

**Exploring the Margins of Kotha Culture : Reconstructing a Courtesan's life in Neelum Saran
Gour's *Requiem in Raga Janki***

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"Exploring the Margins of Kotha Culture: Reconstructing a Courtesan's life in Neelum Saran Gour's *Requiem in Raga Janki*"

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Abstract: In their article, "Exploring the Margins of Kotha Culture: Reconstructing a Courtesan's life in Neelum Saran Gour's *Requiem in Raga Janki*," Chhandita Das and Priyanka Tripathi discuss the invisible challenges in life of a famous courtesan Janki Bai Ilahabadi through close analysis of Neelum Saran Gour's 2018 novel, *Requiem in Raga Janki*. In this novel, Janki belongs to the infamous *kotha* but she never fails to seek her subjectivity. This marginal place of Janaki's belonging will be discussed by appropriating and the theoretical framework of Indian feminist Lata Singh's (2007) for whom courtesans have been represented as "other" in history" (1677). Other than Singh, bell hooks' 'margin as a space of radical openness' (Yearning 228), Veena Oldenburg's spectacular scholarship on courtesans' in 'Lifestyle as Resistance' (1990) will be synthesized to deconstruct the social hierarchy. Although *bajjis* or *tawaifs* in India possess rich artistic heritage but surprisingly enough they have been often in a questionable space wherein their individual and social integrity has been compromised. Gour attempts to rewrite life of a courtesan from Allahabad and in the process creates an alternative discourse or understanding of a courtesan's life through Janki, matron, yes! not patron of Indian classical music and tradition.

Chhandita Das, Priyanka Tripathi**"Exploring the Margins of Kotha Culture: Reconstructing a Courtesan's life in Neelum Saran Gour's *Requiem in Raga Janki*"**

Generally referred as *tawaif*¹ or *baiji*² in the Indian subcontinent, "courtesan" is a woman with artistic grace who incurs the patrons' favor through elusive skill in music, dancing, and poetry. In the early 19th century courtesans were economically and politically elite female groups of Northern India who also made significant allowances to Hindustani Classical music (Maciszewski, "Multiple Voices, Multiple Selves" 8; Wade 16), high standards of Urdu poetry, performing arts, and later to the world of film and theatre (Ali 32; Booth 2) and were instrumental in curating poetic traditions (Shingavi 158). Susie Tharu and K. Lalita's seminal book *Women Writing in India* mentions that in north Indian cities *tawaif* had a "respectable place in society and was admired for her sophistication and culture" (121). In fact, they are always an integral part of Indian socio-cultural milieu (Sengupta 124). Despite being acknowledged as the connoisseur of art and literature in the feminist texts, surprisingly enough, these artists have often than not been given their dues, perhaps due to the colonial hegemony and gender politics that collapsed the gridlines between prostitution and elite courtesan culture (Waheed 995) since the British equated all of them as "dancing and singing girls." The colonial denunciation of the contested courtesan culture towards the later half of the nineteenth century shreds this entire native institution at the margin of the society as Indian middle class under the colonial economy as much as hegemony has also started believing these female performers are mere prostitutes and the root cause of the social deterioration (Bredi 120).

Courtesans belong to a place that has also garnered enough ideological notoriety under colonial moral stigma and therefore, is looked down upon in the socio-cultural space. *Kotha*³, a colloquial term used to refer to their place of residence and performance is often equated with the western brothel, a place of prostitution. However, unlike the West, *kothas* in India, may or may not have prostitution as a part of their set-up. Therefore, in the Indian context, equating courtesans with sex-workers may not be justified for *kothas* have had their orders, and courtesans are at the top of *kotha* culture having high skill of arts, music and dance. In the "Translators' Preface," section (1998) English translators of *Umrao Jaan Ada*, Khushwant Singh and M.A. Husaini also explicate that these artists are efficient, educated and independent women embracing power and privilege through artistry. It is important to mention that in the nineteenth-century *kothas* were also the cultural hub in India owned by some famous courtesans. Quite astonishingly the complex politics of historical representation often overlooked the cultural expertise of these females i.e. *baijis*, *tawaifs*, and *devadasis* (temple women), and therefore, despite being exceptionally talented some of them have become part of faded history.

