

Article

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***Heeramandi*, Women and Culture of Protest in India***Heeramandi*

Sanjay Leela Bhansali's Latest web series, *Heeramandi* (2024), based on the novel of Moin Beg, a Pakistani writer inspired by the courtesan women's participation in the national struggle, got immense popularity. Sanjay Leela Bhansali's earlier productions *Devdas* (2002), *Sawariya* (2005), and *Gangubai Kathiyabadi* (2022) also reflected on the role of the courtesan as a sacrificing and thoughtful woman. *Heeramandi* comes closer to *Gangubai Kathiyawadi*. In *Gangubai Kathiyawadi*, he explored the genre of biography and documented the struggle of Gangubai to recognise the labour rights and fundamental civil rights of sex workers. This film, too, incorporates the struggle of Gangubai to save Kamathipura from encroachment from Bombay's capitalist forces. Gangubai meets the Prime minister to save Kamathipura and save thousands of sex workers from the fear of homelessness. In *Heeramandi*, Bhansali incorporates the struggle of the courtesans of Heeramandi to save Heeramandi

from the Britishers. The only difference is that he weaved this struggle with the Indian nationalist movement here. Heeramandi was a place in Lahore known for its courtesans, famous as connoisseurs of art, dance, and culture.

In the series, he explored the world of courtesan against the backdrop of the Indian nationalist movement. In the end, he produced a counter-history of the Indian nationalist movement in which he kept triply disadvantaged courtesan Muslim women who faced discrimination of gender, sexuality, and community. The web series historicises the courtesan's rebellion against colonial attacks on both national freedom and Heeramandi's freedom. This paper will explore this attempt at historicising the courtesan's role in the struggle for nationalism as an attempt to write history from the perspective of other/women. *Heeramandi* as a genre lies somewhere between Muslim historical and courtesan cinema. The show's director claims it is a

period drama and places it in the middle of historical cinema and social drama. Still, as this historical drama writes the history of a nation through its courtesan women, we can call it a courtesan historical. This exploration of politics in this historiography aims at writing a narrative of the belonging of the other (courtesan women) to the Indian subcontinent. This paper starts with a critical inquiry into the representation of the Tawaifs in Hindi cinema with special reference to *Heeramandi*. The paper then tries to explain and understand the deviation from the real representation of *Tawaifs* and larger politics of this deviation from the perspective of contemporary politics.

Indian state's legal intervention, like the Citizenship Amendments Act 2019 and National Registers of Citizens in the year 2019, aims at delegitimisation of Muslim immigrants as citizens, as Mukul Kesawan suggests, invites massive protests by Muslim women accompanied by intercommunity and intergenerational women in different parts of India began on 15 December 2019 to 24 March 2020. Against the backdrop of this protest, this paper suggests that the portrayal of courtesan women's non-violent and violent protest against the atrocious colonial state and the police force is an attempt to historicise the counterhegemonic practices of the contemporary.

### **Courtesan historical *Heeramandi*, 2024, ruptures as protest:**

In an interview with Bharadwaj Rangan, Sanjay Leela Bhansali argues that he was inspired by *Mughal-E-Azam* (1960), *Pakizaah* (1972), and *Umrao Jaan* (1981, 2006) while he made this web series. He argues that he got fascinated with the power of these women, who had been captivated by their circumstances, desiring freedom yet refusing to see themselves as subjects of pity and sympathy. From silent classics like *Shiraj* (1920) to iconic films like *Anarkali* (1953), *Mughal-E-Azam* (1960), *Mahboob ki Mehendi* (1971), *Pakizaah* (1972), *Umrao Jaan* (1981), *Tawaif* (1985), and *Umrao Jaan* (2006), there are numerous examples of movies that intertwine the themes of love and rebellion, around

the character of courtesans. *Tawaifs*, courtesans and nautch girls may have faded from India's social and cultural history, but they remain vivid in Hindi cinema. Whether in Muslim historical or social dramas or mainstream hits like *Mukkadar ka Sikandar* (1978) and *Jeet* (1996). The courtesans have been integral to the narrative since the industry's inception. These films played a significant role in humanising and dehumanising *Tawaifs*, portraying them as ordinary women who entered the profession due to tragic circumstances or betrayals. Simultaneously, they depicted them as guardians of Indian classical dance and music traditions. Nearly all of these films celebrated these courtesans' beauty, sensuality, manners, and musical talents. While they often danced and sang for the Nawabs, who provided them protection and financial support, their loyalty was frequently contingent on their beauty and the whims of these Nawabs.



