

Re-imagining a Muslim Courtesan as a Virangana vis-a-vis Kenize Mourad's *In the City of Gold and Silver* (2013)

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Abstract: Life histories of historical figures are often complemented by fiction based on these lives. Such narratives form contributing strands to the idea of the Indian nation. A gendered figure whose life stories have been an integral part of identity politics is the Virangana. As a warrior woman personifying the nation, the figure of the Virangana is reiterated time after time to serve different political ideologies. Subaltern narratives have often been overlooked in the dominant construction of identities. Begum Hazrat Mahal, a contemporary of Lakshmibai and a significant part of the 1857 Revolt, finds meagre documentation.

The paper will attempt to excavate the historical narratives of the Begum from the marginalized archives, to study Kenize Mourad's novel *In the City of Gold and Silver* (2013). It will question the making of the nationalist narrative in which a Muslim courtesan has little place. It will interrogate the popular trope of the Virangana, and include an unconventional Muslim courtesan as a feminist symbol.

Keywords: Muslim courtesan, woman in politics, identity politics, re-imagining lives, Virangana.

The field of life writing is multidisciplinary, and it includes different kinds of narratives ranging from biography, autobiography, diaries, memoirs, case histories, letters, biographical and historical fiction. These narratives work not only as testimonies of individual lives, but also represent the historical background of the lives narrated. Biographical fiction, as a form of life writing, is fictionalized re-telling of historical figures. The lines between history and fiction are often blurred since both are pivoted on the narration of events and people involved in these. Also, since both history and fiction play a significant role in the making of the idea of the nation, they may undergo policing by hegemonic power structures. The idea of the Indian nation is thus constructed upon archives of narratives, comprising ones both sanctioned and, or marginalized by the hegemonic structure. One has to therefore understand the layered construction of the underpinning narratives in order to appreciate the meaning of the Indian nation.

Secondly, conforming to stereotypical ideas of nations, the Indian nation is seen in gendered terms. The figure of the Virangana is an example of one such construct. While the Virangana has been a part of the Indian cultural memory since ancient times, it gained renewed resonance during the anti-colonial national movement of 1857. Rani Lakshmibai, the historical Brahmin queen, is an iconic figure who has become an emblem of this Revolt, and can be considered as the most well-known Virangana.

Lives of many other female heroes, however, are not narrated as Virangana in the dominant discourse of the Indian nation. The Muslim courtesan is one such figure. This paper will focus on Begum Hazrat Mahal as a representative of the courtesan figure, and will consider her as the re-imagined trope of the Virangana. Through a discussion of Kenize Mourad's biographical novel *In the City of Gold and Silver* the paper will explore

the courtesan's involvement in the Revolt of 1857. It will also attempt to retrieve this courtesan's figure from contemporary obscurity. Hence, the paper attempts to reimagine the figure of the ideal Virangana through a process of relocating Hazrat Mahal in alternative and subaltern histories.

The first section of the paper is a general discussion on the socio-political constructs of gender and nation. The second section examines the Virangana as a signifier of the Indian nation while the third section looks at the social, cultural and political roles played by courtesans. The last focuses on Mourad's novel and views Hazrat Mahal as a reimaged Virangana in the broad context of anti-colonial nationalism.

Gender and Nation

Influenced by the rhetoric of tradition, nationalist narratives tend to picture the nation symbolically as a wife, a mother and a goddess. These constructs of nation and nationalism tend to be masculine, patriarchal and heterosexual. Subordinate groups like women are objectified and are likely to be victimized. Elleke Boehmer suggests that the patriarchal bourgeois family underpins the idea of the gendered nation. Most male theorists have defined the nation as a "male terrain, a masculine enterprise" (22-23; Julia Kristeva; Elisabeth List). Constructed as male typography, the nation is figuratively associated with female bodies. Women are associated with the "honour" of a nation's men. Thus, sexual violence is inflicted on women to defile the "honour" of the nation and this, in turn, gives rise to the need to control and regulate women's sexuality within the group. While the woman's body is conceived as a symbolic site to reproduce and sustain the myths of a nation, the same physical body is violated to defeat the "Other". Male leaders control Home/Nation, and women are expected to stay within the private sphere with little agency of their own. Nationalism thus emerges vis-à-vis a contest between the men of a nation over the control of "their" women. It is paradoxical that although the woman embodies the nation, in reality, the same hegemonic heterosexual, patriarchal structure treats her as a submissive and passive object (Menon 56, Mostov 90). Nira Yuval-Davis states how "the burden of representation" falls on the nation's women "as they are constructed as the symbolic bearers of the collectivity's identity and honour, both personally and collectively" (26, 45; Bagchi 65). Metaphors and myths that make up dominant nationalist narratives sustain the image of the pliant and commodified woman.