One such woman is the courtesan from Allahabad⁴, Janki Bai Allahabadi (1880-1934) who existed decades before Lata Mangeshkar and exemplified her mastery in Indian classical music. There was a time when Allahabad city's existence was extensively imagined through the cultural lens of Janki's music as well as performances but under colonial logocentric apparatus, a city is only perceived in terms of technological advancement or reformist agendas. Thereby, Janki Bai is hardly remembered even in her very own city and would have been lost in the ashes of time and history if contemporary eminent Indian English author Neelum Saran Gour would not resurrected her and penned Janki's story in her "The Hindu Literary Award" winning fiction *Requiem in Raga Janki* (2018). Gour views that "one fictionalizes when there are gaps in the historical narrative. That's where you intuit and infer. You don't lose but add to the known fact. You step into the areas of silence and doubts and write" (qtd. in Khurana 6) and this is what exactly her fiction does by bridging the lacuna between Janki's blurred history and the reality of this famous courtesan's life.

The present article delineates upon the invisible challenges in the life of a famous courtesan who seeks her subjectivity in a gendered society by voicing from the margins. This is definitely a

¹ The word "tawaif" has come from the Urdu word "tauf" which means to go round and round; "tauf" was used in India to refer group of musicians. Tawaifs are the most sophisticated courtesans from North India since Mughal era (sixteenth century) who has enriched India's classical music as well as dance forms with their artistry.

² *Baiji* is a Hindi word for courtesan who is as honorific artist as of a *tawaif* and in northern India both *baiji* and *tawaif* are often used interchangeably. In this fiction Gour has used the term *baiji* for Janki Bai.

³ *Kotha* is an Indian word for the dwelling and work place of both courtesans and prostitutes; it is more like an institution to them.

⁴ Allahabad is a heritage city in North India situated at the confluence of three holy rivers *Ganga*, *Yamuna* and *Saraswati*. This city is largely famous for its unique blend of Hindu, Islamic and European cultural.

persuasive model to rethink the apparently defamed courtesans under colonial stigma, particularly when their "bodies are displaced, ignored, or outright silenced" (Anantharam 9) within so-called "respectable" society. A courtesan like Janki Bai, through her musical talent and lifestyle, emphasizes upon her dignified space based on sheer merit. Adapting Indian feminist Lata Singh's "From Tawaif to Nautch Girl: The Transition of the Lucknow Courtesan" theoretical framework of courtesans as the "'other' in history" ("From Tawaif to Nautch Girl" 1677) with critical nods of bell hooks's "margin as a space of radical openness" (hooks, *Yearning* 228) and Veena Oldenburg's spectacular scholarship on courtesans' in "Lifestyle as Resistance" (Oldenburg 1990), this present research seeks to deconstruct the social hierarchy of margin and center of which Janki Bai is a perfect example within Gour's "representational space" (Lefebvre 39) of *kotha* culture. Generally, the margin is assumed to be a deprived space but bell hooks theorizes the possibilities of such "othering" or for say "thirthing" from a feminist point of view in which margin generates resistance. Although hooks theorized this feminist model primarily for black women's lives but the framework extends its relevance for any marginal existence and experience of women who are "other" in mainstream discourses. Therefore, this proposed synthesized framework can be appropriated in the lives of Indian *tawaifs* and *bajjis* who are according to Oldenburg projection thwart social marginalization through their independent and determined lifestyles.

In a wider context, the global issue of courtesans in general, their "state of the art," and the role of courtesans in certain geopolitical set-ups have been articulated in quite a few literatures available (Maneglier 1997; Faraone and McLure 2006; Feldman and Gordon 2006). However, reviewed literatures suggest that there is still a dearth of work taken up focusing solely on the lives of the Indian courtesans which can excavate decolonial understandings of "kotha" culture. One of the iconic books in this regard is Moti Chandra's *The World of Courtesans* (1973) which elaborates upon the roles and rituals of the courtesans' since the Vedic age and for him courtesans appease the basic need of society by primarily overlooking the rich culture they inherit as he projects them to be "living the life of shame" (13) in society. Even Pran Nevile (1996) in his seminal book *Nautch Girls of the Raj* depicted the social and cultural efficacy of courtesans tracing their rising aristocracy from Mughal to *British Raj* and subsequent decline but mostly as entertaining objects of men. Contrarily enough Veena Oldenburg in "Lifestyle as resistance" represents the rich culture of the courtesans and the shift in their status from the pre-colonial to colonial period focusing on their lifestyle in which they enjoyed freedom, privilege, and power earned only through their skill in Arts. In 2010 Vikram Sampath published *My Name is Gauhar Jaan: The Life and Times of a Musician* which narrated the story of another contemporary courtesan from Kolkata and in Sampath's representation Gauhar Jaan escapes her victimhood as a courtesan in a patriarchal society by embracing colonial technological offshoot gramophone solely.

