

Social Rejection in *Umrao Jaan*: A Bane or Boon

Priyanka Khattar¹ and Dr. Neelam Raisinghani²

¹Department of English, Apex University, Jaipur, ²College Education, Rajasthan, Jaipur

Abstract

This Film *Umrao Jaan* shows how the average courtesan is associated with the *Ghazal*/Poem through the *Lakhnavi* courtesan culture. The way of life sets up that a *tawaif* should be talented in verse, language, religion/custom, and behavior; it is a direct result of these attributes that the respectability of India and refined society invested such a lot of energy with the *tawaifs*. *Umrao Jaan* reflects a glamorized tale of a *tawaif*, set in Lucknow in nineteenth-century northern India directed by Muzaffar Ali.

Umrao Jaan, an Indian film is the story of an attractive courtesan named Amiran (Rekha). This paper tries to explore her trauma at rejection by the society. At every stage of her life, she feels the pangs of oppression and rejection. She is suffering without any fault and only to take revenge from her parents she was thrown by her uncle to this profession. She is not able to break away from the cycle of *tawaif* even after she once again reached her place of birth. Unfortunately, her brother is not in favor of her coming back to the family due to social stigmas. This paper is an attempt to highlight that the *tawaifs* are not socially acceptable. Society never blames the offenders who convert a girl into a *tawaif*.

Keywords: Courtesan, Ghazal, glamorize, *oppression*, *rejection*, asserting, verse, Female Self, Lakhnavi culture.

Women's issues are important to every human society; primarily because they go on to justify all human relationships and social constructs. And cinema is a means which shows a broad area than any written literature or political debate. Between the eighteenth and early twentieth century in north India, the *tawaifs* were considered professional artists. The word *tawaif* is an Urdu word derived from *tauf*, meaning going round and round during dance into the *mehfil*. According to the renowned Hindi writer, Amritlal Nagar *tawaifs* were the artists, who performed in royal courts and *kothas*. They were not only prostitutes but also artists. They were artists, poets, and dancers, and singers. But it seems to be very odd that *tawaif* was not socially acceptable, everybody looked

down upon prostitutes.

The film depicting the condition of *tawaifs* in the 19th century India, focusses on their difficulties, they faced in finding social acceptability. These difficulties could have been overcome with their education, but unfortunately there was no formal schooling for them. However, with the acquisition of some skills and colonial cultural influence, they were able to survive the male hegemony. The director has been successful in representing the identities of *tawaifs* in a *tawaif*-centered film; their place in society and their relationships with men.

The film points out the idea of the self-respect of a woman, the concept of romance, the imposition of a patriarchal order upon her, and her journey towards self-definition. The female protagonist Umrao Jaan suffers a great injustice in the narrative of this film, first from society and then from her blood relatives.

The film *Umrao Jaan* depicts the protagonist as a victim of circumstances, how she faces persecution and dismissal at different stages in society. She is paying a heavy cost of rejection with no fault of her own and tossed to this profession forcibly by a male relative just to deliver retribution from her folks against whom he had lost a case, yet the circumstance is readily acknowledged albeit the heroine is aching for superior life and a way towards self-completion. The female protagonist comes up as a more beautiful, talented, and emotionally bold character who knew how to survive with her circumstances. The character emerges as a self-governing entity.

The film acquaints us with a much far-reaching audience than literature as it gets across the impediments of class, education, religion, and language. Not just it impersonates reality, it likewise develops reality also. Women's liberation in Indian film investigates both standard and equal examination of 'the women' Image, sentiment, the inconvenience and resistance of the male-centric request, and a woman's excursion towards self.

The film *Umrao Jaan* is a variation from the Urdu novel *Umrao Jaan Ada* composed by M.H.Ruswa. In India, this film was made for the sake of *Mehndi* in 1958 by Chief S. M. Yusuf. Later in the year 1981 *Umrao Jaan* was coordinated by Muzaffar Ali and changed in 2006 by J. P. Dutta. The film shows certain critical revelations of the moral, political, social, and monetary real factors of the contemporary time. The film romanticizes the existence of *tawaifs*. This film is a heartfelt portrayal of the *Mughal* culture. The *Umrao Jaan* movie has equally been a genuine illustration of what Mulvey said: "women are continually taken a gander at and shown for the male observer's pleasure"(Page No 7).

