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Redrawing the Contours of Nationalist Discourse through the Voices of Courtesans-Turned-Warriors

By Neha Arora¹

Abstract

The last quarter of the twentieth century has seen the emergence of a “cult of pluralism” (Chakrabarty) in the writing of Indian history, thus challenging the standardized narrative of the nation. The hegemonic accounts of India’s struggle for independence, which have failed to acknowledge the involvement of many significant warriors, make the inextricable links between power, history, and representation quite apparent. One such exclusion is that of the *tawaifs*² of Awadh.³ This hypocrisy combined with the facade of respectability has eclipsed the contribution of *tawaifs*, demoting them to singing and dancing girls merely. By looking at the role of Begum Hazrat Mahal in the Revolt of 1857, this paper intends to add another dimension to both the understanding of *tawaifs* and the historiography of the revolt. It also seeks to question the inclination of historians to focus on the participation of men and ignore women, especially those women from marginalized demographics. The study foregrounds the role of *tawaifs* in the changing discourses of colonialism and nationalism, with the goal to problematize their invisibility in academic discourse. Kenizé Mourad’s biographical fiction, *The City of Gold and Silver*, is taken as a case study to focus on the production of counter-narratives. A thorough examination of the various aspects of Begum’s personality calls into question history’s selective representations. Furthermore, by focusing on the Begum’s political life, the paper seeks to correct the false image of Awadh’s *tawaifs* and *kothas*⁴ and to restore the lost voices of the unsung heroines.

Keywords: *Tawaif*, Begum Hazrat Mahal, Courtesans, Counter-Narratives, *Kotha*, Women leaders, Women warriors, Kenizé Mourad, *The City of Gold and Silver*, Historiography

Introduction: *Sham-e-Awadh*

The beauty and grandeur of the *nawabi*⁵ influence in Lucknow is magnificent, despite being dimmed by British intervention. William Russell, a famous correspondent from *The London Times*, described both the splendors of Lucknow and its decline in the hands of military and colonial occupants. Thanks to Russell’s account, we have a fair understanding of the enormity of the political, social, and cultural attack that took away the sheen of the city completely:

No city in the world, not Rome, nor Athens, nor Constantinople, can be compared to its stunning beauty...A vision of palaces, minarets, azure and gold domes, cupolas,

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² Translated as “courtesan,” the word comes from the Urdu-Persian word *tauf*, which means to go round and round. A *tawaif* was an accomplished poet, dancer, patron of art, and preserver of culture, primarily functioning in Awadh.

³ Modern-day state of Uttar Pradesh

⁴ Salons, bordellos, or brothels

⁵ *Nawab* refers to a Muslim ruler in North or South India in the former Mogul empire. *Nawabi* is the adjectival form.

colonnades, long, beautifully proportioned facades, rooftop terraces—all that emerging out of a calm ocean of greenery that spreads several miles around. Here and there, the towers of this magical city emerge amidst the luminous green. Their golden arrows sparkle in the sunlight, the towers and cupolas shine like stars. Are we really in Awadh? Is this the capital of a semi-barbarian race? Is this the city built by a corrupt, decadent, and vile dynasty.... Lucknow is henceforth a dead town. All that is left of its magnificent palaces are miserable ruins, their facades, and domes pierced by cannonballs. The invaluable art and precious objects that had been accumulated here for centuries are left to be pillaged and destroyed by soldiers greedy for gold and drunk on rapine. They break everything that is too fragile or too large to be taken away. The ground is littered with fragments of marvels that the men persist in destroying (qtd. in Mourad 355).⁶

The changing equation in Awadh was a direct outcome of the “dying Mughal Empire and the expanding British one” (Llewellyn-Jones 1). The British victory at Buxar in 1764 led to the annexation of Awadh, and eventually a British Resident was appointed at the court of the *Nawabs* in 1774. This “fatal friendship” (Llewellyn-Jones 2) later suffocated the native culture and interfered with the political setup. In 1773, Governor-General Warren Hastings proposed to the *Nawab*, Shuja-ud-Daula, that a British Resident be appointed who would be a trustworthy mediator between the *Nawab*’s court and the British East India Company. The intention, so simply expressed, was not so easily implemented, as this “friendship” between the two authorities would soon end up becoming “fatal.” Awadh was targeted because of its immense riches and the Company was interested solely in draining the wealth. Unfortunately, the *Nawabs* failed to see through this “friendship” which was simply a smokescreen for looting the immense riches of Awadh. The Resident, as an anonymous writer expressed, was responsible for the “gradual encroachment and interference” of the Company in Awadh, he being “an officer appointed by the Company at the Court of a native Prince, ostensibly to advise him, but really, to promote mismanagement and confusion in his dominions, and thus possession of them” (Llewellyn-Jones 6). This “unwelcomed guest” would eventually bring downfall upon the “reluctant host;” acting as a filter between the *Nawabs* and the outside world, he “ultimately curtail[ed] their correspondence and restrict[ed] their movements” (Llewellyn-Jones 2). Everything *nawabi* was condemned; the *Nawabs* were criticized for being incapable rulers, and their authority was undermined in their own region. The civilizing and protecting mission of the Empire, which began across the world, continued in Awadh too; so much so, that by 1856, “the East India Company had assumed the majority of functions expected of the rulers, and the *Nawabs* had become like the plaster statues on their own palaces, presenting a gorgeously rich exterior, but almost hollow within” (Llewellyn-Jones 3). Reduced in power, later, the *Nawabs* themselves relinquished their duties and accepted to be the “voluntary prisoners in their own capital, exotic birds in the most magnificent of gilded cages” (Llewellyn-Jones 4).

