaneous Indian public sphere, which already had patriarchal tendencies. When the British assumed authority, the public’s opinion about courtesans being of the sexual realm began to consolidate over time.

**Conclusion**

The study establishes that the public sphere of colonial India, particularly that of Oudh, offers an unusual structure of inclusivity of women through culture and literature which was otherwise a rare phenomenon. Under the influence of the East India Company, it is quite clear that *tawaifs* were denigrated as prostitutes only meant for sexual purposes despite previously being one of the most valued sections of aristocrats in the public sphere. They were highly valued by the nobility for their skills and manners and were considered to be the epitome of demeanor in the past. They were some of the highest taxpayers and possessed much more liberty than any other women including the wives of the noblemen. It was the imposition of the imperial ideas of morality that began to influence the Indian public sphere making it hostile for the courtesans to continue their profession.

The present paper foregrounds the role that these courtesans played in response to the atrocious attitude of the British towards their culture and profession by being highly active in their participation during the revolt of 1857. Their *kothas* became the meeting point for rebels where they planned important strategies to be employed to resist the aggression of the colonial forces. Not only this, but they were also significant in leaking secrets of the British by luring the British officials into sex and entertainment where they would reveal their plans as the courtesans would make them excessively drunk. Amidst all the factors contributing to the deterioration of their rich culture, they were further disrespected by the Gandhian public sphere in the second freedom struggle against the British. Despite their active participation in the various movements and the financial assistance they provided for the cause, they were denied the deserved recognition, important leadership roles, and membership in the Indian National Congress like other women. The study reveals how even after decades of independence, they remained unsung among the freedom fighters for reasons such as their association with sex work while completely ignoring their valuable contribution to both the freedom movements and the fact that they were forced to choose prostitution and other professions by the imperial rule and the contemporary Indian public sphere. Critiquing the imposition of the European, patriarchal, monolithic, bourgeois position of the British intervention on the public sphere in Oudh through a Habermasian theoretical lens, the article establishes that apart from the British intervention, the patriarchal and moral stand of successive leaders of the Indian freedom struggle has also been responsible for non-representation of *tawaifs* as freedom fighters.

**References**


