

A Journey from the Colonial Stigma of 'Nautch' To the Star-Status of Muslim Women of Hindustani Cinema

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Abstract : *This paper tries to explore and indulge into the debate of how the yesteryears tawaifs were reduced to mere prostitutes and hence the stigma attached to them in the colonial period and how with the post-colonial period, the stigma is erased by the rising to fame of Muslim actresses of Hindustani film industry. This paper turns out to be a comparative study of the 'nautch' girls as portrayed by the British and their downfall on one hand; and the Muslim doyens of Hindustani cinema as stars on the other.*

Keywords: *Muslim Women, Star Status, Muslim Actresses, Stardom, Hindustani Cinema, Film Stars, Nautch, Tawaif*

INTRODUCTION.

British colonial rule deliberately targeted and disrupted the role of the rich culture of North India in the nineteenth century, especially of Awadh in the 1857. The British wanted to break the very backbone of Awadh's *Ganga-Jamuni tehzeeb*. They considered themselves of greater tradition though they knew that the culture of that region would not let their culture thrive. The *tawaifs* who were once the epitome of the refined *tehzeeb* of Lucknow, were now reduced to mere 'nautch' girls by the British. The missionaries soon started taking the profession against morality. According to Pran Nevile [1], some of the British went to the extent of saying that the nautch arouse anti-Christian feelings. He added that they failed to understand the nature of Indian music and dance art and condemned it as repulsive and immoral. They were unable to make out the distinction between a talented and accomplished professional nautch girl and a common prostitute, dubbing both as fallen women.

Pran Nevile maintains that while the Mughal India saw the advent of the nautch girl on the cultural landscape of the country and her rise to the pinnacle of glory, the annexation by the British of Awadh (1856) in the north and Tanjore (1855) in the south - the two dominant centres of Indian art and culture - foreshadowed her decline and fall. Pran Nevile, who himself hails from India (British India) surprises me when he uses the term 'nautch' in the above statement, for the larger than life '*tawaifs*' of North India.

The *tawaifs* were professional women performing artists who functioned between the nineteenth and early twentieth century in north India. The word 'tawaif' is believed to have come from the Persian tawaif of circumambulation of the *kaaba* and refers to her movement around the *mehfil* space, the circle of her patrons. Sampath reports that yesteryears *tawaif* and singer-actor Gauhar Jan speaks of the "necessity of a tawaif to be trained, not only in the 'techne' of classical music but also in the 'abhinaya' or the art of enactment. The tawaif must internalize the meaning of the text,...'its context and the 'cultural setting' of the song as a whole"[2].

The British sahibs who enjoyed the nautch parties in the early part of nineteenth century experienced a drastic change in their life styles in the post 1857 revolt. The British women arrived in India with travel becoming easier. They indulged in ballroom dancing and their kind of entertainment. With this, the nautch (which is an anglicized version of 'naach', a word found in Hindi and Urdu and several other languages of North India, derived from the Sanskrit 'Nritya' via the Prakrit 'Nachha') ceased to be a source of amusement, especially in the Presidency towns. The Uprising of 1857 was a notably 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. Also the tawaifs were not strangers to court intrigues. They even helped the revolutionaries by providing money for arms and also hiding them at

their kothas in times of need. The *tawaifs* represented a major reservoir of Indian culture. Therefore, the British cultural chauvinists decided to bring an end to the *tawaif*-culture altogether.

After the end of the revolt, the British retaliated against the *tawaifs*. They confiscated their property and made the social forces and imperial machinery fall into place for the execution of the anti-nautch movement. There were movements against the nautch. In their drive against the nautch, the missionaries were joined by educated Indian social reformers who, influenced by western ideas and Victorian moral values, had lost pride in their cultural heritage. In 1892, they started an 'anti-nautch' movement at Madras which spread to other parts of the country. This movement was inspired by the Madras Literature Society. A nautch performance was held for the Prince of Wales during his visit in 1875.

Otto Rothfeld, in 'Women of India' (1920) writes:

Dancing remains the most living and developed of existing arts...It sends its call to a people's soul, it is alive and forceful. All the more tragic is it, a very tragedy of irony that the dance...has been by some curious perversion of reasoning made the special object of attack by an advanced and reforming section of Indian publicists. They have chosen to do so on the score of morality-not that they allege the songs and dances to be immoral, if such these could be, but that they say the dancers are. [3]

It was no longer considered fashionable to visit the *kothas*. Any sort of liaison with a *tawaif* was socially condemned. The Arya Samajists, the reformers condemned the *tawaifs*' profession and were of the opinion that it deserved no place in a civilized society. Pran Neville gives the example of Punjab reform society which planned to drive out the nautch girls permanently. He quotes Keshav Chandra Sen, while describing a prostitute, as "A derogatory woman...carrying hell in her eyes." The great teachers and disciples of classical music and dance were forced to search for other sources of living. In the north, the *tawaifs* were compelled to remove the dance element from their performances.