The recent decade has witnessed a renewed interest in documenting the progression and position of Indian courtesan culture. Anna Morcom's *Courtesans, Bar Girls & Dancing Boys: The Illicit Worlds of Indian Dance* (2014) critiques the façade of postcolonial nation-building discourse which often ignores the subjectivities of courtesans and marginalizes their embodied culture. Besides chronicling the social complexity of courtesan culture and their legal struggles, the author valorizes this ever present yet subdued world. In fact, quite a few scholars have also attempted to draw a compassionate transition of Indian courtesan culture from aristocracy to a profession of stigma under colonial hegemony (Sengupta 2014; Singh 2014). Within the dyad of both honor and stigma Sanjay Gautam in *Foucault and the Kamasutra: The Courtesan, the Dandy, and the Birth of Ars Erotica as Theater in India* (2016) poses these courtesans as embodiment of both erotic, sexual and aesthetic pleasure. In *Jalsa – Indian Women and their Journeys from the Salon to the Studio* (2016) Vidya Shah articulates the viable impact of technology on the courtesans' music by tracing the shifting paradigm of their journey from salon to studio. Ruth Vanita's *Dancing with the Nation: Courtesans in Bombay Cinema* (2018) is pivotal in her critical understanding of courtesan culture as nations past and heritage. By providing various examples from Hindi cinema in which courtesan's has a central position, she argues that courtesan characters and real-life courtesans bought classical music and dance to large swathes of modern Indian populations and are intertwined in the cinema industry (Vanita 18-9). By not relying upon the conventional mode of narration, which is the chronological order, she resorts to various themes such as desire, sexuality, nation-building, economic independence etc. and deconstructs modern India's erotic and political imagination. Again, the long maligned history of the courtesans or for say *tawaifs* as culturally erased community has been revisited by Saba Dewan's *Tawaifnama* (2019). Quite surprisingly, almost all the recent developments of insights and interests of courtesan culture visualize courtesans as public figures while their very subjective "selves" remains unveiled. Gour's fictional narrative *Requiem in Raga Janki* brilliantly touches upon this aspect as her

representation of *kotha* culture is extensively reliant upon a single courtesan Janki Bai's musical journey that perhaps best unfolds the challenges of courtesans both as public figure and subjective "self." Detailing Janki's lifestyle and contribution in the domains of Hindustani Classical music (e.g. *dhrupad*, *khayal*, *thumri*, etc.), Gour has explored the invisible challenges attuned in these women's lives.

Although courtesans were academically and economically affluent women, even much ahead of their respective time but society restrained them to be in the mainstream social structures, rather "deny courtesans' full access to privileges guarded at the very highest strata of society" (Feldman and Gordon 6). Such marginal positioning for bell hooks enables them to look "both from the outside in and from the inside out... this mode of seeing reminded us of the existence of a whole universe, a main body made up of both margin and center" (*Feminist Theory* xvii) as courtesans do perform in various social functions, festivals as the outsider but never allowed to partake in social programs as an insider. Moreover, this margin for hooks is also a site of radical openness which is "a central location for the production of a counter-hegemonic discourse that is not just found in words but inhabits of being and the way one lives" (hooks, *Yearning* 230). This is quite relevant in the context of courtesans of the early twentieth century in North India who retorted to the societal politics of repressing them as "fallen women" (Qureshi 320) in terms of moral stigmatization through their artistic popularity. These are also ways in which they resisted mere commodification of their bodies like other girls of the *kotha* although it was the colonial policy during and after 1856 in the Awadh⁵ region to "select the healthy and beautiful 'specimens' from among the *kotha* women and arbitrarily relocate them in the cantonment for the convenience of the European soldiers" (Oldenburg 265) which in Oldenburg's argument not only "dehumanized the profession, stripping it cultural function, but it also made sex cheap and easy for the men" (266). While colonial hegemony relegated these connoisseurs of arts and even the entire *kotha* culture to mere sex business, there is an obvious need to intervene and develop a decolonial understanding of the same in order to provide its due to the practitioners of courtesan culture. It is because they have not only been the connoisseurs of music in Indian cultural tradition but also in Indian feminist Mekhla Sengupta's opinion the rich bearers of an "established social institution" and thereby, "should be the subject of any study of proto-feminism, or in the study of the many origins of the forces that a woman must contend with in India even today" (Sengupta 137). One such feminist understanding upon this rich North Indian culture has been implicitly elucidated in Gour "representational" vision in *Requiem in Raga Janki* through the subjective experiences of once famous singer, Janki Bai.