*Umrao Jaan*

Art forms not only reflect but also produce realities. Hindi cinema has been instrumental in exploring the possibilities and dreams of true love for these courtesan women. Through the theme of love, Hindi cinema consistently explored the courageous pursuit of genuine affection by courtesans. The themes of love and rebellion allowed Hindi cinema to highlight the harshness, cruelty, and dualism of patriarchy, which contributed to the exploitation of courtesans. While films like *Mughal-E-Azam*, *Anarkali*, and *Umrao Jaan* concluded on a sombre and despairing note despite their rebellious spirit, movies like *Mahboob ki Mehendi*, *Pakizaah*, and *Tawaif* offer narratives of hope and integration for these courtesans into mainstream society. They

present the possibility of breaking the shackles of patriarchy and finding true love. Although the mainstreaming of courtesan women through marriage is either counterhegemonic or delineating the narrative of hegemony in a different word, it is a matter of analysis.

Ira Bhashkar and Richard Allen (Bhaskar and Allen, 2009, p.8) argue that Muslim Historical, Courtesan films, and Muslim socials are three dominant genres that delineate Bombay cinema's Islamicate culture and ethos through its various forms and idioms. As Mukul Kesewan (Kesavan, 1994, p.251) suggests, Urdu, Awadh and Tawaif have become the forms and idioms of this Islamic culture. He coined the term Islamicate inspired by Michal Hodgson's use of Italianate, which is not typically associated with Italy but is linked with Italian style and manner. So, Islamicate here refers to the social and cultural complex historically associated with Islam and Muslims, both among Muslims and even when found in non-Muslims. He argued that Urdu was used as a legacy of the Islamic empire. Mughalai Khana, decadent Hawelies, Nawabi Ayyashi and a stereotype of cultivated leisure have become synonyms for Awadh or Lucknow. Unlike the symbolic representation of Lakhnavi culture, these worked as a metaphor for rentier decadence in Hindi cinema, irrespective of its connection with Muslims. Third in this series are Muslim women represented as vamps in most Hindi cinema in the form of *Tawaif*. Unlike prostitutes, *Tawaifs* are women of art, culture and tradition who used to fulfil the needs of cultivated men and provide social education to the sons of Nawabs. Nawab used to learn music, dance, etiquette and conversation in the company of *Tawaifs*. They were the symbols of *Najakat* and *Tahzeeb*. Even the erotic dance of *Tawaifs* called *Mujra* was not an erotic performance but a choreographed ritual of salutation. Mukul Kesewan (Keswan, 2018, p.254) argues that Hindi Cinema gave a different dimension to the figure of Courtesans. In Hindi cinema, the figure of Tawaifs has been internalised as a 'vamp' or the other of the virtuous married women. She has been depicted as a symbol of assertive sexuality, lust, and voyeurism. Keswan argues that even the item number culture in Hindi cinema is an extension of

Islamic ethos. He establishes that Muslim women are represented as Tawaifs in most Hindi films. The figure of *Tawaifs* has always been represented in extremes.

*Heeramandi: The Diamond Bazar, 2024*, is a period drama web series by Sanjay Leela Bhansali. It uses all three idioms to recreate the Islamic ethos in a web series with certain differences. Representing the Islamic cultural ethos could be considered an act of defiance or courage in contemporary times. He replaces Awadh with Lahore and reflects upon the biggest courtesan area of Lahore, known as Heeramandi.



*Mughal-e-Azam*

What makes Sanjay Leela Bhansali's *Heeramandi* common to all these films is its attempt at amalgamation of grandeur, splendour and tragedy as an essential part of the life of courtesan women. Departing from the settings of Lucknow, Bhansali relocates his narrative to Lahore, thus introducing a distinctive element. Ira Bhashkar and Richard Allen argue that all three genres discussed before helped mobilise the monumental forms of Indo-Islamic architecture of these spaces not only to create grandeur and splendour but also to create these imaginary spaces historically and geographically. They argued that these films incorporated both Agra and Delhi as the grand and late phase of the Mughal Era. The city of Lahore was absent from the cinematic imagination of these films. They further argued that in Post-Independence Mughal Historicals on the subject, such as *Anarkali* and *Mughal-e-Azam*, which referred to the Salim-Anarkali episode, which might have happened probably in Lahore, they erased this site of Lahore from their history. The authors referred to the erasure of the site of the city of Lahore as an ideological goal. They want to locate these incidents

in Lucknow, Delhi and Agra at the cost of removing the history of Lahore as a significant city of undivided India (Bhaskar and Allen, 2009, p.10).

After 2014, Indian politics reached the advanced stage of religiousization of politics and politicisation of religion. It began with the Babri Masjid demolition and took a full circle with an announcement of formation and the inauguration of Ram Mandir in Ayodhya on 24<sup>th</sup> January 2024. The Indian state showed a complete departure from its secular promises. Its manifesto declared that if the BJP comes to power, it will conserve and protect the Bharatiya faith and culture. Hindi cinema responded to this move and became a major site of propaganda politics. So, we have fictional films like *Uri: The Surgical Strike* (2019), historical like *Tashkent Files* (2019), *The Kerala Stories* (2023), *Bastar the Naxal Story* (2024), *Art-370* (2024), *The Kashmir Files* (2024), the biography *Swatantra Veer Savarkar* (2024), *The Accidental Prime Minister* (2019). At the same time, we have historical cinema based on political propaganda like *Panipat* (2019), *Tanha Jee* (2020), etc. Then, we have a rise of Nationalistic cinema based on arms struggles and wars. In all three types of film, there is a common trope of fictional representation of history based on the villainisation of Muslims and their depiction as the other of the Indian national self.

