The Muse and the Music: The Story of Love and Loss in *Agra Bazaar* and *Umrao Jaan*

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Habib Tanvir's play *Agra Bazaar* is set in Kinari Bazaar of early nineteenth century Agra (which was then called Akbarabad). As far as stage setting is concerned, the brothel or the *kotha* finds a place in the centre of the market standing tall between the extreme poles of the bookseller's and the kite seller's shop. This brothel of Benazir, the courtesan, stands as a sea and the worlds of the kite seller and the bookseller come out as seashores, coexisting but never intersecting. On the one side, in the words of Patangwala, there are "*Shero shayari par jaan dene wale*" (Tanvir 58) and on other side, "*Shero Shayari ka karobar karne wale*" (58). Here, just like Nazir, Benazir also gets bifurcated and divided in terms of how these two worlds saw her. As a courtesan, she was a figure of gaze, but the gaze differed as far as these two different worlds were concerned.

Kitab Wala, Maulvi, and the Shayar scoff at Nazir's poetry and his way of life which consisted of going to the *kotha* and cherishing, and also celebrating its empirical culture. In one of the instances, the Shayar expresses his version of Nazir's approach towards reality and existence, "*Ab to khair aakhiri umar mein ek soofi saafi kii jindgi basar karne lagey hain. Ismat-e-beebist az bechadri ki misaal hai.Varna suna hai ahde shabab mein ye alam tha ki bazaar ke laundon ke sath gaate bajaate aur kothon ke chakkar lagaate the*" (50). Such lines reflect the way Nazir's life was considered wayward and how knitting experiences by going to the *kotha* was considered a marginally dishonorable aspect of aesthetics by them. However, the kite seller, just like Nazir, took utmost pride in attending "*Tairaki ke Mele*" (72) and also in being a part of Agra's empirical culture of which *kothas* (brothels) were an integral part. One can observe that these two diverging worlds or corners of the bazaar had different views of the *kotha* that stood between them.

If one considers the temporal backdrop of the play, as it is set in 1810, one realises the humongous transformation Agra was undergoing. The Mughal Era was declining, and the Britishers were getting a hold on this city. Economic situations were weak, resulting in a feeling of hopelessness and futility in society. In this extremely chaotic situation, one place which was booming despite the economic situations of the city was the *kotha* or the brothel where it became "house of illusions" as in Jean Genet's *The Balcony*. In Genet's play, the brothel serves as an escape from reality for its customers where they indulge in

momentary fissures from the hideousness that was outside. Outside the brothel, on the streets a revolution is going on, but the customers were flocking to the brothel, putting their lives at stake. A similar situation can be witnessed in *Agra Bazaar*, where the society and the people inhabiting it might be facing a downturn, but that fails to affect the business and the booming of the *kotha*.

The *kotha* has two distinct worlds surrounding it, and it also supplies a chance where divergent consciousness of people like Shauda and Daroga hold a physical presence under the same roof. The knitting beauty of the *kotha* has an empirical beauty of celebration and delight, where binary positioning of existence succumbs to basic human aspirations and desires. The *Kotha* emerges as a hub of people who are a part of a system and the people who aid in running it. It culminates in an interactive and dialogic space for people to assert their presence whether they hold a central or marginal position in the system. These people perhaps find solace and pleasure in the company of Benazir and her *kotha*. It perhaps serves as a sea to them in which they want to dive in, where the hue and cries of this disordered society remain calm and unheard and instead, they hear the musicality of the waves. The musicality of *Agra Bazaar* or for that matter the whole of Agra and its culture has been muted in this era of the early nineteenth-century. Apart from providing an anchor to its customers, the *kotha* served the purpose of securing the culture of Agra, which was losing its roots and its diversifying experiences. The *kotha* somewhere might be seen as one of the factors that were helping in keeping the rhythm of the culture alive and thriving through the tumultuous time.