Neelum Saran Gour's narration of classical singer Janki Bai Allahabadi's life in *Requiem in Raga Janki* is tilted to draw upon the invisibilities in the life of a North Indian courtesan, significantly not through an outsider's lens. For this, Gour reconfigures Janki's story by engaging with an aged *baiji* as narrator to subvert the "repressive hypothesis" of society as "each society has its regime of truth, its 'general politics' of truth—that is the type of discourses it accepts and makes function as true" (Foucault 316). It is also relatable in the words of the narrator, "I am, by your leave, that other thing that you historians make so much of, a lore-mistress of the mehfil⁶" (Gour 4), which undoubtedly hints at the politics of representation of the *baijis* by mainstream historians as the "other." In the book *Hyderabad Aisa Bhi Tha*, Tamkeen Kazmi emphatically asserts that "the word *tawaif* was coined for singing and dancing girls and not for prostitutes" (Kazmi 26) but since the colonial usurpation of the Awadh kingdom in 1856, it gave an abrupt jolt to courtesan's royal patronage in North India, as a result of which the colonial authority attempted to smudge courtesans' as mere prostitutes by interchangeably using both these terms. Post hegemonic diversions of colonialism, it became part of mainstream discourse where courtesan culture and prostitution were equated often with an even discernible contempt in popular Bollywood movies like *Mughal-e-Azam* (1960), *Pakeezah* (1972), *Umrao Jaan* (1981), *Devdas* (2002), etc. that hardly endorse any concerned heed to the courtesans' "cultural debate, on central matters of power, of status, of gender, of genre, and of reality itself" (Appadurai 471). Even the *kotha* itself became the "other," something not so celebrated in the Indian context. Gour also indicates this while narrating the outward ambience of Allahabad in which *kotha* is an, "old, crumbling, many-storeyed house in its dingy lane where sunlight never reached" (62). It perhaps signifies the apparent darkness of such a life without any ray of hope but through her narrative, she deconstructs such societal conception and generates alternative awareness about North India's long-standing courtesan culture by projecting Janki as an artist from *kotha* who sustains her glory and subjectivity through her musical talent and lifestyle.

⁵ Awadh is present Uttar Pradesh, India.

⁶ Arabic word "mehfil" refers to festival gathering of entertainment.

Gour has represented this particular "space" of *kotha* as an extension of reconstructing the invisible history of courtesan Janki's musical journey. In Gour's narration the entire *kotha* culture becomes a "representational space" including the body of professional performances and the nuanced culture attuned. Henri Lefebvre in his *Production of Space*⁷ has developed a central argument that the spaces of performance include the scenic dimension i.e. "representation of space corresponding a 'lived' experience of the artists producing a 'representational space'" (Lefebvre 188). Lefebvre also argued that production of space can be an alternative way to visualize history as "History would have to take in not only the genesis of these spaces but also, and especially, their interconnections, distortions, displacements, mutual interactions, and their links with the spatial practice of the particular society or mode of production under consideration" (42). Considering the courtesan culture as a mode of production, Neelum Saran Gour's text hints at the conceptual space of *kotha* as something "dark" (as referred in the last paragraph). It is of course an offshoot of colonial heresy but simultaneously Gour conjures up the very decolonial production of *kotha* culture. Here, she details upon the rich architectural dimension of a late nineteenth century *kotha* with "storeyed structure," "reception chambers for guests...designed in modern style," "beautiful easy chairs," "tables," "silver bedstead," "large mirrors," "colourful pictures," "costly carpets," "chandeliers" and "beautiful urns" (Gour 142). While this material dimension of *kotha* indicates the outward richness and grandeur of courtesan culture, Gour also stirringly outlines *kotha*'s "spatial practices" primarily through dancing, singing and other gestural art forms. Through the interface of both "spatial practices" and "representation of space" in Gour's fiction, there is a production of "representational space" of courtesan culture which constitutes a "lived space" of practiced rich arts.

For Lefebvre "representational space" is "alive: it speaks... it embraces the loci of passion, of action and of lived situations" (Lefebvre 42) and if to consider the courtesan culture as a social production, Gour's novel *Requiem in Raga Janki* reproduces this "lived" experiences of *kotha* culture. The narrative outlines the lived experiences of *kotha* with,

the sound of overwhelming music from the rows of old stone tenements, the liquid sounds of sarangis and tanpuras, the brisk thump of tablas⁸ the trilling ascent of practicing female voices and the jingle of tintinnabulating anklet bells. From late morning onwards till evening there were intense rehearsals, then after sundown a lull for rest and a readying for the night. (Gour 62-63)

