



Research Paper

## "The Witty and Intelligent Women: A Critical Study of Courtesans in India with reference to Vasantsena and Umrao Jaan Ada"

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### Abstract

Literature has always been uncertain in its representation of women. Even though many women have been recognized in literature still until recent times, most of the published writers are men. Speaking of depiction of women in poetry and cinema they have paved way only as physically weaker, innocent household commodities or as courtesans. This dissertation will explain how literature performs and contains ideological crises around racialized sexuality. It will shed light on the existence of courtesans in ancient and medieval literature inspiring the modern day filmmakers to cinematize their lives. Their existence has been very prominent in the literature pieces from ancient times in India. By reading of the play *The little clay cart (Mrcchakatika)* written by Shudraka, the existence of courtesans in ancient literature becomes clear through the character of Vasantsena and Charudutta along with a medieval period novel by Mirza Hadi Ruswa, *Umrao Jaan Ada*, a story of a courtesan and poet by the same name from 19th century highlights how courtesans have been kept at a distance from the patriarchal identity of the women in society.

The research will hold parts of the reading of certain reform speeches, epistolary debates and a plethora of reading texts including *The World of Courtesans* by Chandra Moti, to find about the life of courtesans. *Dancing with the Nation: Courtesans in Bombay Cinema* will be explored for the representation of courtesans as twaifs or dancers.

Indian cinema acts as a medium to produce and promote the ideal womanhood that works best in favor of existing patriarchal constructs of society. Likewise, the cinematic adaptations of these fictions also reflect the lives of women as courtesans in the patriarchal society. It will also talk about the 1981 adaptation of *Umrao Jaan Ada* by Muzaffar Ali and adaptation of the play *Mrcchakatika* by Girish Kanard, named *Utsav* (1984).

This dissertation attempts to understand the under layers of the narrative presented by Indian cinema through the film *Utsav* and *Umrao Jaan Ada* to explore the character of a courtesan Vasantsena and Umrao Jan respectively.

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### I. Methodology

To analyze the roles of courtesans in Indian patriarchy, through the famous Sanskrit play *The little clay cart (Mrcchakatika)* by Shudraka which intrigues to dwell into knowing more about the life and culture of the protagonist Vasantsena eventually it will outline that cinema has played an equally important role in the representation of the lives of courtesans in India.

It will put forward the newly found broader aspect of literature, the cinematic picturization of the play, through the movie by Girish Kanard – *Utsav*. And other similar adaptations like *Umrao Jaan Ada* were taken into consideration.

Filmmaking as a process will be taken into consideration, that reflects the social reality through the narrative structure and attempts to characterize the courtesans as twisted and highlight the qualities such as sacrifice creating a sense of traditional womanhood.

Through the research areas explored, it will be demonstrated that responsibility of pure lineage comes upon the women in society. The patriarchal social constructs aim to control the sexual position of the women stating the concept of 'ekapati'. These ideas are further given importance during the reformation of the nation in this dissertation. The appropriate family structures were seen as a cultural requirement. This also led to the change in the identity of courtesans in society and degraded it to mere sex workers.

## II. Introduction

If we talk about the position of courtesans in society, it also changes from time to time. Their existence has been very prominent in the literature pieces from ancient times in India. Courtesans have been kept at a distance from the patriarchal identity of the women in society. Indian cinema acts as a medium to produce and promote the ideal womanhood that works best in favor of existing patriarchal constructs of society.

This dissertation will explain how literature performs and contains ideological crises around racialized sexuality. It will shed light on the existence of courtesans in ancient and medieval literature inspiring the modern day filmmakers to cinematize their lives. It also talks about the tragic end for the protagonist which suits the pre-existing ideas of the spectator and supports the conventional idea of womanhood.

Keywords: courtesans, Indian cinema, womanhood, social order, patriarchy Indian cinema

In ancient scriptures we find three kinds of women. Women who were chaste and devoted to only one man, even though that man had many wives. Second was the women who stayed away from men and lived as nuns. Third were the ones rich and single women well versed in fine arts held a position in ancient times, but in modern literature, they have been described as prostitutes.

The courtesans of India have long and very turbulent history, once seen as advisor's to the Mughal courts, they are now objects of sexual glorification. The courtesans of India did not emerge out suddenly, the history of such women takes us back thousands of years. In fact, details of the great epics Mahabharata and Ramayana also have a mention of courtesans even then. The courtesans are called by different names in different parts of India, they were an integral part of the subcontinent's cultural heritage, proudly remembered for their art and command over vast Persian and Urdu literature and poetry. These performing artists catered to the nobility even before the Mughal era.