The seeds of the drastic political and social upheaval caused by the annexation of Awadh in February 1856, followed by the deposition and pensioning off of Wajid Ali Shah to Calcutta, could be traced back to 1831. Lord William Bentinck, the Governor General, visited Awadh, saw the “existing disorder and misrule,” and issued a warning that if nothing was done to rectify the misrule, then the British Government would assume direct management of the region (Llewellyn-Jones 4). Despite the promises made by the King, Nasir-ud-Din Haider, nothing improved, and eighteen years later Colonel William Sleeman presented a similar report of utter lawlessness. In 1854, James Outram’s report struck the final nail in the coffin. Lord Dalhousie, the new Governor General, took strict action against Awadh, the prized city. They let the people of Awadh believe that they were under severely bad rule and that the Company wanted to

⁶ Excerpt from William Russell, *My Indian Mutiny Days*, 1858.

liberate them (Llewellyn-Jones 128). Eventually in January, 1856, when Outram returned to Lucknow, he had a letter from the Governor General to the King stating that the British Government could no longer “lend its countenance and support” to the Awadh regime (Llewellyn-Jones 127). Besides this, he also brought a draft treaty for the King to sign, agreeing “that the sole and exclusive administration of the Civil and Military Government of the territories of Oude shall be henceforth vested *forever*, in the Honourable East India Company” (Llewellyn-Jones 127). He also brought two Proclamations. The first announced that, if the King agreed to sign the treaty, he must relinquish his kingdom. In case the King did not sign the treaty, the second proclamation announced that the Company would be taking control of Awadh anyway (Llewellyn-Jones 127). In their last meeting, on February 4, 1856, Wajid Ali Shah took his turban off his head and placed it in Outram’s hands. Awadh was ultimately annexed on February 7, 1856, thus bringing the *sham* to the *sham-e-Awadh*.⁷

Tawaif: History and Exclusion

Dipesh Chakrabarty talks about the entanglement of the “writing of history” with the “politics and production of identity” (473). Drawing a brief trajectory of minority histories, he refers to the changing perception from the 1970s (“history from below”) to the 1980s (ethnic groups, queer people, etc). The last quarter of the twentieth century has seen “the cult of pluralism” in writing history whereby the minority histories have begun to challenge the so-called “official or officially-blessed accounts of the nation’s past” (473). This led to the critique of one standardized narrative of the nation. According to Chakrabarty, minority histories express “the struggle for inclusion and representation that are characteristic of liberal and representative democracies” (473). Also, he clarifies that the concepts of the “majority” and “minority” are not natural occurrences, but rather social constructions; hence writing history can become an exclusionist enterprise. Referring to the Subaltern Studies group, he develops his idea of how dominant voices succeed in marginalizing a group, labeling it minor/ity and inferior. Likewise, our subject of study, the *tawaifs*, were pushed to the periphery, both spatially and culturally. Their pasts and their histories became “minority,” or “of lesser importance” and hence were neglected by historians (475).

Like Chakrabarty’s interest in the “subaltern past” (475), Partha Chatterjee, in “Colonialism, Nationalism, and Colonialized Women,” also questions the exclusion of voices and histories of minority groups. He groups the colonial rulers and the nationalists together in their enterprise of exclusion:

The continuance of a distinct cultural “problem” of the minorities is an index of the failure of the Indian nation to effectively include within its body the whole of the demographic mass that it claims to represent. The failure becomes evident when we note that the formation of a hegemonic “national culture” was *necessarily* built upon the privileging of an “essentialist tradition,” which in turn was defined by a system of exclusions. Ideas of freedom, equality, and cultural refinement went hand in hand with a set of dichotomies that systematically excluded from the new life of the nation the vast masses of people whom the dominant elite would represent and lead, but who could never be culturally integrated with their leaders (632).

Meenal Tula and Rekha Pande, in their article, “Re-Inscribing the Indian Courtesan: A Genealogical Approach,” problematize the figure of the courtesan in India, specifically “its

⁷ Awadh was known for its cultural evenings, with the poetry and dance provided by the *tawaifs*. However, with the coming of the British, and due to their lack of understanding of the native culture, the British brought an end to these cultural evenings, which is here referred to as the “evening” of Awadh, i.e., the dying culture of Awadh.

histories, representation, repression, and re-emergence” (67) in the context of history writing. Referring to Tharu and Lalita’s point that the “Liberal feminists invented a female tradition that was imaged as the lost city, submerged but intact, waiting to be recovered, and they spoke of an essential difference between male and female...and began to think of these significations as natural or constituting some sort of female essence struggling in the work of women writer to express itself...” (Tharu and Lalita 35), Tula and Pande question feminists about the voice of women who “have left no writings/sources of their own, or rather, been purged from the official archive” (Tula and Pande 72). Saba Dewan also echoes the same concern: “The process of retrieval is further complicated by the fact that the history of the *tawaif* and her arts over the last century and a half is also a history of erasure and silencing” (Dewan 3).