A favoured gendered allegory representing the Indian nation is the figure of the Virangana. This female figure has its cultural origin in the myths of warrior women and mother goddesses in Indian society. However, not all warrior women who existed in Indian history are equally famous as Viranganas. A few alternative narratives of female warrior figures from the marginal sections of the society are available in circulation. These narratives, challenging the dominant discourse, have gathered visibility in recent decades. The figure of the Virangana, is thus, a complex one with layers of ideas woven into it—nation and nationalism, myths and history, masculinity and femininity and, the Virangana's dominant and marginalized representations.

Twentieth-century nationalism saw the emergence of a new female Hindu deity, Bharatmata or Mother India. In continuation with the age-old pre-Aryan cult of mother goddesses as protectors of devotees, the Bharatmata cult also assimilates the idea of the earth as a goddess and symbolizes the nation as a mother goddess. Conceptually, though Bharatmata has no male consort, her protectors are her sons: the men of the nation. As products of the hegemonic Hindu patriarchal structure, the traditions and myths about the goddess are selectively used as part of the nation-building process, thus repressing several other non-dominant myths.

Viranganas as Signifiers of the Nation

The female warrior figures in Indian history are associated with the cult of Bharatmata and with the myths of goddesses of the broader Hindu tradition. These heroic female characters have been represented as dominant Hindu goddesses or the mother goddess in nationalist narratives since the late nineteenth and early twentieth century. Such heroic women came to be known as Viranganas. Etymologically, the term Virangana connotes a woman who displays qualities of *viryam* or heroism. Although this term is borrowed from the capacious repository of Hindu tropes and texts, it is used in the context of a warrior woman fighting for her nation. She is neither entirely a quintessential chaste wife nor is she the archetypal dangerous, all-powerful goddess. Sumathi Ramaswamy states that a Virangana is primarily a woman warrior described in patriarchal language as one possessing the qualities of *viryam* or male heroism (347). Hence, although a woman warrior at a particular point in history manifested her physical strength and power to fight for her nation, she is pushed under the masculine umbrella of male freedom fighters.

Kathryn Hansen lists the qualities which a Virangana is supposed to portray. She is a “valiant fighter,” peace-maker, one who “adopts male attire” and “the symbols of male status and authority” like sword-fighting and horse-riding. Most of all, she is dedicated to virtue, wisdom, and the defence of her people (26). During the anti-colonial nationalist movement, the image of the Virangana evoked nationalist sentiments amongst all Indians; it brought together different identities into one cohesive unit against the colonial power.

However, the idea of India as one nation represented by the figure of Virangana did not develop until the late nineteenth century. The Revolt of 1857 catalyzed the concept of the Indian nation as large sections of the Indian population fought against one common enemy, the British East India Company (EIC). The Indian women who fought in the Revolt were not addressed as Viranganas at this historical juncture. The term came into use later in the context of the development of Hindu nationalism. The term is now deployed to represent a woman in Indian history who offered either active or passive resistance against foreign dominion to safeguard her nation.

Not all historical female figures resisted the British government. All of them did not necessarily fight for the Indian nation. The several kingdoms to which they belonged, represented their idea of the nation. It was only during and after the Revolt, in the wake of the development of modern ideas of nation and nationalism that these historical female figures were seen as Viranganas. The patriarchal caste Hindu nationalist discourse started gaining strength from the later decades of the nineteenth century. It began to uphold the figure of the “new Indian woman” who would be an amalgamation of modernity and tradition. The figure of the warrior-mother as the Virangana was held up as the model in the making of the Indian nation. However, though reference to other women-warriors occurs in the history of the Revolt, they do not figure in the dominant nationalist narrative.

An example of such exclusion are the courtesans who fought actively in the Revolt. Not only is there meagre historical documentation, very few courtesans-turned-warriors find representation in fiction. Only Begum Hazrat Mahal of Awadh and Azizun Nisa Bai of Kanpur have fictional narratives based on their lives. Like their contemporary Rani Lakshmibai, these courtesans also fought in the same Revolt. However, perhaps owing to their social identity as “public” and sexually independent (Muslim) woman, the courtesan does not find a position in the caste Hindu nationalist discourse.

