
The Dancing Girls of Lahore: Book Review

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ABSTRACT

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The dancing girls of Lahore inhabit the Diamond Market in the shadow of a great mosque. The twenty-first century goes on outside the walls of this ancient quarter but scarcely registers within. Though their trade can be described with accuracy as prostitution, the dancing girls have an illustrious history: Beloved by emperors and nawabs, their sophisticated art encompassed the best of Mughal culture. The modern-day Bollywood aesthetic, with its love of gaudy spectacle, music, and dance, is their distant legacy. But the life of the pampered courtesan is not the one now being lived by Maha and her three girls. What they do is forbidden by Islam, though tolerated; but they are *gandi*, "unclean," and Maha's daughters, like her, are born into the business and will not leave it. Sociologist Louise Brown spent four years in the most intimate study of the family life of a Lahori dancing girl. With beautiful understatement, she turns a novelist's eye on a true story that beggars the imagination. Maha, a classically trained dancer of exquisite grace, had her virginity sold to a powerful Arab sheikh at the age of twelve; when her own daughter Nena comes of age and Maha cannot bring in the money she once did, she faces a terrible decision as the agents of the sheikh come calling once more. For as long as anyone can remember, the neighborhood known as Heera Mandi, tucked into the northern corner of the walled city of Lahore, Pakistan, has been a red-light district. The name means "diamond market," but long before the British arrived in the mid-19th century it was already well established as a pleasure center, a place for Pakistani men to stray from their arranged marriages and to spend time with beautiful women schooled in the arts of song, dance and seduction. The old neighborhood, with its crumbling buildings, is on its last legs now. The fabled courtesans of Heera Mandi, once sought out by princes and emperors, are a distant memory, their role much reduced, like the *geisha* of Japan. Today's client is more likely to be a fat businessman flashing a Rolex and driving a Range Rover. The women, hastily trained, dance to music booming from a tape deck if they dance at all. Some are barely in their teens. Art has given way to pure commerce. "It was good in those days, but all that has changed," an old prostitute recalls. "Nobody bothers with singing and dancing anymore. We were trained for years, but today nobody does that." Louise Brown, a British academic who studies the sex trade in Asia, spent seven years, off and on, living in Heera Mandi. "The Dancing Girls of Lahore" is her report, both chilling and heart-warming, on a neighborhood where all the rules seem to be changing except the ones that keep Pakistani women in a state of abject servitude.

Brown, author of "Sex Slaves: The Trafficking of Women in Asia," has a sociologist's eye and a novelist's appreciation of her surroundings and the human drama that plays out before her. She spends nearly as much time describing the street foods of Lahore and the excitement of religious festivals as she does analyzing the grim economics of the sex trade. Her main character, Maha, a prostitute on the downward side of her career, comes alive in all three dimensions, fully realized in the circumscribed world that has defined life for her mother, grandmother and great-grandmother before her. Prostitution, in Heera Mandi, is a family profession. Maha, like Brown, has a nose attuned to the subtlest gradations of status. Her miseries and her triumphs depend on it. In her prime, like the

rest of the women of the quarter, she commanded top prices. At 12, she was sold to a wealthy sheik in Dubai, United Arab Emirates, for a single encounter. Later she enjoyed the patronage of powerful, wealthy men, who, in Pakistan, are expected to keep multiple mistresses. Prostitutes refer to such clients as their husbands and, if lucky, can amass enough cash and gifts to buy a comfortable retirement. As the years pass, the clients become more numerous and less wealthy. Maha, in her 30s, overweight and shopworn after bearing five children, now depends on the uncertain charity of the feckless Adnan, an opium-addicted businessman who once set her up in a nice house outside Heera Mandi but more recently ordered her back to the old neighborhood. "I'm old and finished," Maha tells the author, who writes: "She's probably right." The family fortunes look bleak, and Brown looks on in distress as Maha grooms her three daughters for the trade. In spare, eloquent prose, she explains the harsh rules of the game. Adnan was Maha's last chance. After he leaves her, a question of when rather than if, she will be hard-pressed to attract another patron. Her son cannot hope to marry respectably. Unless her daughters rise to the occasion, she could very well wind up in Tibbi Gali, the discount sex market, where older women sell themselves for as little as 20 rupees, the price of a bottle of Coke. The once-beautiful Maha, fiery and proud, still refers to herself as one of the "'ten-thousand-rupee women' (\$169)." Brown perceptively analyzes this boast, often heard in *Heera Mandi*. By maintaining a prosperous front, prostitutes defend their price.