One most common name known for them is Tawaif which is a derivative of the Urdu word Taifi, meaning "a traveling troupe." Some etymologists believe that Tawaif comes from the Arabic word "Tauf" or "tawaf", which means circling around, roaming. This word is also mentioned in the Quran in the context of heavenly rewards for believers, with youthful servants dedicated to "circling around" or "waiting on" them.

In the male dominated society where women were mostly confined to four walls of their home, these women wielded influence, and individuals could increase their social status by associating with them. Historians have said the courtesans also had agency and were not dependent on men. This part of society is being presented through myriad texts and their adaptations throughout the generations.

This dissertation will put forward the newly found broader aspect of literature, the cinematic picturization of the play Mrichkatika, through the movie by Girish Kanard – Utsaav. And other similar adaptations like Umrao Jan Ada into consideration.

Mirza Muhammad Hadi Ruswa's Umrao Jan Ada (1905) was written and published way after Sudraka's Mrichkatika. The societies they portray, however, seem in many ways, to be worlds apart. The two novels share a common theme of the "fallen" woman who becomes a courtesan.

In examining the two novels together and their respective cinematic representation we will encounter the literary portrayal of the courtesans to reflect how literature performs and contains ideological crises around racialized sexuality.

Sex workers in the late-nineteenth century, including Indian courtesans, dancing women, and devdasis, all emerge as paradoxical figures in the colonial, national, and oriental imagination. Just as courtesans were regulated by the instruments of colonial modernity such as law, knowledge production, information gathering and moral hierarchies.

**The Witty and intelligent Vasantsena of Mrichchhakatika and Utsav**

“The best account of courtesans is obtained in Kamasutra of Vatsyayana which goes into great details in drawing an accurate picture of the institution of courtesans, the clients who visited them, the low characters who either helped the courtesans and their clients and hangers-on and their lovers, periodic festivals in which they participated, their acts of piety and their virtues and vices.”(Chandra) The courtesans in ancient society are projected as individuals following the matriarchal lineage and willingly shun the idea of marriage. They create their own independent world where the legacy of art and culture is transferred from one generation to another. Natya shastra introduces the courtesans as one of the Nayikas- Ganika. Ancient literature includes the character of courtesans as a protagonist, majorly present in the Sanskrit plays.

It includes chapters defining the ultimate role played by the two strong characters vasantsena and umrao jaan

The Sanskrit plays pick up the character of courtesans for creating the narrative structure to get the spectators to the rasa realization. This playful character adds a flavor of witty and teasing conversations. The existence of courtesans in ancient literature inspires the filmmakers too. Indian cinema captures the various roles from ancient India to build a narrative around the institution of courtesans. The patterns of similar protagonists are observed in the representation of the courtesan characters. A wide range of films coming from Indian filmmakers introduces the courtesan as the tragic heroine. The narrative structure romanticizes the circumstances for the courtesan and is later infused with realism by the filmmaker creating a tragic end. Hegel's theory of tragedy says: “In life, as in literature, tragedy signifies that the Spirit is divided, that it is suffering from an inner dissonance due to the conflict of universal and particular. This tragic conflict always ensues when an individual part negates a universal. Self-alienated by the necessity of its own nature, this particular spirit becomes too assertive and feels the overpowering force of the universal. Thus human sorrow reaches its greatest depth when the opposition between the particular and universal makes itself felt.” (Hegel) This idea becomes relevant while viewing such narratives for the tragic heroine where her inner identity is conflicting with the feminine identity of the society. Filmmaking is a process that reflects the social reality through the narrative structure. The characteristics of the courtesans are twisted and highlighted by the qualities such as sacrifice creating a sense of traditional womanhood. The tragic end supports the preexisting notions in the society of the unmarriageable position of the courtesan. Reading the ancient bhramical social order that provides a base for Indian culture, the position of women can be derived. This particular notion is responsible for creating ideal womanhood and further motherhood. The status of women was given a crucial role in the society of creating a pure lineage. The privilege of this position layers the control over the women emphasizing the chaste and divine image. The concept of ‘ekapati’ holds power over the sexual status of women. Society working under these ideas associates the identity of women with the responsibility of procreating. Ideal womanhood and motherhood are absorbed as the ultimate aim of women’s life. This normative structure is read and supported as an important factor in the society to create a controlled family with morals and ethics. Courtesans were excluded from this category of women as she is working in the society with pleasure motifs. It is believed that her sexual relations do not adhere to the social order and thus her life remains incomplete. Filmmakers, familiar with the pre-existing ideas, mess around while creating characters for an entertaining narrative. This paper attempts to explore the character of a courtesan Vasantsena who is the protagonist of the film Utsav (1984) by Girish Karnad in relation to the conventional woman in society. The film Utsav is adapted from a Sanskrit play Mrichchhakatika by Sudarka. This paper focuses on two questions that are - How the Indian cinema promotes the ideal womanhood by forging a courtesan’s desires of a monogamous relationship in the narrative? How does a tragic end for a courtesan come as a relief factor for the spectators and prevent any harm to the conventional social order? Indian cinema emerged as the main ground for shaping the family structures after the post-independence reformation began. The family structure provides a solid foundation for the development of the nation. The 1980’s films project the morally and ethically appropriate idea of maintaining family relations. Though the roots of this lineage formation lie in the bhramical text, guiding the Indian culture. But Indian cinema, in its artistic ways, handled the responsibility of strengthening the idea of the family under the social normative structure. As the ancient bhramical works suggest the source of forming pure lineage and strong family relation relies more or less on the ideal womanhood, Indian cinema works towards presenting different roles of the woman in society. Each action and its further consequences are used by the filmmakers to develop the narrative in support of the social order. 1984 Utsav by Girish Karnad can be read as one of the films unconsciously nourishing the pre-existing patriarchal family structures. The narrative picked up from the ancient literature is twisted and presented in ways to indulge the spectators in the process of building the nation. As suggested in the title, this film by Girish Karnad appears to be celebrating the courtesan culture. The character of Vasantsena is introduced as the merry nature of the spring. She is a virtuous and respectable courtesan of the city Ujjain. The narrative begins when Vasantsena encounters a virtuous brahmin, Charudatta and falls in love with him. Vasantsena truly admires the morals and high ethics of this brahmin who isn’t financially rich. Shoma