Courtesans in India

Courtesans have a long provenance in Indian culture and despite regional differences in nomenclature, a courtesan commonly signifies a woman who exercised sexual, artistic,

financial and political liberty, rendering her unconventional for society. Courtesans were, thus, “public” women, though not necessarily available for all (Singh, “Making Visible,” 100; Oldenburg). They, in fact, occupied a “respectable” social position in nineteenth-century Awadh.

During the years leading to the Revolt of 1857, the courtesan’s *kotha* became a space for political conspiracies. Historical evidence suggests that courtesans played a “covert” role in the Revolt, lending their establishments as hubs for the revolutionaries, and often financing the conspiracies plotted within them. Sanctions imposed on courtesans reveal that British officials were aware of their secret participation in the Revolt (Oldenburg 259, Singh “Courtesans and the Revolt,” 1678). As a result, the elite and “cultured” courtesans were cut off from their arts and reduced to doing sex work after the Revolt. With the decline of the rule of the Nawabs in Awadh, the unsuccessful Revolt of 1857 and the restrictions imposed by the victorious British, courtesan culture went into a terminal decline.

However, the courtesans’ access to the political happenings during the anti-colonial nationalist struggle in general, and the Revolt, in particular, is to be noted. It may be questioned if they had any political agency; however, stray references to their activity reveal not only covert involvement but also their active role as combat soldiers. Why then is their role in the Revolt not more visible?

Courtesans who survived the colonial government had to endure the bourgeois Hindu nationalist structure (Meena Tula; Teresa Hubel). The Anti-Nautch Act passed in 1947 banned temple dancing and dedication of devadasis. Thereafter, performing women came to be viewed as prostitutes (Srinivasan 1869, 1873; Singh, “Retrieving Voices,” 95; Hubel 218) and the courtesan was excised from the hegemonic discourse. Moreover, popular representations of the historical courtesan became increasingly skewed, thus reducing an otherwise strong, independent, flesh-and-blood woman to a negative archetype.

After India’s independence, Hazrat Mahal, like other Muslim courtesans was also excluded from nationalist and historical narratives by the dominant upper-caste Hindu nationalists. Unlike Rani Lakshmi Bai, Hazrat Mahal finds meagre representation in popular historical and fictional narratives; her identity as a courtesan is the antithesis to patriarchal notions of the virtuous woman.

Begum Hazrat Mahal: A Brief Historical Account

British historical narratives on the Revolt in Awadh discuss Nawab Wajid Ali Shah with marginal reference to Hazrat Mahal. Ira Mukhoty discusses Mahal to a little extent in her recent book *Heroines: Powerful Indian Women of Myths & History*. However, despite the promising title, Mukhoty offers a more detailed description of Nawab Wajid Ali Shah and his patronage of the courtesan culture in nineteenth-century Lucknow. Mukhoty states:

Muhammadi Khanum [as Hazrat Mahal was originally known] was born to a slave of African origin called Umber, who was owned by a certain Ghulam Ali Khan. Her mother was Maher Afza, Umber’s mistress. At some stage of her adolescence she was sold by her parents to a courtesan. (152)

Nawab Wajid Ali Shah had an “institution of the *pari*, or fairy”. He “acquired a large harem of singers and dancers by using a Shi’a variant of Islamic marriage called *mu’tah* (sic) wherein a temporary contract could be drawn up between a man and a woman for a specific amount of time in exchange for gifts or money.” These women included “female palanquin bearers, courtesans, domestic servants, and women who came in and out of the palace.” He married four “women of high birth and important political connections through traditional *nikah*” especially during his father’s lifetime. If any woman from his later *mut’ah* wives, who belonged to the lower strata of society, gave birth to the king’s children, they “were given the title ‘mahals’ and were allowed to live in *purdah*” (Mukhoty 156–57).

When Muhammadi Khanum was bought as a courtesan for the Nawab's courts, she was renamed Mahak Pari. Due to her intelligence and poetic talents, the Nawab's interest in her increased. In an autobiography titled, *Pari Khana*, Wajid Ali Shah notes that he married Mahak Pari according to the *mut'ah* marriage laws, and in due course of time she gave birth to Birjis Qadr. The Nawab notes the birth of his son with great joy (96).

