

The Construction of the Courtesan in *Ulysses* and *Sin*: Notes on Irish and Indian Orientalism

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Abstract

This article offers a creative and critical reconstruction of Wajida Tabassum as a “lost modernist” through a close reading of the construction of the courtesan in James Joyce’s *Ulysses* and Wajida Tabassum’s *Sin*. The lack of research and critical sources in the English language on Wajida Tabassum’s writings from Hyderabad Deccan, and her own marginal position as a non-elite female Indian modernist whose archives have considerably disappeared in relation to the more productive archives of Rashid Jahan or Ismat Chughtai, offers an avenue to read James Joyce against the grain or in the mode of creative disaffiliation such that an unsettling of Joyce’s hypercanonicity renders distinct the “aesthetic qualities” of “minoritised literatures” (Ward 2022, 343). In this paper, I enter this debate from a comparative perspective as I examine the constructions and representations of Eastern domestic locations such as the “harem” in representative Irish and Indian Modernist texts, with a focus on James Joyce’s and Wajida Tabassum’s historic and understudied connections, their representations of colonial domestic spaces, and the representation of the feminine and ethnic other linked to the construction of the courtesan in the twentieth-century.

Keywords: Irish Orientalism; Indian Orientalism; Joyce Studies; Indian Modernism; Irish Studies

Introductory and Background

In a recent debate on Joyce and creative disaffiliation, Malcolm Sen (2008) demonstrated various aspects of Joycean Orientalism and Joyce’s Orientalist strategies alongside a measured reading of its merits and failings. In this article, I enter the debate from a cross-cultural and comparative perspective, examining the constructions and representations of Eastern domestic locations such as the “harem” and the figure of the courtesan in *Ulysses* and *Sin*. I am interested in the perpetuation of stereotypes of the Orient not only by and within European Modernism (such as those affiliated with the Bloomsbury Group),

but also those with Eastern affiliations, such as Wajida Tabassum herself, who merits further study for these reasons. In terms of positionality, Tabassum has remained curiously peripheral to the All-India Progressive Writers’ Association in the Indian context, which itself has either first-hand or second-hand contact with the Bloomsbury group. For this reason, Tabassum has remained an elusive Modernist to date. Tabassum’s reflection on the afterlives of her fiction in her marginalia gestures toward her status as a marginalised author whose archives have considerably disappeared, which I posit against the “industrious” Joyce industry (Crispi 2015, ix) of professional readers,

specialists, and scholars offering new and interpretive approaches to Joyce Studies. In this article, I propose not that Joyce be used as a “yardstick for [the] non-European achievement” of Tabassum, but rather to interrogate the phenomenon of Joyce’s “hypercanonicity” and to ensure a comparative reading produces “mutually transformative dialogue” (Ward 2022, 337), even when such a dialogue would mean acknowledging the disparity of research and funding that goes into each of these Modernist writers’ respective archives. An interesting development to note against this background is the serialisation of Tabassum’s stories in twentieth-century Urdu literary magazines, which contributed to the construction and consolidation of what Afroz Taj has termed the “Urdu cosmopolis”. This has helped modernists such as Tabassum articulate and negotiate modes of modernity within the broader context of Urdu modernism, which has been addressing a felt gap in the reception of Joyce within the Urdu cosmopolis. Writers such as Rashid Jahan have adapted Joyce’s works for the stage after coming into contact with the works of European writers (Jalil 2014, xviii). “Murdey”, a compilation of translations of Joyce’s texts into Urdu by Shahid Ahmed Dehlvi, has been digitised by the Rekhta Foundation (1980).¹ Joyce’s influence on Urdu modernism has been little more than spectral. Taking these developments into consideration, I argue that Tabassum’s semi-erotic stories and literary representations of feudal values, societal taboos, and harem practices merit further critical attention within the broader context of modernism, both in India and Ireland. I compare the reproduction of Orientalized Hyderabad in the twentieth century with Joyce’s twentieth-century representations of opulent indulgence, despotism, and sexuality in colonial Dublin in an attempt to offer some comments on the operations of new Orientalisms in the twentieth century. Tabassum’s *Sin*, as minoritized literature, engages with questions of sexual experience, aesthetic form, and what comes to constitute the “proper stuff of fiction” in twentieth-century prose. Joyce had similar concerns with the form of the novel, but has received considerably more attention due to his “international and cult status” (Barry 2000, xxix).

