

**UNRAVELING THE SECULAR FACE OF COURTESANS: A NEW HISTORICIST ANALYSIS OF  
“A SUITABLE BOY”**Syed Hussain Irtqa Hussain<sup>1</sup>, Dr. Moazzam Ali Malik<sup>2</sup>

Original Article

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**ABSTRACT**

*In the subcontinent, the institution of courtesan has a complex history that intertwines with the multiple artistic movements in poetry, music, and dance. The current study reviews the literature on the evolution of this cultural institution to demonstrate that it has maintained its non-religious secular outlook for centuries, in the subcontinent. The study applies the principles of the New Historicist approach and explores the character of Saeeda Bai in A Suitable Boy to present a more nuanced understanding of the secular outlook of the institution. The researchers believe that the new historicist perspective on the courtesan institution has important implications for our understanding of Indian history and culture. The study counters the traditional discourses on the institution of courtesans that categorize them as prostitutes; contrarily, the findings of the study emphasize the historical role played by the courtesans as secular figures who promoted communal peace and harmony in Indian society. Additionally, the study sheds light on the lives of women in India, who have often been marginalized and silenced and encourages future inquiries in this under-researched area.*

**Keywords:** Courtesan Institution, New Historicism, Secular Women, Communal Peace, Marginalized, Silenced.

**INTRODUCTION**

The institution of the courtesan, in the subcontinent has a long and complex history. The earliest evidence of courtesans in the region dates back to the Indus Valley Civilization, which flourished from 3300 to 1900 BCE (Keay, 2011; Mark Kenoyer, 2006; Jonathan Mark Kenoyer, 2006). In the later periods of Indian history, courtesans became even more prominent. They were often associated with temples and were considered to be sacred women. Later on, their roles evolved from religious to secular, and they became a significant part of royal courts. These courtesans were highly skilled in music, dance, and poetry and played a significant role in the region's cultural life. They were also highly respected for their knowledge and skills. The courtesan institution, however, peaked during the Mughal Empire (1526-1857). During this time, courtesans were highly sought-after for their beauty, intelligence, and conversational talent. The Mughal emperors and other members of the royal court often patronized them. Courtesans were highly skilled in the arts of music, dance, and poetry, and they played an important role in Mughal society as entertainers, educators, and cultural ambassadors.

The British eventually abolished the courtesan institution during the colonial period. As British colonizers moved into the subcontinent, the political climate changed, as did how courtesans were portrayed. From the eighteenth century to the middle of the nineteenth century, British colonizers' attitudes towards courtesans varied from Indian cultural acceptance to fallen sexualized women (Howard, 2019).

Today, the courtesan institution is largely extinct in the subcontinent. However, there is a growing interest in preserving and reviving the tradition. In recent years, there have been several initiatives to document the history of courtesans and to celebrate their contributions to the region's cultural history. The courtesan institution was a complex and multifaceted institution that played an important role in the cultural life of the subcontinent for centuries. While the institution is no longer as prominent as it once was, there is a growing interest in preserving and reviving its cultural legacy.

### LITERATURE REVIEW

One of the first problems this study faces is related to the term 'courtesan' since its equivalent in the subcontinental tradition is way too nuanced for the term in English. Moreover, being a profoundly ambivalent subject, its treatment ranges from the sacred to the utterly profane. She has received lengthy discussions in various religious and literary texts, and these discussions are not always pejorative. Pande (2018) defines a courtesan as, "Courtesans in the Indian context, can be defined as a woman who was paid to dance in royal courts for the entertainment of royalty." (p. 7). Colonial authors, on the other hand, used the term courtesan as an umbrella term for sex workers, which blurred the lines between women entertainers and dancers who did, and did not, perform sexual services for money (Tula & Pande, 2014, p. 74). Similarly, the literary texts from the millennia have treated the courtesan in various roles. These roles have oscillated from the cast-out harlot to the royal love's sophisticated and culturally trained artist.

Courtesans have been a significant part of Indian cultural history since ancient times. In the Vedic period, courtesans were highly skilled in the arts of music, dance, and poetry. Kings and wealthy patrons often employed them to entertain and provide companionship. During the Buddhist period, courtesans continued to play an important role in society. They were often involved in the spread of Buddhism and were respected for their intelligence and wit (Young, 2004). In the Jain period, courtesans were treated with ambivalence. The strong ascetic emphasis of Jainism did not go well with the spirit of revelry that courtesans were associated with. However, courtesans still enjoyed certain distinctions and social merit in the Jain period.