Although *Heeramandi* is a web series, as a cultural production, it took a departure. *Heeramandi* unfolds in the vibrant streets of Lahore, each alley adorned with magnificent havelis. Unlike other Mughal historicals, this courtesan historical historicises the participation of these courtesans in the nationalistic struggle. Their revolutionary depiction in film is analogous to that of a revolutionary like Bhagat Singh. They have not shown themselves simply as associates of revolutionaries with wealth, but they are the main protagonists of the freedom movement. Whether intentional or not, the story is set in the 1920s. Although earlier Mughal historicals always incorporated some natural spaces in the cities of Lucknow, Agra, and Delhi, So *Mughal-E-Azem*

starts with an accurate picture of Fatehpur Sikri; few real glimpses of the qabristan area of Lucknow have



*Pakeezah*

been depicted in *Pakeezah*, Bhansali refrained the inclusion of any actual location of Lahore. But Lahore is being reiterated again and again in its dialogue. Lines like ‘*Bibbojaan ki Aawaj Lahore hi nahi sare Mulk Main gunjegi*<sup>1</sup>’, Mallikazan says ‘*Ham Tawaife Raniyan hain Lahore ki har Nawab hamare dar pe salam thokte hain*<sup>2</sup>’. Thus, *Heeramandi* departed from earlier erasure as Ira Bhaskar and Richard Allen argued and put Lahore at the centre stage of the Indian Nationalist movement. So this film not only brings Islamic forms and idioms to the centre stage but also brings Lahore as a culturally rich city that fought against colonial modernity and patriarchy. In the film, the character of Bibbojaan is inspired by the character of Ajijan bai, who was a Lucknow-based *Tawaif*. In her seminal writing, Lata Singh discussed how the bourgeois nationalist historiography of India kept the contribution of courtesan women at the margins as they don’t fit into the larger narrative of the Nation as mother India. In this essay, she discussed Ajijan Bai and Umraon Jaan, who were placed in Lucknow and participated in the Movement of 1857. *Heeramandi*’s Bibbojan is in Lahore, and she is working during the Quit India Movement. This shifting of time and space in web series has larger politics. It is not just the courtesans of Lucknow but a courtesan of Lahore who contributed to undivided India’s independence. This rupture of representation of Lahore instead of Lucknow could be taken as a protest against the ideological implication of leaving Lahore and taking

<sup>1</sup> Bibbu Jaan’s voice will reverberate not only in Lahore but in the entire country.

<sup>2</sup> We are the courtesan queens of Lahore, every Nawab salutes us at our door

Lucknow as a general practice of earlier courtesan Hindi cinema.

The series starts with the street, where a drone shot shows a cart approaching Shahimahal, a fictional Haweli of Heeramandi ruled by the main protagonist, Mallikazan. Through the camera, the grandness of Shahimahal has been established. Here, Bhansali crafts a semi-historical realm where these havelis stand as epitomes of luxury; each presided over by a courtesan known as its *Hujur*, or mistress. In Bhansali's portrayal, courtesans are not mere victims of tragedy; they emerge as formidable figures, embodying the strength and resilience of courageous queens tasked with safeguarding their domains within *Shahimahal* or *Khwabgaah*. Just like Akbar's kingdom, this is the reign of Mallikajaan, the queen of Shahimahal. Similar to Akbar's empire, Shahimahal too has social division inside it. Shahimahal has both class and sexual divisions. There is a glimpse of the domination of sexual and class minorities. In the beginning, Rehana responds to young Mallika, "Ladka tha to kya use hojasaara banned date". So, courtesans, too, have their biases and discriminations. Males are useless fellows in their reign. Satto, Phatto, Siama, and Iqbal represent the working-class members of the Shahimahal. Just like Mughal-E-Azem's Akbar, who wants to save his reign in India, Mallikajaan's ultimate commitment has been shown to protect the glory and aura of Shahimahal and Heeramandi. She is at the top of the hierarchy along Bibbojaan; Alamzeb and Lajwanti are at the second level, and at the third level, there is Wahida, the youngest sister of Mallikajaan. Within this grandeur and opulence is darkness, as each of them longs for freedom from this golden cage and shackles of colonialism. Each of the second-level courtesans has different sets of desires, which they ruthlessly subvert to become courtesans. What makes the series unique is the conflation of desires and the conflation of adjectives in their statements.