Rosie Llewellyn-Jones, in her book *The Last King in Awadh, 1822-1887*, states, "If [the *mut'ah* wife] became pregnant during the marriage, the child was considered to have been fathered by the husband and was therefore legitimate" (143). Such *mut'ah* wives were "given the title 'mahals' and were allowed to live in purdah" (Mukhoty 157). Similarly, Mahak Pari was also permitted to live in purdah and Birjis Qadr was considered a legitimate offspring of the Nawab. In 1850, the Nawab divorced six of his wives, including Begum Hazrat Mahal. It is believed that Janab-i Alliyah, the Nawab's mother had ordered this move (Llewellyn-Jones 13, 144).

Hazrat Mahal, better known as Iftikhar-un-nissa at the time of her divorce, "retired quietly to a house in Lucknow along with Birjis Qadr, living on the pension provided to her by her ex-husband." After Lord Dalhousie's proclamation to annex Awadh, Wajid Ali Shah retired to Calcutta with three of his wives, leaving the others in Lucknow. Though British history sees the Nawab as a debauch, Indian historical records suggest that the exiled Wajid Ali Shah "was deeply mourned by his people" (Mukhoty 158-59).

The fire of the impending Revolt was kindling under the surface, and Awadh was in want of a new king. Wajid Ali Shah's eldest son, Noshewan Qadr, was deaf and dumb and hence, not considered fit for the crown. Eventually, Hazrat Mahal's twelve-year-old son Birjis Qadr was crowned the King of Awadh in July 1857 in Kaiserbagh Palace, as a result of which she became the queen regent (Llewellyn-Jones 14, 25, 159).

Historical accounts such as these scarcely describe the Begum's journey from obscurity and squalor to becoming the queen regent of Lucknow (Mukhoty 152). Moreover, after recapturing Awadh, "all the papers and documents found" except Wajid Ali Shah's autobiography, were destroyed by colonial troops. As Mukhoty suggests, "all that remains are the accounts of witnesses recorded during the trials that followed the recapture of Lucknow and the proclamations issued by Hazrat Mahal" (172). Thus, there are barely any historical narratives dedicated to Hazrat Mahal. Kenize Mourad's novel *In the City of Gold and Silver* (2013) is perhaps the only fictional narrative on the Begum. As for cinematic representations, filmmaker Mohi-ud-Din Mirza's "Begum Hazrat Mahal: The Last Queen of Awadh" (2011) is the only documentary depicting the queen's life.

Kenize Mourad's *In the City of Gold and Silver* (2013)

Published in 2013, Kenize Mourad's novel *In the City of Gold and Silver* depicts a fictionalized account of the nineteenth-century historical courtesan and queen of Lucknow, Begum Hazrat Mahal. The novel traces the humble origins of Begum Hazrat Mahal in an ordinary household and her upward movement to the courtesan's salon, and finally to the court of the nineteenth-century Nawab of Lucknow, Wajid Ali Shah. The novel also depicts the Begum's involvement in the Revolt of 1857, her romantic and sexual relationships, her role as the queen regent of Lucknow and her escape to Nepal, from where she continued her anti-colonial nationalist fight.

(I) Mourad's novel does not devote much space to Hazrat Mahal's childhood and life as a courtesan, in order perhaps to emphasize the Begum's role in the Revolt. Begum Hazrat Mahal, as the novel narrates, is born as Muhammadi "into a family of small artisans from Faizabad, the ancient capital of the kingdom of Awadh." She is twelve years old when her mother dies, leaving her with her father, Mian Amber. After the death of her father, who is "the only person who loved and protected her," the young girl is orphaned. She is taken

in by her uncle who has a garment shop. In a turn of events, Muhammadi is discovered by a eunuch, who sends two courtesans to take the girl away to their salon (26-9). Thus, Muhammadi is sold and “pushed” into the *kotha* by women: her aunt and the two courtesans, suggesting the use of force in recruiting girls as courtesans, and the limited agency of the women who ran such businesses in the patriarchal world.