Methodology and Literature Review

What is at stake in this article is not the question of “influence” or a demonstration of the “intertextual condition” of the Joycean text — much work has already been done on this, with scholars such as Shinjini Chattopadhyay, Dirk Van Hulle, and Flavie Epié demonstrating the sheer volume of advancements in

genetic criticism and Joyce Studies — rather, the emphasis is on a close reading of *Sin* and *Ulysses* in an attempt to draw out the interactions between a “hypercanonical text” and “minoritised literature” and the comparative value of the resulting study. In “Gender and Geomodernisms”, Yogita Goyal has shown how geomodernism seeks to “broaden the modernist archive, rethinking established canons and including a variety of alternative traditions” (Miller 2015, 89). The project of undoing elitist accounts and expanding modernist archives is relevant to the concerns addressed in the article. Such decentralized avenues of engaging with Modernist texts enable me to develop a comparatist working model with which to begin reading modernist texts such as *Ulysses* and *Sin*, each of which deploys radical aesthetics in its cultural critique of life in both Irish and Indian contexts.

Throughout the article, I use the term “Orientalism” to invoke the Saidian notion of the West’s complicity in “stripping humanity to ruthless cultural and racial essences” (Said 1995, 34). As a result, I demonstrate how Tabassum’s fiction reveals the operations of Orientalism as a direct effect of colonial policies, not just culturally but also in medical, legal, and political registers. Take, for instance, the permeation of domestic borders by the onset of “liminal” figures in twentieth-century India, linked inextricably to contagion, untouchability, and disease. In the twentieth-century fiction of Wajida Tabassum, these liminal figures encompass, but are not limited to, nautch girls (Indian dancing girls or courtesans), performing women, courtesans and dancers, prostitutes, eunuchs, and the “discarded” women of the Nawab’s harems, each of whom has been subject to exoticising and dehumanizing characterization in Orientalist imagination. The reference to the word “orient” or “oriental”, for example, occurs in Joyce in a few contexts. Carol Schloss has pointed out the similarities between Bloom’s fantasies and late nineteenth-century travel writing, while tracing ancient sources behind Leopold Bloom’s fantasies of the Orient as a place to indulge in sensual delights (Schloss 1998, 107). Schloss also undoes Bloom’s sumptuous fantasies in revealing the underlying social and religious realities in harem contexts. In this article, I examine the representations of female professional performers and courtesans in *Sin* and *Ulysses* against the broader context of orientalism and despotism.

Intertextual Echoes: Continuities and Ruptures

While Joyce’s Gerty MacDowell has been singled out for embodying a “knowing sexuality” (Fogarty 2022, 65) and for challenging traditional gender roles and expectations, Tabassum’s “harem women” (not a homogenous category as imagined by Leopold Bloom in *Ulysses*, but individualised in each prose piece) rise to sexual agency in tellingly individualistic ways against a crushingly patriarchal twentieth-century context where home and nation are conflated: the Nawab of Hyderabad (the state), complicit in imperial administration (the nation sphere), is depicted in Tabassum’s fiction as the man of the

1. At the time during which the research on this article was being conducted, the translation of “Murdey”, a compilation of translations of James Joyce into Urdu, has been attributed to Shahid Ahmed Dehlvi. The information on the digitised Urdu translation (found on the official Rekhta Foundation website) also confirms the details of this translation. The Cultural Academy, Gaya is enlisted as the publisher. The information published on this material is based on the information found on the digitised and preserved Urdu translation of Joyce.