Alamzeb defiance has been established in the beginning, as she said that she dreams to achieve a status of sharia rather than Tawaif in front of her sister, and Lajwanti responded with a sentence 'Aurat

*ke aasali dushman to uske khwab hote hain jinhe wo dekh to sakti hain par puri nahi kar sakti*'.<sup>3</sup>

Here the word 'tawaif' has been replaced with the word aurat. This paper suggests that the series interchangeably uses the trauma of courtesans to depict the trauma of Muslim women as well as the whole group of women as a community. Three women have three different dreams: Bibbojaan dreams for India's freedom; Alamzeb wants to break the shackles of the traditional role she is supposed to fulfil as the daughter of a courtesan queen; and Lajwanti seeks freedom in love and conjugality. Through the characters of Bibbojan and Tajdaar series, the struggle for freedom of these women was placed against the backdrop of the Indian nationalist movement. Desire of freedom in these women could be explained as a symbol of protest against the patriarchal and ruthless queendome of Mallikajaan. It had been beautifully placed against the massive protest of Indians against colonisers. These two protests conflates in the last episodes to depicts last sites of protest in which women of Heeramandi protest against all forms of patriarchy.

### **Courtesans dilemma of sexuality and motherhood**

However, in the initial episodes of *Heeramandi*, the courtesans are depicted more as participants in a world of conspiracy, ruthlessness, brutality, and the sex trade, akin to queens of their queendoms. For instance, Rehana's actions include selling Mallika's son, prompting Mallika to retaliate by killing Rehana. Mallika herself engages in the grim cycle by selling her daughter. This portrayal illustrates a world driven by competition, resembling a marketplace where *tawaifs* vie for the attention of the wealthiest Sahebs to maximise their profits. The first generation of *Tawaifs*, like Mallikazan, prioritises loyalty to the Saheb. Still, the next generation, represented by Faridan, seems more inclined towards transforming the Kotha into a hub of the sex trade. Following his earlier depiction of animalistic Muslim men in *Padmavat*, Bhansali seems to continue this trend by potentially dehumanising Muslim courtesan women.

<sup>3</sup> The real enemies of a woman are her dreams which she can see but cannot fulfil.

Mallikajan bottom of form in *Heeramandi*. Mallikjan is ruthless, Lajwanti is a drinker, Wahida is a thief and a conspirator, and Rehana is cruel. The two central protagonists, Bibbojan and Alamzeb, both daughters of Mallikajan, yet lacking the conventional traits associated with being great Tawaifs. While Bibbojan harbours a deep love for her nation, Alamzeb finds solace in poetry and her affection for Tajdar. Bibbojan engages in singing and dancing, but her loyalty lies solely with the independence movement, providing funds and intelligence to revolutionaries regarding British activities. Throughout the series, Mallikajan repeatedly laments that neither of her daughters embodies the qualities of a renowned *Tawaif*, seemingly reinforcing a stereotype of being a Tawaif. Manjari Chaturvedi, the founder of 'The Courtesan Project', in her interview with news portal The Quint, argues that Hindi cinema damaged the history of courtesan through the wrong and vicious representation of courtesans. She argues that Bollywood's depiction of tawaif has contributed to bringing more stigma around their art and dance. She says that Bollywood transformed the word of *Tawaif* into an abuse. However, Bhansali subtly challenges this stereotype by portraying Mallikajan, Bibbojan and Alamzeb.



*Padmavat*

During the first two episodes, Mallikjan has been depicted as a strong and ruthless woman. But her firmness and ruthlessness take an entire arch when she challenges Jorawar about his existence. She says that Jorawar is her son, so he doesn't belong to the Nawabs family. He is a son of Mallikajan. If we see the earlier films, whenever a courtesan is

humiliated for their dreams of inclusion in the mainstream, it has been argued that she is the daughter of some of the so-called respectful men who visit Kotha. Mallikajan in *Heeramandi* takes a departure. She questioned the existence of Nawab himself. In the moment of Lajwanti's despair and discontent, she owns her as her mother. She fights for her respect and argues that even if her pain of unfulfilled desire could be ignored, her existence as a protector of art and culture must be appreciated and respected. The courtesan is not an ordinary woman. She is an artist and argued that nobody can mistreat her. The insult of Lajwanti in Jorawar's court and her death transformed a ruthless power-seeker courtesan into a grimed mother. She questions her natural motherhood and proves that Jorawar's existence is an outcome of her illegitimate sexual relationship. He is the outcome of an illegitimate sexual relationship between her and his father. She questions her natural motherhood and performs the role of a mother of Lajwanti. Mallikjan does not just rule over Shahimahal; she is also a father figure who protects each of its residents even if she has to sacrifice her honour. In a beautiful mourning scene of Lajwanti's death, Mallikajan argues that with death, *tawaifs get freedom*, and rather than departure, we must celebrate this freedom. Here, we, as an audience, witness the formation of a community of women getting shaped and constructed against the darkness of death beyond all the individual differences. They celebrate death. Bhansali coloured them in Black. They are in black dresses tonight. Their dance becomes an allegory of protest against the denial of love, respect, and freedom to them by social structures with the lines *Hame dekhni hai aajadi har haal main hamko dekhni hai*<sup>4</sup>.