The marvelousness, sparkle, and extravagances of the celebratory season are anxious in the initial segment of the film. The illness, crumbling, debasement, mistreatment, and the terrible state of the

Social Rejection in *Umrao Jaan*: A Bane or Boon

tawaifs overwhelm the last areas. The film delightfully outlines the depiction of the period; Urdu, *mehfils*, *tawaifs*, *ghazals*, *shers*, *hookahs*, stunning dresses, ideal houses, and the *kathak* exhibitions.

The film puts forth a striking attempt to raise the idea of *tawaif*, whores, and prostitution during that period. Tragically, a dim thin path that prompts where fair men don't go, a spot resonating with the beats of *tabla*, and a bejeweled woman moving among men lounging around a lobby is the image Bollywood has painted of a *tawaif*. In any case, the truth of various prostitutes who lived in antiquated and archaic India can't help disagreeing. A few concubines of the middle age period figured out how to leave an imprint in the male overwhelmed society on those occasions. These ladies stood sure and mindful of their capacities and didn't spare a moment to scrutinize the standard. *Umrao Jaan* has polished her singing and moving abilities, and her ingenious nature to see her through her propelling years. *Umrao* isn't just a thoughtful woman yet additionally more grounded woman. She is neither fatalistic nor discouraged with regards to her life despite the fact that she utilizes a modest *Lakhnawi Urdu* style that romanticizes the changes (and misfortunes) of history.

Prostitution is a complicated issue not only in India but also in the world (Cao & Maguire, 2013). The public opinion of prostitution is intriguing to study for many reasons. First, it is a fragile issue because it deals with a typical behavior or style of living that is judged by some as unusual, sinful, or mischievous, originates from society's historical attempt to control sexual expression (K. Davis, 1966; G. Rubin, 1993). Most people seem to be morally enigmatic to its regulations. On the one hand, prostitution acts as a sexual alternative to marriage (Cao & Stack, 2010; Liang & Cao, 2013). Its endurance represents a symbolic rejection of the prevailing norm of marriage between one man and one woman. On the other hand, despite thousands of years' legal suppression, prostitution as a part of the huge sex industry still exists and even tends to flourish in some areas (Attwood, 2009; Brents & Sanders, 2010; Zheng, 2014). Public criticism of prostitution coexists with illegal visits to prostitutes. Second, the topic blurs the line between the personal and the social. It is personal because two willing adults concur to indulge in it, and it is a social issue because activities related to it are not socially acceptable in India. The continuation of prostitution is associated with traditionally culturally supported behavior that encourages men to feel entitled to sexual access to women and to feel an overbearing attitude to women (Cotton, Farley, & Baron, 2002). This profession is persistent because "the marketplace exchange of money for the unsentimental provision of sexual gratification with no strings attached" (Meier & Geis, 1997, p. 31).

Prior Research on the public opinion of prostitution is generally perceived as a moral issue. It

Priyanka Khattar, Dr. Neelam Raisinghani

embodies moral beliefs. Starting with an ineffective relationship with Nawab Sultan, a blue blood, to her looking for comfort, on the bounce back in Gauhar Mirza, her youth side kick, to her adventures with the famous dacoit Faiz Ali, Umrao discovers herself as a survivor of conditions. Yet, through her verse, she rises above her distress and interprets them into imaginative articulations.

The Film *Umrao Jaan* portrays the miserable story of a little youngster who is abducted and compelled to turn into a *tawaif* (prostitute). One morning when she is playing with her brother whom she loves a great deal and shows him how to talk around then, Dilawar Khan abducted Amiran from her home in Faizabad in 1840 that had been shipped off prison after Amiran's father affirmed against him for a certain robbery case.