house (home sphere). That Gerty MacDowell embodies an Irish whiteness, corresponding to a certain “vantage point” in the world (Fogarty 2022, 66), markedly different from the harem women in Tabassum’s fiction, emphasises the complex historical and racial moments embodied in both texts. Tabassum’s stories often produce visceral effects on the reader as each of the nineteen stories is “determined to shock” (Tabassum 2021, xii) and “create an explosion” on both the form and content (Tabassum 2021, xiv) of twentieth-century Urdu prose. Tabassum’s Modernist project is tied closely to textual acts demonstrating her female protagonists “negotiating with agency” in matters of textuality and sexuality (Hamid 2022, 141). South Asian women have traditionally been cast as “instrumental objects” rather than “active subjects of liberation and improvement” (Beverley 2015, 205). The representation of female Muslim protagonists across spectrums of disability and desirability in *Sin* as active agents of desire and intimacy offers a close intertextual echo to the construction of Gerty as a disabled desiring subject (“little limping devil”, Joyce 1986, 13. 852). Tabassum’s female protagonists break away from traditional and limiting representations as “passive victims”, and instead engage with Muslim women as desiring subjects, and even “living, multifaceted beings who cannot be reduced to their religious or gendered identity” (Hamid 2022, 146). Where the “woman author” and her “fictional personae” are orchestrated by a male author in “Nausicaa” (Fogarty 2022, 67), often foregrounding female differences in “sexist, racist and ableist” terms (Fogarty 2022, 68), Tabassum demonstrates how the male voice has inflected traditional narrative representations of “fallen” women, rendering them mute and homogenous entities in similarly oppressive ways. The representation of, on the one hand, unhappy homes, poverty, lack of opportunity, and violence resulting from alcoholism from dominant male characters (Joyce 1986, 13. 290-302), and the “proactive, sexually aware adult” (Fogarty 2022, 67) participating in colonial modernity on the other, also remain critical intertextual echoes in each context.

The four base elements of lust, pride, greed, and envy determine the energies of Tabassum’s short stories, and help Tabassum examine the implications that follow when her female characters are set free to “feast” on their private desires and emotions, specifically those “layers of denied, smothered feelings” (Tabassum 2021, xvii). Through this, Tabassum looks to address middle-class taboos and the depravities of the orthodox household, giving voice to women in their “silent despair” and “eventual detonation” (Tabassum 2021, xvii): “[t]hese stories [are] my saviours” (Tabassum 2021, 109), Wajida Tabassum documents in a personal essay titled “Meri Kahaani” (“My Story”) indicating the difficulty and darkness of navigating the writer’s path as a woman whose world remains “blanketed, conventional” (Tabassum 2021, 133). *Sin* abounds in symbolism — from garments to food metaphors, to Islamic injunctions and sensuous imagery — Tabassum’s work remains a key document of colonial modernism in

the twentieth century, even as it remains formally avant-garde. Joyce and Tabassum demonstrate how elaborate sexual designs underpin sartorial choices made by female protagonists in both *Ulysses* and *Sin*. Where Gerty is self-congratulatory in having decided to “put on the transparent stockings thinking Reggy Wylie might be out” (Joyce 1986, 13. 426-427), but which served its purpose now for a different “foreigner” looking man on the strand (Joyce 1986, 13. 416), Tabassum similarly draws attention to her female protagonists exercising sexual agency through sartorial choices of a “beautiful brocade” of “gharara” (Tabassum 2021, 23), “saree over a lehenga” (Tabassum 2021, 25), or a “green lungi and silk kurta” (Tabassum 2021, 71), which locks in a “carnal gaze” from the object of the woman’s desire (Tabassum 2021, 25). Fine clothing contributes to visual stimulations of sexual excess, perversion, and pleasure in the contexts of both *Ulysses* and *Sin*. Tabassum demonstrated before modern readers what it was like to imagine an Indian woman with intellectual and sexual agency, a stark contrast to what was being consumed by Indian readers and spectators in film and popular media (Urfi 2018, 126).

“Weaving Dreams on Paper”: Critical Reviews, the Female Reader, and the Place of Urdu

The irony of foregrounding the reading habits of a young female Dubliner in a literary work only to be deemed unsuitable for female readership is encountered in the publication history of the thirteenth chapter of *Ulysses* in the United States (Fogarty 2022, 58). With such a parallel in mind, the critical reviews and censorship of Wajida Tabassum’s stories center around the themes of sexuality and female readership, which ironically sets her up for the predicament of censorship and inadmissibility of female reading due in large part because her female protagonists embody a “sexual knowingness” previously encountered in the construction of Gerty MacDowell (Fogarty 2022, 58) in the Irish context. The conception of the thirteenth chapter of *Ulysses*, its serialisation in *The Little Review*, and its subsequent trial in 1919-1920 in response to the textual moment of Bloom’s masturbation (Joyce 1986, 13. 851; also Joyce 1986, 13. 517-520, Joyce 1986, 13.563-567, Joyce 1986, 13. 740) offers a stunning and hitherto unexamined parallel to Tabassum’s serialization of Modernist prose. The phenomenon of *woman-as-reader* is encountered at length in Tabassum’s “The Dove”, and marginally elsewhere over the course of her fiction, as when a female character borrows a copy of a Thomas Hardy novel from her beau in “The Identity Trap” (Tabassum 2021, 83). Curiously, the display of a female character’s reading and sexual agency revolted the societies in which Joyce and Tabassum operated. The cultural impact, reception, and trial of the thirteenth chapter of *Ulysses* found an unprecedented focus on the “policing of what women read and the corrupting influence of unsuitable material on a female audience” (Fogarty 2022, 58), which also framed the debates around

