



The Fall of Lucknow in *Umrao Jan Ada*

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ABSTRACT

The novel is set in the historical setting of Lucknow that depicts its decadence through the eyes of the various characters, making Lucknow, the hero of the text. There is no direct reference to the conflict of 1857 but the readers come across the incident through the conversations between the characters, which bring the novel under the genre of social realism.

KEYWORDS

historical setting; decadence of Lucknow; social and psychological realism.

The novel, *Umrao Jan Ada* by Mirza Hadi Ruswa, has a historical setting of feudal Lucknow in the mid-nineteenth century. It gives a picture of the then decadent society when the *nawabs* were busy in their luxurious acts and gave way to British rule in Lucknow. The reader witnesses all this not directly but through the effect of these changes on the lives of various characters and mainly on Umrao's journey through all these years. The fall of Awadh in 1857 sends tremors into the world of the *nawabs* and the courtesans which is vividly described. Therefore the paper discusses the realistic and historical aspects of the novel.

Ruswa chose Khanum's establishment to highlight the various facets of the socio-cultural scenario of Lucknow. It was the microcosm of the larger society where customers from all classes of society intersected and became the vantage point from where he could witness the vast decay according to M. Asaduddin. Lucknow had been depicted as the real hero of the novel with its culture of poetry, music, *mushairas*, evening soirees, *imambaras*, *marsiyas*, Muharram, Holi, the fair at Aishbagh and so on. M. Asaduddin sees the novel as an elegy on the demise of that hero. The theme of the novel is the fall of Lucknow and its essence in a particular period in the Indian history.

The novel has been written in the first person narration that enhances the intimacy with the reader. Ruswa is himself a character in the novel who is writing down Umrao's journey from Ameeran to a successful *tawaiif*. He wears different masks sometimes as a character and sometimes as a narrator. The tension emerges when he takes ambiguous positions between his sympathy for the character he has created and the social attitudes he must uphold according to Meenakshi Mukherjee. Umrao, as a courtesan is not out of social order. She has a role to play as long as she is young. It is the loneliness of this ageing *tawaiif* that gives the novel its special human poignancy according to Meenakshi Mukherjee.

The narrative starts with the kidnapping of Ameeran and her entry into Khanum's establishment. The passage of time is depicted at various places with statements like 'I grew to adolescence... At fourteen I learnt to gaze at myself in the mirror' or 'I had been in Kanpur for about six months'. Sometimes Ruswa fixes dates by referring to public events. When Umrao reaches Faizabad, where she had spent her childhood, she measures the distance that she had travelled: 'But I have lived through the tragic days of the Mutiny, seen kingdoms collapse before my eyes, witnessed the fall of princes like Birjis Qadr and my heart has become as hard as stone.' These incidences are mentioned in the novel through effect that they have on the lives of the various characters and thus gives the novel its

historical stance.

Delhi had lost its former glory as the Mughal capital and gave way for Lucknow to become a world for culture and refinement. Even the minor poets from small towns pretended to belong to Lucknow. 'Many make their living on the name of Lucknow as I did when I was in Kanpur' said Umrao as noted by Meenakshi Mukherjee. The novel describes pre-1857 and post-1857 years and the various changes during that time in Lucknow through the eyes of Umrao. The Nawab Wajid Ali Shah's lawlessness gave way to British rule in Awadh. The people in Awadh were busy in their luxurious debauched lives, including the *Nawab*, which led to the overtaking of Lucknow by the British forces. Such a vivid description of Lucknow could also be in Premchand's *Shatranj ke Khiladi*. In the earlier passages of the short story, the people are depicted totally engrossed in *vilasit* that is luxury. Both these works have a historical backdrop of the decadent state of Lucknow and the shifting of the seats of prosperity to the Deccan. They give a realistic account of the contemporary life through a well knitted plot.

The Revolt of 1857 comes about halfway through the novel when Umrao is at height of her power. Umrao goes through various stages of the Siege of Lucknow. When she is with Faiz Ali, she witnesses the troops that are after Faiz, and then when she is in Kanpur she protects Begum's bungalow from looters, then the looting of Khanum's establishment by the end of the novel. Also the presence of various historical characters like Bahu Begum, Begum Malika Kishwar, Nawab Wajid Ali Shah, enhances the historical accuracy or the mimetic realism of the novel according to Meenakshi Mukherjee. There is a debate about whether Umrao Jan herself is a historical personality or not since there is a mosque named after her that hints at her being a real life character as noted by M. Asaduddin.

The realistic aspect of the novel also gets highlighted through its portrayal of the courtesans which is authentic to the contemporary time. The *tawaiifs* had their own autonomous identities, different from one another according to M. Asaduddin. Umrao was good in music as well as dance but lacked the conventional beauty of a courtesan. Her success as a courtesan was because of her poetry. She used to sing her own poems unlike the courtesans. Bega Jaan excelled in music, Khurshid in dancing and beauty and Bismillah's asset was her body. Khanum Jan fitted in her role as a powerful mistress of a whorehouse and Bua Hussaini stood as her foil. Ruswa's close acquaintance with this life helps him create characters and situations that are lively, interesting and entirely credible. According to Veena Talwar Oldenburg in her study on the

courtesans of Lucknow, she wrote that this novel is the single most important source on the courtesans of Lucknow and their profession as it was practised in the nineteenth century in northern India.

Ruswa conflates history and fiction and revolves the destiny of his characters in a well-knitted plot aligning it with the social realistic aspect of novels that started in the West. Social Realism depicted the complex relationships between individuals and their society, women in general. Social conformity has always been more obligatory for a woman than a man, and generally a woman's identity tends to be defined, by her as well as by others as noted by Meenakshi Mukherjee. Ruswa in his novel, through the articulation of subjectivity of female character like Umrao, aligns it with psychological realism too. He believed in the potential of novel as describing life and human beings truthfully.

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