

Umrao Jan Ada: A Chilling Exposition of Social Issues in Nineteenth-Century Lucknow

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Abstract

As we all know that novels work as a mirror of the society, so did the novel which I am going to discuss in this paper. The present paper will deal with the novel *Umrao Jan Ada* by Mirza Mohammad Hadi Ruswa. It is a chilling exposition of many social issues that were prevailed in nineteenth-century Lucknow. Today India is struggling with a large number of social issues as child labor, illiteracy, corruption, child marriage, the social status of women, dowry system, poverty etc. In *Umrao Jan Ada*, Hadi Ruswa is discussing the major social issues of his era that are dowry system, child abduction, child marriage, the existence of prostitutes and prostitution, moral hypocrisy of patriarchal society etc. This paper is an analysis of all these problems especially the problems faced by the women and how they were forced to go on the wrong path. The novel is the biggest satire on the hypocrisy and crookedness of the then society.

Keywords- *Prostitution, Moral Hypocrisy, Child Abduction, Existence of Prostitutes*

Introduction

Mirza Mohammad Hadi Ruswa is one of the most prominent Urdu writers. He was a great scholar of many languages such as Hindi, English, Sanskrit, Arabic, Persian, Hebrew and Greek. His writings are full of poetry and music that makes his literary works unique. *Umrao Jan Ada* is his magnum opus. It was published in 1899 and is considered to be the first novel in the Urdu language. It was written with the purpose to highlight the problems of nineteenth-century Lucknow and he has done his job with utter veracity. Ruswa has delineated a voluminous picture of Lucknow of his era. It is an authentic cultural document of Lucknow. The novel *Umrao Jan Ada* has a historical background of mid-nineteenth century Lucknow. It portrays the picture of the then dissipated society when the Nawabs were busy in their opulent acts and gave a path to British rule in Lucknow. Mirza Hadi Ruswa is himself a character in the novel who is narrating Umrao Jan's life story.

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On the surface, we find *Umrao Jan Ada* as a novel of characters but when we analyze the novel, we find that there are so many social issues that are unnoticed through the eyes of readers.

The novel begins with the happy life of Ameeran. Ameeran who later becomes Umrao lives a peaceful life with her parents on the outskirts of the city of Faizabad, as Umrao herself describes in the novel, "As long as I lived with my parents, I do not remember having known any sorrow" (Chapter I p.25) but soon the tragic fate of Ameeran comes in the form of Dilawar Khan who abducts her. He sells her to Khanum Jan in Lucknow. From here, her life takes a drastic change for forever. Not only Ameeran but also there were lots of girls who were sold for few rupees. It was the common business of many people at that time in Lucknow.

Lucknow was the center of child abduction in nineteenth-century. Scores of boys and girls were abducted by crude people for their livelihood. As in the novel, Umrao Jan is describing the horrible deed of an abduction of herself in her childhood, "One evening before my father had returned from his work, I happened to go out of the house and saw Dilawar Khan standing under the tamarind tree...I wanted to scream but he gagged my mouth by thrusting an old rag in it. He tied my hand with a scarf and threw me on the floor...the two men picked me up in a bullock cart and drove off." (Chapter I, p.28). Merciless Peer Baksh and Dilawar Khan who kidnapped the Ameeran were very easy and comfortable in their work. They had no fear of what they had done. As in the novel, Peer Baksh is saying boastfully to Dilawar Khan, "What are you scared of, old man? No one will catch us. In Lucknow, such deals are made all the time. You leave it to me; I will manage the transaction." (Chapter I, p.31). Thus the child abduction is one of the chilling issues that can be noticed through the novel.

Child marriage issue can also be seen in the novel. It has a vast history in India. It has breathed from the very ancient time till today. Marriage, which is contemplated to be a sanctified alliance between two ripened and consenting individuals who are prepared to live with each other and to share responsibilities of marriage. Here in the novel, we can see how an innocent girl Ameeran at the age of nine engaged to her cousin. As she referred in the novel. "I was only nine when I was engaged to my father's Sister's Son: His parents were better off than us and owned a lot of land in Nawabganj"(Chapter-I p.24). Ameeran who was nine years old only was very happy that she was going to be married to a handsome and wealthy boy. She was so excited for her marriage that she became very pleased whenever she heard about her fiancé. She was proud of her fiancé. She proudly explains about him, "He was more handsome than the fiancé of my friend Kareeman, the carder's