the publication of obscene literary material by Wajida Tabassum in the leading magazines of her day.

According to the critical reviews of her time, Tabassum's stories, serialised in popular twentieth-century literary magazines such as *Biswin Sadi* ("twentieth-century") and *Shama* ("Candle"), possessed the dissident energies to shock *sharif* ("noble", "honourable", "legitimate") culture and societal expectations. These critical reviews represent the consolidation of reader-response on emerging work, comprising contributions by specialist readers, literary critics, and the general reading public in a latter part of the twentieth century: "Wajida Begum has left Ismat behind. Can these stories be read by noble girls?"; elsewhere, "Her work will shock married women" due in part because for Tabassum, the proper stuff of fiction involved casting "naked truths in stories" (Tabassum 2021, 122-223). That these parallels are observed in a comparative context, particularly within the first and second half of the twentieth century, indicates the persistence of the "inadmissibility" of women's reading in the Indian context, as Fogarty has observed in the Irish context. Tabassum's fiction signalled the transition from nineteenth to twentieth-century attitudes to sexuality and the redefinition of sexual roles against the perpetuation of sexist constructions of traditional female protagonists in twentieth-century Indian literature and film. It also interestingly corresponds to the development of the private sexual narrative in Joyce's fiction of the early to mid twentieth century, which moved away from the concept of sexuality with relation to sexual health and reproduction to inquiries into sexual perversity (Brown 1985, 52).

While "noble" girls and "married women" in heteronormative Hyderabad Muslim households may not have been the intended targets of Tabassum's attack, that male critics could raise concerns about Tabassum's potential to scandalise and "offend" these categories of women from *sharif* or noble households (particularly married women) is telling of themes, characters, and reading practices that had become habitual, and that was beginning to be destabilised by Tabassum's Modernist project: fiction before modernism reproduced deference toward the clergy and nobility in sustaining gender hierarchies and roles. The contents of *Shama* (a journal that published Tabassum's own work) were also considered inappropriate for respectable households and "decent society" due to its publication of titillating fiction and illustrations (Taj 2020, 185). The risqué image and taboo cover illustrations attracted more readers for *Shama*, and consequently, for Tabassum. Tabassum seems to have been aware that when it becomes habitual, reading becomes "predictable, inflexible, resistant to novelty" (Mahaffey 2007, 4). Tabassum's Modernist prose pieces, particularly her short stories, share the quality of *Dubliners* in remaining elusive and open-ended. Wajida Tabassum's "Up, Further Up!" contains the following reference to Pasha Dulhan in relation to her body, for example: "Her body, moist as a wet monsoon night, was tauter than a maestro's sitar strings" (Tabassum 2021, 22). Compare

these lines to the protagonist's affections for Mangan's sister in "Araby": "But my body was like a harp and her words and gestures were like fingers running upon the wires" (Joyce 1958, 29). In each instance, the "sitar" and the "harp" are conjured to evoke the same sentiment of desire across their respective cultural contexts.