A similar sense of nostalgia can also be talked about in reference to the film *Umrao Jaan* by Muzaffar Ali. In the Treaty of 1801, Saadat Ali Khan, a puppet king, yielded half of Awadh to the East India Company while also agreeing to disband his own troops in favour of a highly expensive British controlled army. This treaty allowed theBritishers access to Awadh's treasuries. The Nawabs were ceremonial kings, busy with pomp and show but with little influence over matters of state. By the mid-nineteenth century, however, the British had grown impatient with the arrangement and demanded direct control over Awadh. In 1856, the East India Company first moved its troops to the border and then annexed the state under the Doctrine of Lapse. Awadh was placed under chief commissioner Sir Henry Lawrence. Wajid Ali Shah, then Nawab, was imprisoned then exiled by the East India Company. In the subsequent rebellion of 1857, his son was killed, and his wife, Begum Hazrat Mahal and other rebel leaders fled to Nepal.

Culturally, Lucknow also had a tradition of courtesans, and it was the tradition and the culture of *mehfils* and dancing, singing, and revelry that Lucknow lost when the Britishers gained control over the city. This is the collective

nostalgia of *tehzeeb.* The silence, not only of longing but also of a place left empty, an era bygone, the silence of those *kothas* from which people had to flee and ensure their own survival when the pangs of despair throttled their existence, filled Lucknow

Umrao Jaan is empathetically capable of connecting to such nostalgia of the historical past through one character in the film, Faiz Ali, enacted by Raj Babbar. He is the character who narrates about the Britishers and the pompous ways of the Nawabs to Umrao. He is the thread that leads Umrao to share a collective historical nostalgia. He is a man who not only loves her but also elopes with her. The song at the end when she goes to her birthplace, Faizabad, beautifully captures her loss and the sudden unfamiliarity she feels for a place so dear to her heart, "*Ye kya jagah hai doston, ye kaun sa dayaar hai, Hadd-e -nigaah tak k jahaan gubaar hi gubaarhai*" *(Umrao Jaan* 2:20:00-2:20:30).

According to the translation of the song, the lyrics are "Which is this place my friends, which is this region/ where, till the eyes can see there are only clouds of dust". These lines function at two levels. First, for Umrao maybe this region is full of dust storms, i.e., the nostalgia is there, as later in the song she asks whether someone is calling her from behind the curtain. That longing is also there, but maybe the memories have become a bit hazy like a dust storm. Secondly, this song can also be negotiated in the light of people like Khannum Jaan and others who have to leave their homes due to the political unrest and are going to different, new places, and feel the strangeness of a new place.

The gust of memories also cyclones in her heart where the past is hazy, but eyes are full of tears. The sand is a tricky texture to hold, but it pinches hard when a whiff of it gets into the eye. The vision becomes unclear, and one struggles to see the complete picture. It is as if Umrao is suddenly unaware of her own heart as she delves into the depth of it. She uses the word '*doston'* to address in the song. Perhaps what she really misses here is the companionship where she is lost in the familiar waters. There are certain questions in her mind which she is troubled by, so she throws this dilemma over to the people surrounding her. Perhaps she seeks to connect with the audience through these lines. Here, the film works as a medium of communication through which the search of Umrao extends towards the viewers who as humans might share her woes.

The song by Shiv Kumar Batalvi, "*Maaye ni maaye mere geetan di naina wich virhan di radhika pavey"* beautifully captures the emotions of Umrao. These lines lend a vision and an image to a song and show fluidity (and lack of it), a memory provided to the musicality of life. The pangs of separation

mostly do not hurt like pelted stones; rather they pinch like sand granules which are more unnerving. These flashes of memories are in pieces, and as a human, one struggle to make a mosaic out of them. Umrao feels a myriad of emotions which is an amalgamation of happy and sad notes. At Khannum Jaan's place, she is a successful and beloved courtesan and so are her songs, but in the realm of her past memories, even her songs have a grainy texture, and they lament the loss which is personal as well as collective. The unfamiliarity of the long-known *dayaar* pierces Umrao but apart from that, the gust of uncertainty *(gubaar)* is also shared by people like Khannum and several others who are saddened because of the land and the life they have left behind.

In *Agra Bazaar*, the business of the *kotha* also flourishes because, unlike the *feriwallas* whose simple plain voices to sell their stuff fall on deaf ears, the music of the *kotha* rushes forth as a humanitarian refuge of sensitivity and sensibility. It fills the voids in the lives of people who locate themselves in horrid experiences caused by the power structures around them. The nostalgia and the longing are there, but perhaps they are muted because of the cacophony of chaos. The rhythm and the musicality, similar to the *kotha*, are perhaps desired by the street vendors in Agra Bazaar. One, in the literal sense, where the *kakdiwala* or cucumber seller is on a frantic lookout for a *shayar* who can write a few lines of *shayari* on his cucumbers, and second, they want to acquire the musicality of normalcy, the lost rhythm of the life, where the *sur* of the life is somewhere shaken.