### Love, Nation and Agency in *Heeramandi*

Fareed Kazmi, in his seminal essay *Muslim Socials and the Female Protagonist: Seeing a Dominant Discourse at Work* (Kazmi, 1994, Pp. 188-225), argues that most of the protagonists in Muslim society are courtesans. In most of the rebellious representations of courtesans in Hindi cinema, acts of

<sup>4</sup> We have to see freedom, we have to see it at all costs.

rebellion by these women have been used to interpellate the audience through the overt representation of their aggression. Rebellion is not substantial. *Anarkali* rebels against Akbar but declares herself as Bandi of Salim; in *Pakeezah*, Sahebjan rebels against the fortune of being a courtesan and wants to fall in love with *Salim*. Her freedom is dependent on her acceptance by *Salim*. *Umrao Jaan*, too, is dependent on a male figure for her emancipation, and *Sultana* in *Tawaif* is dependent on *Dawood*. Thus, they look rebellious to interpellate the audience, but their representation reinforces gender inequality and projects women as objects who are dependent on men for their free existence. Even if they appear rebellious, they do not break the stereotype of gender inequality. *Heeramandi* took a departure from this hegemonic representation. In the below section, we will analyse the nature of this departure around the representation of Bibbojaan and Alamzeb. These two daughters of Mallikjan are not victims of circumstances, but they, too, rebel against adversity. Alamzeb leaves Shahimahal for the love of Tajdar, although it was a consequence of a conspiracy. She, too, finds love for a man is the only way of seeking freedom from Shahimahal, just like the earlier representation of the expression of freedom by courtesan films.

However, as the narrative proceeds, it has been established that marriage is not her last goal. During a raid on Amrood Kothi by Britishers, she took charge of rebelling against the British on herself. Just before this event, she promised Tajdar and his team that she wouldn't come between Tajdar and his patriotic duty. Alamzeb's love for Tajdar transformed her from a soft-hearted Shaira to a woman who made decisions on her own. She took charge of the rebellion and put her life in danger to save Tajdar and his mission as revolutionary. In the process, she partakes in a nationalist movement. To save Tajdaar Balooch and his nationalist goal, she accepts the identity of a nationalist revolutionary. Tajdar, too, keeps love for the nation above his passion for Alamzeb. Tajdar refuses to recognise her in the police station. Tajdar, too, keeps love for the nation above his passion for

Alamzeb. He refuses any connection with Alamzeb. Through this incident, the series registers the violent nature of Nationalist patriarchy. His denial of recognising Alamzeb in the police station registers the violent patriarchy inherent in nationalism. Alamzeb also shows her anger by burning the rumour she made to gift Tajdar. A soft woman transforms into one who understands the world's reality outside the Heeramandi.

Mallikazan, too, comes out of the dilemma of motherhood and sexuality. To free Alamzeb from the Britishers, she accepts her rape at the police station by Cartright. This represents the darkest moment in the series. It proves that these courtesan women are the opposite of Mother India. Mother India is a metaphor for a nation whose honour needs to be saved against all odds. Still, unlike Mother India, Mallikazan herself has to transform her body into a dead sexual object to save her identity as a mother. Courtesan women's motherhood could only be saved by transforming a woman of power into a woman, an object which could be assaulted, mutilated, or raped against her consent.

This reality check about Mallikajan's agency is a moment of departure. This moment pushes every exploited woman to the path of agency and freedom. But after Mallikajan's rape removed all internal differences. Faridan, too, understood that the patriarchy of colonial modernity is much larger than their mutual rivalry. Bibbojan explains that courtesan sells their sexuality on their condition and consent. They can't be reduced to the prostitutes. This paper suggests a few glimpses of the grey characterisation of courtesan women. Still, it also historicises their forced transformation into prostitution due to the combined exploitation of Nawabs, nationalist and colonial modern's joint patriarchy.

The last few episodes of the series also attempt to document the involvement of colonial patriarchy and their conspiracy to transform the status of courtesans as protectors of art, music, dance, and culture to the reductive status of Nautch girls or sex sellers. Pran Neville<sup>5</sup> writes that Hindu social reformers were also involved in reducing the stature

<sup>5</sup> Neville, Pran.(2009). *Nautch Girls of the Raj*. Penguin Books India.

of these courtesan women, as for them, these women were considered threats to the moral order. Social reformers and colonial forces joined their hands to reduce these places into a sex market space. In the series, too, Colonial Police joined hands with Nawabs to dominate the resilience and power of the women as Ashish Nandi (Nandi, 1989, p.1-26) argues that the modern state constantly functions through the processes of domination of the margins. Courtesans, rebel Nawab, and revolutionaries represent different kinds of margins.