The Maurya period, however, was a time of significant change for courtesans. During the Maurya period, India had a centrally organized rule for the first time (Chander, 2015). Alliances or conquests joined the small city-states ruled by local Rajas during this period, and a central governmental structure emerged. This required resources, both bureaucratic and cultural, that could be employed in the service of the royal court to organize the society under some shared cultural assumptions. A land mass as large as India with the kind of communication strategies and resources available at that time did indeed need a central organizing force like a shared culture, and the specific socio-historical conditions, therefore, propped up the institution of the courtesans as the ideal institution. During this time, the courtesan's profession had acquired great depth and complexity regarding the types of courtesans categorized and often ranked according to their skill

and training and the nature of their activity. They were highly skilled in the arts, respected for their intelligence and wit, and involved in various social and cultural activities.

In the medieval period of Indian history, the institution of courtesans became more tolerant and inclusive than it had been in the classical periods. This was due to the cosmopolitan nature of the Mughal Empire, which brought together people from different cultures and religions (Fisher, 2019). The Mughals were also patrons of the arts, which led to a demand for courtesans who could perform music, dance, and poetry. As a result, courtesans in the Mughal period achieved a higher social status and played a more active role in society.

The Mughal courtesan institution was founded on the principle of secularism. Courtesans were free to practice any religion they chose, and the same religious restrictions as other women did not bind them. This freedom allowed courtesans to develop a strong sense of independence and self-reliance. Courtesans were also highly educated. They were trained in the arts of music, dance, and poetry, and they were often well-versed in history, literature, and philosophy. This education gave courtesans a unique perspective on the world, allowing them to contribute to Mughal society in various ways. In addition to their artistic and intellectual talents, courtesans were known for their beauty and charm. They were often the objects of desire for Mughal men and played an important role in Mughal culture as symbols of beauty and eroticism. The Mughal courtesan institution was a vibrant and dynamic part of Mughal society. Courtesans were highly respected and admired and played an important role in developing Mughal culture.

As the Mughal Empire declined in the latter half of the 18th century, the northern state of Awadh grew more robust and independent. Under its rulers, the nawabs, Awadh became the most generous patron of the courtesan institution. Lucknow, the cultural capital of Awadh, became a place where the courtesan profession evolved into an institution under the patronage of the nawabs, especially Wajid Ali Shah, the last nawab. The courtesans' establishments, called the *kothas* of Lucknow, were famous cultural hubs, attracting artists and musicians from all over the country. *Kothas* were a platform that taught its inmates poetry, music, and dance art (Arfeen, 2016). During this period, the courtesans, called *tawaifs* in the indigenous language, were highly skilled in music, dance, and poetry, and they often entertained wealthy patrons at their *kothas* (Abbas, 2015). These *kothas* upheld secular meritocracy by hosting courtesans from Hindu and Muslim backgrounds alike and performed their role in promoting communal peace and harmony in the subcontinent's cultural history (Oldenburg, 1990).

The courtesan institution, however, began to decline in the middle of the 19th century. The dominant narrative of the eighteenth century portrayed courtesans as emblems of Indian cultural acceptability to substantiate British political power. However, courtesans' social, political, and financial standing declined in the latter half of the nineteenth century due to many factors, including the British Colonial Empire's annexation of the Awadh state in 1856 and later on in reaction to the mutiny of 1857, the courtesan institution was mainly targeted and dismantled at the hands of the colonial masters (Oldenburg, 2014). Their reputation as degraded, sensual women who endangered the imperial mission and corrupted British men through their sensuality arose around the beginning of the nineteenth century. Moreover, in the middle of the nineteenth century, the British colonizers' medico-moral discourses ushered in the construction of courtesans as sex workers endangering the British Empire in India.

## RESEARCH QUESTIONS

1. In the light of New Historicism, how does the character of Saeeda Bai provide the reader of the novel *A Suitable Boy* with a secular understanding of the courtesans' institution in the cultural history of the subcontinent?
2. How did the courtesans' institution help to create an ambiance of communal peace and harmony in the cultural history of the subcontinent?

## RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

New historicism is a literary theory that emerged in the 1980s as a reaction to the formalist approach to literary criticism. Formalists believed that the meaning of a text could be found solely within the text itself, without reference to the author's life or the historical context in which the text was written. New historicists, on the other hand, argue that the meaning of a text is always shaped by its historical context. They believe that the best way to understand a text is to read it in the context of the social, political, and cultural forces at work when it was written.

The present paper opts for qualitative research, and the data has been collected through textual analysis or the close reading of the text of the novel *A Suitable Boy*. In this regard, the historical character of the Saeeda Bai has been focused on and analyzed, which quite deeply exhibits the historically secular nature of the courtesans' institution. Although the novel was set in 1953, the post-independence time of Indian history when the courtesan institution was waning from the cultural milieu of Indian history, the character of Saeeda Bai in the novel reveals how in the past, the courtesan institution maintained its secular contour and was a source of promoting communal peace and harmony.

Quite interestingly, the courtesan characters portrayed in the Indian also reveal the historical secular tilt of the courtesan institution, especially in the movies like *Mujhe Jeenay Do* (1963), *Mandi* (1983), and *Sardari Begum* (1996) made before and during the time of novel's production. In one of his interviews, Seth said it took him "almost eight to nine years to imagine, plan, research, write and revise"; the voluminous novel *A Suitable Boy* finally published in 1993 (Seth, 2017). Therefore, these cinematic characters have also been analyzed, which align with the new historicist premise that sociocultural factors also contribute to the production of any literary work. Moreover, as part of the biographical context, some extracts from the novelist's interviews have also been incorporated in connection with the role of the courtesans' institution in the cultural history of the subcontinent.

## DATA ANALYSIS

Seth set his voluminous novel *A Suitable Boy* in 1951, a time of significant change in India (Seth, 2013). The country had recently gained independence from British rule and was preparing for its first general elections. These events profoundly impacted Indian society, and Seth's novel captures the changing socio-political contour of this period. In one of his interviews with Sudeep Sen, Seth discusses the socio-political changes during the novel's setting:

"The first general election were taking place. People who had stood side by side fighting the British were now fighting each other. Land reforms were taking place: the large land estates were collapsing, and the patronage for the musicians and courtesans was disappearing as well" (Seth, 2008).

In this statement, Seth clearly explains his apprehension about the growing communal hatred in Indian society. The people who, under one nationalist fervor, stood against the oppression of British colonialism were belaboring one another on communal differences much opposite to communal peace and harmony of the medieval period preceding British colonization of the subcontinent. Moreover, in this statement, Seth mainly talks about the sociocultural changes, musicians and courtesans, and their patronage, which was disappearing in the post-independence period. What is significant here is to realize that Seth, in his statement, mentions the growing communal violence along with the disappearing patronage of the musicians and courtesans, which are, in a sense, very closely related as we go through the narrative of the novel. Seth's mention of growing communal violence and the musicians and courtesans are not without a method, as Seth seems to be quite aware of the role these musicians and courtesans played for the communal peace and harmony in the history of the subcontinent.

In this regard, Saeeda Bai Firozabadi, although a staunchly Shi'ite Muslim character in the novel, very clearly exhibits the secular outlook of the courtesan institution of the Awadhi culture of northern India. As we have discussed in our literature review, the courtesans in the north of India during the eighteenth century held a secular disposition of their art and profession and resisted the communal divides of the society. This promoted communal peace and harmony in Indian culture. The narrative, in this regard, testifies to the secular nature of northern India's courtesan institution when we observe that the first performance of Saeeda Bai Firozabadi is at the residence of Hindu minister Mahesh Kapoor on the eve of Holy, a religious festival of Hindu religion. Holi is a major Hindu festival that celebrates the return of the god Rama to his kingdom of Ayodhya after 14 years of exile.

The Hindu guests at Prem Nivas were mostly fans of Saeeda Bai's singing and had come specifically to listen to her: "Many of Mahesh Kapoor's guests this evening had come not so much to enjoy their host's -----or, more accurately, their unobtrusive hostess's ---excellent hospitality as to listen to Saeeda Bai" (P-89). Saeeda Bai is specially invited to perform on this occasion, and as part of her protocol, a special car was sent to bring Saeeda Bai to Prem Nivas, Mahesh Kapoor's residence "The car's already been sent for Saeeda Bai" (p.89). Saeeda Bai's high reputation as a renowned vocalist with an artistic pedigree is reflected in the fact that the Minister Mahesh Kapoor sent a car to bring her to Prem Nivas (back in 1951). However, when Saeeda Bai starts singing at Prem Nivas in accordance with the demand of the eve:

"only a few words had emerged from that lovely throat when the 'wah! wah!' and other appreciative comments of the audience elicited an acknowledging smile from Saeeda Bai" (p. 92).