Aligned with historical records, Mourad’s novel portrays how Muhammadi is renamed Hazrat Mahal in the Nawab’s palace. She gains recognition not only for her exquisite beauty but also for her skills in poetry and satire. However, Mourad pictures Hazrat Mahal in a unique light. Hazrat Mahal is described as an atypical courtesan, who “prefers to spend her time alone, reading or composing poems, rather than participating in games and chatter she considers childish” (Mourad 34, 79). Mourad’s intention is to represent Hazrat Mahal as an unconventional woman of her times, and therefore she presents other courtesans as unintelligent and untrained in the arts. Oldenburg’s research suggests that courtesans in nineteenth-century Lucknow were educated and skilled in all forms of art like poetry, languages, music and dance. Mourad’s portrayal of Hazrat Mahal tends to see all other courtesans in derogatory terms, thus presenting a patriarchal view of the institution.

Mourad presents the Nawab as somewhat less manly for harboring “feminine” interests in poetry, music and dance rather than “masculine” warfare and politics. As the patriarchal head of the court and the kingdom, he indulges in revelry and sexual pleasure involving the commodification of women. The novel depicts the Nawab’s male chauvinism and lack of concern towards the women he once “enjoyed.” Hazrat Mahal notes this lapse, although other courtesans only consider the absent husband and king to be their sole guardian (Mourad 94). Thus, the novel depicts Hazrat Mahal as a self-aware woman who recognizes and resists the patriarchal order in which she is positioned.

(II) Mourad’s novel portrays the *zenana* as an alternate space for the Begums. The Begums, though secluded, are politically aware and receive information of the political goings-on in the public sphere. They exult in the idea that the British Raj be uprooted by the impending Revolt. They “spend the whole afternoon in discussion, drawing up the most absurd [political] plans” (Mourad 151, 170-71). The novel suggests a life full of intrigue within *purdah*. The *zenana* restricts women from the public sphere; however it does not preclude their political interest in matters of the state. Despite their political awareness, however, the novel tends to dismiss the other Begums’ participation in political discussion as “absurd.” Thus, the ideological position of Mourad’s novel is entangled in a web of contradictions. Other women characters exhibiting political understanding and individual voice are depicted as unimportant for their lack of appropriate knowledge of the matters of the state. Mourad seems to be exceptionally partial to her protagonist.

The novelist presents Hazrat Mahal as involved and knowledgeable in political matters. She uses her “burqa” as a tool that facilitates her mobility within the inner and outer world; the burqa helps her venture into the public world to gauge political events and mood (Mourad 153). However, Mourad’s novel also shows how Hazrat Mahal “[heaves] a sigh of relief” when she returns from such visits to the markets and takes off her burqa. It perhaps implies that she does not usually like being veiled but only employs it as a tool to access mobility in the outer world. While Mourad clearly understands that the *purdah* is a patriarchal invention to police female sexuality, her protagonist Hazrat Mahal cleverly appropriates this patriarchal instrument in order to hone her own political sensibility. A reader may well question Mourad’s representation. It can be argued that Hazrat Mahal’s choice to be in *purdah* in the outside world may also indicate her indoctrination in the patriarchal society of which she is an inalienable part. Hazrat Mahal’s choice to be in *purdah* reminds readers of the contemporary debate on the issue.

Through Hazrat Mahal’s character, Mourad’s novel sketches a figure similar to Rani Lakshmbai. Unlike the latter however, Hazrat Mahal’s choice to participate in the Revolt

is not forced upon her. Mourad's novel portrays an unrelenting warrior woman fighting against the British, but it suggests that it is her male lover and guardian, Raja Jai Laal, who is the source of inspiration (403). Thus, Mourad presents a rather problematic view that a male consort, and his patriarchal espousal give birth to a woman warrior.

In the novel very few people appreciate Hazrat Mahal's political sensibility. However, Mourad shows that her privileged position as the queen mother offers her the opportunity to articulate her political opinions. She vehemently oppose religious chauvinism and patriarchal impositions (Mourad 157, 205, 309). There are not too many Indian historical records that point to the activity of Mughal women outside the *zenana*. European historical records comprising the accounts of British officials and the few white women who were permitted to visit the *zenana*, reveal the administrative, political and business affairs of the Mughal begums. These records suggest that begums, especially in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, were powerful, wealthy and capable women in commerce and trade.

Aparna Kapadia discusses the capabilities of begums and queen mothers who were powerful businesswomen and able politicians. However, such powerful women were also constrained within patriarchal boundaries. Confined to the *zenana*, on rare occasions when interaction with the outer world was necessary, they would be in *purdah*. Thus, their involvement in administration, politics, trade or commerce was restricted. They relied on male servants, agents and middlemen, which hindered their progress. However, contrary to popular representation, the begums of the Mughal period were accomplished businesswomen and political enablers ("We Know All About Warrior Queens...").