Through such "lived" organization of "kotha" space Gour reasserts the creative as well as rich artistic aspect of courtesan culture of which Janki Bai is an integral part and perfect representation. Janki belonged to *kotha* neither through her patrilineal nor matrilineal inheritance for she was the child of a *halwai* (sweet-maker) family born in Benares⁹. Her subsequent life in *kotha* from her adolescence is the result of patriarchal subjection as her father Shiv Balak deserted her mother Manki with her children completely shirking his responsibilities towards the family. After being cheated by Parvati, Manki became a member of *kotha* and chose prostitution to take care of her children. Despite Janki's mother resorting to prostitution for her familial responsibilities, Gour clearly demarcates the courtesan culture from that of prostitution, a differentiation, which colonialism had almost blurred. She classifies the complex hierarchies of the then elitist *kotha* culture as "the girls of the *kotha* were graded in various professional categories" (98) based on their talent and has further elaborated it stating that, "there were superior *bais* and *jaans*, the former being primarily singers and latter being singers as well as dancers. There were the somewhat inferior *mirasans*, the lower-classed *domnis* and lowest in the ladder, the *randis*" (98).

In order to make courtesans or *baijis*, *kotha*-girls were given education in multiple languages (e.g. Urdu, Persian, Sanskrit, etc.) and also trained in music from early ages by some reputable *ustads*¹⁰ of

⁷ Henri Lefebvre in his seminal book *Production of Space* (1991) on social theory puts forth a central argument that each society constructs its own space and mode of spatial production. He theorizes three very categories as part of his argument: "spatial practice," "representation of space" and "representational space" which respectively denotes "perceived space," "conceived space" and "lived space."

⁸ "Sarangis," "tanpuras" and "tablas" are the Indian musical instruments which are often used in classical music performances.

⁹ Apart from Allahabad, Benares (also known as Varanasi) is another ancient ethnographic city in North Indian state Uttar Pradesh. This city beside river *Ganga*, is a famous site for Hindu pilgrims. It is often referred as a religious hub of India as this place is considered sacred in Hinduism, Buddhism and Jainism.

¹⁰ Urdu word *ustad* refers to highly skilled musician who has expertise knowledge in Indian Classical music specially.

musical *gharanas*¹¹ in which they identified themselves as courtesans or "highly skilled practitioners of the arts" (Ruswa ix). In such formative years, it was discovered that Janki was a musically gifted child and therefore music maestro Hassu Khan was employed to train her in classical music. Even, Gour's narrative provides extended details that "tutors had been hired for Janki. A maulavi¹² came from Daryabad to teach her Persian and Urdu. A panditji¹³ came to teach her Sanskrit and an English-knowing master sahib had been appointed to impart lessons in English" (Gour 97). The narrative emphasis here is on re-inscribing the artistic aspect of kotha culture. One never becomes courtesan by deserting home rather it is all about undergoing rigorous trainings and practice sessions. It eulogizes courtesans as the "treasure houses of culture" while projecting *kotha* culture as the "full-fledged establishments" (Singh, "Visibilising the 'Other' in History" 1679) that requires lot of cultural arrangements like hiring dancing girls, musicians, their training and many more. While Indian feminist Lata Singh in her conceptual framework argues that colonial history "overlooked the artistic and creative element of the kothas" (1679) and projected courtesans as the historical "other," Gour's literary reconstruction alternatively aligns this frame curating the decolonial "lived" dimensions of this nuanced cultural production.

In the general perception of society, *kotha* is one of the darkest sections but the pampered treatment of the girl child there in terms of education and artistic training often triggers counter-discourse for "respectable" society's contempt towards having a girl child. While a male child is more than welcomed, it is the female child that bears the brunt of society even before she is born. Even during pregnancy, pregnant women are blessed with the statement like, "be the Janani of sataputra" (mother of hundred sons). As per the United Nations report 2014, the birth of a daughter is like a burden for the Indian families as they are mostly concerned about their marriage in a highly competitive market.¹⁴ Contrarily enough in *kotha*, a girl child's birth is celebrated and one such event is also documented by Veena Talwar Oldenburg in "Lifestyle as Resistance" (Oldenburg 262). Again, it is also a part of gender stereotyping in which a son's education is more important than girls but in *kotha* major concern is girls' education and it is visible in Janki's story also. She has been "tutored exhaustively in Sanskrit, Persian, Hindi and English, there in the kotha itself" (Gour 71) whereas her brother Beni Prasad earlier enjoyed "existence as a respectable householder's only son" (97) but is now found dull and therefore, his education is never emphasized upon in the *kotha*. Moreover, adding to the intricate gender politics Gour's fictional narration includes ironical comments of the *kotha* patroness on Janki's brother that "a young lad, an almost-man, should not sit and eat off the earnings of women. That rather than be an idle parasite he should serve the kotha in some capacity" (98). Such literary reflection on *kotha*'s "lived" experiences propounds a subversive discourse of gender and history where men become "second sex," "the deprived gender and were entirely dependent on the mothers and sisters... it was the girls in whose education investments were made" (Kidwai *India-Seminar.com*).

