

# RE-CLAIMING THE LOST QUEEN: BEGUM HAZRAT MAHAL AS A SUBALTERN

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**Abstract:** By its very nature of representation, documenting history has been an exclusionist and gendered enterprise. It includes erasure, silences, selectivity, and homogeneity as certain voices are engulfed and strangled while few projections create the hegemonic discourse. The *tawaifs* were an integral part of the Indian freedom struggles. They were highly intellectual patrons of art, known for their manners or *nazaqat*, and played a significant role in India's pre-independent social and cultural life. *Tawaifs* such as Azizun Nissa and Begum Hazrat Mahal, contemporaries of Rani Lakshmibai, played a pivotal role in the 1857 Revolt. Still, because of their professional identity, their political contributions are rarely mentioned in history.

This paper studies Kenize Mourad's novel *In the City of Gold and Silver* (2013), based on the life of Begum Hazrat. It intends to re-surface the contributions of such females in the volatile public memory and celebrate their participation in the roll call of honor.

**Keywords:** *Tawaif*, cultural silencing, colonization, agency, Begum Hazrat Mahal, subaltern.

## Introduction

In Indian tradition dance and singing have, from times immemorial, been associated with divinity. The multiculturally convergent Indian society has always had its performing artists ranging from *Devdasi*, *nartaki*, *kanchani*, *nagarbadhu*, *tawaif*, and nautch girl. The word *tawaif* comes from an Urdu-Persian word: '*tauf*', means to go round. In English, the closest word that contains the meaning of *tawaif* is a courtesan. A *tawaif* was an accomplished, highly intellectual patron of art with dance and poetry in her blood. She was known for her manners (*nazaqat*), the art of conversation, and played a very significant role in the socio-cultural life of India in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. In Feldman and Gordon define courtesans as women who 'engage in relatively exclusive exchanges of artistic graces, elevated conversation, and sexual favors with male patrons.' (5) Being polished and refined, they gave training to the sons of *nawabs* and elites. Their performances used to be an essential part of celebrations, thus being popular in demand.

The art flowered immensely during the rule of the Mughals but when colonization by Britishers began, these practitioners were perceived as 'dangerous outcasts' for social, moral, and public health. The colonial misinterpretation of *tawaifbazi* led to its death and consequent cultural silencing. There have been many *tawaifs* who have done a lot for their motherland. Among them, a few are Begum Hazrat Mahal, Azizun Nissa, and Begum Samru of Sardhana.

In Indian history, these females have been turned into 'subalterns', who have no voice of their own when it comes to their presentation. Subaltern term was first used by Antonio Gramsci and later employed by Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak in her seminal essay, "Can the Subaltern Speak?" in order to describe the silencing and erasure of the marginal voices. The *tawaifs* have mostly been portrayed as sexualized objects, bereft of any cultural significance.

## From *tawaif* to *taj*: Journey of Begum Hazrat Mahal

Mourad's *In the City of Gold and Silver* inhabits the space between the banks of imagination and reality, in the gendered history, it gives space to Begum Hazrat Mahal, a *tawaif*. The work foregrounds the idea of the existence of a strong leader, Begum Hazrat who determined the course of her life from being a *tawaif* to

owning the *taj* of Awadh. Nevertheless, over the centuries she remained unrecognized. The employment of these theories aims to confer the place she deserves in history.

Undeniably, Begum Hazrat Mahal is a forgotten pole star in the radiant sky of 1857. However, an attempt to map the precise parental details of Begum leads one to tread on the unascertained territory. Little is known about her familial background. There are multiple narratives; some claim she was born to an enslaved African, and some assume she was born in Nepal. Hazrat's real name was Muhammadi Khanum. Although, as per Mourad's novel she was born in an artisan's family in Faizabad, which once used to be the capital of Awadh. Muhammadi became an orphan at an early age and was transferred to the custody of courtesans, after rigorous tutelage, she was introduced to the harem (*parikhana*) of Wajid Ali Shah. Captivated by the enigma and talent of this young courtesan, Wajid Ali Shah kept her in his harem as *muta* (temporary marriage) and Muhammadi now became Mahak Pari. Coming from a humble background, she was titled Iftikhar un Nisa, 'the pride of women', by the Nawab, a woman bestowed with the capabilities to examine and perceive beyond reality. She was promoted to the position of Mahal after giving birth to Birjis Qadar in 1845 and came to be known as Nawab Iftikhar un-Nisa Begum Hazrat Mahal Sahiba. It was Begum Hazrat, whom Wajid Ali left behind to be his eyes and ears when he was sent for exile. Because of her intelligence and loyalty, she was entrusted with passing all the vital information to him.