Through the course of this film, one can witness the change of an honest young woman Amiran as she becomes Umrao Jaan, one of Lucknow's generally pursued courtesans. At the brothel, innocent Amiran gets prepared in classical singing, *Kathak* dance, and Urdu verse, a taboouniverse of craftsmanship and instruction that the normal Indian young women of this period could never find the opportunity to investigate. At the point when the brothel's madam Khanum feels that she has been adequately prepared, Umrao Jaan starts performing and drawing in the consideration of affluent supporters all over Lucknow.

Nawab Sultan enters her life and raises false hopes in her heart for having the option to carry on with an emblematic wedded life containing a caring spouse, social acknowledgment, and parenthood. However, at last, she finds that forlornness just is her predetermination. The title of a *tawaif* is the core reality of her life. Normally a *tawaif* has no other choice, but to experience her label.

However, Umrao Jaan is a strong-willed woman, who dares to violate her courtesan hood. She faces challenges in her day-to-day presence to achieve genuine love and satisfaction.

According to Simone de Beauvoir, "what woman wants primarily is to serve, for in responding to her lover's demands"(Page No 24). All this is done by Umrao for Nawab. Again, Simone de Beauvoir is of the opinion, "whereas a woman in assuming her role as the inessential accepting a total dependence creates a hell for herself" (Page No 26).

Meanwhile, Umrao's leaving the *Kotha* and meeting Nawab's family makes her realize the harsh reality that this chapter of her life is now finally closed for her and despite all unfavorable circumstances; she returns back to her profession and settles down in Kanpur, where Husseini and others find her and insist her to return to Lucknow on the ploy that Khanum was not well. But she finds Khanum Jaan to be quite well. One cannot blame Husseini for this betrayal as it shows that

Social Rejection in *Umrao Jaan*: A Bane or Boon

Husseini and Khanum were becoming helpless with their age growing. They were now totally dependent on Umrao for their livelihood. Gauhar tries to assuage Umrao Jaan's fears by proposing to her for a marriage with him. She knows that he is also ensuring his lifelong survival through this marriage. She does not trust him and turns his proposal down. Umrao is intelligent enough to quickly understand that her survival is dependent on British rule. She witnesses the demolition of Lucknow, which was at the center of the 1857 battle, and the subsequent clampdown by the British and records how her *Kotha* is demolished.

Historical realities also mediate in this film *Umrao Jaan*, which depicts that how delicate the presence of the *tawaif* community was during the nineteenth century in India. *Tawaifs* recognize that once they are in a *Kotha*, they are protected. On the one hand, there is indignity associated with their name while on the other hand; they are the safeguards of royal and noble culture. They are specialists and not whores as the British marked them after the revolt of 1857. These *tawaifs* rely upon the aristocrats and the trade class for their support.

An intriguing point to recollect about the *tawaifs* of that period is that they were not only the storehouses of art and culture but also self-governing women. Men were reliant on them and not the other way round. They engaged male artists, music, and dance instructors, had male customers, and even pimps who were employed by them to bring business.

Oldenberg, who has surveyed the *tawaifs* of Lucknow thoroughly, revealed that when the British pursued everyone who had joined 1857 mutiny, found that their occupations were given as "*dancing and singing girls*", and as though it was not amazing enough to find women in the financial assessment records, it was significantly more surprising than they were in the highest income tax bracket, with the largest individual incomes of many in the city.

Albeit the film depicts numerous examples of ethos, feeling, and logos, the escalating and passionate scene is depicted in the film when Umrao returns to visit her native house and family, she was detracted from as a kid, exhibits tenderness by displaying her mother after a very long time, and implores her feelings when she's crying alongside her mother as she first lays her eyes upon mother that she is a similar little girl she was years prior. The tears gushing down her cheeks as her eyes become red with at least some expectations of her mother accepting her even though she is a courtesan shows the force of the feelings and the poignancy of the film. But the rejection by her brother hurts her again. The reunion is cut short when Umrao's brother refuses to acknowledge Amiran. Instead of telling his mother that she is Umrao Jaan, he implies that Amiran should have drowned herself than submitting to this ignoble profession. She was rejected by her family for her profession. The same brother here says to her to go away from their lives and home. But it was not the same brother, to whom she had once taught how to speak. Her crime was only