Chatterjee in her book *subject cinema*, object women a study of the portrayal of women in Indian cinema reads the movie with a perspective of glorification. She says- "The dignity of the prostitute in ancient India has been highlighted in *Utsav* (festival), directed by Girish Karnad, based on Sudraka's 4th century A.D. Sanskrit classic, *Mrichhakatikam* (the little clay cart) ..... the film was in open praise of prostitution as an essential more showing women who practised their trade really enjoying what they did.... Karnad desired to evoke a golden era in Indian history when life was not only joyous but also free from want." (Chatterjee, 165) Reading the direct incidents of the film seems to glorify prostitution in Indian history and celebrates the poetic nature of the narrative. It appears to be a smooth journey where the acceptance of the courtesan culture is projected through the respected position of Vasantsena. The internal reading analyses the underlayer implications that support the social normative structure. Indian cinema provides the main stage to a character that is required to be closely observed and thus acts as an influential figure. The spectator is the mass that has to be guided and controlled under the norms created by the power. The power in this film is the patriarchal constructs that guide society. The centre stage is given to a courtesan (a woman) who is reinforcing the socialization process. Vasantsena is the character providing a cinematic locus of social control by her submission to the conventional idea of womanhood. *Utsav* attempts to construct conventional Indian femininity. Whereas the real-life courtesan debunks the idea of patriarchy by rejecting the institution of marriage, the cinematic courtesan highlights the ideal womanhood in her actions and nature. She keeps her distance from the transgressive role and stays within the boundaries of social order. The power of the institution of marriage is presented when Vasantsena is lured by the idea of chastity and desires to devote herself completely to a single man. Her characteristics go parallel with the social construct of patriarchy. Vasantsena craves the monogamous relationship with a brahmin to get on the ultimate path for the women under the bhramical notion of ancient India. "Courtesan characters are usually depicted as discontented both in the matrilial family they inherit and in the unconventional family they create. They long to marry and get absorbed into a conventional family." (Ruth Vanita) Vasantsena captures and reflects the qualities of a marital relationship in the narrative and yet her desire to build a monogamous relationship meets a tragic end. The social order considers the creation of family for a courtesan unconventional. Like many other films with the courtesans as the protagonist, the end gets in favor of the existing marital relationship. Courtesans are characterized by the qualities of giving up on their chance of happiness and being pushed back into the circle of prostitution. They are alienated by accepting the reality of their status in social constructs. वसंतसेना: आज तक येमेरी दासी रही। आज सेयेतम्ुहारी जीवन संगिनी। मदाननका: हसी मत कीगजयेमेरेसाथ हसी मत कीगजयेमेरेसाथ। वसंतसेना: पिली कहीं की जाओ! सुखी रहो। आज मुझेतुमसेईर्ष्यााहो रही है। (utsav, 1:06:00) Although *Utsav* also develops a parallel subplot that is working to project the institution of marriage. Madanika, the maiden of Vasantsena, craves a similar relationship and successfully get engaged to her desired partner. Her heartfelt happiness on this turn of events sharpens the necessity of marriage implied in the life of a woman in Indian culture. Though the scenes explain how the liberty of a courtesan relies on the partner's monetary capability to get her in exchange for an amount. But the intensity of the protagonist's desire is channeled towards the fulfillment of womanhood through her maiden. Moti Chandra in his book *the world of the courtesans* compares the duties and the ways of wife and courtesan to be similar in the context of kama shastra. "In the fourth section of the *Kamasutra* Vatsyayana deals with the duties of a housewife. In a broad sense this term also includes widows and courtesans...." (Chandra, 111) Their identity mirrors each other in respect to the love relations with the Nayak. The wife and courtesan encounters in such narratives carry a great significance in the courtesan genre films. The conversations and visuals highlight the main idea that has the power of influence. In *Utsav*, when Vasantsena meets the wife of Charudatta, they exchange their attire with each other in a very playful manner. The exchange holds great power and takes place in accordance with the desire of Vasantsena. The desire metaphorically represents the willingness of the courtesan to move drastically from her own identity in society to become the woman under the patriarchal establishment. वसंतसेना (चारुदत्त के बेटेसे): जोऊ खेलो सुनो ..... अब तो मैंतुम्हारी मााँजैसेलित्ती ह ाँन? (utsav, 1:24: 20) The scene is extended where Vasantsena shows her maternal instincts while showing affection towards the son of Charudatta. The duties of the ideal woman according to brahmical normative structure is the fusion of womanhood and motherhood. Both ideas together make the journey of women complete. Once Vasantsena submits herself to the idea of womanhood developed by society, she is taken to the next step of motherhood. The necessity of becoming a mother The passive nature of Charudatta persuades the spectator to believe that a courtesan (a woman), with pleasure, supports the concept of 'ekapati' and wishes to transform her identity from a courtesan to the ideal woman. Indian cinematic narrative spreads the patriarchal idea of controlling the sexual status of a woman in society through a courtesan that aims to leave a deeper mark on the spectator's mind. The chances of oppression increases when the authoritative power directly commands certain roles to adhere to. The courtesan, who is otherwise considered independent to have multiple partners and openly shun the institution of marriage, stands as a better alternative to metaphorically propagate the ideas in the society maintaining the existing social order. The silences of Charudatta in the cinematic representation work better for the regulation of the order. This silences of male-character in the cinematic representation suppress the position of the spectator to question the normative structure. The end of the film shares the greater meanings in the context of creating an



