

Exploring the history of emotions in 19th-century Urdu novels.

Swapnil Singh

Post Graduate,

Department of English

University of Delhi, Delhi, India

ABSTRACT: The idea that emotions have a history, was once controversial. However, it has been gaining ground over the last several decades. Ruswa's novels serve as the perfect paradigms for exploring this idea further, where we see multitudes of emotions corresponding with the notions that have been evolving through generations. Ruswa's characters are bold in expressing their emotions, be it in the mushairas and mujras of Umrao Jan or the letters exchanged between Ruswa and Sophia. Emotions for *tawa'ifs* were not just responses to the world but a tool through which they interpreted their experience. This world of *tawa'ifs* is filled with countless temporary and permanent relationships, and this paper will focus on examining the intimacy and extimacy¹ surrounding them. In tracing such emotions in history, we will possibly have explanations of human motivation and more nuanced discussions of why men and women did what they did in the 19th-century Awadh.

INDEX TERMS: emotions, extimacy, feelings, history, intimacy, relationships, *tawa'if*, Urdu poetry.

I. INTRODUCTION

Set amidst the decadent setting of *nawabi* Lucknow, Mirza Hadi Ruswa's novels, *Umrao Jan Ada* (1899) and *Junun-e-Intezar* (The Madness of Waiting) (1899), offer their readers a world wrapped around bundles of emotions. Ruswa published *Junun-e-Intezar* under Umrao Jan's name as an April Fool's joke to capitalize on the success of *Umrao Jan Ada*. One of the main reasons for the popularity of these works was that their characters strung that thread in the hearts of the readers, which was familiar. The stories of these characters were almost their own, filled with misery, sacrifice, jealousy, and love. The organic nature of the emotions as portrayed in the texts makes his characters ordinary yet extraordinary.

While exploring these two texts under the lens of emotional history, numerous questions come up. Why was it necessary for *tawa'ifs* to master the art of *nakhra* (pretense) to capture the hearts of their customers? How does love become an economical transaction in their lives in the 19th century Awadh? Why did the men choose to seek pleasure and solace at a *tawa'ifs* *kotha* (salon) rather than at their own homes? Why were there almost no examples of marital love? Was it even a known concept then? Why was Ruswa and Sophia's relationship just an unfortunate dream? Investigations by historians of emotions have demonstrated that emotions can shape public realities², and these questions form the basis of this paper, which we will intricately answer while exploring the layers of transformation that emotions go through.

II. LITERATURE REVIEW

We will first explore the relationships in the texts and the feelings surrounding them. *Doing Emotions History* (2014) is a detailed study of the history of emotions and uncovers the worldviews and most fundamental assumptions about life, culture, and personality that people in the past carried. It will help us understand the role of friendship in the lives of *tawa'ifs* and the fundamentals of marital and conjugal love in the 18th century. Veena Talwar Oldenburg, in her "Lifestyle as Resistance: The Case of the Courtesans of Lucknow, India" (1990), points out that "the tactics of the courtesans may be new, but the spirit behind them is veteran."³ And through her paper, we draw on the similarities between the feelings shown in³ the texts and the ones she experienced decades later.

Elizabeth Bernstein's *Temporarily Yours* (2007) is a text that elucidates the understanding of the role of intimacy in the commerce of sex. The exchange of sex for money has been a symbolically laden transaction for successive generations of social thinkers. Her concentration on the concept of extimacy aids us in locating its presence in the texts. A *tawa'ifs* intimacy lies in her extimacy, as people know who she belongs to. This transactional exchange is the origin of many of the tactics that *tawa'if* employs to survive. Lastly, through Bennett W. Helm's *Love, Friendship, and the Self* (2009), we will scrutinise the romantic relationships of Umrao, with Nawab Sultan, Gauhar Mirza, and Faiz Ali, as well as Ruswa's with Sophia, focusing on their transactional and emotionally turbulent facets.

¹ In Lacanian theory and the uses of this theory in critical psychology (e.g., Parker, 2004, 2005), the term extimacy refers primarily to the presence of exteriority in intimacy.

² Ma Susan J and Peter N. Stearns, "Introduction", *Doing Emotions History*, University of Illinois Press, 2014.

³ Oldenburg, Veena Talwar. "Lifestyle as Resistance: The Case of the Courtesans of Lucknow, India." *Feminist Studies*, vol. 16, no. 2, 1990, pp. 259-287. JStor.

III. DISCUSSION

The history of emotions is a fairly new field of research and is based on the assumption that not only the expression of feelings but also the feelings themselves are learned. The social relevance and potency of emotions are historically and culturally variable. In the view of many historians, emotion is as fundamental a category of history as class, race, or gender. Ruswa's characters are complex and multi-dimensional, and the familiarity surrounding them hints at the deep-rooted conventions of emotional behaviour of the 19th-century gentry. Mirza Ruswa did not believe in creating characters that did not exist. In the introduction of Afshai Raz, he wrote:

The most paying and interesting subject of study in this world is what happens to human beings; not only their external behaviour, but also their inner feelings and thoughts. These can be depicted through a novel provided an effort is made to present the picture truthfully... We should not give ourselves unnecessary trouble by trying to base our novels upon the lives of persons about whom we cannot know anything in detail. In our own circle of friends and relatives, there are bound to be many whose experiences are truly strange and fascinating.

