



## UMRAO JAAN – THE TWO ROLES

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### ABSTRACT

What sets apart the two films and the writings of Mirza Muhammad Hadi Ruswa is the role of the protagonist depicted by Rekha and Aishwariya Rai both Hindus and both getting to the soul for the Muslim ethos with elan. No doubt Indian cinema has been a strong integrating element finding the Ganga-Jamuna duality of the subcontinent and it has deep roots in the culture of north India, in particular the new public culture that emerged in the nineteenth century, itself in part a product of many changes in Indian culture that began as part of the colonial encounter and other social shifts of the time.

No doubt the novel 'Umrao Jaan Ada' which recounts the life story of Courtesan of 19<sup>th</sup> century Lucknow is one of the best loved works of early Urdu fiction. The backbone of Urdu culture through it is rarely remembered now that the majority urban population of north India before partition was Muslim. It was spread across the whole social spectrum from royalty and aristocracy, a landowning class as well as the beginnings of an educated middle class, a petty bourgeoisie and

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to lower classes. Bombay, as a presidency city had its own peculiar demography, with a very diverse population.

The new visual regime which evolved in late nineteenth century Indian public culture was a new visual field, where an interlocular was established between forms such as chromolithography, theatre and so on. Interestingly although there is no historical study of Islamicate chromolithographs. There are many images which are kept in Muslim homes, mostly images of Mecca and calligraphy of verses from the Quran. Although the production of images was anathema to orthodox Muslim culture, India has a long tradition of the production of images among Muslims, most famously in Mughal miniatures and illustrated books. Although Muslim painters had abounded in the courts where they painted human images, the human image is mostly absent in the production of chromolithographs, which were perhaps too closely associated with images of gods.

It was only with the coming of sound that is to say post-1931 that larger numbers of Muslims entered the industry. The perception that the industry has a disproportionate number of Muslim stars, producers, directors, stunts, in fact at all levels, is only true of the Indian cinema after this point. Even with the coming of sound the big studios of Bombay Talkies, Prabhat, and New Theatres, had few Muslims in the production side but included significant persons such as Sheikh at Prabhat.

Here it would be relevant how clothes play a role in designing the professions too. In the Muslim social and other films, Muslim men often wear unremarkable clothes such as western style outfits or kurta-pajamas, but may be shown wearing clothing that marks them as Muslims. Some Muslim men like Hindu holy men, intellectuals, baddies, Sikhs, wear beards and they may wear small Muslim caps as one of the friends in Salim 'langde pe mat ro' who wears a cap and a kurta while other Muslims wear western clothes.

Muslim women's clothing is somewhat more realistic as they are shown wearing Muslim garments such as the salwar kameez or Punjabi suit, originally a Muslim dress which became popular in north-west India and has also become a national and even international dress. In some films, Muslim women wear the sherara usually now for weddings though for everyday in older films. While many Hindu women veil themselves in the presence of older men, by covering their heads and sometimes their faces, the veil is largely associated with Islam. This is also true in the films, and it plays important roles in some genres, such as the Muslim social and in the courtesan films. In the Muslim social, the hero catches a glimpse of the heroine, but her veil often leads to a tragedy

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of mistaken identity in films such as Chaudhvin ka chand (1960, dir, M.Sadiq).

In some films, Islamic culture is in a woman who lives outside respectable society. However exotic and desirable this woman makes her living as a prostitute and represents a socially unacceptable sexual but non reproductive femineity like the beloved of the Ghazal.

This behavior marginalizes her, positioning her outside the domain of the modern female citizen by creating a powerful image of a decadent femineity, very different from the active sexuality of the Hindu woman with in the bounds of marriage and the family explored by the Hindu film. This marginality is enforced by these films, which locate Muslims in the past, albeit a glamorous and exotic past, meaning that their presence in the modern world is anachronistic, for they are archaic, outmoded and nonmodern, even if they are exotic and beguiling.

This pleasure is alarming in that this dominant form of Indian public culture continues to position the Muslim.

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