Tripurari Sharma’s play, *Sann Sattavan ka Kissa: Azeezun Nissa*,⁸ John Lall’s *Begum Samru: Fading Portrait in a Gilded Frame*, Michel Larneuil’s *Begum Samru of Sardhana*, and Kenizé Mourad’s *In the City of Gold and Silver: The Story of Begum Hazrat Mahal* are a few examples to discuss marginalization of *tawaifs*’ role in Indian political history. These texts situate the *tawaifs* in the political space that has been long denied to them. Such semi-fictional works question their invisibility in nationalist discourse, and “disrupt(s) the trope of ‘mother India’ that dominated anti-colonial and middle-class nationalist thought” (Singh, “Visibilising the ‘Other,’” 1677). The focus of Kenizé Mourad’s narrative also is less on Begum’s life as a courtesan, but more as a wife, mother, and warrior to firmly establish her role in the Revolt of 1857. The present paper attempts to read the glory and valor of Begum Hazrat Mahal, and, by recounting the days of the First War of India’s Independence, to restore the lost heroes of Awadh. Besides the few literary works aforementioned, it becomes imperative to acknowledge the courtesans turned warriors and give due place in history to these unsung heroes of 1857.

Tawaifs or the Nautch Girls?

*Chowk*⁹ and *tawaifs* have a very old connection with Lucknow. The *tawaifs* enjoyed a very high status in the time of the *nawabi*. They were known for their elegance and sophistication and were maintained by rich patrons who visited them in the evening to enjoy art, music, dance, and conversation. Pran Nevile describes a *tawaif* as “not merely a woman of pleasure but an accomplished and a refined person with dance and poetry in her blood” (xi). Veena Talwar Oldenburg, in her study of the social consequences of colonial urbanization in Lucknow, mentions *tawaifs* being the highest taxpayers:

They appeared, surprisingly, in the civic tax ledgers of 1858-77 and the related official correspondence preserved in the Municipal Corporation records room. They were classed under the occupational category of “dancing and singing girls,” and as if it was not surprising enough to find women in the tax records, it was even more remarkable that they were in the highest tax bracket, with the largest individual incomes of any in the city. (Oldenburg 259)

Wajid Ali Shah established a *parikhana*¹⁰ in Lucknow, as a place to keep the girls that were being trained in dancing and singing. But the annexation of Awadh in 1856, followed by Wajid Ali Shah’s exile and later by the Mutiny were major blows to the *tawaif* culture; their *kothas*¹¹ were destroyed, their patrons impoverished, and the regulations introduced by the

⁸ The English title is “A Tale from the Year 1857.”

⁹ The oldest market in Lucknow, the heart of the city, and the prime residential area of the *tawaifs*.

¹⁰ Translated as “fairy house,” the residence of the *tawaifs* in Kaiserbagh and the Emperor’s Garden in Lucknow.

¹¹ Brothels/bordellos; in native culture, it means the residence of the *tawaifs*.

British began the devolution of this long-cherished cultural symbol of Lucknow. The patrons who spent evenings at the *kothas* to taste the nectar of music and dance, to indulge in the intellectual debates with the *tawaifs*, and to relish in the rich poetry they composed, were replaced by the newly educated Western imitators with voyeurism being their sole desire. *Chowk* was almost closed, its streets deserted. The *nouveau riche* (*taluqdars*) and European soldiers replaced the old aristocrats, and the former had no refinement of culture and could not differentiate between the *tawaifs* and ordinary courtesans. This is how the British concept of the *nautch* girls (dancing girls) came into existence and eventually the art degraded into the sex trade. The *kothas* that were once centers for musical and cultural soirees turned into mere brothels. The cultural significance of *tawaifs* declined until eventually the final blow came in 1957 when the *zamindari*¹² system was abolished completely. Concurrent with Britain's mid-century Social Purity Movement laws (such as Act XXII of 1864 in India, the provisions of Britain's Contagious Diseases Act of 1864,¹³ or the Lock Houses¹⁴) were enforced in India as well, not for any moral purpose, of course, but to curb the *tawaifs* post-Mutiny. Scholars Veena Talwar Oldenberg and Saba Dewan have noted that some of the upper caste and middle-class Indians also sided with the British in their sanitizing mission to create a "clean" society. Women who were a cultural asset for the *nawabs* became necessary evils for the Victorian British Raj. The government thus curbed the *tawaifs* and simultaneously commodified them for cheap sex.

This was the beginning of the debasement of a rich tradition. Stripping the *tawaifs* of the cultural function of preserving art and heritage made them the othered outcasts as this British military note reveals: "...the cantonment authorities can keep...the immediate vicinity of barracks free from the outcasts, who are so dangerous to the men."¹⁵ Thus, with a few rules on a piece of paper, the British labeled the custodians of culture, art, and etiquette of India as the "dangerous outcasts" (Banerjee), a threat to the moral fabric of society, and hence to be kept outside the arena of respectable society. As Saba Dewan notes,

Feted as artists and sought after as lovers, elite *tawaifs* enjoyed access to high prestige and considerable wealth. Yet, their non-marital sexuality and the stigma attached to women who were in the public gaze, accessible to all, placed them on the margins of "respectable" society; neither totally contained within pre-colonial patriarchy nor entirely outside it. (Dewan 2)