There is a degree of ambivalence in the portrayal of Hazrat Mahal in the novel. A loyal wife who tries to justify her husband's detachment from the ongoing political upheaval Lucknow, Hazrat Mahal is yet resentful that the sovereign is a British captive, least interested in his kingdom and the well-being of his people (Mourad 168). Her powerful political voice is on display during her son's coronation ceremony. Raja Jai Laal addresses the audience on behalf of the minor and the queen regent, as convention dictates that women do not speak in public. However, Hazrat Mahal steps forward and addresses her people, promising to serve them and exhorting them to offer their commitment in the name of their Nawab. Jai Laal, who is initially "surprised by this unceremonious intervention," is later "stunned" (207-08). However, the male *talugdars* present are outraged (Mourad 208). Thus, a woman's active role in politics is frowned upon and probably considered threatening to the hegemonic social structure since it poses a threat to the patriarchal structure of society. Secondly, as a courtesan with a hypersexual identity, her competence in administrative matters is also easier to dismiss.

However, the response of the Lucknawi women to Begum Hazrat Mahal's new political position is quite striking. Perhaps intending to draw attention to the possibility of female solidarity, the novelist has these lines: "hidden behind the *jalis*, the women [who nevertheless] praise the young boy's qualities [but they also] ...marvel that for the first time in Lucknow, power is in the hands of a woman" (Mourad 210).

The novelist paints an elaborate image of Hazrat Mahal's first day as the queen regent at the court, providing a graphic description of how she adorns herself, and the confidence with which she projects her heroic leadership. Is this overt expression of sexuality aimed to exact obedience and awe from the male-dominant court? Can Hazrat Mahal be seen as a Virangana? We must note that she has political, administrative as well as sexual independence.

Hazrat Mahal quickly proves herself as an efficient administrator and "a remarkable organiser" (Mourad 218). She focuses on the financial matters of the state in times of conflict. She negotiates with bankers, and to meet the shortage of funds, she "decides to have her jewellery and all her gold and silver ornaments melted down", convincing the other reluctant begums to follow suit. As a result of her proficient budgeting abilities, she

can “secretly set aside a small war chest to finance her diplomatic actions” (Mourad 318). The novel presents a Virangana who is more accomplished in administrative and financial affairs than in actual warfare and combat fighting; her achievements thus redefine the conventional trope of the warrior woman.

However, she senses the omnipresent scrutiny to which she is subject. The patriarchal society enveloping her expects a courtesan who has “come from nowhere” to fail, so that she may be brought back under the clutches of the normative social structure (Mourad 220–21). The Begum’s limited freedom to express her voice and sexuality is probably only permitted to her as a lower class and a “fallen woman.” Positioned as she is in royal surroundings, her ancestry entirely crosses out her individual competence.

Through a solitary incident on the battlefield, the novel portrays Hazrat Mahal in combat during the Revolt in Lucknow. Raja Jai Laal reprimands her for joining the armed forces. The queen mother’s political status symbolizes stability and security in the kingdom. She is a mother not only to the king but to the entire kingdom. The position of the queen mother restricts her individuality. Jai Laal’s rebuke infuriates her for its patronizing attitude. She asserts that her presence on the battlefield as the queen mother will encourage the sepoys, who “captivated by this fragile woman’s bravery, fight with increased courage and daring” (Mourad 286). Thus, Hazrat Mahal’s presence on the battlefield is limited to her inspiring presence as the Mother Nation exhorting the sons to martyr themselves for her.

Mourad’s novel portrays Hazrat Mahal as a rational and pragmatic woman. She does not underestimate their weakened situation when the British lay siege to the palace. The British troops enter the Chattar Manzil Palace, ordering the women to evacuate and move to the south wing of Kaisarbagh. Unlike a few other women who refuse to leave, Hazrat Mahal recognizes that bravado and de-contextualized loyalty will not save the situation. Nor is she given to believing in prophecies and miracles (Mourad 96, 107). Thus, Hazrat Mahal, who later becomes an integral part of the 1857 Revolt, is depicted neither as an impractical chauvinist nor as a religious fanatic.