After the king's exile, the atmosphere of Awadh was witnessing constant conflicts between Britishers and natives. Feeling the urgent need for unanimous authority to keep the hold on all, the begums of Wajid Ali Shah were approached by the military leaders of Awadh. Proving herself true to her name: 'the pride of women', Begum Hazrat stepped in to embrace this opportunity of serving her people, without hesitating ones for her son's and her own life. Following these events, her son Birjis Qadar aged eleven became the new king, Krishna for the population, and Begum Hazrat the Regent. Despite not having the royal blood in her veins, the ingenious Regent was well aware of the political intricacies and could screen the essential human nature of greed. Shifting allegiances was a common practice among the *talugdars*, but adroit Begum had her plans to counter this issue. She exhorted them and successfully made them vow to fight faithfully, relentlessly for Awadh until the Britishers were to be driven out.

The primary directive force behind the great uprising of Awadh in 1857 has been dismissed from the memory of most of the fellow citizens. This force is none other than Begum Hazrat Mahal of Awadh about whose persona *The London Times* wrote, "The Begum of Awadh shows greater strategic sense and courage than all her generals put together." (Mourad 416)

### **Begum: The Administrator, Ruler and Warrior**

Determined to pull Awadh out of its marshy state, Begum preferred to be a part of all the decisions regarding the struggle against the intruders as well as the country's administration, instead of just assuming a role of a content puppet. She became the power behind the throne in Awadh and all orders that emanated in the name of Birjis Qadar were hers. (Mukherjee 14) Like a remarkable organizer, every morning, she presided over a meeting with the new Grand Vizier, Sharuf-ud-Daulah, and all the ministers, who keep her abreast of civil affairs; every afternoon, Rajah Jai Lal came to report on military matters. (218)

Without being intoxicated with power and by showcasing her pragmatic personality, the regent ascertained to bring the scattered population together. There were multiple problems that Awadh was facing, some of which were: insufficient soldiers, arms and ammunition, and food scarcity and all these found solution because of Begum's administrative and political prowess. The decisive personality of this regent left all officers awestricken, with her excellent mastery of rhetoric, organizational skills, and astute political sense, she overcame all the hurdles. Under Begum's governance, social justice prevailed, and the city of *nawabs* bloomed once again with a flicker of hope in its people's hearts.

Willingly Begum abandoned the cozy existence of her earlier life in the harem for the dangerous adventure of power. The reason why she took the position of power was not with the purpose of self-advancement and power hunger. Instead, it was because of the rage against an injustice that was perpetrated upon the natives, an injustice that had crushed and humiliated them and their culture. Hazrat Mahal became a rebel and a leading figure almost as soon as the rebellion began in Lucknow.

Since the Residency homed/encaged thousands of whites, it was bombarded from sunup to sundown; the rebels did not allow the besieged prisoners a moment's respite. These attacks ran the prisoners ragged; morally, too, they were drained. All this tactical planning would have been entirely unimaginable without having a head, who could do a realistic assessment of situations and rightly estimate the steps of the opposition party. In his book Rudrangshu Mukherjee delineated the war condition in the region of Awadh:

The Residency was surrounded, one report said, with as many as 35,000 rebels (sepoys and retainers of the taluqdars); the report added: 'Everyday their numbers increase.' The situation for those within the Residency was so dire that Lawrence thought they could hold out for a maximum of 15 to 20 days. (28)

Furthermore, by keeping herself closely involved in all the developments, the Regent closely pondered and assessed the reasons responsible for the defeat; wondered how they could learn from their mistakes and improve their situation. Like a responsible Queen Mother, Begum made all the necessary arrangements for the families of the soldiers because she knew very well that nobody would participate and fight in the battle until and unless the soldiers were to be convinced that their children and families left behind would not be dying hungry. The exceptional oratory skills of Begum and *ishtihaar* circulated in the name of the king were successful in promoting public participation. General Havelock along with his troop was marching towards Lucknow so as to rescue the inmates of the Residency. In a message, while reporting the situation to the commander-in-chief, he wrote: "My officers, in whom I have total confidence, are all of the opinion that with the forces at our disposal, our advance on Lucknow is destined to fail. To confront the enemy in our current condition would be to court the total annihilation of our troops." (Mourad 239)

Holding morals to be of supreme importance and believing that the strength of a nation depends on its moral strength, Begum refused to attack the refugees as it was against her principles as she believed in not competing with the Britishers when it came to the race of barbarity, cruelty, and hypocrisy.

Reading the daily mails, appeals, and petitions was part of her regular routine despite being engaged in other occupations. By doing so she could stay in direct touch with her subjects and really know the thoughts of the people. At the same time, she found them more reliable as well as informative than the reports which were submitted by the ministers. Riding on an elephant, the Regent made her presence on the battlefield of Alambagh Palace, to galvanize and exhort the soldiers. However, the Indian troops were defeated and Havelock and Outram managed to reach the Residency on 25 September 1857. It was called the "first relief of Lucknow." Ironically, the rescuers failed to anticipate that they themselves became the captives imprisoned inside the Residency.