The nation got caught in the *Bhadra Mahila* Syndrome,¹⁶ especially in the nationalist movement (primarily during the Gandhian phase), when women became involved in the freedom struggle. When talking about womanhood, the society had already carved the image of *adarsh bhartiya mahila*.¹⁷ Like the British Victorians, Indians also adopted the madonna/whore complex; the women were either *pavitra* (respectable) or they were *patita* (fallen women). In this binary, the *tawaifs* were the other, a challenge to the Victorian *adarsh* (ideal to be emulated). Partha Chatterjee identifies the separate social spaces *ghar/bahar*, (home/outside), and spiritual/material as defining the social roles of women and men respectively. In the wake of the national struggle, it was realized that the crucial need was to

¹² Land revenue system with the landlord as the head

¹³ The Acts were introduced to control prostitutes to prevent sexually transmitted diseases within the British army.

¹⁴ Hospitals were set up in Britain and in the colonies for treating venereal diseases.

¹⁵ From an official note prepared by the British military department of India, 8 October 1886 – File no. 34-58, Home Sanitary, June 1887.

¹⁶ The idea of glorifying the chaste woman.

¹⁷ The ideal woman stands as a symbol of self-sacrifice, devotion, chastity, and religiosity.

“protect, preserve, and strengthen the inner core of the national culture, its spiritual essence” (Chatterjee, “Colonialism,” 624), represented by women. The period saw the rise of the New Woman, the *bhadra mahila* with “specific markers” (Chatterjee, “Colonialism,” 629) such as chastity, self-sacrifice, devotion, and patience. The new image for women brought in “the honor of a new social responsibility whereby she became the sign for “nation”” (Chatterjee, “Colonialism,” 629). Lata Singh also talks about the binary of the ideal/fallen women: “Through discursive formations that marked women who had greater access to the public space and were relatively independent as aberrations from the ‘ideal,’ the ‘women in the streets’ were sought to be marginalized, their ‘publicness,’ ironically, making them invisible” (Singh, “Courtesans,” 59).

Partha Chatterjee points out how the “adulation of woman as a goddess or as a mother served to erase her sexuality in the world outside the home” (Chatterjee, “Colonialism,” 630). But this complicated the case for women who deviated from the acceptable norm, such as *tawaif*. The *tawaif* was a bold, educated, financially liberated woman who did not fit into the mold of the ideal woman, as Saba Dewan writes, “This space was to be recast from the late nineteenth century, when the cultural and social position of the *tawaif* was not only marginalized but also branded as deviant and obscene” (3). Their presence in public spaces posed a threat to the moral and physical well-being of Indian society. The anti-*nautch* movement¹⁸ of the late nineteenth and early twentieth century attacked the tradition of regarding *nautches* as members of the upper class on festive occasions. This was marked by demands in various north Indian cities, including Benaras, for changes in municipality laws that restricted the *tawaifs*’ places of residence to certain specified areas of the city. In effect, public space was being sanitized for “‘respectable’ women (like [Dewan’s] grandmother) to step out without being mistaken for *tawaifs*” (Dewan 14). The construction of the *adarsh mahila* (ideal woman) became the litmus test for the acceptability or rejection of women in the social framework: “The question of ‘respectability’ assumed its sharpest form with regard to issues concerning women, as a redefinition of the female was a crucial feature of the hegemony that brought the middle class into power” (Singh, “Visibilizing the ‘Other,’” 1677). In brief, efforts were made to control their bodies and restrict them spatially.

Relevance of this Study

Most of the research on *tawaifs* in the past has focused on their cultural importance in the period of the *nawabs*, their fall during and after colonial times, and their stigmatized portrayal in media. Though some researchers have explored the other side of the story as well, concerning their political role in Awadh, the dearth of resources validates the need for the present study. Lata Singh, for example, attempts to “unsettle the nationalist project” in her article on Azizun Nisa,¹⁹ and “by bringing the figure of the courtesan centrally into the political space constituted by the nation, a space denied to her in the dominant narrative of the nation,” she also “opens up the nationalist public/political discourse for interrogation” (Singh, “Courtesans,” 61). She challenges the historical accounts that have snuffed out the political role of the courtesans, and thus she “rewrite[s] dominant versions of historical truth and relocate[s] the ‘lost’ subjects of history in anti-colonial struggles as well” (61).

It is urgent to bring to the forefront the interconnection between the professional and political role of *tawaifs* in 1857. Ayesha Arfeen writes:

¹⁸ A movement in the late 19th and early 20th century to abolish the tradition of Indian dancing girls. It first began in Madras (1892-93) and was in sync with the Social Purity Movement of Britain.

¹⁹ A famous *tawaif* from Kanpur who actively participated in the Revolt of 1857.