Benazir, a courtesan at the *kotha*, is a woman who has seen Nazir come to her place apart from other characters like Shauda and Daroga, and she even sings Nazir's *nazms* in her *kotha*. One might say she becomes a tool for helping Tanvir portray certain characteristics of Nazir as well as his poetry and how they mattered to the consciousness of the people around the *kotha*. Through Benazir, one comes to know about the people who cherished the dynamics and aesthetics of his poetry. When Benazir sings *nazm* of Nazir as her '*Aapbeeti*', Shauda says, "*Waah waah kaisi achi aapbeeti sunayi hai/ Ye Miyaan Nazir bhi ajeeb karishmon ke aadmi hain*" (100). In this *Bazaar*, not many female characters are seen. Yet, the two important characters have got their due as far as their relevance in the play is concerned. The portrayal of Benazir as well as the grand-daughter of Nazir, that is the character of Nawasi, becomes a beautiful mouthpiece for Nazir, his way of life, and his poetry.

Patangwala is also one such character who is a friend of Nazir and a lover of his poetry and thus becomes an important mouthpiece of Nazir. But, Vilaayti Begum, the granddaughter of Nazir, and Benazir are two important female characters and are subtle yet effective reminders of Nazir's poetry. If Nawasi reminds one of Nazir through the recital of the nazm '*choohon ka*

achaar' to the Pansaari, Benazir sustains Nazir's poetry by singing his *nazms* at her *kotha* and sensitizing the people who cherish her embrace like poetry. On the one hand, it is the note that Nawasi brought to the Pansaari:

> *Fir garam hua aanke achaar choohon ka,*
> *Humne bhi kiya khwanchaa taiyar choohon ka,*
> *Sar paaon kuchal koot ke do char choohon ka,*
> *Jaldi se kachhoomar sa kiya do char choohon ka,*
> *Kya jor mazedar hai achaar choohon ka* (79)

On the other hand, it is the *nazm* sung by Benazir:

> *Khhorej karishma, naaz sitam gamjon ki jhukawat waisi hai,*
> *Mizgaan ki sinaa, nazron ki anni, abroo ki khichawat waisi hai,*
> *Ayyar nazar, makkar ada, tevri ki charawat waisi hai,*
> *Kattaal nigah, aur dusht gazab, aankhon ki lagawat waisi hai,*
> *Palkon ki jhapak, putli ki fitrat, surme ki ghulawat waisi hai.* (99)

Both these instances show how Benazir and Nawasi help in bringing to the fore what Tanvir was attempting to showcase in his play, the presence of Nazir without giving him a physical presence in the play. Through the lines that Benazir sings, love is also foregrounded as to how love can be beautifully encapsulated in words.

Benazir as a courtesan had no dearth of customers, especially at a time when all other structures of the economy were collapsing. Her *kotha* and her business remains unaffected. In the context of this play, in 1810, *kotha* and Benazir were the much-needed escapades for the customers of the *kotha*. The number of women characters in the play does not go unnoticed, but Tanvir perhaps had something in his mind when he portrayed Benazir as one of the mouthpieces of Nazir, however indirect and subtle. Tanvir somewhere knew the position of women at that time, especially courtesans, and the way they were seen by the supposed intellectuals. Through Benazir, perhaps, he tried to give a platform to the voice of the women in society and that voice is strengthened by the voice and the character of *Nawasi*, who in her childhood as well she carried the parcels of Nazir's poetry to people.

Erica Wald in her article, "From Begums and Bibis to Abandoned Females and Idle Women: Sexual Relationships, Venereal Disease and the Redefinition of Prostitution in Early Nineteenth Century, India" observes the position of the early nineteenth century women, specifically prostitutes who were considered as 'diseased' and transmitters of venereal diseases. This concept started when,

during the British Rule, European soldiers started relationships with Indian women and venereal diseases were seen as one of the threats to the Company in these relationships. In the early nineteenth-century, Lal Bazaars were established along with the Lock hospitals system. According to the above-mentioned article, "Lal Bazaar was the term most frequently used to denote the area of a cantonment Bazaar dedicated to regulated prostitutes" (Wald 13). This idea was combined with that of a lock hospital, a venereal disease hospital, where Bazaar women who were considered diseased, would be sent for treatment and detention until they were cured of their diseases. Tanvir, by designing a central position for a *kotha* in Agra Bazaar, perhaps also wanted to indicate towards the practice of Lal Bazaars that was prevalent in the early nineteenth-century.