Tabassum's serialisation in *Biswin Sadi* and *Shama* contributed to the status of Urdu as a "cosmopolitan language" (Sherman 2015, 154) in addition to the consolidation of the "Urdu cosmopolis", which served as Tabassum's readership in resisting "the fractures of religious communalism" (Taj 2020, 178). In its role as a "hybrid linguistic vehicle", these standardised Urdu journals presented themselves as instrumental for Tabassum in raising questions of textuality and sexuality in fiction alongside critiquing religiosity and nobility (Dähnhardt 2002, 370). That Tabassum's writing attacks the nobility in Hyderabad, and that "noble" men and women were offended by it, suggests that perhaps Tabassum was writing to deliver a blow to her own readers in the vernacular so that they may recognize themselves in the pages of her fiction carried in the leading magazines and periodicals of the day. The Urdu reading public was geographically dispersed (Taj 2020, 178-179), which helped Urdu literary journals consolidate readership across India, thereby increasing Tabassum's own readership. Stephen Alter has observed in the "Foreword" to *Biswin Sadi: Memoirs* by Abdul Jamil Urfi: "[...] the [Urdu] language had a widespread egalitarian currency in post-Partition India, not just in mushairas (poetic symposia) but in everyday life" (Urfi 2018, 12). Afroz Taj alludes to Urdu's status as a "transnational language" linking readers in India, Pakistan, and the diaspora, with the expansion of *Shama* beyond India's borders (Taj 2020, 205).

The Construction of Indian Stereotypes and Images

It is worth noting that the question of Orientalism, either in the context of Ireland or India cannot be singularly or facilely explained (Schloss 1998, 270). Where Tabassum consolidates dissident energies brewing within regal homes functioning as the seat of empire in conservative Hyderabad, Joyce draws from the "conservative outpost" of Ireland on the European periphery in his constructions of the Orient. For the most part, India still represented to the Irish "a distant, exotic land", and in some accounts of Irish Orientalism, the Orient is also seen as "a ticket to adventure and romance" (Lennon 2004, 176). In one of Joyce's lectures, he employs the phrase "Orient" as being the "true home of mysticism", with the mystic books of the West merely shining with a "reflected light" (Barry 2000, 180). "An Encounter" in *Dubliners* details the doors of "escape" which stories set in faraway lands opened up for readers who were shackled by the "restraining influence" of colonial institutions (Joyce 1958, 17). In the Irish context, the word "harem" makes an appearance in Oliver Gogarty's 1906 articles, referenced in Joyce's personal letters, which calls out the false righteousness of

the English common man, army, and nation: “he cannot perceive that at his very feet in India are slave-compounds, where women are incarcerated with more than the horrors of the harem to be debauched at the good pleasure of the Army” (Ellmann 1975, 108). Gogarty’s reference to the harem in this context is characterised by phrases such as “incarcerated”, “horror”, and debauchery which he deploys to demonstrate the greater horrors inflicted by the English Army. The imagery of being “incarcerated” in the harem and exploited by lustful Nawabs is the image that Tabassum reproduces in her representation of Oriental despotism in *Sin*. The harem, as referred to in Gogarty’s article, in local terms, is closer to the brothel in the Irish context. This points to how the “harem” as a concept has implied a bundled set of images which remains “ubiquitous and elusive”, encompassing long-standing stereotypical notions that have conventionally been associated with “passivity, silence, incarceration, and sensuality” in the Anglophone lexicon, especially in relation to Islamicate societies (Booth 2010, 4, 17-18). A primary reading of *Sin* reveals how Tabassum relies heavily upon the image of the ‘imperial harem’ in her modernist portraits of colonial India (comprising the wives of the Nawab, eunuchs, and the servant class), and her construction of the harem foregrounds the challenges and transgressions of political authoritarianism. In *Sin*, the word “harem” appears as an arrangement of domestic space in the story “The Flesh Market”, where, for the first time, the term is invoked in relation to the “customs of [the nawab’s] palace”, which readers quickly learn as being oppressive and exploitative in nature. In contrast, the space of the harem appears to be subsumed more broadly under the general category of the oriental edifice in the textual construction of *Ulysses* (Tabassum 2021, 30-31).

While Joyce’s texts exhibit a degree of self-reflexivity in their constructions of the Orient (a quality that Tabassum’s texts do not), they still participate within Orientalist discourse as it remains reliant on its imagery and vocabulary. Both Joyce and Tabassum, I argue, reproduce conflicting strategies of representation in their imaginative writing since they can do no more than employ the terms of Orientalism to critique imperial powers. What is at stake here is, as Joseph Lennon identified, how the “power to represent a colonized people is related to the power of self-representation, both of which run the danger of merely reproducing the power structure within which they operate” (Lennon 2004, xxix) and the “divided consciousness of the colonial subject” (Nolan 1995, 130). Though these Modernists do not identify as proud subjects of the British Empire, issues of ambivalent identity and textual experiments with “dynamics of exoticism” render them liable to charges of employing Orientalist strategies. While Joyce resorts directly to the word “Oriental” in differing contexts (at times canonical or rhetorical, at other times, “human material” governed institutionally by the West, and still others, colonial edifices, garments, and undesignated geographical and imaginative entity), Tabassum does not employ the term (we shall turn to this

shortly).