Priyanka Khattar, Dr. Neelam Raisinghani

that she was a woman. Ethos can be seen through the tone and style of Umrao in this scene of her homecoming, as she says her last words to her mother and brother before vacating that place saying, "*She is in the hunt of Amiran, who was lost in the soil of life, or maybe before kicking the bucket embracing her kin*", shows her validity not just as the prostitute we have considered her to be in the entire film, however a little girl and a sister as well. If Nawab Sultan or her brother had been in the same situation, she would never have told them to go away from her home.

The rejection occurs because patriarchy still positioned the women under the domination of men as the controllers. Men are still positioned as country controllers and religion controllers. Second, the rejection motif of women characters toward patriarchy culture is because there is no ownership of rights for women for their body and soul, such as beauty, virginity, mate, and marriage which are always determined by men. (Asri Yasnur,24)

Although rejected---once by her lover and the second time by her biological family, Umrao Jaan does not give up. Yet there are some reasons that compel a feminist to study women's rejection by patriarchal ideology.

First, in the context of feminist study, it is stated that patriarchy controls the social role of women and men. According to Walby, "patriarchy is a system in a social structure, a practice that placed men in a dominant position, to oppress and exploit women (213-220). In practice, the patriarchy dominated the family and religion, and then spread to the country. This expansion caused the patriarchy to curtail the rights of women. The husband being the head of a family was expected to be responsible to protect his wife and fend for the family as per his capability, whereas the wife was supposed to confine herself to the four walls of the home and take care of all the domestic chores, such as cleaning the house, washing the clothes, cooking, taking care of the children, and serving the husband.

In the nineteenth-century, the Northern India saw the flourishing of patriarchal culture as well as the raising of the feminist issues about the idea of gender equality for women. Although feminists questioned the placing of women in a private field as wives and mothers, whereas placing of men in a public field as the sole bread winners, but the dominant patriarchal culture expected women to be meek and docile, follow the stereotypical roles assigned to them as wives and mothers. They were supposed to conform to the prescribed norms of accompanying their husbands and supporting them, giving birth to children, making her children grow well and succeed. A barren woman was not judged well by society. The paradox was quite visible. A mother was respected but on the other side, she was placed as a subordinate to her male counterpart, because power structures were controlled and governed by men. Women's rights were limited. They depended on men in the

Social Rejection in *Umrao Jaan*: A Bane or Boon

economic, social, political, and psychological way, especially in the marriage bond. Thus, women were placed in a subordinate or inferior position in family and society. The dominant position of men worsened women's mental condition also. They had to obey the man-made rules. With the concept of beauty for them, so that women wasted their time and energy on taking care of their bodies and making themselves beautiful. Women were just "The Second Sex" (Simone de Beauvoir), that were accidentally born after men. A woman without beauty or domestic accomplishments, was not loved by a man especially and society in general. It made her depressed. This tendency was visible not only in the real life, but also in the contemporary literature and films, which described, expressed, and criticized this dark social reality.

Fourth, the study of women's rejection by the patriarchal culture in Indian films was not done much yet. Based on the limited study, it can be concluded that a number of male directors, who consider women as motherly characters, caring, gentle, and able to take care of a family well.

Deviation from such prescribed stereotypes was Umrao's crime and she was punished by her lover as well as her brother for this crime. They did not try to understand the circumstances, which made her a *tawaif*.

This research paper tries to establish that Umrao's character in the film represents a woman that refuses to conform to the patriarchal ideology in society. She rejects this patriarchal hegemony, which strengthens her already strong character. She chooses her own means of survival and takes a pride in the role she had already been playing as a courtesan.

Any attempts of rejection made by a woman are still unacceptable to the male dominated society. Such women are labelled as bad women or rebels, who do not get any support from patriarchal ideology and also the country that still makes women in under the man's power control.