However, with the coming of All India Radio and cinema, opportunities were opened for talented artists to practise their profession but most of them sank into oblivion. Neville states that during the 1930s, there came an awakening when the admirers

of old performing arts of music and dance launched a vigorous drive to revive them.

But, after independence, the national government became the guardian of public morality. As a result of this, even the All India Radio closed its doors to these professional women singers on the ground that their private life was a public scandal.

And then came our films. Bombay film industry is ruled by Muslim actresses from the very genesis of it. According to Sarah Dickey [4], each major actor has a distinct image and the fans show a special preference for that image. Fans rarely describe their emotional attachment to the star in any explicit term but their feelings can be inferred from action and statements about him (her). Fans were eager to talk about their star's personal character and often went on at length about their star's personal character. They keep track of his (her) biography and especially how he (she) moved up from an insignificant star to a very eminent one. They are eager to see whether the screen persona extend to their real lives or not. The qualities that the fans want out of the stars are as follows: 1) attitude towards society, 2) philosophy, 3) simplicity and 4) relationship with people.

STARDOM AS A SOCIAL PHENOMENON.

According to Durgnat, the stars are reflections in which the public studies and adjusts its own image of itself. The social history of a nation can be written in terms of its film stars [5]. Herbert Marcuse in *One-Dimensional Man* says that art previously was a critique of society but presently it has become an upholder of the society [6]. In Richer Dyer's words, 'Close-ups' make a star because it focuses and concentrates on the star's face. He agrees with Bela Balzas that the close-up reveal the hidden mainsprings of life that we had thought had already existed. Close-ups highlight the solitary moments of life, monologues and capture the soul of the star. The star is important because we foreground them and we get both the person and the character that he/she plays. Stars are strongly authored roles which bear the personal style and signature of the actor, opines Richard Dyer [7].

A star is a performer in a particular medium whose figures enters into subsidiary form of circulation and the feed back into the future performances (Ellis, 1982). Economically, stardom is a patent on some given set of human characteristics that includes purely physical aspects [8]. In 1970's and 1980's the stars were explored academically. The study of stars typically involved the labour involved in the construction of the star's presence

on screen; parallel narratives in their lives [9]; what might be the cultural and ideological effects of such constructed presence on and off the screen.

Dyer says that stars are cultural systems-their constructedness appears in two ways: Sociological-economic history of studio; and Semiotic-structuralist-where several codes signifying personal histories, life stories, bodies, films are all combined to create a filmstar [10].

Stars, says Dyer, exists beyond the films. Criticisms, gossip magazines and personal appearances add to the star image. Stardom is an image of the way stars live-and lifestyle forms the background of the persona. Stars when they become very big represent themselves only. Star deaths are spectacular tragedies. Weber defines charisma as the quality in an individual perceived by himself and the others in what is thought to be his connection with some very central feature of man's existence and to the cosmos in which he lives. The centrality coupled with the intensity makes him extraordinary [11].

Audience constructs the star on certain basis. Those basis according to Richard Dyer are prior knowledge, name, appearance, objective correlates, speech of character, speech of others, gestures, actions, structure, and misc-en-scene. He describes the kinds of audience knowledge on the basis of films story, familiar characters, familiar genre, film publicity, film criticisms and gossips.

Noted journalist Vinod Mehta says about film stars:

Their off-screen activities, their on-screen activities, their marriages, love affairs, birthdays, hobbies...it would seem that the average Indian cannot get enough of this kind of information...This interest, although psychologically wasteful and possibly reprehensible, has basis. Cinema, after all, is the only genuine mass medium in this country and the film star, to a person leads an unexciting predictable life (most do), becomes a very real person. He becomes a personification of the good life: of glittering premiere shows, of late-night parties, of beautiful women, of expensive imported cars. I have a strong feeling that if you conducted an 'opportunity poll' in India and asked the fifty-six crore population with whom they would like to change places most, fifty-five crore would answer 'film stars' [12].