However, the novel does highlight her patriotism in crucial instances. After Wajid Ali Shah surrenders on Awadh’s annexation, Hazrat Mahal readily accepts the position of the regent and shoulders the responsibility of regaining Awadh from the clutches of the colonizers (Mourad 201–203). This independent choice of the Begum’s is, however, not historically documented. Mourad chooses to establish the Begum as a strong and independent patriot. The novel also shows the queen regent playing an active role in the unfolding of the Revolt by being in continuous contact with the rebels.

During one such meeting, she is advised by the sepoys to wait for the Revolt to gain strength. It is noteworthy that the active agents of the Revolt are men who seem to patronize her. Nevertheless, she refuses to be a passive nationalist waiting for men to initiate action. She claims,

We, women spend our whole lives waiting, until...we have nothing left to wait for. But this time it is different, do you not see that? (Mourad 118)

Hazrat Mahal does not acquiesce in the advice to be the quintessential passive woman. When the “good woman” usually waits or is expected to wait (to act), she is rendered passive and inferior in the patriarchal power structure. Hazrat Mahal is asked to wait till the male leaders of the impending Revolt take action. However, she flouts the normative and decides that she will not wait; she plans to take matters into her own hands and fight the British. Thus, Mourad, in certain aspects, manages to sketch a strong female figure in the novel.

Apart from the single incident of Hazrat Mahal portrayed on the battlefield, the novel also mentions other women playing minor roles in the battle: they “hurl[ed] volleys of bricks and stones from the terraces [on the British troops]” (Mourad 288). Thus, women’s

active participation on the battlefield is acknowledged and highlighted in the novel. The novel mentions the historical statement published by the “London Times”: “The Begum of Awadh shows greater strategic sense and courage than all her generals put together” (416), which is a testimony of the British acknowledgement and appreciation of Hazrat Mahal’s diplomatic leadership.

(III) Hazrat Mahal, as described in the novel, is not only an able political leader but she is also a compassionate ruler. She expresses her loyalty towards the people of Lucknow before the onset of the Revolt (Mourad 122). She expresses her outrage at the tragic Bibighar incident in Kanpur when several innocent British women and children were massacred by Indian sepoy. The novel also shows her as a progressive woman who is tolerant towards all religions (Mourad 243–45, 254, 272). However, her kindness and humanity seem to result from her maternal aspect; she has “motherly” feelings for her son and her people. This aspect of her personality also surfaces in moments when she is expected to be a ruthless authoritarian; Mourad shows that such duties disturb her emotionally.

On one occasion, circumstances lead to the pronouncement of capital punishment. Unlike customary practice, which does not allow women to witness criminals hanged to death, Hazrat Mahal looks at the accused “with her penetrating gaze” and orders the punishment to be carried out. She wishes to set an example of the consequences of betraying the kingdom, and her authoritarian diktat shows that the “crowd’s cheers drown the victim’s cries” when they witness “justice [having] served” (Mourad 258).

The novel attempts to establish her as “a true sovereign” (Mourad 258) but, it also portrays the impact of the incident on the Begum’s state of mind. She repents her decision, considering herself to be cold-blooded, and wonders if she has turned into an inhuman ruler (Mourad 259). Does her self-incrimination weaken the authoritarian figure who is feared by all, which the novel probably intends to portray? The question arises, can a woman holding significant political power not be shrewd and stern? A female political leader who is compelled to take political decisions based on the state’s interests, perhaps emerges as “unwomanly” and may be considered a “dangerous woman” in society. Hence, Hazrat Mahal’s repentance is necessary for her to fit in the conventional trope of the Virangana as a brave warrior but a doting mother.

(IV) Hazrat Mahal does not succumb to the British Raj nor does she yield to its ally, Jung Bahadur the king of Nepal. Mourad portrays her as the lone survivor of the Revolt. Pragmatic as always, Hazrat Mahal manages to escape to Nepal from the clutches of the Company. In exile with her son and friend Mumtaz, she secretly tries to sustain the spirit of nationalism amongst her people. There are several occasions when Jung Bahadur forces her to reveal her secret activity (Mourad 424). She only responds in silence, thus resisting colonial power. Mourad’s novel portrays Hazrat Mahal’s resilience against the British Raj, which may not necessarily translate to heroism on the battlefield. However, this steely resolve does establish her as an alternative Virangana.