The Uprising of 1857 was a notable event both in Indian as well as British history and the *kothas* of the *tawaifs* had the reputation of being behind the uprising. There was close interaction between the *tawaifs* and the feudal lords. The *tawaifs* were also no strangers to court intrigue. They even helped the revolutionaries by providing money for arms and also hiding them at their *kothas* in times of need. (1686-87)

Another important figure, spatially and professionally close to Azizun Nisa, was Begum Hazrat Mahal.²⁰ Despite her pivotal role in 1857, she is almost absent from history. Interestingly, Kenizé Mourad's *In the City of Gold and Silver: The Story of Begum Hazrat Mahal* (2012) is the only fictional work on Hazrat Mahal in English (originally written in French). In Hindi, the novella *Begum Hazrat Mahal* (2015) by Ashok Kumar Sharma and filmmaker Mohi-ud-din Mirza's "Begum Hazrat Mahal: The Last Queen of Awadh" (2011) is the only documentary available. Therefore, it is natural for historians like Dipesh Chakrabarty to ask, "How do you construct a narrative of a group or class that has not left its own sources?" (473). By focusing this research on the courtesans-turned-warriors, it is hoped that "history may be re-read and re-written and the contours of the contests over narrating the nation redrawn" (Singh, "Courtesans," 63).

To further establish the relevance of the present work, a parallel reading of Rani Laxmibai and Begum Hazrat Mahal is necessary. The partial and biased portrayals by historians have led to the immortality of the former in contrast to the oblivion of the latter; as Mukherjee notes, "Lakshmibai is not only remembered but also commemorated and celebrated. Hazrat Mahal hovers on the margins of remembrance" (Mukherjee 139). Rudrangshu Mukherjee reiterates that one cannot ignore the memory of the masses, "How common people remember and do not remember became the basis of the evaluation of educated nationalist leaders and historians" (133). Also important here is the idea of *Bhadra/Adarsh Bhartiya Nari* defined as "one who stood as a sign for 'nation'" and embodied the "spiritual qualities of self-sacrifice, benevolence, devotion, religiosity and so on" (Chatterjee, "The Nation," 131). Taking a cue from this, Mukherjee concludes that:

Lakshmibai easily fitted the bill of virtues; valor was an additional quality. The fact that Lakshmibai was a Brahmin and a benevolent queen cannot be eliminated as a factor that influenced the choice. An upper caste queen was preferable to a Muslim dancing girl who was the daughter of an African slave (Mukherjee 136).

Nationalism, Women, and *Tawaif*

Despite recent attempts to give voice to the marginalized, "still, a significant section of women's history, especially of those on the margins, considered the 'other' women in the construction of middle-class women, remain[s] invisible" (Singh, "Courtesans," 58). Lata Singh points at a "middle-class respectable discourse" that felt threatened by the independent, educated *tawaifs* and explains how the "nationalist discourses have always negated or erased their creative aspect by putting them out of the framework of the respectable nation" (58). She explores "their [*tawaifs*'] public/political role by bringing them centrally into the political space, a space denied in nationalist discourse in its search for respectability" (59). Here, one can recall the incident cited by Vikram Sampath in his *My Name is Gauhar Jaan* that in 1921 a group of *tawaifs* offered to be a part of Gandhi's non-cooperation movement, but their proposal was rejected as obscene. This incident once again proves that "the place of the courtesan in nationalist discourse was not premised on simple inclusions/exclusions" (Tula and Pande, 76).

²⁰ The last wife of Nawab Wajid Ali Shah.

The Begum: In the City of Gold and Silver

Kenizé Mourad, in her conversation with Jacob Daniels, notes that “it always surprised me that no one had written about this remarkable woman, a heroine forgotten by history” (qtd. in Daniels 16). It is this very reason that prompted her to write *In the City of Gold and Silver*. Furthermore, the lack of visibility that Mourad refers to served as the impetus for the present investigation into the reasons for the invisibility of Begum Hazrat Mahal despite her contemporary, Rani Laxmibai, getting due recognition in the historical records. Mourad further notes an unbelievable truth she encountered during her research on the subject, “I started in the libraries of England but found nothing except one very important sentence in an 1858 issue of the *Times of London*: “The begum of Awadh shows greater strategic sense and courage than all her generals put together” (qtd. in Daniels 16). This should be taken as a matter of great concern that such a shining star of 1857 has been hitherto denied her due place.

Lucknow immediately evokes the image of the glorious *nawabi* culture, its wealth, its unique cuisines, *chikankari*²¹ and monuments, the *adab* (manners) and *tehzeeb* (etiquette) the *kothas* and *tawaifs*. However, how can we ignore the historical 1857 revolt, the “Siege of Residency” in Lucknow, and the spirited warrior Begum Hazrat Mahal? As Mourad notes in *In the City of Gold and Silver*: “The little Muhammadi, the poetess of the Chowk, Wajid Ali Shah’s captivating wife, the young regent, the passionate lover, the enlightened sovereign, the intrepid war leader, Hazrat Mahal, was like a meteor in Indian history. She has shown the way towards India's freedom” (Mourad 428).

This contemporary of Rani of Jhansi led the Revolt in Awadh almost single-handedly, defying the patriarchal and social laws of *purdah*.²² Her name remains indelible in the annals of the Indian Freedom struggle. She stepped in when almost all was lost in Awadh, both the economy and the zest of life. Her multiple roles, in crucial times, as a soldier and as an administrator impressed and boosted courage in the lost souls of natives, simultaneously posing danger for the British.