Although courtesans are the most educated women with mesmerizing artistic skills, still they remain as the objects of public desire primarily. Particularly while performing *mujras*¹⁵, their bodies become the objects of the "male gaze." It is this gendered gaze upon female body that provides male spectators visual pleasure with some fantasizing connotations (Mulvey 21). Their bodies perform as an object of desire and gets shaped by the popular understanding of these spaces (Iyer 66). Therefore, *baijis* are often hired by their patrons for performances in various courts not solely considering their talent but also due to their objectification or artists' physical beauty. Such prioritizing of woman artist's physical beauty is explicitly suggested in the utterance of the chief steward of Rewa Durbar who after knowing that Janki is physically average looking, "his (*Maharaja* of Rewa) Highness is fastidious and disposed to quick displeasure. He has a fine ear for music and also... also a... finer eye for a woman's appearance" (Gour 127). Such stereotyping of Indian women as submissive to patriarchal power is vehemently challenged by courtesan Janki Bai who is extremely vocal in uttering

¹¹ In Indian Classical music, *gharanas* refer the systems of some socio-musical organization linking musicians of lineage, constituting same musical ideology. There are several musical *gharanas* in Hindustani Classical music like *Khayal gharanas*, *Dhrupad gharanas*, *Thumri gharanas* etc.

¹² "Maulavi" is a native word used in India to address a learned Muslim.

¹³ The word "panditji" is a native equivalent address for a Hindu learned person in India.

¹⁴ For further details, see: "Girl Child Being Seen as a Burden in India: UN Report." <https://www.Outlookindia.Com/>, <https://www.outlookindia.com/newswire/story/girl-child-being-seen-as-a-burden-in-india-un-report/851028>.

¹⁵ *Mujra* is the special choreographed gestures for salutation by *tawaifs* either in musical or in dance form during public performances. It introduces courtesans' mastery over artistic skills.

the truth even before the authority as she boldly asserts before Maharaja of Rewa during her very first royal performance that "My Lord, an artist is measured by her *seerat*¹⁶, not her *soorat*, by art not her face. My *soorat* is worth nothing, my *seerat* I leave you to judge" (Gour 130). In a society where women are compelled to accept patriarchal decisions, Janki goes on to state her choices and thereby rejects the royal offer of being a lifelong court performer of Rewa. She becomes the representative of that voice from the margins which bell hooks refers to as the voice which can propagate an alternative discourse in mainstream society much against the understanding that

In a society like India, female subjectivity is a matter of construction as well as contestation (Chakravarty 1993) and courtesans are the active agents of their own resolutions. Any woman including courtesan can "reflect upon the discursive relations which constitute her and the society in which she lives, and able to choose from the options available" (Weedon 125). As far as Janki's life is concerned the best option available to her is music which she embraces as her passion and lets her life flow in the *ragas*¹⁷ of classical music. Her musical skill allows her to perform in various royal courts and also enables her to pursue a career through recording, as the early twentieth century is also known as the age of "Gramophone fame." She starts recording at a rate of two hundred fifty rupees for twenty songs but it is her immense popularity which inflates it to five thousand rupees for twenty songs and she is also provided offers from various companies like Gramophone and Typewriter Company of Calcutta etc. With such popularity, her music traverses beyond *kotha* and *mehfil* into the courtyards of various Indian families. Her musical talent incurs international fame for her as she and a famous courtesan from Kolkata Gauhar Jaan both perform in Delhi *darbar* before George V in 1911. This fame earned solely through her musical talent constructs her subjectivity in a male-dominated society and makes her conscious of owning herself and having an identity, which is reflected in her proclamation after each recorded song, "my name is Janki Bai Ilahabadi" (Gour 171).