Maha is a fighter, and Brown renders her life in full, sensuous detail: the long hours of boredom punctuated by vicious fights with her daughters; the search for solace in fattening foods and codeine-laced cough syrup; the firm belief in black magic and spells; the lurching mood swings. Perhaps the girls can find their way into films. (The neighborhood has produced many of Pakistan's movie stars.) Or perhaps Nena, Maha's most attractive, accomplished daughter, can find a pot of gold at the end of the rainbow on sex-junkets to the Persian Gulf states, or in the protective arms of a wealthy patron. There are no truly happy endings. But against all the odds, women like Maha manage to make a life. Brown, astonishingly, makes that seem plausible. Louise Brown, an academic who lives and teaches in Birmingham, has spent a great deal of her adult life researching the sex trade in Asia. Before she wrote her most recent book, "The Dancing Girls of Lahore", she wrote, "Sex Slaves: The Trafficking of Women in Asia". In order to study the dancing girls of Lahore, or the "nachne wallis" as they are called, Louise rented a room in the red light district of Heera Mandi in old Lahore so that she could observe the subjects of her research from close quarters. Heera Mandi (Diamond Market) was once the abode of the fabled courtesans of the Nawabs (Princes) of Lahore. The women were respected for their art which included being a master of Kathak, a very intricate dance, she also spoke chaste Urdu (the language of the poets) and was able to sing impeccable ghazals (songs in a classical or semi-classical tradition). After Independence in 1947, the Nawabs were stripped of their purses giving way to a new class of Pakistani industrialists and businessmen who became the dancers' new patrons. However, when in the 1960's the military dictator Ayub Khan, while pursuing a policy of stricter Islamization closed the district down, the women of Heera Mandi had to go underground. Since the place was now declared illegal, the nature of the clients changed. The elite stopped visiting Heera Mandi and the current customers, poor or middle-class men, now seek the girls out only for sexual favors. Not being cultured they have no real interest in paying to see the women dance. As if riding on the luck of their residents the havelis (grand residences) in which the courtesans reside, have also crumbled into tiny, dark, stinky, airless rooms.

Readers might want to know how this book, which is one among hundreds of books on prostitution and sex slavery, is different from the others. What makes it special is that the people of Heena Bazaar, have descended from true artists. These courtesans of old and ancestors of our current Heera Mandi women, may not have gone to school but they were highly accomplished in the art of dancing, singing and pleasing a man. Till today there is a refinement in many of the women of Heera Bazaar that one finds hard to locate elsewhere, also, the residents of Heena Bazaar are tightly bound to Shia rituals and customs. Religion plays a very important part in their lives. One of the finest parts of the book involves descriptions of Ziyarat (a religious ritual at Moharram) and the mattam ceremony , where 100's of young men flagellate themselves with blades strung on metal chains to show sorrow at the killing of the Shiite prophet, Imam Hussain from many centuries ago. The Sunni majority in Pakistan look down upon such rituals as semibarbaric and these ceremonies very often become sites of clashes between the Sunnis and Shias.

Although the author describes the lives of many of the girls in Heera Mandi the focus of her book is Maha and her five children. Maha was born into a family of kanjars (prostitutes). When she was only 12 years old she was taken to the United Arab Emirates and was paid well for allowing one of the ruling Sheikhs to take her virginity. After that, she returned to Lahore where she enjoyed the patronage of some fairly rich Pakistani men. When Louise meets her she has 5 children by three different men and her latest husband already has another family and is a drug addict. Maha considers herself lucky to have a legal marriage. Most of the women in Heena Bazaar don't. However they call all their clients shohar (husband) because being intimate with someone who is not your husband is a criminal

offence. At 36 years, plump and not as pretty as she once was, Maha appears to be a spent force, and much to Louise's concern, spends most of her energy (when she is not overdosed on cough syrup) on grooming her 12 and 14 year old daughters to take up the trade. She insists they have no other way to survive. She is very concerned that if they don't find another source of income she might wind up in Tibbi Galli which is where older tawaiifs (prostitutes) are forced to sell themselves for little or nothing. Maha is lucky in that she has daughters. How ironic that while elsewhere in the country the birth of a son is celebrated, in Heera Mandi it is a daughter who is celebrated because in this business it is she who becomes the sole bread winner. I love Louise Brown's writing style. Although she is an academic discussing her research, she doesn't have the dry style of a researcher because she weaves into the study true conversations, wonderful anecdotes and beautiful geographic descriptions. Best of all, each chapter is subdivided into little chapters under headings like, "Shadi-Wedding Ceremony", "The Shia and Sunni", "Black Magic" "Friday Prayers", etc. which makes it easy to use as a reference book. Her particular strength lies in being an astute observer of customs and everything else she sees around her without being judgmental.

REFERENCE

Brown, Louise. (2005). *The Dancing Girls of Lahore: Selling Love and Saving Dreams in Pakistan's Ancient Pleasure District*. New York: Harper-Collins.