The trouble is that we do not pay heed to them because we cannot spare time from poring over the tomes of the histories of Alexander the Great, Mahmud of Ghazni, Henry VIII, Queen Anne, Napoleon Bonaparte etc.⁴

Rather than focusing solely on the external behaviour of individuals—the traditional subject of history—scholars of emotions investigate the emotions that motivate such behaviour. They strive to know how history felt for those who lived through it. Some classicists contend that in ancient Greece, there was no romantic jealousy between partners, for the ideal of a love-based marriage did not yet exist. Love, however, could be found in friendships.⁵ This can be seen in the relationships present in the novels, like that of Maulvi Sahab, who was married but was staying away from his family and was living with Bua in Lucknow. Gauhar Mirza was Umrao's first lover, but this love was also deeply rooted in friendship. There was no jealousy surrounding the many customers that Umrao entertained, and theirs was a friendship that lasted till the very end of the novel. Love-based marriage was a lesser-known concept in the 18th century, it was more of a transaction than a relationship. This was the primary reason why men left their homes in search of "love," and the simplest way to find it was at salons like Khanum's *kotha*.

In *Junun-e-Intezaar*, Umrao presents us with the tale of 'Maddening love of Ruswa and Sofia'. Ruswa's patience, Sofia's restlessness, and Umrao's anger, jealousy, and sadness are a few of the intricately displayed emotions in the text, and the poetry acts as the perfect medium for their portrayal. The *tawa'ifs* had a command of words, and their impeccable facility with poetry won them a following among the aristocrats of Lucknow. Umrao remarks that in poetry a man can express without embarrassment- and in any company- things which he could never speak of in ordinary conversations.⁶ In *Umrao Jan Ada*, the evocation of emotions begins with a couplet: "Who will hear the sadness of my heart, Ada? / In wandering life's journey took us near and far"⁷. The courtesan, abandoned by her lover, inhabits the salient spaces of the quintessential lover of Urdu poetry, who pines and mopes for her fickle, heartless love. The employment of this trope suggests that the courtesan's suffering has less to do with the immorality of her profession than with the nature of romantic (as opposed to conjugal) love, a trope with which the courtesan as a poet is familiar. Similarly, the poetry present in the letters exchanged between Ruswa and Sophia resembles the Petrarchan sonnets, not necessarily in length and meter but surely in feelings. This notion of loving the unattainable, and then crying and moping about it is long followed tradition. Traces of the same can be seen in the old tales of Laila-Majnu or Shireen-Farhad. Umrao in *Junun-e-Intezaar* points out Ruswa's hypocrisy, for publishing her life story which even though was as intimate as it can be, due to her profession, hides his own scandalous associations. This suffering that is involved in wanting the impossible, be it Umrao's want for love from Nawab Sultan and Faiz Ali, or Ruswa's from Sophia, acts as the very factor responsible for the evolution of their characters. Emotions act as the technology of change, a tool that enables processes of evolution. Be it Ameeran's transformation to Umrao or Umrao's to Umrao Jan Ada. A pattern of similarities can be seen between Khanum's character in the text and the persona of Gulbadan in Oldenburg's paper. Both are chaudharayans of their kothas, but the gap between their recordings is decades apart. They act as a maternal presence in the lives of their courtesans but also hold a rigid authority in their kothas. Another such example is the high level of camaraderie, wit, teasing, and affectionate interaction that Oldenburg witnessed among the courtesans of Gulbadan, which mirrored the friendships shown among Umrao, Khurshid, and Bismillah in the texts.

In Ruswa's rendering of Umrao, the courtesan is most candid about her profession; though it may well be a woman's desire to be loved, a desire that swells as she grows older, it is not given to a whore to live out this desire (p. 38). A tart's only friend is her money; she is no one's wife, and if she is foolish enough to give her love to some man, she does so at the considerable risk of jeopardizing her livelihood (p. 56). When Ruswa interrogates Umrao about the place of love in her life, she is quite forthright in her pronouncement of the view that in her profession "love is a current coin. Whenever we want to ensnare anyone we pretend to fall in love with him." As she adds, no man ever loved her, nor did she ever love any man (p. 59). While Umrao's relations with the Nawab Sultan appear to belie her own profession of indifferent engagement with men, her surrender could not have been complete lest her very livelihood should have been endangered, for where was the man who would openly risk his lot with her? A 'respectable' man had a home to which he could return, and a wife to embrace, but what was the net of safety around Umrao? This safety net came from the transactional value of her relationships.