Bhansali continuously oscillates between reinforcing and subverting stereotypes throughout the series. On the one hand, he presents Nawabs as debauched individuals consumed by alcohol and lust (*'Nawab kaha paye jaate hain ya to mahfilo main ya kotho par.'*<sup>6</sup>), but on the other, he challenges this notion through characters like Tajdar Baloch. Tajdar exemplifies devotion to his nation and his love interest, rejecting the confines of patriarchy and colonialism. Tajdar Balloch represents a marginalised Nawab who defies all the traits of stereotypical Nawabs. By this time, Mallikajaan too represents margin, as her sexuality has been avenged to save her motherhood. Alamzeb rebelled through love, but Tajdar's love for the nation had subdued her love for Tajdar. Series in glimpses counterposes that love for the nation comes in women's love, and women are at the margin of the country and men's world. Bibbojaan questions this patriarchy inherent in nationalism in a statement, *"naujaj aulad nahi naujaj unke baap hote hain."*<sup>7</sup>. This paper attempts to argue that through these lines by Bibbojan, the series communicates with the contemporary. Illegal is not its citizens, but the illegal is the practices of nations that delegitimise their citizens through discriminatory law. The betrayal of Tajdar to Alamzeb is an allegorical representation of the betrayal of a nation by its citizens who once contributed to the nationalist movement.

After this moment, Courtesan Women shifted to revolutionary nationalism as they understood that they had to save the nation first to save Heeramandi and her profession. Each of them took charge of their

destiny. Bibbojaan has put her commitment to the nation above everything since the beginning. She sells her sexuality to seek freedom for the nation. She is an informant of rebels. She has been portrayed as benign but focused on her goal. After Mallikajan's rape, Bibbojan, a sympathiser and informer of nationalists, directly participated in the nationalist movement.

Here, the real change happens; an imaginary trope of Bibbojan's direct participation in the movement is highly inspired by the representation of Bhagat Singh's involvement in the nationalist movement. Just like Bhagat Singh, Bibbojaan too kills Handerson on her own and, shouts *Inqilab Zindabad* and lands in Jail. Just like Bibbojaan, Alamzeb too participates in the movement and kills Cartright, although her agency as a killer of Cartright was motivated by personal reasons. The brutal denial and death of Mallikajan's agency transform these women from victims of circumstances to a real and independent agent of change. Mallikajan has been denied any support from Nawab. For the First time, we witnessed a representation of courtesan women whose desire for freedom and agency was not dependent on marriage or male figures.

### **Courtesan Historical and Contemporary Socio-Political discourses**

Urvi Mukhopadhyay, in her book (Urvi Mukhopadhyay, 2013, Po 236), argues that the representation of 'medieval' in Hindi cinema was greatly influenced by contemporary socio-political discourses. She takes an example of *Mughal-e-Azam* that, at one point, represented the secular vision of Nehruvian India. Still, at the same time, through Anarkali's lonely battle against the powerful Akbar regime, this film presented an allegory of the omnipresent, all-engulfing, authoritarian contemporary Nehruvian State. She argues that the genre of historical not just document the past but it sometimes reinforce the contemporary dominant narrative of nationalism and at the same time it also present the allegory of criticality on contemporary.

<sup>6</sup> Where are the Nawabs found? Either in the mehfiles or in the brothels.

<sup>7</sup> It is not the children who are illegitimate, it is their fathers who are illegitimate



Swapana Gopinath and Rutuja Deshmukh, in their book *Historicizing Myths in Contemporary India: Cinematic Representations and Nationalist Agendas in Hindi Cinema*,<sup>8</sup> explores the genre of historical cinema through various cinema scholars and argues that historical cinema takes influences from contemporary socio-political discourses through depiction of the past in art and, secondly, the way present captures the past. They argued that historical films always construct the idea of the nation, influenced by contemporary understandings of nationalism present in society. They argue that earlier Mughal Historical works like *Pukar* (1939), *Yahudi* (1958) and *Mughal-e-Azam* (1960) presented a syncretic idea of the Indian nation. They explained the contemporary rise of historical Hindi Cinema as a representation of the past in terms of the fascist, fundamentalist and majoritarian nature of the Indian state. They referred to biopics and other genres of contemporary historical cinema as examples. With the help of recent historical films released after 2014, they argued that they represent the contemporary idea of dominant nationalism.

This paper will advance these arguments regarding the historical genre and try to unravel the politics of history involved in Heeramandi and its more significant implications. The paper will try to analyse how the series reflects on the past. Whether it conforms to the dominant narrative of nationalism present in contemporary India or attempts to communicate with the contemporary critique on the nature of Indian nationalism in modern times is a matter of investigation here.