In Mourad’s book *In the City of Gold and Silver*, the journey of Begum Hazrat Mahal from the orphaned Muhammadi²³ to Iftikhar un Nissa, the so-called “pride of women,” to Begum and Hazrat Mahal was full of personal and public struggles, but her undeterred efforts and an indomitable will enabled her to overcome all the hurdles. The poetic talent of the fourteen-year-old Muhammadi captivated Wajid Ali Shah, but her administrative prowess and leadership skill mesmerized the kings in the Awadh region, who bowed down to accept her as their leader. All the various facets of Begum’s personality—her devotion towards her husband, her concern for her subjects, and her motherly instinct for her son—amalgamate to give her the image of a new and bold woman. In the absence of the father, that too in the most chaotic conditions, she brought up her son, Birjis Qadar, single-handedly and also instilled in him all the qualities of a good king. While Wajid Ali was busy with his “fairies” in *parikhana* (in Lucknow as well in Matiya Burj), Begum defied all conventional norms of femininity, and although she continued observing the cloth *purdah*, she brought herself out of the patriarchal *purdah*.

Born as Muhammadi, into a family of artisans in Faizabad, she was in the custody of her uncle before she was taken in the *kotha* by the two courtesans, Amman and Imaman. They trained the girls in dance, art, and etiquette, preparing them for the *parikhana*. Muhammadi was not the typical courtesan and would rather enjoy writing poems. In fact, she unhesitatingly

²¹ A special kind of embroidery, for which Lucknow is famous worldwide.

²² Meaning a veil. It is the social and religious practice amongst the Muslim community to keep their women in seclusion and privacy.

²³ Very little is known of Hazrat Mahal’s childhood and parentage. The details in this paper are taken from Kenizé Mourad’s book.

declined to dance in front of Wajid Ali Shah, saying, “I am not a dancer, I am a poetess!” (Mourad 35). Though stunned, Wajid Ali was captivated by her enigma and courage and decided to have her as his wife (through *muta*, temporary marriage). Muhammadi thus became Mehak Pari and later Iftikhar un-Nisa. After giving birth to Birjis Qadar in 1845, she came to be known as Nawab Iftikhar un-Nisa Begum Hazrat Mahal Sahiba.

If the young Muhammadi was infatuated, if we may dare use the term, with Wajid Ali Shah, for his poetic disposition was similar to hers, the Begum was in love with Rajah Jai Lal Singh with whom she shared the ability to fight back and not to surrender to the British. While Wajid Ali Shah’s advisors pestered him to sign the treaty accepting Awadh under the Company, only Jai Lal Singh opted to fight back, despite their untrained and small army. The two men presented two contrary views—a man of words versus a man of action. In such troubled times, words had fallen flat on the British ears, and all that Awadh needed was action. And in the lack of the right course of action, Awadh was officially annexed. Although the King left the kingdom without his beloved wife Hazrat Mahal, she was entrusted with major responsibility, and she did live up to her name, “the pride of women.” Not belonging to the ruling lineage was certainly a major impediment for Begum, but Wajid Ali’s deviant interests, her isolation, and eventually, his exile groomed her into an astute administrator and a true ruler despite her humble background. In an undaunted manner, she let the message be clear among the natives as well as the British, “Do not forget that my son is a prince and I am the wife of the exiled sovereign. There is no question of us abandoning our people. We belong here” (Mourad 122). With the change in the wind and protests in the air, Begum too brimmed with optimism. Not essentially a fighter, she was swept into the war gradually. She stood by her people when her kingdom needed strong leadership and she led the army through the storm, refusing to surrender. Her trusted informer Mammoo Khan and her closest friend Rajah Jai Lal Singh transformed her from a coy and silent Begum into a daring fighter. Her keen political sense, a rarity among the women of her times, made her memorable in the pages of history.

With the King imprisoned in Calcutta, Awadh needed a sovereign to hold the loosening threads together. Following the discord between the cavalry and infantry over Wajid Ali Shah’s brother, Prince Sulaiman Qadar, Rajah Jai Lal and Raja Mehmoodabad had to zero in on the two young sons of Wajid Ali—Nausherwan, aged sixteen, of Begum Khas Mahal and Birjis Qadar, eleven, of Begum Hazrat. As events turned out, Nausherwan was chosen with his mother to be the Regent, but fearing the risk of his life, Khas Mahal withdrew the proposal at the last minute, and it was then that the determined Begum Hazrat stepped in. Realizing the twists of the laws and the necessity of time, she accepted that her son be named as the next King and she became the Regent. Deprived of all grandeur, Birjis Qadar was crowned in a rather simple ceremony, and shocking the audience and defying the *nawabi* decorum, the Begum stepped forward to formally address the audience with determined zeal. A mere dancer of a humble origin, she dared to persuade the *taluqdars* (feudal lords) (knowing their fickle nature) to swear undying faith and loyalty to the royal kingdom of Awadh.