Feminists and other scholars have debated theoretically what is "really" purchased in a prostitution transaction. Is it a relationship of dominance? Is it love, addiction, or pleasure? Can sex be a service like any other? Only recently have they begun to tackle this question empirically. The "privilege" of participation in a postindustrial paradigm of sexual commerce can perhaps best be described as an ambivalent one. As I found with the middle-class sex workers that I interviewed for this study — whose sexual labor required much more significant quantities of emotional work than did the sexual labor that was characteristic of modern-industrial prostitution — those who participate most fully in the emotionally contained economy of recreational sex and bounded authenticity are

⁴ Ruswa, Mirza Muhammad Hadi, *Umrao Jan Ada*, trans. David Matthews, Rupa Publications India Pvt. Ltd., 1996.

⁵ Stearns Peter N. and Jan Lewis, "Introduction", in *An Emotional History of the United States*, ed. Jan Lewis and Peter N. Stearns (New York: New York University Press, 2006).

⁶ Ruswa, Mirza Muhammad Hadi, *Umrao Jan Ada*, trans. David Matthews, Rupa Publications India Pvt. Ltd., 1996. Pg, xxxiii.

⁷ Ruswa, Mirza Muhammad Hadi, *Umrao Jan Ada*, trans. David Matthews, Rupa Publications India Pvt. Ltd., 1996. Pg, 1.

also those whose psychic lives are most fully penetrated by the cultural logic of late capitalism.⁸ This is how the transactional lives of *tawa'ifs* worked in Awadh, the emotional labour was directly correlated to the amount of money they received. They were the sellers of emotions. Through their *mujras*, they were required to overwork each and every emotion to attract their customers. Their intimate relationships were extimate and on display for the world to see. And *mushairas* worked as the perfect platform to express their woes and sorrows. The tussle with religion is a common motif present in their shayaris, "Sparkling as gems when Koran's commentary is unfolded/ Out of its scabbard it issued, glittering like gold". Others like Abdul Haleem Sharar also often wrote about the Islamic past and extols virtues like courage, bravery, magnanimity, religious fervour, and the abounding spirit of the Muslims. *Firdaus-e-Barin Aina-e-Haram*, *Husn Ka Daku*, and *Zawal-e-Baghdad* are some of his famous novels. He is a romantic at heart, just like Ruswa, but in terms of preferences, he conforms to Muslim ideals in a didactic way.

At an individual level, emotions have been implicated in change, with personal development and growth often articulated as emotional turmoil and struggle, and where therapeutic attempts to 'deal with' emotions are located as key to the making of a new self.⁹ Umrao points out in the novel that emotional needs do not disappear with success, fame, or independence; on the contrary, they often intensify. And Ruswa in *Junun-e-Intezaar* is shown as a lovelorn poet, who sits in the garden of his house every day, waiting for his lover, Sophia, who never returns. When it comes to the display of emotions, they share the same grandeur as *Elihu Jan's Story; or, The Private Life of an Eastern Queen* (1855). Many similar examples can be pulled out from the two texts, wherein they go through innumerable emotions in order to become who they are, but those emotions and their functioning have been preexisting for decades and continue to evolve even today.

IV. CONCLUSION

Ruswa's novels are complicit in layers of emotions that a single character goes through, whether it be significant characters like Umrao and Ruswa himself, or even minor characters like Khurshid or Dilawar Khan. They are who they are because of their emotions, positive or negative. We have come to recognize that transformations in these emotional standards shape not only family relationships but also work-life, class relations and identity, religious devotion, and political expression. Umrao's transformation is the most pronounced among the characters, as she was the woman who had struggled all her life, and the miseries that life threw at her, made her who she was, Umrao Jan Ada. Ruswa was a man of character and depth. He had travelled around and grasped how society worked, and this depth was responsible for his attention to detail for every little emotion that we encounter as readers of his texts. And studying the history of emotions allows us to see contemporary patterns and their relationship to past modes of experiencing and expressing feelings more clearly.

V. REFERENCES

1. Ma Susan J and Peter N. Stearns, "Introduction", *Doing Emotions History*, University of Illinois Press, 2014
2. Oldenburg, Veena Talwar. "Lifestyle as Resistance: The Case of the Courtesans of Lucknow, India." *Feminist Studies*, vol. 16, no. 2, 1990.
3. Ruswa, Mirza Muhammad Hadi, *Umrao Jan Ada*, trans. David Matthews, Rupa Publications India Pvt. Ltd., 1996.
4. Stearns Peter N. and Jan Lewis, "Introduction", in *An Emotional History of the United States*, ed. Jan Lewis and Peter N. Stearns (New York: New York University Press, 2006).
5. Helm, Bennet W., *Love, Friendship and the Self: Intimacy, Identification, and the Social Nature of Persons*, Oxford University Press Inc., New York, 2009.
6. Knighton, William, *The Private Life of an Eastern King: Together with Elihu Jan's Story; Or, The Private Life of an Eastern Queen*, 1855.
7. Rosenberg Jessica and Gitana Garofalo, 'Riot Grrrl: Revolutions from Within,' *Signs* 23, no. 3 (1998).

⁸ Helm, Bennet W., *Love, Friendship and the Self: Intimacy, Identification, and the Social Nature of Persons*, Oxford University Press Inc., New York, 2009.

⁹ Rosenberg Jessica and Gitana Garofalo, 'Riot Grrrl: Revolutions from Within,' *Signs* 23, no. 3 (1998).