The focus of this research paper is on the form of Umrao's status as a courtesan and her rebellion toward the representative patriarchal culture in the film *Umrao Jaan*. Instead of begging for any familial or social acceptance, she wipes her tears and returns to the *kotha*, where as a child, she had been pushed against her will, but now, after being rejected by the patriarchal structures, she returns back willingly. Umrao discovers a spot for herself in the outside world after she is disappointed at attempting to get away from Khanum's house as a youngster, her sentimental attachment with Nawab Sultan, her elopement with Faiz Ali, and at long last her rejection by her brother.

Umrao Jaan has been depicted as a romanticized character that experiences incredible treachery from the public and for her thwarted expectation of adoration. This film depicts women not only as

Priyanka Khattar, Dr. Neelam Raisinghani

sufferers of conditions, but also strong individuals, who pose a threat to the society by refusing to accept the prescribed social norms or the conventional situation of women in society.

Umrao emerges as a strong individual, who undoubtedly poses a threat to the male hegemony. She goes through shades of self-definition. She develops because of the misfortunes and vicissitudes of life, caused to her.

Umrao Jaan is not portrayed as a common courtesan, yet modern, the cultured woman with adoration for verse, who longs to be cherished and is not content to keep carrying on with this existence of prostitution that has been forced upon her. Through her stanzas, Umrao Jaan sings about her predicament and communicates her sensations of hopelessness.

Umrao Jaan's story is based on a 100 years old fictional story of human trafficking, quite different from its present form but reflects what a girl child can do despite the harsh reality of having no choices of her own. Rising from the state of subjugation, exploitation, sexual orientation, social stigma, she grows up into a strong human being, who is not ashamed of her profession and prefers to live by it than to succumb to the social pressures. It is the story that does not mirror the existence of a traditional young lady all through her life, starting under the territory of father at youth, spouse of wedded life, and child at an advanced age. It is the story of a girl child growing up, with all the vicissitudes of life, into a strong individual, who is passionate, emotional, and intelligent.

Works Cited:

1. Attwood, F. (2009). *Mainstreaming Sex: The Sexualization of Western Culture*. London, England: I.B. Tauris.
2. Asri, Yasnur, (2017). "Women's Rejection toward Patriarchy Culture: A Feminism Study in Selected Indonesian Novels". *Advances in Social Science, Education and Humanities Research (ASSEHR)*, volume 148, Atlantis Press. Sixth International Conference on Languages and Arts (ICLA).
3. De Beauvoir, S. (2011). *The woman in love, The Second Sex*. Tr. Constance Borde & Sheila Malovany-Chevallier. Vintage; 1st edition.
4. Cao, L., & Maguire, E. (2013). "A Test of Temperance Hypothesis: Class, Religiosity, and Tolerance of Prostitution". *Social Problems*, 60, 188-205.
5. Cao, L., & Stack, S. (2010). "Exploring Terra Incognita: Family values and prostitution acceptance in China". *Journal of Criminal Justice*, 38, 531-537.
6. Cotton, A., Farley, M., & Baron, R. (2002). "Attitudes toward Prostitution and the Acceptance of Rape Myths", *Journal of Applied Social Psychology*, (pp 32), 1790-1796
7. Davis, K. (1966). "Sexual Behavior," In R. K. Merton & R. Nisber (Eds.), *Contemporary Social Problems* (pp 354-372). New York, NY: Harcourt, Brace, & World.
8. Hadi, M., Singh, K. and Husaini, M.A. 2005. *Umrao Jan Ada: The Courtesan of Lucknow*. Orient Paperbacks.

Social Rejection in *Umrao Jaan*: A Bane or Boon

9. Meier, R. F., & Geis, G. (1997). *Victimless crime? Prostitution, Drugs, Homosexuality, Abortion*. Los Angeles, CA: Roxbury.
10. Mulvey, L., Rose, R. and Lewis, M. 2016. *Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema*(1975). London: Afterall Books.
11. Walby, Silvia (1989). "Theorizing Patriarchy." *Sociology Journal*, Vol.23 (2) hal. 213-231