He continues by saying that for Indians, characters do not fade away with the climax of the films. We bring them home, put their pictures on walls, discuss them and admire them, not for their professional acumen, but for their clothes and the affairs they are supposed to be having.

While defining the stars, Geraghty maintains that the star exists in both- glamorous roles on the screen and ordinary person in real life. The duality on off screen together constitutes a star image. The contrast between the private and the public, the ordinary and the extra ordinary are made available through a wide variety of texts that go beyond the cinematic texts and involve popular magazines, television shows and so on. However, celebrities are not stars-they are known for their lifestyle and not for their contribution towards the society [13].

The first talkie in India was *Alam Ara* which was released in 1931 and was a hit. Actress Zubeida was in the lead role. Those days, no respected family would send her daughter to work in films. So, Zubeida got the role as her mother did not see any harm in it as they had nothing such to lose. Zubeida was already into acting and so she agreed to Ardeshir Irani's *Alam Ara*. She will be ever remembered as the actress of the first Indian talkie. Zubeida was born in Surat (Gujarat) in 1911 to the Nawab Sidi Ibrahim Muhammad Yakut Khan III and Fatima Begum. Fatima Begum's background is not clear. It is quite possible that she was a courtesan and later a film actress. She brought Zubeida to the film world along with her sisters Sultana and Shehzadi, who were lesser known actresses. Those days, women would not enter the world of cinema. It was predominantly the field of those who were courtesans earlier. Jahanara Begum belonged to Calcutta. Earlier she was famous as Kajjan Bai as she was a dancer at Calcutta Club. She was born in Patna (Bihar). She acted in Shireen Farhad (1931). She sang for this movie too. In the movie '*Laila Majnu*', she sang twenty two songs. It is believed that she earned more than then famous actor-singer Kundanlal Sehgal [14]. Other names which need mention are Farhat Hasan Bibbo; Akhtaribai Faizabadi or Begum Akhtar, Khursheed; Noor Jahan who was titled 'Mallika-e-Tarranum'; Meena Kumari whose mother was a dancer named Prabhavati, later came to be known as Iqbal Begum after marriage; Nimmi whose mother Wahidan was a singer and actress herself,

Jaddan Bai is believed to be one of the forerunners of Bombay film industry. By the first decade of twentieth century, there were only a few towns left where the singers of yesteryears were praised. One among the places is Benaras (Varanasi) where artists have always been admired. Jaddan Bai

started her career from this town. She earned reputation by her performances and soon took the part of the main singer in the homes of rich and the respected. The first generation of Bollywood actresses were courtesans. This is because performing on screen required singing and dancing which they were already proficient in. Moreover, the stigma associated with performing in films considered lowly job did not matter to the courtesans as they had no worries regarding their families or in-laws. They were the bread earners of their family and decision rests in their hand. The oldest existing gramophone record of an Indian singer is that of Gauhar Jaan who herself was a courtesan. Naseem Banu was believed to be the first female super star of Indian Cinema [15]. She was known as 'Pari-chehra Naseem Banu' (angel-faced Naseem Banu). Noted Urdu writer, Manto dedicated a short-story to her by the same name. Naseem Banu's daughter, Saira Banu proved to one of the most beautiful and talented actresses of Hindustani cinema. The popularity of these actresses needs no mention. They were and still are loved and admired to the extent that the audience or fans regard them as goddesses.

CONCLUSION.

Unlike Pran Neville, I believe that the British could understand the Indian culture of art and music to the extent that they feared the refinement of the culture and they doubted that the culture could be a base for the natives to sing their glory. They were ethnophobic people. However, they were successful in branding the 'tawaifs' as mere 'nautch' girls or as prostitutes. The *tawaifs*, who could not stand such humiliation and tortures inflicted upon them by the British, soon faded and thus the *tawaif* culture declined. The colonial ethnocentrism did play an important role in changing the mind-set of the colonies when the colonies started taking the British as 'reference groups' or role models to the extent that tawaifs, for natives too, becomes a 'nautch girl'. Today, the families of yesteryears *tawaifs* are doing well in the film industry but certainly the 'refinement' is lost. These film stars are, however, successful in gaining ample respect and fan-following. We have lost our *tehzeeb*, which is a part of Muslim nostalgia and which is depicted in Hindustani films time and again. Post-colonial India places the British or the Western culture as a global and common one as against the composite and unique culture of India. The film stars in India are regarded as both the 'reference groups' and the 'role models' today than any other existing profession.

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