



Literary Evolution of Naatch Girl

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Abstract: Nautch girl was an umbrella which came into existence post colonisation. Dancers who performed naach in the courts of Kings were referred to as nautch girl by the britishers. These performers were treated with uttermost respect and had establishments such as palaces, land, jewellery etc. to their name. These dancers belonged to

different tribes and performed different dances as well. These included- devadasis, Randis, kunbis tec. The purpose and intent to perform these dances vastly differed as well. However, after British Invasion, all these dancers were grouped under the common umbrella term of Nautch girl. The meaning of Nautch changed too. After colonisation, the dancers were seen as sexual entities whose intent was to entice their audience. While sensuality was an important part of dances, arising, it was not the primary intent of the dance. This changed meaning led to stereotyping of an entire literary culture and led to its drastic decline. However, in today's era, we do see the presence of these dancers in Bollywood works. The relevance of naachaniya in the present day is still prevalent. We can identify these dancers in Bollywood movies. Items songs are practically a modern day version of a naachaniya. The research aims to provide an in-depth analysis of the term 'nautch girl' and draws the evolutionary meaning of the same.

Keywords: Naatch girls, dance girls, the British court, the British period.

Introduction

Nautch girl was a term which was assigned by the Britishers to women who performed naatch in the courts of nobles and royals. A nautch girl used to entertain men and women in their homes as well as in public places. Over the ages, the term nautch girl has undergone evolutionary change in term of its semantics as well as interpretation.

Through my research, I argue that the concept of nautch girl is not restricted to the environment and setting- of nobles, courts and royals. Instead, it finds place in the contemporaries of today's era with a varied interpretation as compared to pre colonised India.

Today, the Nautch girls have lost their reputation and status to the ideology and traditions coerced on the Indians by the colonisers. The high stature at which the nautch girls were considered has been replaced with the derogatory perception of the colonials. Youth today associates the concept of this term as an abstraction restricted to the previous centuries. However, in contemporary media, we can still observe the prevalence of nautch girls in a variety of forms. By illustrating the idea of Nautch girls in the present day, I aim to bring into attention the sustenance of the term all throughout these ages.

The word nautch has been derived from the Urdu and Hindi word - Naach (نچ)- which translates to 'dance' in English. Nautch girl is an anglicised version of the 'Naatch girl'. Naatch girl, as commonly used in Hindi, is a word used for a professional dancer or a performer who performs in front of an audience for the mere purpose of entertainment. Nautch girls performed for no other purpose apart from entertainment of an audience. A performer was classified as a nautch girl only after they had received abundance practice in the art form of naach which had its roots derived from kathak. The naach they performed comprised of three forms: the mor naach, the qahar naach and the patang naach. These were necessary elements for the classification of a nautch girl. The articulation of sensuality through the expressions and gestures of the nautch girls was also a necessary element of the process. In terms of their sociological stature, the Naatch girls were held at a high position in the society. A Naatch girl originally performed before the nobles and the royals in the courts of the Kingdom. The presence of a naach girl was considered an honour, and they were treated with uttermost respect. They held luxurious establishments such as palaces, land, jewellery etc. in their name.

However, in pre-historic India, nautch girls were not the only dance performers. There were many other tribes who danced as rituals for temples. These performances held religious and

societal roles in the community. For such tribes, dancing was a way of worshipping idols and performing traditional rituals.. They were different from Nautch girls.

Post colonisation, all dancers were forcefully categorised as nautch girls. It was a classification imposed by the British imperialists who failed to comprehend the importance of Indian traditions, culture and societal values. The new categorisation comprised of devadasis, concubines, Randis, kunbis and nautch girls all under the umbrella term of Nautch girl. The dance traditions of these artists conflicted with the established moral and religious perspective of the Britishers. In the seventeenth century, the Catholic Church looked down upon sexual acts and acts which led to women dancing before an audience. The Europeans interpreted the sensuality in the dance as an act of indulgence. The idea that these dances were seductive caused nautch females to be associated with immoral behaviour and prostitution in British culture. According to them, naach was termed as a vulgar practice where women sold their respect and dignity to entertain the courts and specifically males as they were the main audience. As a result, the nautch girl had a particularly notorious reputation among the memsahibs, British ladies who had settled in India, who saw the nautch girl as a threat to conventional Victorian family values because of her link with sensuality. This is supported by the profusion of historical literary works (many of which were produced by female British authors) that focus on the claimed "danger" of the nautch girl and feature nautch girl characters who engage in corrupt activities like theft, spying, and other sorts of malice. Thus, with the advent of Britishers, the outlook towards nautch girl changed drastically.