In the month of January 1858, Hazrat Mahal undertook the fortification of Lucknow because a large number of enforcements were encroaching towards Awadh. Bulwarks were constructed around Lucknow. Hazrat monitored all the events. "The regent was present on all fronts. Mounted on the royal elephant, she visited every construction site to encourage the men and to ensure ration distributions were sufficient." (318) Because the farms were turned into ashes by the invaders, it became difficult to procure grains and cereals. The prices were atmospheric. In order to contend with this problem, area-wise leaders were appointed by Begum, who had the task to make sure that none of the subjects starved to death. To meet the expenses and to provide the ration to the families of the soldiers, like a true leader, she made all the necessary arrangements by having her jewellery and all her gold and silver ornaments melted down. It was she who filled the soldiers with vigor once again, by recognising their importance and paying homage to them, whilst at the same time reinforcing the strength of her people and uplifting their enthusiasm.

In March 1858 Campbell and Outram incessantly dynamited the seat of ultimate authority, Kaisarbagh. The circumstances deteriorated and a day before the capture of Kaisarbagh, Begum secretly, by deceiving the penetrative eyes of the Britishers, fled to Musabagh along with the king and then to Mehmoodabad and finally to Bhitauli.

Furthermore, even when thousands of soldiers deserted her army, the strong-willed Begum was determined to continue the resistance without surrendering at any cost. Besides directing the military campaigns, Begum continued governance from Bhitauli; the orders were sent to *taluqdars*, taxes were collected timely; Russell in his diary pointed out that revenues were collected by rebels. (Mukherjee 40) It was possible only because

of her clear mind and remarkable leadership skills. For her people, she was Durga, the warrior goddess. The dynasty's prestige and her personal influence were such that even driven out of the center of power, Hazrat Mahal still commanded respect and obedience. (Mourad 369)

In the reports of the British, this fearless young woman was described as the "soul of the revolt". On 1 November 1858 in her proclamation, Queen Victoria offered the hand of friendship to war leaders and declared that the power would transfer from the East India Company to the British Crown. She guaranteed to agree to all the treaties signed in the past; moreover, she promised religious freedom, equal treatment of the natives keeping aside their race, and forgiving the rebels whose hands were not smeared with the blood of the whites. Recognizing the main objective behind Queen Victoria's offer of amnesty, and knowing well that it was an act of mere foolishness to trust these usurpers (Britishers), Begum got a counter-proclamation published. As she could perceive the things behind this smokescreen, it became transparent to her that all that hypocrite Queen Victoria wanted was to decapitate the revolt by giving false hope and promises. "This proclamation says everything and it is opposite! It is interesting to note that the British have no better jobs to offer Indians than those of labourers! If people do not understand all that this implies, we can do nothing to help them. Do not be deceived!" (Mourad 398)

Every announcement made by Queen Victoria was counter-attacked separately. Earlier the country was in the hands of the East India Company, although now the new in charge would be the Queen herself. To counter this 'change' that was taking place, the Begum's proclamation said, 'for the laws of the Company, the settlement of the Company, the English servants of the Company, the Governor-General, and the judicial administration of the Company, are all unchanged.' (Mukherjee 73) General Campbell, by surrounding the insurgents from three sides, pushed them towards the Terai region. Fleeing from the hands of Campbell, on 7 January 1859, the Begum along with her troops took refuge in the Terai region, along the Nepal border. Failing to find any help from Jung Bahadur, an ally of the British, the native forces continued to fight fearlessly to death. Standing firm, the Queen Mother outrightly rejected the capitulation. Britishers did not want to take responsibility for the death of this deeply admired, idolized, and charismatic leader, so Jung Bahadur offered asylum to Begum and her son. During exile as well, she continued to contribute to India's freedom.

At the age of forty-eight, on 7 April 1879, the warrior queen took her last breath, after making Birjis vow that he would wrest for independence. She was buried in a mosque built by herself, Hindustani Masjid, which she named after the name of her homeland. The little Muhammadi, the poetess of the Chowk, Wajid Ali Shah's captivating wife, the young regent, the passionate lover, the enlightened sovereign, and the intrepid war leader, Hazrat Mahal, was like a dazzling meteor in Indian history. (Mourad 428)

## Conclusion

While references to *tawaifs*' role in politics are present in historical accounts, yet most of them have largely failed to trace and foreground the journey of *tawaifs* as political subjects including Begum Hazrat Mahal, Begum Samru, and Azezun Nisa. Begum Samru, a *tawaif* and crucial political figure played an indispensable role in eighteenth and nineteenth-century India. Even the Mughal ruler Shah Alam acknowledged her as a dynamic woman and his esteemed protector, and the military strategists of the East India Company considered her crucial to their territorial ambitions. (Singh 74)

*In the City of Gold and Silver* (2013) by Kenize Mourad, interwoven with the historical facts is the 'only' currently existing literary piece in English that graphically presents the active role played by Begum Hazrat Mahal, a *tawaif*, in the unfolding of this extraordinary saga. There is a great dearth of material about Begum's role and all the information that readers get is through colonial documents.

Further, the seminal question is that how the nation is going to make the children aware about these less known figures because many of them fail to find any place in the school textbooks? The history that is being taught is that of colonizers and again it is can not be ignored that the conolinal influence still persists.

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