impact on the spectators. The ending tragically suspends the romantic scene in the life of Vasantsena and seizes the opportunity of a courtesan entering into the marital relationship. Indian cinema plays an eminent role in gathering a considerable amount of sympathy for the character of the courtesan from the spectators. Considering the fictional character, the spectator might seek a happy ending for Vasantsena but the conventional ideas of the society are comforted with the ending served. Utsav ends with a hint of the reality of society. This reality has been formed and shaped over the years to maintain the power of institutions. The mind of the spectators is conditioned in ways that functions according to the culture developed after the reformation. Indian cinema serves well to produce and sustain the required culture for the regulated functioning of the individuals in a society. "Cinema as an institution performs an ideological function; films as particular cultural production..... The ideological function of cinema as an institution does exist independently of any particular audience's response to a particular film. This function is performed by means of what Louis Althusser calls "interpellation": that is, the viewer is interpellated ("hailed") as a subject as the bearer of a familiar social role, or rather one that has become familiar over time through the operation of ideological apparatus that confirms the real conditions of existence." (green) Any other end for the movie Utsav would have questioned the cinematic representation of the life of a courtesan clashing with the pre-existing cultural ideas. The mass of the spectators is fed with patriarchal ideas through the narrative. Indian cinema as a medium is used to glorify cultural practices. Picking up a famous actress like Rekha as the protagonist, who people admire, and making her the addresser leaves a stamp that stays. The mass desires to follow the ideas and thoughts supported by the celebrity figures. Indian cinema is employed as a political tool to maintain the inherited values and norms that have long existed in society. In the cursory outline detailed above, the paper discusses the film Utsav to be read as the cinematic representation of a life of a courtesan. The 1984 film emphasizes the ideal womanhood in the patriarchal social construct. The idea originated from the brahmanical texts and has deep roots in Indian culture. The responsibility of pure lineage comes upon the women in society. The patriarchal social constructs aim to control the sexual position of the women stating the concept of 'ekapati'. These ideas are further given importance during the reformation of the nation. The appropriate family structures were seen as a cultural requirement. This also led to the change in the identity of courtesans in society and degraded it to mere sex workers. The rich and vast associations of the courtesans with art and literature was also ignored. Indian cinema engages in the production of the required culture by unconsciously guiding the mass spectators. 1980's Indian cinema actively presented the importance of family. Considering the setting of the film on the surface level, cinema appears to be celebrating the existence of courtesans and glorifying their position in society. But on the interior, the film reinforces the pre-existing normative social structure. The courtesans craving for the marital relationship makes a socio-cultural statement for the spectators to absorb the patriarchal society.