Analysis

I would like to bring out the differences evident in the text of post colonized era through comparing them. Both texts are

derivations of the film industry and reflect upon the different ways in which a nautch girl is perceived. The two texts are “In Aankhon Ki Masti” which is from the film ‘Umrao Jaan ’set in the year 1840. Another text I use is the song “Goliyon ki Raasleela Ram-leela” which is set in modern India. The texts are used as a source to compare and contrast the various ways in which the term nautch girl is perceived. .

The video begins with classical music as the audience sits on mattresses. The nautch girl is then introduced, sitting in a graceful posture and greeting the audience. She is dressed in a white Anarkali outfit with heavy jewelry, including a mang-tikka, haath phool, a passa, jhumkas, and a multilayered necklace. As she sings to the audience, she lifts her dupatta and performs hand gestures with poise and grace, coordinating them with her facial expressions. The dance she performs is classical in nature and is accompanied by classical music beats. She wears heavy ghungroos on her feet and uses alta to cover her hands and feet. Her movements are articulated great elegance. She uses hip movements and footwork in combination with hand gestures. Her hair is tied and covered by a dupatta. In this video, there is a strict separation between the audience and the dancer, and there is no physical interaction between the two. Through her singing, dancing, and expressions, the nautch girl conveys subtle hints about her feelings towards the audience through the use of imagery and hand gestures. The focus of the performance is on the dancer's expressions, eye movement, and hand gestures.

In the second text, Priyanka Chopra wears a white blouse with a draped skirt and minimal makeup and jewelry. She accessorizes with silver bangles and silver anklets that coordinate with her outfit. She also wears alta on both her hands and feet. The background of the video is colorful, ranging from blue to pink, and Priyanka Chopra dances to the lyrics of a love story involving the audience. In this video, the

dancer maintains a connection with the audience and there is no clear boundary between the audience and the performer. The dancer interacts with the audience and performs on the same level, symbolizing the equal status of the dancer and the audience. At one point, the dancer uses sensual movements while interacting with the guest, Ranveer Singh. These movements are common in the nautch tradition and are not intended as advances or propositions. The dance involves a lot of hand, hip, and body movement, with no distinction between horizontal and vertical movements.

Though there exist a wide range of discrepancies in the acts of the 2 performers, both artists can be classified as nautch girl. A nautch girl is a woman who dances before an audience. In the first text, the dancer dances before the king and his courtesans for the purpose of their entertainment. All men are seated in a circular manner, surrounding the dancer. They are concentrated on the movements of the dancer. In the second text, Ranveer Singh, is invited as a chief guest to the performance. The dancer performs for Ranveer Singh and other male audience who surrounds him while he hears the story iterated through the dance. In both the texts, the sole purpose of the dance is for entertaining. Rekha in the first text iterates the story of gazing through her gestures and the lyrical composition of the song. The audience is smoking hookah and enjoying the performance.

Their enjoyment is reflected in their attention towards the performance and the gestures of praises/ admiration which they openly display. Additionally, Priyanka in the second source text, narrates the love story of the chief guest and his lover. The audience starts dancing in amusement and enjoys every movement performed by the dancer. They look happy and seem to be having a gala time. Moreover, the grace and poise with which both the dances are performed affirm the professionalism of the dancers. The movement and the fluidity

of the dancer's body suggest their expertise in the dance form and hence displays the skill of a professional dancer.

Upon observing carefully both texts with further skepticism, we notice variation in which the word nautch girl can be used.

During the performance of Rekha in the first text, all eyes are set to the moves of the dancer. Every subject has their full attention and respect for the art form performed which is far from the scenario in the second text. In the second text, there is a lot of commotion in the background where people are busy amongst themselves. Additionally, the chief guest also strikes a business deal with his client during the act of the dancer. During pre-colonised India, this was considered as disrespectful to the dancer and their performance. This difference between treatment towards the dancer can be attributed to the difference in which the dance is perceived. The approach has evolved over the years. "In Aakhon ki masti" is set in a time before independence when nautch girls were treated with uttermost respect and given the highest stature in the society. "Ram leela" is set in a period post colonisation which depicts the influence of colonialism on the concept of nautch girls which views them as vulgar and a means to prostitution and sex trade.

Furthermore, in the naach performed by nautch girls, sensuality was considered to be an important aspect. In both the texts, there is evidence of the same in a varying ways. The portrayal of which in both texts differ drastically. Hence affecting the perception and interpretation of sensuality. In the first text, sensuality is expressed through facial expressions and eye movements. The nautch girl compliments the movement of the eyes to the lyrics of the song with great intimacy and sensuality. In the second text, the nautch girl's clothes and bodily movements depict sensuality. The flexibility with which she indulges in the various movements of the body is symbolic of erotica and sensuality which was commonly noticed in Nautch girls of post-colonial India.