Though the *kotha* of Benazir runs well as a place of business, yet her being an object of male desire cannot be ruled out. The power struggle to obtain her as an object is quite evident in the way in which Shauda and Daroga fight for Benazir. For instance, when Daroga comes to the *kotha* and sees Shauda, he says, "*Aap kaun naat-e-shareef hain? Koi nayi chidiya maaloom hoti hai. Barkhuddar abhi tum humein pehchante nahin ho*" (Tanvir 102). To which Shauda replies, "*Bhaanp raha hoon. Mauka dijiye to abhi pehchan leta hoon. Aeeye ho jaaye do-do haath*" (102).

This power struggle intensifies when Daroga, making use of his power, gets Shauda arrested for being a part of a feud in the market which was actually a fabricated case. Shauda reprimands Daroga and says, "*Abey bada namard nikla tera Daroga ka bachha. Hum samjhe the mukabla raavan se hai. Seeta haran hoga, do-do haath honge*" (103).

This statement is very powerful as far as the position of Benazir is concerned. The phrase "*Seeta haran hoga*" points to the fact that women in that era were seen as objects to be possessed and be proud of. On one hand, Benazir has these two characters of Daroga and Shauda who fight for her possession and on the other hand the play has Manzur Hussain, who seems to be an insane person to people. But in the words of Benazir, Hussain has surpassed that petty level of supposed love that Daroga and Shauda show her and she says to Daroga "*Woh raqabat ki manzil se guzar chuke hain"* (Tanvir 118).

Through the character of Manzur Hussain, Tanvir perhaps gave that era a possibility of humanness, a possibility of loving a woman, even to a courtesan, irrespective of her status in the society. But towards the end, this possibility sort of dwindles, where the loud shout of Daroga to Hussain as "Manzur Hussain" instills a feeling of fear in Hussain, and he hurriedly leaves. Perhaps Tanvir

wished to convey that in the era in which the play is set, looking at a woman as a human being, capable of being loved, that too a prostitute might not be impossible but still had a long way to go.

Umrao Jaan as a cinematic text also tugs at the feeling of love for beloved or the lover. Ali, as the director, beautifully weaves an angle of love in the life of a courtesan. Whether this love would amount to something or would fade far away is a question to grapple with. In one of the scenes, Maulvi sahab is sitting with Umrao and is explaining to her how true love happens and what are the conditions that are to be fulfilled to call it true love. He talks in terms of *bekhabri*. He says in true love, nothing remains— Be it the beloved, the lover, or feeling of love itself. Everything just becomes one, and that too goes into the shadow of *bekhabri*, which is a beautiful emotion of being completely lost in love. The silence that comes with this feeling also brings the serenity and the calmness where one is reduced to nothing yet he or she has everything.

This is not the type of love which Mirza Gauhar is seeking. In fact, it cannot be called love as he somewhere only seems to take physical or material pleasure from Umrao. Later in the movie, she herself says when he comes to her "[..] *kya asharfiyaan khatam ho gayin*?" (*Umrao Jaan* 2:00:01-2:00:07). It shows that Gauhar is only concerned about his personal gains. Incidentally, when Umrao and he come close and are caught by Khanum Jaan, he deters owning up and puts the blame on Umrao instead. It signifies that Umrao is a mere commodity, another material wealth for Gauhar to possess, to accumulate. He, perhaps, looked at Umrao as trade and not as someone who could be a worthy companion.

Another silence in terms of love, lover, and beloved is that enchanting silence, where Umrao gets another space to grapple with the possibilities of love with the Nawab, who is played by Farooq Sheikh. This love is sort of a trajectory which is associated with words or their absence. This maze of presence and absence of words is interesting because it can invoke a feeling of awe as well as denote the piercing silence of a relationship which has nothing left. The silences that were there in their relationship denote the different junctures that their love encounters.