(V) Hazrat Mahal’s bold expression of her sexuality does not conform to the image of an ideal aristocratic Nawab’s wife. The novel probably justifies her sexuality that ties in with her origins as a courtesan. During her first private meeting with Jai Laal, she shows “none of the shyness and simpering airs common to the palace women” (Mourad 173). Hazrat Mahal is aware of her beauty and its effect on the men around her. She uses her body and sexuality as a tool to appropriate her political standpoint. For a woman who is usually in purdah in public, she “allow[s] her veil to slip, revealing an aquiline nose and a determined chin that contrasts with her voluptuous lips,” which the Raja notices (Mourad 175). Hazrat Mahal seductively enlists the male gaze to strengthen her administrative position. Once his attention is gained, however, she resists his patronizing attitude (Mourad 175).

The novel also depicts how Hazrat Mahal develops romantic feelings towards the Raja (233). She realizes her feelings for Wajid Ali Shah are initially “an admiration for a sovereign

wreathed in glory”; later, they develop to “tenderness tinged with pity for a kind and loyal being” (Mourad 330). Her feelings for Jai Laal, however, are more amorous. Their liaison is consummated in a *kotha* in the city, an alternate space that permits Hazrat Mahal to flout the normative structure. The novel describes their erotic encounter in the *kotha*, dwelling on her sensual response. In Jai Laal’s embrace, “for the first time in her life, she is no longer in control of her feelings” (Mourad 331). It is debatable whether the novel tries to portray a sexually expressive woman or wishes to show her loss of individuality under male guardianship. Hazrat Mahal’s affair with Jai Laal is fictitious. Did the novelist feel the necessity of showing a romantic side to her otherwise strong and independent protagonist? It can be argued that the affair may be a way of depicting the Begum’s sexuality. However, the fact that this amorous incident takes place in an alternate space, that does not interfere with her position as the regent appears to undercut authorial intent to add to the Begum’s unconventionality. Moreover, the Begum’s readiness to shoulder her responsibilities towards her son and the kingdom confine her within the patriarchal structure. Hazrat Mahal is held back from pursuing a conjugal life with Jai Laal. Secondly, her relationship with Jai Laal makes her more dependent on him, validating a woman’s need for a man’s patronage and security. Thus, Mourad’s portrayal of a fictitious amorous relationship between Hazrat Mahal and Jai Laal does not contribute greatly to her depiction as a powerful feminist figure.

Mukhoty notes that Hazrat Mahal was divorced by the Nawab in 1850 “probably at the indignation of the queen mother who abhorred the low-born among the king’s wives.” Consequently, she “retired quietly to a house in Lucknow along with Birjis Qadr [before the prince was crowned as the Nawab after Awadh’s annexation], living on the pension provided by her husband” (158). Mourad’s novel, however, does not mention Hazrat Mahal’s divorce. A divorced Muslim courtesan rising to the political position of the queen regent makes her a strong, progressive woman in a patriarchal colonial society. The novel’s omission of this significant detail is telling of Mourad’s preference to paint Hazrat Mahal more conventionally in the context of the Revolt.

(VII) Mourad’s novel portrays how a woman who does not engage in conventional gender roles is considered to have failed in being a “good wife” and a “good mother.” The novel, however, does not question these assumptions; it simply represents them. The novel shows Hazrat Mahal’s friend, Mumtaz, to be emotionally closer to Birjis Qadar than his mother. Mumtaz observes that “the queen mother is far too busy” in political and administrative affairs. Mumtaz also questions Hazrat Mahal’s lack of maternal feelings (Mourad 405). Although the novel does not draw any definite conclusions concerning Hazrat Mahal’s incapacity to be a “good woman of patriarchy,” it perhaps subtly endorses the perceptions to which a woman flouting the hegemonic structure is subject.

Conclusion

The biographical fiction explored in this paper throws light on the life of a historical courtesan who took part in the Revolt of 1857 and was erased from the hegemonic discourse. An analysis of Mourad’s representation of Hazrat Mahal, who is otherwise marginalized in dominant history, suggests how available historical records can transform into fictionalized narratives. The novel attempts to relocate courtesans in the political and historical trajectory of the nation. Apart from their military role in the Revolt, their negotiation with routine centres of power is also incredibly significant in understanding the lives of courtesans. The agency which the conventional “fallen women” exercised in their lifestyle, their profession, politics and their passion is explored in the paper. The ideal trope of the warrior-mother Virangana may thus be debunked. This paper has attempted an examination of a courtesan who may not have necessarily engaged in actual

warfare. It takes note of her resistance in other significant domains and suggests she can be considered as a Virangana from a postcolonial and feminist perspective.

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