To criticise the association of nautch girl with the above mentioned texts, Nautch girls often performed in troupes of (minimum) 2- 10 individuals. The troupe comprised of 1-2 dancers and a singer. Historically, the musicians played 4 instruments- sarangi, tabla, manjeera and dholak. At the end of the 20th century, a fifth instrument, known as the harmonium, was introduced to the nautch party. In both the texts that we analysed, there is no evidence of any of these instruments. There is an absence of a troupe as well. While in the first text, there is a music playing the harmonium, the nautch girl is the dancer and the singer herself. In the second text, all elements of a nautch party are absent. The performer holds the responsibility of dancing as well as singing.

Historically, the dance forms were given extreme importance. While the nautch girls borrowed styles from kathak, dasi attam and folk forms, every nautch girl was expected to know how to perform the "beaver's dance"-qahar ka nach, "the kite dance,"-patang nach and "the peacock dance," or "mor ka nach". These were significant elements in the performance of nautch girls. Analysing the above texts, we observe that none of these elements have been taken into account in the dance of "Inn Aakhon ki masti" or "Ram Leela". The naach of the artist in the second text is neither wholly centred around the mentioned dance forms nor does it involve the elements of patang nach, qahar nach and mor nach. Though the first text does derive its movements from classical Indian dance forms, it does not account for the elements mentioned above.

Social Debate

The social debate of the term revolves around the using the term "nautch girl" is that it is a term with historical and cultural significance in India, and that it should be respected and preserved as a part of the country's cultural heritage. Supporters of this view may argue that the term represents the rich diversity and traditions of India, and that it should not be

discarded or erased simply because it may be considered politically incorrect or offensive to some. However, others argue that the term "nautch girl" is offensive and demeaning, and that it perpetuates negative stereotypes and prejudices against women. In view of this, the anti nautch movement was launched in 19th and early 20th centuries. The movement was a social and cultural movement with the goal of abolishing the traditional dance form of nautch. In the late 19th and early 20th centuries, the nautch industry came under criticism from a number of quarters, including social reformers, feminists, and others who saw it as a form of exploitation and degradation of women. One of the main arguments against nautch was that it objectified and exploited women, who were often recruited at a young age and trained to dance and entertain men in private parties and other events. Many critics argued that nautch promoted a culture of male entitlement and objectification of women, and that it was a form of moral corruption that needed to be eliminated. Many feminists and social reformers saw nautch as a symbol of the oppression of women in traditional Indian society, and argued that it needed to be abolished in order to promote gender equality and women's liberation.

Contemporary Scenario

In today's India, the definition of the term Naatch girl has altered but the cultural traditions and practices associated with nautch girls continue to have relevance in contemporary India. Classical Indian dance forms such as Bharatanatyam and Kathak, which have their roots in the nautch tradition, are still widely practiced and appreciated in India today. In addition, the cultural and artistic contributions of nautch girls and other traditional female performers are an important part of India's cultural heritage and continue to be valued and celebrated by many people.

There are still cultural promotion programs in India that are working to preserve and promote classical Indian dance and music. The SPIC MACAY (The Society for the Promotion of Indian

Classical Music And Culture Amongst Youth) program is one such important program supporting traditional cultural practices alive and accessible to the public.

The review presents us with a gendered perspective. It helps us understand the role gender and power have played in different societies throughout history. Nautch girls were often subject to exploitation and discrimination, and understanding the ways in which they were treated can help us to better understand the broader issues of gender inequality and power dynamics. It also points out the effects of the influence exerted by the dominant group which can still be felt today. It also provides us with the insight on the evolution of the various cultural traditions and practices. It highlights in ways in which influencing factors affect the dynamic of the society and how they affect our cultural and artistic landscape. The review also reflects on the negative connotations associated with the term "nautch girl" are often rooted in the ideology and perspectives of colonizers, and that these views do not accurately reflect the cultural traditions and practices of the societies in which nautch girls were a part. In order to address the taboo surrounding the concept of nautch girls, it is important to engage in honest and open dialogue about the history and cultural significance of these women. This can involve educating others about the historical and cultural context in which nautch girls operated, as well as examining the ongoing issues of gender and power that continue to shape our society. Negative connotations associated with the term "nautch girl" are often rooted in the ideology and perspectives of colonizers, and that these views do not accurately reflect the cultural traditions and practices of the societies in which nautch girls were a part.

Conclusion

Based on the analysis presented, the term "naach girl" is still relevant and applicable to various contemporary dance performances. However, the way in which the term is used and understood has changed over time and may be influenced by societal attitudes and cultural context. Despite these shifts, the term has managed to adapt and retain its significance as a literary term, while also finding a place in the modern world. It is interesting to note the transformation of the nautch girl from a respected figure to one that is looked down upon, and the fact that nautch itself continues to exist in an indirect form.

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