She was not ready to be a mere puppet in the hands of the Rajas and *taluqdars*. Instead, she wanted to be a part of their every discussion and decision. She had completely discarded the *pardah*, conveying that the person presiding over the meetings should not be mistaken to be a “woman” but a Regent, a soldier, or an administrator (Mourad 213). Assuming power, she displayed her managerial skills in recruiting soldiers who were dismissed by the British: “Every morning, she presides over a meeting with the new Grand Vizier, Sharuf-ud-Daulah, and all the ministers, who keep her abreast of civil affairs; every afternoon Rajah Jai Lal comes to report on military matters” (Mourad 218). Her chief intention was to restore order and to reinstate Wajid Ali Shah on the throne, ousting Britishers. Besides organizing law and order, Hazrat Mahal reinstated the rights of the *taluqdars* and the peasants were given back their land (earlier confiscated by the British). In an almost failed attack on the Residency in Operation

Sawan, she did not hesitate in executing the traitors and appeared in public herself to attend the executions. Without cruelty, she let the people know of her single-minded aim to liberate Awadh and not to spare the traitors. Denying the cozy existence of the harem, she chose the dangerous terrain of an adventure for power, the power to improve other people's lives. Living up to the title of Queen Mother, she indeed protected her subjects like her own children. When needed on the battlefield, she was there to encourage them; when she saw her people dying of hunger, she had her gold and silver ornaments melted down and the money thus obtained was used to provide rations to the families and also to finance the war. In September 1857 when the British army attacked the Alambagh Palace, a woman appeared on the battlefield, "riding an elephant, from her howdah high above, she spur[red] on the fighters" (Mourad 285). Hazrat Mahal herself came on the warfront to boost the morale of her soldiers, although the Indian troops lost and Alambagh was captured on 23 September, followed by the assault on Charbagh Bridge.

With the turmoil escalating, the forces of Awadh needed to frame a proper strategy for their opponents. For this, the Begum had to flee to Musabagh, then to Mehmoodabad, and then had to take shelter in Bhitauli. She was a fighter and her fleeing from Lucknow had hardened her into a war leader. She even declined the offer of amnesty after the Proclamation of 1858. Instead of surrendering, she preferred to fight, and in these attempts, she crossed the river Rapti and reached the *terai* region, bordering Nepal. Although Jung Bahadur, the Nepalese King refused to give asylum to Begum and her troupe, understanding very well that being harsh to her would evoke rebellion, both in Nepal as well in Awadh, he later yielded to Begum's demands. In Nepal, she was provided with modest accommodation but being away from her people and the cause, and surrounded by the Nepalese guards, Hazrat Mahal felt suffocated. The political losses combined with the personal losses escalated her pain (Jai Lal was still in prison, Rajah Mehmoodabad had to rush to protect his family, Tantia Tope was hanged, Mumtaz died, and her son was sick), but the fighter in her did not surrender. This prisoner managed to win praise from the common folks of Nepal too. In Nepal, she began teaching the basics of reading and writing to Nepali women.

The Begum, even when not directly involved in the battle, kept aware of the events. She closely observed the developments and also pondered over their shortcomings. She would read the letters, appeals, and petitions daily, to stay in touch with her subjects. In September 1857, she made her presence on the battlefield, riding on an elephant; in January 1858 she undertook the fortification of Lucknow as a large number of enforcements were moving towards Awadh. She monitored everything: "The regent was present on all fronts. Mounted on the royal elephant, she visited every construction site to encourage the men and to ensure ration distributions were sufficient" (Mourad 318). Despite the change of circumstances that led Begum to flee to Bhitauli via Musabagh, she continued her governance, and it was because of her fighting spirit that the rebels in Awadh could impede the progress of the enemy forces for almost eight months.

On 1 November 1858, Queen Victoria issued a proclamation, announcing the dissolution of the East India Company and the transfer of its authority to the British Crown (Mourad 396). The Queen also promised religious freedom, equal treatment to the natives, and forgiveness to the rebels. The astute Regent, however, could see through the trap and hence got a counter-proclamation published:

One must be simple-minded to believe that the British have forgiven our mistakes, or what they call our crimes. All of us here know they have never forgiven the slightest offense, big or small, whether it was committed out of ignorance or negligence...the Company has appropriated the whole of India and failed to respect most of the treaties it signed with the sovereigns...Do not be deceived. (Mourad 398-99)

In addition to this, she also spurned the pension offered by the British and refused to return to India. At the age of 48, on 7 April 1879, the warrior queen, the Queen Mother, the Regent, took her last breath. She was buried in Kathmandu, in a mosque built by her, called the Hindustani Masjid.

The Rani and the Begum

The jacket cover of Rudrangshu Mukherjee's *A Begum & A Rani: Hazrat Mahal and Lakshmibai in 1857* reads:

The *rani* [queen] and the begum never met, even though they were embroiled in the same struggle. It is the rebellion of 1857-58 that provides the context, which makes these two outstanding women feature in the same narrative... The afterlives of the begum and the rani took on very different hues. The rani was made a nationalist icon—a woman on horseback with a raised sword, who died in battle. The begum, however, is a relatively forgotten figure who did not get her due place in the roll call of honor.