When Umrao and Nawab are with each other, the *sher* is uttered: "*Jab aap saamne hain to kuch bhi nahin hai yaad, varna kuch aapse kehna zaroor tha*" (00:57:50-00:57:58). Here is a desire to express love but the moment there is an encounter with the person one loves, everything fades away, except for the image of the beloved. Further, when Nawab and Umrao come close to each other physically, Umrao asks Nawab to listen to her *ghazal* to which the Nawab replies that he is already listening to one, and describes the different

body parts of Umrao as a complete, beautiful *ghazal*. He hears an unspoken *ghazal* and the absence of words takes a beautiful form where they are swapped for silent compassion. This silence is perhaps the feeling of awe that is inspired in the Nawab.

Further, when the Nawab is tensed about talks of his marriage into his father's family and is silent when Umrao comes to meet him, this silence pricks her. Then she questions the Nawab about her not being dear to him as he is not sharing his worry or problem with her. Due to this silence, she questions her worthiness in the eyes of the Nawab. The final silence comes into this relationship when the Nawab keeps silent on his relationship with Umrao and agrees to marry another girl who, later on finds, is the same girl who met Umrao when she was abducted. This silence of the Nawab unsettles Umrao, and in a frenzy, she tears off the Nawab's clothes and she cries her heart out. The man she loved with all her heart chose to be silent, and the silence crumbled her world. He came as a ray of hope in her world and instead, left her heart in darkness.

At a point in the film, Husseini also shares her idea of love with Umrao and Gauhar. She says, "*Yaa to kissi ko apna banaa lo, ya to kissi ke ho lo*" (01:30:01-01:30:03). She combines nostalgia with love when she says that if true lovers were there, then it was in her era. In her golden days, lovers used to completely give themselves to love; there was peace and satisfaction in completely belonging to someone.

In conclusion, as Hemingway says, "All cowardice comes from not loving or not loving well, which is the same thing" (*Midnight in Paris* 00:34:54-00:34:56). These courtesans got a chance at love or perhaps they too were seeking it somewhere. Benazir was the bright and eye-catching sight right in the middle of a bustling market who people sought refuge in, and she was left as a possession to acquire. The courage of a prospective lover fails her somewhere when Manzoor Hussain who, according to her, is above all the petty competitiveness that her other customers have for her. She perhaps longs for the sense of belongingness as a woman capable of love, but it might be the lack of courage on the part of the lover.

However, if one tries to understand the time that it was, can one really blame the person or is the situation to be blamed? Has courage nothing to do with the times that the person is living in? Perhaps it is easy to love a courtesan, but what about the fulfilment that she craves which goes beyond the physical aspect of existence? Similarly, Umrao also gives ample chances to love and with the character of the Nawab, she dreams of practising love as she used to sing about it in her songs. Eventually she is left with no one. She perhaps realizes that in her world the idea of love is beautiful, but practising it, committing to it, receiving loyalty from the other person, and being worthy of the courage

that this type of love demands is not easy. In both the texts discussed, love somewhere travels its journey through verses, whether it is Benazir singing, Nazir's poems, or Umrao singing the songs at her *kotha*.

These verses are an anchor to these courtesans in a way, where the emotion of love perhaps is not able to provide a firm grounding to them. They have a long way to tread before they get hold of the companionship they desire. However, the sense of loss that they possess is perhaps a priceless feeling to hold on to. Loss in love is not necessarily a feeling to lament. It can be celebratory as being in love is a festival in itself. It is a carnival where the whole world seems to be in revelry. But the loss of love is a festival of one's own. It is a cyclone, a whirlwind where the choice is between getting stuck in that hazy but fierce engulfment of remorse or reveling and dancing in that circular milieu where the mystique of one's contentment will help him or her achieve sublimity. Here, one's existence becomes one with love more than the lover. The song of life and love then goes far away from the push and pull of happiness as well as sorrow, and instead becomes a melody in itself. It is a melody with the strength to twirl and dance in the mysticism of being born, living a life for love and because of love. This melody surely has tunes of longing, but perhaps it contains a lingering hope. It takes the form of a mosaic where the muse is not life or feeling of love alone but is a myriad of experiences that a person goes through in the journey of love. This journey fuses the muse and music, and a melody is born.

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