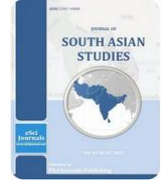




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Review Article

LIFESTYLE AS RESISTANCE: THE CASE OF THE COURTESANS OF LUCKNOW, INDIA

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By Veena Talwar Oldenburg, *Feminist Studies*, Vol. 16, No. 2, *Speaking for Others/Speaking for Self: Women of Color* (Summer, 1990), pp. 259-287

Veena Talwar Oldenburg's essay "Lifestyle as Resistance: The Case of the Courtesans of Lucknow, India" on courtesan culture is a critical record of her interaction with the courtesans of Lucknow, framed in a rather radical-feminist mold and aimed at providing a character sketch of the courtesan as an agency of subversion. The essay looks into the 'history' of courtesans in India, but bases itself on first-hand accounts of some of them, questioning conventional history by the very act of 'listening' to rather than silencing the community. Oldenburg tries to establish that the courtesan culture of India, in the specific context of Lucknow, is a kind of alternative lifestyle that offers resistance to the oppressive patriarchal regime in the state.

Charting the effect of colonial annexation of Awadh on the cultural legacy of the city of Lucknow, the essayist lays out two landmark moments in history that can be said to have turned the social status of the courtesan by a hundred and eighty degrees. The first event that led to mistrust of the courtesan community among the British minds was their support of rebels in the Mutiny of 1857, leading to policy crackdown on these kothas and increase in taxes on these women. The second was the passage of the British Contagious Diseases Act in 1864, acting like finality in the reversal of the image of the courtesan, linking her inherently to venereal disease and unmindful sexual licentiousness. A tradition that once maintained cultural privilege was irrevocably thence linked to mere prostitution. Earlier considered the haven of cultural training and mores, the courtesan's kothas

and mehfilis now became a symbol of degeneracy. Much in the line of other colonial thought, this decadence in Mughal culture allowed them to justify their annexation of and rule in Awadh. Whatever happened to Mughal culture on the whole, the tawaif was stamped with disrespectability.

However, in Oldenburg's lucid work, it is this idea of 'respectability' that is rightfully questioned and completely rejected. The fabric with which patriarchal values cover women has been proven to be insufficient and hypocritical, by laying bare the actual tragedy behind individual stories from the women who chose (or not) to enter this profession. Oldenburg interviews these women and quotes their well-translated answers in the essay not only to make it authentic but also to evince the strong voice these women have, unlike many others who go on suffering their domestic lives at the hands of (mostly) affine relations. Conditions like extreme penury and unemployment in the family combine along with rigid traditional dogmas to denigrate women on the whole. What is ironic is that patriarchy successfully builds the rhetoric of morality, in order to suppress women belonging to any of the categories created by patriarchy in the first place. The concerned essay does the job of exposing this hypocrisy by stressing the desirability of this profession among women who are anyway suffering "hell/ jahannum".

Further, Oldenburg believes that this community and this profession, while seeming to perpetuate those patriarchal values that demean women, silently undercut men's domination. This alternative lifestyle not only practises customs that hold the matron as supreme in power relations and decisions affecting social

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relations, as opposed to the conventional valuation of the patron, but it also appropriates the idea of capitalizing on the female body for its own benefits. No matter how complicit this may seem with capitalistic preferences, by the extraction of material profit by feigning or lying to men that visit them, the courtesans manage to turn on its head the idea of Erotic Capital.

Some very important factors, in this “lifestyle as resistance”, that tend to destabilize established patriarchal norms can be enumerated from the essay. First is the privileging of very fiercely guarded privacy: the courtesans take special care to give away only that much that they feel necessary to the man, protecting their right to not only their own bodies but also to their actual lives. In a culture where a woman has no right to privacy in front of the man that she is supposed to please, this seems to be a careful move towards agency through privacy. Secondly, in not allowing the men to see when outside of the *kotha*, in wearing burqas that is, these courtesans again (at least attempt to) both appropriate and mock patriarchal rigidity. By not being available to public view, they are trying to make an important statement about the powerlessness of the male gaze. Changing the way these women are “supposed to be”, they gain some sense of control over who gazes at them and who does not, and more importantly according to me, evoking the question of why one does not see what one does not see! Thirdly, unlike many other cultural activities, the practice of the courtesans, apart from their cultural performances,

fortifies silence as a way of rebellion. Lastly and most importantly to me, the courtesans’ secret practice of lesbianism carries the weight that can shatter the assumptions that patriarchy complacently rests itself on. Relegating heterosexuality only to the realm of pretense for profit, these women indulge in homoerotic love for actual satisfaction; and not only do they have no qualms about honestly accepting it but they are unflinchingly silent about it since they do not have a ‘label’ for this practice. It is a more radical destabilization of patriarchal categories and the need for fixity of gender roles, than one can imagine.

It is such customs that spell protest that Oldenburg bases her argument on. Even while comparing Romila Thapar’s Hindu (male) ascetic to the Lakhnavi courtesan, she seems to be fully convinced that it is these women that actually manage to register a “quiet but profound” rebellion against patriarchy and the associated values and categories. However, it is important to remind oneself that alternative lifestyles, be it any kind, and work only over and against the established regime. As long as they are ‘alternative’ to the mainstream, they could stand liable to being deemed affirmative of that which is dominant. Nevertheless, reading a work like Oldenburg’s is a pleasure not just for the sake of analysis—but also because it prefigures itself as a counter-narrative, “a departure from conventional perspective on this profession”, relying for its content on other multiple counter-narratives.