Any discussion of 1857 automatically brings up the name of Rani Lakshmibai, the great warrior queen, but simultaneously, this also compels one to think of the lost voices of the *tawaiifs*. Lakshmibai is generously titled “*Virangana*”²⁴ whereas the same epithet is never used for Hazrat Mahal. Deka and Mokashi-Punekar question the absence of the courtesans-turned-warriors in the dominant national narrative (47). Barring a few fictional works, these warriors have not found the same fame as their contemporary Rani Lakshmibai has. One can easily conclude that due “to their social identity as ‘public’ and sexually independent (Muslim) women, the courtesan does not find a position in the caste Hindu nationalist discourse” (Deka and Mokashi-Punekar 47). While the Rani perfectly fits into the mold of the mother-goddess, the Begum, being a Muslim and a courtesan, could not be cast as a warrior/goddess/mother. She, being a *tawaiif*, was an outcast. Deka and Punekar argue that:

[Her] active role in politics was frowned upon and probably considered threatening to the hegemonic social structure since it poses a threat to the patriarchal structure of society. Secondly, as a courtesan with a hypersexual identity, her competence in administrative matters is also easier to dismiss. (51)

Rudrangshu Mukherjee recalls Tagore's short essay on the Rani of Jhansi, “Jhansir Rani” (1877) that sings of Lakshmibai's bravery. He writes that the essay “initiated a trend that has stayed on—to regard Lakshmibai as an object of devotion” (Mukherjee xvi). She was created into a national icon by Vinayak Damodar Savarkar, Subhadra Kumari Chauhan, Subhas Chandra Bose, and even Jawaharlal Nehru, remembering her as a shining example of female heroism in India, comparable to France's Joan of Arc (Bose 246) or “the young heroine of the Indian Mutiny” (Nehru 105). Lakshmibai has thus “become part of the nation's memory, a *virangana* in the national consciousness” (Mukherjee xvii).

It is interesting to point out the contrast between Lakshmibai and the Begum, how and why one is immortalized while the other is erased from the memory of the masses. Mukherjee writes about the numerous folk songs available on Lakshmibai, but almost nothing about the Begum. He gives a passing mention of Begum in a long song, “The Settlement of Oudh,” as collected by the ICS officer William Crooke:

²⁴ Sumathi Ramaswamy states that a *Virangana* is primarily a woman warrior described in patriarchal language as one possessing the qualities of *viryam* or male heroism (qtd. in Deka and Mokashi-Punekar, 47).

What kind of bravery did Birjis Qadr, the Queen show?

Her name has remained in the world.

Who will ever show such courage?

When the Queen had fled what fight was possible? (qtd. in Crooke 66)

While the Rani is eulogized, the Begum is forgotten. The British historians described Lakshmibai as “a heroic adversary” (Mukherjee 130), and the Indian historians emulated the same. Mukherjee refers to R.C. Majumdar’s book that has a section called “Heroes.” While Lakshmibai and even Maulavi Ahmadullah Shah feature there, Hazrat Mahal is once again erased. Clearly, writes Mukherjee, “writers on 1857 seem to have set up a hierarchy of heroes in which Hazrat Mahal was many rungs lower than Lakshmibai” (Mukherjee 130). Similar sentiments were echoed by Savarkar in the chapters “Oudh” and “Lucknow” of his book *The Indian War of Independence, 1857*. Savarkar wrote, “This Begum of Oudh [Hazrat Mahal], though not quite another Lakshmi Bai, was undoubtedly a great organizer, full of love of liberty and the spirit of daring” (Savarkar 260). Mukherjee emphasizes the italicized phrase to project Savarkar’s idea of Hazrat Mahal and Lakshmi Bai as the criterion for assessing one’s valor and loyalty. Writing about the forgotten hero, Mukherjee expresses:

The act of remembering inevitably summons up its opposite or the Other—forgetting. The making of Lakshmibai into an iconic figure relegated, without anyone quite intending it, another woman rebel leader into relative oblivion. Hazrat Mahal, unlike Lakshmibai, was not a late entrant into the rebellion but had been a leader of the rebels in Awadh from the very beginning of the uprising. She continued in that role until she was forced to flee to Nepal, where she died in obscurity...For the 150th anniversary of the uprising, Hazrat Mahal was scarcely commemorated. There was perhaps only a passing mention. Forgotten and unsung, Hazrat Mahal has traveled unclaimed in the luggage van of 1857 (Mukherjee xvii-xviii).

It is ironic and unfortunate that the two queens, living in the same era, have received two different reactions from historians and the nationalist discourse. In the hierarchy of the heroes of 1857, the Begum seems to be placed at the bottom rung: “While the genesis of Rani’s legend began with her death, Begum Hazrat Mahal’s legacy dimmed with the embers of the house of Oudh” (Johri 22). Is it because of her professional identity (as a *tawaiif*) that her valor was erased from the pages of history? It is once again shocking that this brave queen was long-forgotten until 1957, the centenary year of the Revolt, when the Prime Minister, Jawaharlal Nehru renamed the Queen Victoria Park in Lucknow as the Begum Hazrat Mahal Park. Also, on 10 May 1984, in remembrance of the Begum, a commemorative postage stamp was issued as a part of the Freedom Struggle Series Stamp.

Conclusion

The paper attempted to trace the rise and fall of the *tawaiifs* and how history has been biased against them. Moreover, their sexual objectification in popular culture in the twentieth century added to their further being misrepresented. By including the discussion of Indian feminism, the study also highlighted the movement’s exclusionary nature, which completely ignored these unsung heroines and ignored their contribution to the nation’s struggle for independence. Mourad’s work, albeit fictional, is important in the sense that it foregrounds the Begum’s personality as a warrior and as an astute Regent. Her free will, independence, and devotion to her country were overshadowed by the label of *tawaiif*. This counter-narrative

successfully establishes the necessity of redrawing the contours of nationalist discourse and reinstating the Begum to her due place in history.

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