### **The lonely poetess Umrao Jaan Ada in fabrication and cinema**

Novels and flicks are two ways of seeing and describing the world. Both share in the same culture and engage with social issues like class, gender and race. Ruswa uses tone-conscious fictional bias to explore the inner space of Umrao Jan's personality. Then he uses fictional, rather than metafictional bias, to establish the verity of Umrao Jan's life story. The narrative of this novel rests on both Ruswa who's also the followership within the textbook and on Umrao the first person narrator of her own story. One way in which a new differs from the film is in the idea of authorship. Novels are composed by a single author while flicks are products of cooperative sweats, thereby rejecting the idea of a single author. In one case when Umrao and Ruswa talk to each other, Ruswa takes the occasion to speak in defense of righteous women " Let me say a many words in defense of other righteous women who, like her and her son-in- law, spend their lives locked within the four walls of their houses and suffer all the conveniences of a sheltered life ... When the men lose their plutocrat and youth, their doxy cease to bother about them and they turn back to their women who are their companions in torture. Why should n't these good women be proud, intolerant, harsh and enduring?" This is like a play within play, an individual knowledge within another, manly voice incorporating womanish history, a social representative to note on individual experience. All this is woven and achieved within the textbook of the story itself.

On the other hand Muzaffar Ali's adaption of Umrao Jan Ada makes cinematic adaptations and negotiations, but is gem all the same. The setting of the movie is in Lucknow, capital of the northeastern area of Oudh (a.k.a. Awadh), which broke down from the worsening Mughal Empire in themid-eighteenth century. Where erudite Umrao admits to " noway having really loved a man," the cinematic Umrao has one great and moping love. The report of events is drastically altered as well, and ofcourse a great deal of story is neglected. Nonetheless, Ali's film is lovely in its own right, and piecemeal from offering fine performances by famed actors and songs, it succeeds to capture the atmosphere of the new remarkably well through cinematography and accurate period sets. Muzaffar has taken liberty to communicate the necessity of musical training through a frame which is more pleasing to the eye and the observance. Indeed by the norms of Bollywood movie sagas, Umrao Jaan is complex

and melodramatic. This novel by Mirza Hadi Ruswa has spawned two Bollywood flicks, featuring two of the biggest womanish leads of the time—a 1981 interpretation starring Rekha and 2006 movie with Aishwarya Rai.

The story revolves around the pen Mirza Ruswa himself who happens to live near a prostitute who was different from others. Her window always had its curtains draped down all day round and no one was ever seen coming to her room whatsoever and neither did she go to sit on anyone's door or talk to anyone living near her. After an incident where Ruswa was having a shayri night with his musketeers she happens to get into notice, that's where the story of *Umrao Jaan* begins, “ लुप्त है कौन सी कहानी में; आपबीती कहुं की जगबीती” the promoter happens to be abducted from Lucknow in 1840 by a man who was transferred to jail after her father witnessed against him. She's also vendred to a cighthouse, where she becomes a drabs and takes the name *Umrao Jaan*, ultimately beginning a relationship with the high status Nawab Sultan. Also effects get confusing nawab is disowned by his disapproving father and leaves her, *Umrao* strikes up another relationship with a different man and when she meets nawab again he disowns her for being unchaste *Umrao* is also ravished by a nonage friend, has to flee Lucknow after the British attack the megacity, finds her way home and is disowned yet again by her long lost parents because of her times as a prostitute. The movie and the new ends with our heroine poor and alone, musing on her mischance.

The rich and vast associations of the drabs with art and literature was also ignored. Indian cinema engages in the product of the required culture by unconsciously guiding the mass observers. 1980's Indian cinema laboriously presented the significance of family. Considering the setting of the film on the face position, cinema appears to be celebrating the actuality of drabs and glorifying their position in society. But on the interior, the film reinforces the pre- being normative social structure. The drabs pining for the connubial relationship makes a socio-artistic statement for the observers to absorb the patriarchal society.

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