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daughter. Kareeman's fiancé's face was covered with a thick bushy beard; mine had barely had grown a mustache. Hers went about in dirty dhoti and a green vest; mine was always well dressed..." (Chapter I p.24). At the tender age of nine, when actually she didn't know even how to manage herself, she was going to take the responsibility of another family. She didn't know what is marriage and its responsibility. For her, it was a dream to get married to a boy, having a good fortune and good looks. As she herself said in the novel, "I was happy. I couldn't believe anyone was luckier than I was. It seemed that all my dreams would soon be fulfilled." (Chapter I p.24)

Another very important issue which has been satirized in the novel is dowry system. It is one of the worst evils of our Indian society. It is a rampant tradition that is pervaded in all the sections of our society. Every efforts to remove it proved useless. It has been going freely in the society. Every class rich or poor, all are bound to give dowry for their daughter's marriage. As we see in the novel, Ameeran's parents were very much eager to marry her in a good family, having a good fortune. They fixed her marriage to their relative's son. They were very much busy for collecting money for her daughter's dowry. In the novel, Umrao Jan referring, "My father had brought everything for my dowry. He only needed a little more money for Rajab, the seventh month of the year. To make my dowry, my mother had her bracelets and necklace melted and refashioned with a little more silver added to them. She kept only a few of the cooking utensils for her household..." (Chapter-I p.24-25). Hadi Ruswa discernibly analyzed the biggest problem of our society. He has expressed the fear and helplessness of parents for dowry. He has explicated how parents whether rich or poor, all try to give all their possessions for their daughter's dowry so that their daughters can live happily in their in law's houses. As Umarao's mother said to her husband, "She may be your sister but she will also be our daughter's mother-in-law and you know how critical in law's are! If our daughter goes to her new home empty-handed, they will taunt us!" (Chapter I p.25). These lines can make us clear how important dowry was at that time also.

The major issue which Ruswa has dealt in this novel is the issue of prostitution and moral hypocrisy of patriarchal society. Prostitution was very much prevalent in nineteenth-century Lucknow. In *Umrao Jan Ada*, Ruswa has chosen Khanum Jan's Institution to highlight the several aspects of the social-cultural atmosphere of Lucknow. According to M. Asaduddin, "It was the microcosm of the larger society where customers from all classes of society intersected and become the vantage point from he could witness the vast decay." Khanum Jan's house was the center of prostitutes. Ameeran who later became Umrao Jan was sold to Khanum Jan by crude Dilawar Khan

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for one fifty rupees only. There were lots of girls who came from reputed family and abducted and sold by merciless men for few rupees. Innocent Ameeran who later became Umrao and Ram Dei, daughter of a Hindu trader, all these girls were living their life in quite peace and happiness but situations made them that they had no choice except to take the path of prostitution. Lucknow was famous for its courtesans. Elite class was also involved in this business. As in the novel, we can clearly see the moral hypocrisy of Nawabs. Nawabs and their sons were also involved with courtesans. All the courtesans in Khanum's house were involved with any Nawabs or men. Even old age Nawabs were also kept a courtesan for their services. As once Umrao Jan's services were engaged by Nawab Jafar Ali Khan, a venerable gentleman of seventy summers. Umrao said to the narrative about the hypocrisy of elite class, "You may well ask what object had a decrepit old man in engaging the services of courtesans?" That was a sort of thing done by the elite of those times and all aristocrats and men of wealth had a courtesan they could call their own." (Chapter-6 p.84). It was compulsory for the courtesans to keep a man for themselves. They help them to spend the time when there is no one. The patrons wanted the courtesans to fall in love with them. Courtesans' effect was too much in every class whether lower or upper. As Umrao said in the novel, "I am but a courtesan in whose profession love is a current coin. Whenever we want to ensnare anyone we pretend to fall in love with him...All these are parts of our game of love. However, stonehearted a man may be he falls in our wiles." (Chapter-7 p.101). In this way, we can see that prostitutes and prostitution were effectively spread in all over nineteenth-century Lucknow.

Conclusion

Hadi Ruswa has noticed such issues which are generally tried to conceal from our society as prostitution, the immorality of upper class, child marriage, dowry system etc. Moral hypocrisy of Elite class of nineteenth-century Lucknow has been shown in the novel very frankly. They were indulged with courtesans just because it was customary to hire a courtesan of their own. Through this novel, Ruswa is neither preaching us nor revolting against these evils, but he is simply satirizing all these social evils. It gives a detailed account of all the prevalent issues in nineteenth-century Lucknow. In this way, *Umrao Jan Ada* can be said a novel of social realism. It can also be said, "A mirror of nineteenth-century Lucknow"

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