It is interesting to note that Veena Oldenburg's essay "Lifestyle as Resistance" points out courtesans' freedom and self-esteem as they are economically independent because of their professional skills (Oldenburg 267). This economic self-sufficiency leads them to live their lives in their way as *kotha* teaches sustenance on own self to its girls. Such agency and independent choices are also reflective in Gour's fictionalization of Janki's life as she independently buys several houses in the Allahabad city. She also purchases Naseeban's *kotha* on her request perhaps to sustain the culture she actually belongs, although she as a "kotha-patroness" modifies the building endowing to her subjective choices. Even after achieving fame, Janki gives outlet to certain ethics which are essentially the offshoots of the so-called peripheral *kotha* culture, and one such is the secular out-looking blurring from the religious demarcation of the mainstream society as *kotha* is one of those few liminal spaces like a hospital, asylum, etc. where religious demarcation hardly matters. In Oldenburg's observation courtesans have created "a secular meritocracy based on talent and education, accepting Hindus and Muslims alike" (279). Janki too pursues such a liberal mentality as for artists there is only one faith and that is her "art." Therefore, after knowing about the undermining approach of *Natyashastra* towards music, dancing, and acting, she identifies herself more within the "Islamic Avadh in her music" and as a self-sufficient independent woman, she decides to change religion from Hinduism to Islam. The present fictional account reflects upon such secular osmosis ingrained in *kotha* culture, as "kotha-woman did not choose her clients by religion" (Gour 184) and therefore, after region change Janki experiences that "her Islam had only extended her original Hindu self, added something while uprooting nothing, that there was nothing antithetical in her successive registers of belief, only a fulsome continuity" (188-189). Moreover, Gour's narrative explores such "secular meritocracy" through the cultural production of courtesan's rich art in the form of music. Here, music becomes a tool of resistance towards the mainstream society's discourse where an individual cannot follow more than one religion at a time, but Janki as a practitioner of courtesan culture can easily "sing 'Raghubar ajj raho more pyare' as well as 'Madina mein mor piya vala hai re' with equal fervor"¹⁸ (203) in various public performances. Gour's narrative underscores how such artistic performances of courtesans not only hold a swift grip over Indian heritage but also produce a rich amalgamation of ethics with aesthetics.

¹⁶ Urdu word "seerat" means "behavior" and the word "soorat" refers to "face."

¹⁷ *Ragas* are the melodic frames of Indian Classical music. Concept of *raga* shares two broad traditions i.e. Hindustani (North Indian) and Carnatic (South Indian).

¹⁸ "Raghubar ajj raho more pyare" means "Lord Krishna, stay today as my love" and "Madina mein mor piya vala hai re" refers "My love is well in Madina." The first song signifies Hindu belief while the second represents Islamic faith.

Requiem in Raga Janki, offers details of Janki's public performances as in Rewa durbar (King's court) and Grand Delhi Durbar of 1911 which not only provided her fame as a practitioner of music and but also endowed her with economic stability as she received grand gifts and gold coins as a token of performances. Therefore, in Gour's representation socially marginal *kotha* culture has become "a site of creativity and power" (hooks, *Yearning* 234) and Janki has endorsed her creativity from this very space since this particular *kotha* culture hardly allows any scope for "othering" women. In the conventional society, women with their limited space have to ascertain their power since "woman has been constructed as man's 'other', denied the right to her own subjectivity and to responsibility for her own actions" (Moi 92). It has become a prevalent discourse in the "respectable" society where women become the "second sex" and it is believed both in the Muslim and Hindu communities of North India. In a respectable Muslim community, women should sacrifice everything for their family or for say husbands and they have no separate existence than husbands (Sharar 195). Such "othering" of women is also an innate part of Hindu patriarchal societies which believe that women are unable to address their own issues of which *Manusmriti*, ancient text completely boasts off stating that a woman belongs to her father in childhood, to her husband in youth and in her old age she belongs to her son only (Ghosh, "Manusmriti"). Such "othering" of the woman as an inferior and weak one, is also implied in Gour's *Requiem in Raga Janki* when Janki expresses her wish to help Haq Sahib but in turn is humiliated by Akbar Sahib, "there are matters of law that a song from a koel or a baiji like yourself cannot wish away" (Gour 210). Significantly enough courtesan like Janki successfully subverts such discourse of patriarchal society as she, a woman from margins appears as a savior of her would-be husband Haq Sahib by donating him a house in Allahabad city so that he can partake in election. It is not just that she contributed on a personal level as a savior but the novel puts forth the often subdued history outlining Janki's economical contribution in Indian nationalist movement. Gour revisits the lanes of history through her fictional imagination manifesting the context of Non-cooperation movement in Allahabad in which Janki Bai donated her "velvet purse containing the 100 gold mohurs¹⁹ in kerchief's breadth of khadi²⁰, along with the Coronation Song record, and placed a carefully worded letter with it, addressed to Motilal Nehru" (292). Feminist Lata Singh has examined the historical "othering" of courtesans as political figures and the dominant discourse that "denies agency and political voice to these women" (Singh 1678). Therefore, Gour's novel is enticingly a serious attempt to re-intervene those shady versions of courtesans' history and relocate them both as cultural as well as political figures very much like Ruth Vanita's argument in which she considers them iconoclastic women in ways more than one: modern single working women, single mother, first women to drive cars, direct and produce films etc. (Vanita, "How Courtesans Shaped Bombay Cinema"). Retrieving the spaces of margins like *kotha*, Gour not only brings them back into the creative domain but also reconstructs their 'denied agency' and political subjectivities.