The aforementioned quotation illustrates how courtesans' music unites people of all religious backgrounds and how the religious differences between the courtesan singer and audience merge into a unified transcendental condition. A courtesan initiates this convergence, Saeeda Bai:

"It being Holi, she began her recital with a few Holi songs. Saeeda Bai Firozabadi was Muslim, but sang these happy descriptions of young Krishna playing Holi with the milkmaids of his foster-father's village with such charm and energy that one would have had to be convinced that she saw the scene before her own eyes. The little boys in the audience looked at her wonderingly" (p. 93).

Saeeda Bai Firozabadi was a Muslim, as the novel's narrative makes clear in these lines, but she sang the Holi songs with 'such charm and energy' that one is obliged to believe she saw the event in front of her eyes. She impressed her mature audience and mesmerized the little boys who looked at her in wonder. Saeeda Bai's first performance on the eve of Holi, in the narrative according to the new historicist underpinnings, reveals the historical context of her character in which these accomplished artists performed at inter-religious functions and created an ambiance of communal tolerance and acceptance through their art. In this way, these accomplished artists played their part as a bridge among diverse communal divisions of the subcontinent which resisted the divisions propagated by the hardline religious factions of the society.

In this regard, the novelist strikingly contrasts Saeeda Bai's performance on the eve of Holi with an incident of communal violence in the narrative, where the Hindu and Shia Muslim mobs fanatically attack each other when they meet at the crossroad. As the novel's narrative exhibits, the unfortunate coincidence of the Muslim Tazia procession, which marks the highest grieving time for Shia Muslims, and the Hindu Bharat Milaap procession, which celebrates the return of Ram to Ayodhya and his reunion with his brother Bharat, gave rise to the mobs. Despite city authorities' efforts to schedule the two processions so they would not meet in the city, they ended up meeting. A delay in the proceedings prompted precisely that, and riots between the two processions left numerous Hindus and Muslims injured and dead.

The novel's narrative, in this manner, resonates with the event in Ayodhya in 1992 over the dispute at Babri Masjid, ushering communal violence between Muslims and Hindus. Seth, the novelist, in his many interviews, expressed his deep concern on this communal conflict and was found emotionally inarticulate: "it's... it's...I was so upset. When I read the headline, I was sick to my stomach" (Woodward, 1993).

The novel's narrative, in this way, highlights the historical context of the courtesans' institution signifying their character as accomplished artists performing their role as a bridge for masses belonging to diverse communal backgrounds. This goes back to the time of the Mughal era. Our literature review discussed that the Mughals were cosmopolitan rulers and encouraged the secular outlook of the courtesan's institution. However, with the change of masters in the shape of British colonizers, the communal harmony of the subcontinent culture was eroded due to their administrative strategy of divide and rule. In this regard, the narrative of the novel also refers to the British policy of divide and rule as

"the police force before Partition was very largely composed of Muslims as the result of the sound imperialist policy of divide and rule: it helped the British that the predominantly Hindu Congresswallahs were beaten up by the predominantly Muslim policemen" (p. 265).

The narrative here reveals how the communally tolerant ambiance of the subcontinent was affected by the administrative strategies of the British rulers, which penetrated the subcontinent culture like a contagion turning this region of the globe from a communally tolerant society to a society of communal hatred and intolerance.