### **Contemporary Discourses of Protest and Women in India**

Women and movements are associated with each other, even in the nationalist movement. The socio-religious reform movement took women's freedom as a primary site of contestation. On the one hand, it was kin to reform to provide women with some social

rights. Still, at the same time, the Indian nationalist movement considered women a major metaphor for distinctive identity Indianness.<sup>9</sup> The Indian feminist movement started against this and fought for its problems and issues. Women participated in the Indian nationalist movement, too. In post-independent India, women not only participated in protests regarding their rights and demands but also protested against the capitalist understanding of the idea of development. They participated in Chipko Aandolan to save trees. They participated in Narmada Bachao Aandolan to save the river. They led a protest against the Bhopal Gas Tragedy. They protested against the exploitation of women at work. They participated against the violent and harmful masculinity of the security policy of India through an anti-nuclear movement. India has a long history of women protesting against all forms of state domination against the marginalised sections of society.

When it comes to Muslim women, they, too, have taken both a subjective and objective position. They resisted religious orthodoxies, fought against Zanjana and Purdah, and participated in the Nationalist movement. Muslim women have a history of protest in post-independent India, too. Whether it was education that educated Muslim women to protest against religious orthodoxy, protest against Triple Talaq, or protest participation in educational institutions in Hijab, we have various examples of Muslim women's protests in India.

In recent years, the Shahin Bagh movement against the Citizenship Amendment Act in 2019 was one of the most distinctive and unique in the history of Muslim women's protests in India. In Shaheen Bagh, women of all ages initiated an intergenerational sit-in protest against the Citizenship Amendment Act. The Shahin Bagh protest differed slightly from the earlier Muslim Women's protest in India. Gazala Zamil<sup>10</sup> In her book *Muslim Women Speak of Dream and Shackles*, Shackles argues that Muslim Women have always been seen as victims of

<sup>8</sup> Swapana. & Rutuja, Deshmukh.(Eds.) (2023). *Historicizing Myths in Contemporary India: Cinematic Representations and Nationalist Agendas in Hindi Cinema*. Routledge.

<sup>9</sup> Chaterjee Partha. (1993). *The Nation and Its Fragments*. Princeton University Press, New Jersey

<sup>10</sup> Ghazala jamil, 2017 *Muslim Women Speak of Dream and Shackles*, Sage

either Islam or Muslim Men historically. However, the Shahin Bagh movement broke this larger narrative by silencing their real opposition to the dominant narrative of the state against Muslim women. In this movement, they sat together to show their opposition to the delegitimisation processes of the majoritarian state in India.

Following this, thousands of women farmers participated at the Tikri Border in 2020 against the Indian Agricultural Act 2020. In 2023, Vinesh Phogat, Sakshi Malik and Bajrang Puniya sat on dharna in an anti-sexual harassment movement against the president of the Wrestling Foundation of India, a ruling party member. Vinesh Phogat recently again joined the farmer protest at the Shambhu Border, where farmers are protesting for a minimum support price. It is important here that women not only participated in the fight for their rights but also tried to seek justice from the state. Most of these women faced *lathi* on their bodies and fought for citizenship rights, the right of occupation, or the right to have sexual integrity in the workplace. Their movements are symbolic of resistance against authoritarian and violent forces of governance by the state.

Heeramandi reflects on these contemporary moments of protest through its imagery.

### **Heeramandi and Historicizing Muslim Women Protest in Contemporary India**

*Heeramandi* delineates the contemporary socio-political discourses of protest and rebellion in India. Heeramandi captures multiple spectacles of women sitting in groups. Mallikajaan went to seek the help of Julfikar Shaheb, and her Begum answered, '*Jo aadmi apni patni ka na hua wo aapka kya hoga*'<sup>11</sup>. After this scene, it is clear that the women of Heeramandi have to take charge of their safety and liberation. After this, in every mise-en-scène, we see women assemble in a group to worship God, discuss the next move, or determine the next course of action against the encroachment of nations and Heeramandi. Every frame after this assembles women's bodies in

private and public spaces. The screen becomes the site of public space where we witness the assemblage of women's bodies. Judith Butler (Butler, 2015, p.24-66) argues that precarity leads to alliances of bodies in public space, even with all forms of disagreement and differences. She further argues that freedom against injustice could be achieved by simply walking in the streets. Here, gender as performance is linked with public assembly. Butler here takes help from Linda Zerilli's argument about agency as a non-sovereign form of political freedom and argues that freedom of assemblage, bodies in alliance, and freedom of expression signifies freedom of agency. This paper used this idea to argue that in the public assemblage of women's bodies through its various mise-en-scenes on-screen, *Heeramandi* depicts the agency of Heeramandi's women as a group. They forget to set aside their internal differences in class, position, and generation to create a group. Faridan says '*hamne sharafat chhor di aur mardo ne hamara sath chhor diya ab Miiti hi hamara sath de sakti hai*'<sup>12</sup>. Here, she claims that her only support is her land, neither the men nor the state. This resembles a group of Muslim women shown on screen in each frame and each shot. Just like walking in the street, they have been shown walking, sitting, discussing, participating, shouting, killing and killing too in the frame. Frame after frame, there are only Muslim women we see on screen, which itself becomes a metaphor for not just Muslim women's uprising but also works as an allegory of women's protest against the majoritarian, violent and patriarchal nature of the state.