Both the world of art and its entailed economic self-sufficiency empowered the courtesans which enable Indian theorist Mekhla Sengupta to examine the entire *kotha* culture as "the nascent start of female empowerment in society" (Sengupta 125). Gour's literary reflection makes it explicit how this entire mode of courtesan culture provides the protagonist Janki Bai "a room of her own" (Woolf 7) through aesthetics of art and economic solidarity. It becomes more reflective since Janki gets married to Haq Sahib who even objects to Janki's humming a *thumri* (song) in bed and also he as the authorial figure within the marriage institution goes to the extent of deciding Janki's musical performance without her prior consent. Janki's portrayal in Gour's narrative is not as radical as the famous courtesan from Kolkata Gauhar Jaan who denounces marriage openly "shaadis²¹ are like the notorious pedas of Mathura" (236) but Janki still gives it a chance. Unlike Indian households where lessons of adjustment are tutored to girls, in *kotha* women are more familiar with taking their own decisions, "reversing the constraints imposed on" (Oldenburg 278). Such is visible in Janki's utterance to her husband when her long-cherished liberation is in question, and she asks, "you want me to be a mujra woman beneath your roof?... Not under your roof, milord, never under yours. I am a mujra singer only under my own roof and under those that honour me for myself" (Gour 271). This entire episode of Gour's text conceptually aligns closely with Lata Singh's feminist framework who argues that courtesans "had a conscience and values and knew where to compromise and where not to" (Singh 1679). This validates not only their conscious choices but also the agency of "self." Janki's reconstructed history as a courtesan also substantiates this. When Haq Sahib creates hindrances in

¹⁹ Mohurs' are former Indian gold coins.

²⁰ "Khadi" refers to hand woven fiber clothes originated in Indian subcontinent. It is also known as "khaddar."

²¹ "Shaadi" is a generic term that refers to Indian weddings.

Janki's parenting the child she realizes that her marriage is "the biggest error of her life" (Gour 319). She has never been conditioned in her *kotha* culture to compromise without reason; she asserts her freedom and asks her husband to "go. And may God grant you His forgiveness" (287).

Preksha Malu remarks that "life for performing women was harder than the pleasure of fame" (Malu 4) and it is extremely relatable Janki's story where her fame as *baiji* "sealed an irreconcilable distance" between her and her in-laws for which they often address her as *baiji* other than "Dulhan or Ammi or Khala" (Gour 268). The possible reason behind this is the social baggage that courtesans carry. Perhaps the most considerable observation is made by Amelia Maciszewski as for her "their (courtesans) struggle is multifaceted, all-pervasive—yet they must continue in order to survive" ("Tawa'if, Tourism, and Tales" 345). This is exactly what Janki's life reflects as she accepts all the challenges of life as a woman artist from the margins and thereby, establishes her subjectivity in a gendered social milieu. Even after her marriage is proven to be a futile exercise still, she decides to survive alone and eventually she also dies alone as if the motto of her life was that famous song Rabindra sangeet by Rabindra Nath Tagore, "if no one responds to your call, then go your own way alone" (Som 254) and it becomes extensively possible for her *kotha*-culture which teaches girls to be self-sufficient in life without any patriarchal dependence.

Through the representation of Janki Bai and the courtesan culture in Neelum Saran Gour's novel *Requiem in Raga Janki*, one comes across an ideal narration in which many untold stories unfold from behind the life of a courtesan. Although the word "courtesan" is used for both *baiji* and *tawaif*, this English word somehow fails to fathom out the depth of Indian musical and other cultural nuances since colonial history often homogenizes *kotha* culture only as a dominant site for prostitution. It is often heard that "Indian feminism is clearly a response to the issues related to Indian women" (Nayantara 243) but the suppressed history of *baijis* or *tawaifs* has not been adequate in the sense that more often than not it follows a descriptive model in which they adhere to the colonial travesty of the courtesans giving a frequent miss to the dominant aspect of their agency and subjectivity. Therefore, it is unquestionably a unique composition by Gour wherein she reconstructs the blurred past of an extremely talented Indian courtesan from Allahabad, who establishes her subjectivity from a marginal space solely through her artistic grace and lifestyle. Simultaneously it emanates alternative discourse within a gendered Indian society with an indication of how margin can subvert biased gender roles in multiple aspects of education, finance, culture, art, and social politics.

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