Moreover, unlike the institutionalized nature of her profession present in the middle of the nineteenth century in Awadh in the form of *kothas*, Saeeda Bai's profession became a personal

enterprise in the post-independence period. However, her residence at Pasand Bagh exhibits the same tradition where people from diverse communal backgrounds visit her place. Here, the dialogue of an older courtesan in the movie *Mujhe Jeene Do* (1963) catches our attention when she comments on the secular contour of the courtesan culture when she goes to the police station to report the kidnapping of her daughter. When inquired about her religion, she replies, *Aap jaante hain hamara rishta har qaum se hai (you know we are associated with every community)* (Vanita, 2018). To support her claim, one of the men with her said his name was Allah Rakha, while the other introduced himself as Ram Rakha. The movie also presents the conjugal union of a Hindu dacoit Jarnail Singh, and a Muslim courtesan, Chameli, and Jurnail Sing sends for both a maulvi and a pandit to officiate his wedding to Chameli. When the pandit and the maulvi objected to the Hindu-Muslim marriage, Jurnail Singh's best friend reminded them of the precedent set by Mughal Emperor Akbar's marriage to Jodhabai. Akbar was a Muslim ruler who married a Hindu princess, and their union helped to promote religious tolerance and understanding in India. By citing this example, Jurnail Singh's best friend hoped to persuade the pandit and maulvi to accept his friend's marriage.

Here, the courtesan institution connects with its historical context, where the medieval period of Mughal rule openly defied the religious divisions and aspired for a liberal and secular society. The courtesan's institution maintained its secular contour, promoting communal peace and harmony.

In the 1983 movie *Mandi*, the *kotha's* financial success is due to its secular nature, which means it is open to everyone, regardless of religion or social status. This openness attracts a wide range of customers, generating much income for the *kotha*.

Zeenat, the rising star of the *kotha*, symbolizes the hybridity of the *kotha* itself. She is the daughter of a Muslim courtesan and a Hindu businessman, and her mixed heritage reflects the *kotha's* openness to all. Zeenat is a talented courtesan, and her popularity with customers of all backgrounds shows that the *kotha* is a place where people of different cultures and religions can come together.

In the 1996 movie *Sardari Begum*, the titular courtesan gets into trouble for facilitating Hindu-Muslim marriages. Sardari Begum was a powerful and independent woman who defied the expectations of her time. She was a successful courtesan whom her clients respected. Sardari used her position to help others and was particularly passionate about assisting Hindu-Muslim couples in love. She was arrested and imprisoned for her beliefs but never gave up fighting for what she believed in.

All these textual and cinematic courtesan presentations exhibit the secular outlook of the courtesans' institution, which was later dismantled by the British Colonizers' political and economic policies, and these accomplished artists were silenced and pushed to the marginal fringes of obscurity. The British viewed courtesans as immoral and degraded, and they passed laws that restricted their freedom and opportunities. For example, the Contagious Diseases Act of 1868 required all courtesans to undergo regular medical examinations, and the Devdasi Act of 1908 banned the practice of dedicating young girls to temples as courtesans. These laws had a devastating impact on courtesans. They lost their livelihood, their social status, and their freedom. Many were forced into poverty and prostitution. As a result, courtesans became increasingly marginalized and silenced in British India.

The horrible irony is that the East India Company also used this cultural institution of the courtesan as a vital component of its 'moral' justification to annex Awadh in 1856. As a result of this annexation, Lucknow's patronage networks and mechanisms for dance, poetry, and music in Awadh were severely dismantled. Due to this significant political shift, the patronage center of courtesans and their entourages (mentioned in the interview quote of the novelist at the onset of data analysis) was displaced from nawabi royal courts to East Indian Company Officials. Given this political context, it was unsurprising that many courtesans sympathized with the 1857 uprising due to their strong relationships with the former nawabi administration. However, the revolt's failure led to this cultural institution's further decadence, degeneration, and the overall decline of Awadh culture, as the British mainly targeted courtesans for their alleged involvement in the rebellion. As a result, the courtesans' institution vanished from the cultural milieu of the subcontinent, and only a few lonely courtesans like Saeeda Bai were left in the subcontinent to remind us rich cultural past of Indian history.

### CONCLUSION

In the light of new historicism, we have seen how the historical context of courtesans' institution secular outlook is woven around the novel's narrative. The unraveling of this historical context reveals that courtesans in the past were highly accomplished artists, and the political and royal elite patronized them. However, their art and profession were resistant to the prevalent religious division of society, and their establishments provided a platform where people from diverse communal backgrounds gathered to appreciate their artistic skills. In this way, their art and their profession's secular orientation helped create an ambiance of communal peace and harmony. However, with the changing political milieu of the subcontinent, their art and institution were severely affected by the presence of the British colonizers. This victimization of these liberal artists barred their cultural role in the performing arts and, most notably, their significant contribution to the region's communal harmony, which was gradually replaced by the hatred of communally violent forces.

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