In continuation, Bibbojan argues that Akbar to murali se mulkwali ban kar dekhiye. In the process, she affirms these women's claim on land as citizens of the land. She asks everyone to participate in the rebellion against Britishers as citizens of India.

Irfanullah Farooqui, in his essay argues that in 13A Shahin Bagh, thousands of Muslim women participated in a sit-in protest as an audience. He claims their commitment to sit in groups suggests a unique connection between resistance and belonging. Muslim women of Shaheen Bagh had expressed their

<sup>11</sup> If a man doesn't respect his wife, how can he respect you?

<sup>12</sup> We have given up our decency and men have left us, now only Meethi can support us.

belonging to the land through their resistance. Thousands of interclass, intergenerational women, from newly born babies to ninety-year-old Bilkis Bano, showed extreme solidarity. They constitute the 'Hum'/ the People from Faiz Ahmad Faiz's famous poetry *Ham dekhenge*. Similar to the film, we see that Mujrewali women decide to participate in a peaceful March to show their solidarity with Bibbojan, who is going to be executed by the Britishers. By showing their participation in the Nationalist movement, both in the form of a group of women and Bibbojan, Heeramandi locates Muslim women within the nationalist discourse and contributes to the production of a counter-history of nationalism in which these women participated. This counter-historicisation locates the courtesan women at the centre of the nationalist struggle and pluralises the history of nationalism from the perspective of women who both gender, community and state had exploited.

This counter historicisation could also be taken as an effort to secularise cinematic representations of women's agency on screen. Secondly, Heeramandi historicises the contemporary claims of Muslim women to the citizenship of the nation. Muslim women are historical citizens of India. They contributed to the production of undivided India. Their participation in nationalist movements in history strengthens their claims in contemporary times. It provides continuity and historicity to their claims of citizenship.

As discussed before, after the death of Lajwanti, women participated in mourning their fellow women and danced to the song *hame dekhni hai aajadi*; this solidarity took a final shape in a last sequence. Mallikajan, on the one hand, felt proud as a mother of Bibbojan, and at the same time, she refused to be vulnerable. Mallikajaan says they are not rebels, but they are queens who fight the war against injustice directly. In a beautiful shot, chandlers had been covered along with other musical instruments. The courtesan left the role of protector of art as they wanted to participate in the freedom

movement to ensure the protection of *Bharatmata*. In this sequence, Bhansali creates a spectacle of mass protest analogous to the Shaheen Bagh Protest. Women appeared in the street with the lights in their hands and words of defiance in their mouths against the brutality of the colonial state. In the film, these women sing *sab taj pare besudh honge ham apne hakim khud honge, Bharat maa ki asmat ko hame bante shahjadi dekhni hai*. The film depicted the corporeal collective wilfulness<sup>13</sup> of women of all ages during their solidarity march towards jail. This resembles precisely the imagery of Shahin bagh movement. In Shahin Bagh, women of all ages sat together with all the nationalist symbols. They tried to reclaim the symbols of nationalism from the majoritarian community. In the film, they claim they want Mother India's honour to flourish like a shahjadi. It seems that they are linking the honour of each woman, irrespective of their caste, class, and gender, with the honour of the mother nation. A Nation's motherhood and honour do not only belong to the women of a particular group or class. It historicises the contemporary intergenerational Muslim Women's Participation in Shaheen Bagh. Each Heeramandi woman faced *lathi* on their bodies yet continued the march. They showed collective wilfulness as each faced stickers on their bodies and remained firm in their march. This scene has a lot of resemblance to contemporary India in both its visuality and sounds.

This paper suggests that *Heeramandi* not only creates the counter-history of marginalised women but also resembles, depicts, and presents an allegory of contemporary protest culture in India. At a time when historical cinema in India is taking a completely propagandist turn, *Heeramandi* produces an alternative idea of historical cinema. Courtesan women's claims of nationhood from the draconian colonial state could also be read as a metaphor for Indian women's claims to their land against the contemporary patriarchal forces of the state.

<sup>13</sup> Karishma Desai "Mera Jamia, Mera Ghar": The corporeal collective willfulness of young Muslim women at Jamia Milia

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