The word “orient” occurs in “Circe”, when the “Orient” is conjured as a vast expanse as in Eden (characterised in this episode as encompassing mountains, lakes, shores, and aroma), or the delight at beholding novelty or a sense of the sublime (“burning”): “(Gazelles are leaping, feeding on the mountains. Near are lakes. Round their shores file shadows black of cedargroves. Aroma rises, a strong hairgrowth of resin. It burns, the orient, a sky of sapphire, cleft by the bronze flight of eagles” (Joyce 1986, 15.1324). Though the reference to “cedargroves” contributes to a sense of Edenic glory, it remains undercut by the reality of the colonisation of forested environments. The gazelle functions as a signifier of the Orient elsewhere in “Circe”, specifically in Bloom’s interaction with Zoe (Joyce 1986, 15.1317). In this way, the text participates in the confirmation of the Orient as phantasmagorical in the reader’s eye. The image of the Orient as “celestial” is encountered additionally in “Lotus-Eaters”, with a reference to the “heathen Chinese” and “Budda their god” (Joyce 1986, 5.326-328) against the broader context of the Christian saviour complex associated with the civilizing ideology of European imperialism. In “The Wandering Rocks”, the Orient is constructed as “immortal” (Joyce 1986, 10.815). In *Annotations to Ulysses*, the entry for lines 43-45 in the “Proteus” chapter references visions of Eden in seventeenth-century texts, the King James manuscript, and the Catholic Encyclopedia to suggest the “unchanging” quality of the Orient as the dominant image in Joyce’s representation of the East. In “Calypso” and “Lotus-Eaters”, “Orientals” simultaneously reference ethnic groups and language (as in Turks, Cinghalese): Bloom recalls their language as being “dark” (Joyce 1986, 4.88-96); and their activities sedentary and lethargic (Joyce 1986, 5.31), which reinforces the Saidian observation, “An Oriental lives in the Orient, he lives a life of Oriental ease, in a state of Oriental fatalism” (Said 1995, 102). The “Orient” is then constructed as infinite space, and falling lethargically into a state of inactivity is the predominant image of the Orient in “Lotus-Eaters”. These vast territories of unconquered space teem with the possibility of “strange customs” (Joyce 1986, 5.293-295). This word recurs in Tabassum with reference to the uncharted territory of Hyderabad as a frontier and despotic state.

Wajida Tabassum wrote in Deccani Urdu, a literary and spoken language in Hyderabad (Beverley 2019, 1047), distinctly different from (the highly Persianised) Hindustani Urdu. Tabassum’s translator, Reema Abbasi, has argued that Deccan customs and practices, as documented by Tabassum, would be significantly difficult for modern-day readers to apprehend in the original. Abbasi has contextualized the production of Tabassum’s work within the context of old Hyderabad Deccan, with limited access to the outside world, under impoverished circumstances. Her “language constitutes metaphors, analogies, dialogue, imagery,” and turns of phrases bearing no semblance to Indian modernists such as Saadat

Hasan Manto and Ismat Chughtai.² This should offer her modern day readers a perspective on her singular position as a modernist producing her work under isolating conditions, by which I mean to refer to her abject poverty, her relative unpopularity in comparison to Rashid Jahan, Ismat Chughtai, and Qurratulain Hyder, and various other socio-cultural and personal obstacles against which it seemed impossible to garner the kind of hegemony enjoyed by writers affiliated with the Progressive Writers' Association. Where Joyce's personal library records as many items as possible sources for the composition of his chapters, in "My Story", one learns of how Tabassum's individual access to libraries is greatly constrained due to the "shrunken stock of books" that she had at her disposal in Hyderabad (Tabassum 2021, 118). This has also meant that Tabassum was reliant on her imaginative prowess as a source of literary construction, and at times, one that projected the motif of the destabilised Orient as insinuating danger (Said 1995, 57). For these reasons, in her oblique dismantling and critique of the complicity and despotism of state structures operating with colonial administration (the Nawab's regime), her caricatures often fall prey to the Orientalist construction of barbaric sexuality that has traditionally characterised "Oriental" people, confirming the unquestioned Orientalist assumption of the inability of indigenous people to self-govern without descending further into chaos and barbarism. The enduring power of Orientalist cultural legacy is embodied in the "Cyclops" episode of *Ulysses*, where we encounter a reference to the empires of Ireland and India as white and non-white colonies united by English rule:

"Thereon embossed in excellent smithwork was seen the image of a queen of regal port, scion of the house of Brunswick, Victoria her name, Her Most Excellent Majesty, by grace of God of the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Ireland and of the British dominions beyond the sea, queen, defender of the faith, Empress of India, even she, who bore rule, a victress over many peoples, the wellbeloved, for they knew and loved her from the rising of the sun to the going down thereof, the pale, the dark, the ruddy and the ethiopian"
(Joyce 1986, 12.292).

The persistence of artistic and cultural legacies ("smithwork") points to Great Britain as a sovereign, self-contained, unified empire bound by order and tradition. The passage abounds in signifiers of royalty, demonstrating the Queen's power against a broader theatre of power managed (as in this specific instance) by artisans. Tabassum's construction of the state of Hyderabad in India as destabilised frontier descending into chaos and despotism, on the other hand, opens itself to a form of cultural stereotyping which was prevalent in nineteenth-century academic and imaginative constructions of the "mysterious" Orient (Said 1995, 26), particularly in the

way that "Oriental despotism" is spoken and understood (Said 1995, 32). Throughout Tabassum's work, there is an emphasis on the lascivious character of the Nawab: his breath is often "bitter with alcohol" and body sweetened by the "scent of jasmine" (S 17); his stately room covered in "odours of seduction" (Tabassum 201, 17); he is frequently characterised by a "ravenous lust" (Tabassum 2021, 18). In "The Alms of Death", women in the story corroborate the sexual exploitation of the Nawab: "[...] many ladies narrated torrid tales from his heydays — ceaseless sexual exploits, damsels and orgies" (Tabassum 2021, 90). Though Tabassum's caricature serves satirical ends, her depiction of the Nawab's despotic rule is representative of the kind of Orientalism seen in the thought of Balfour or Cromer in their descriptions of the "Oriental" as "irrational, depraved, fallen" (Said 1995, 40). In the specific context of the state of Hyderabad, its "geographical setting" and the "complexity of the state's political practices" made the frontier prone to dacoity (Bhukya 2022, 118). Tabassum's fiction runs the risk of being reminiscent of British Orientalists' accounts of unquenchable Oriental despotism thirst for power (Lennon 2004, 177), as well as the portrayal of native Hyderabadis as conniving. The particular complexity of such a representation lies in its erasure of the colonial construction of criminality in terms of the caste system, which tapped into the framing of fanaticism, deceptiveness, and cruelty as inherent qualities of the subject race (Bhukya 2022, 120). In "Sirens", Bloom's recalling of the anecdote of the Shah of Persia wiping his nose on a curtain in Buckingham Palace, and then attributing this to be the custom of his country ("Custom his country perhaps", Joyce 1986, 13. 1050-1051) reveals a lesser examined, profaning caricature which circulated in the nineteenth-century, operating based on racist Orientalist strategies, and the colonial construction of depravity as inherent qualities of a subject people or race, whether based on religion or creed.

Joyce's ignorance of life beyond the Pale has formed the basis of much criticism of his representation of the East as *topos*: "Joyce remains in his own words 'The lazy Dubliner [...] [who] knows his country *only* by hearsay'" (Barry 2000, xxi). An instance of both Joyce and Tabassum writing based on a combination of hearsay, Oriental imagery, and religious and scriptural metaphors (i.e. consigning the Oriental within the Orient, as embodied in the concept of "re-orientalism") is seen when we juxtapose these lines from the "Proteus" episode in *Ulysses* — "Spouse and helpmate of Adam Kadmon: Heva, naked Eve. She had no navel. Gaze. Belly without blemish, bulging big, a buckler of taut vellum, no, whiteheaped corn, orient and immortal, standing from everlasting to everlasting. Womb of sin. Wombed in sin darkness I was too, made not begotten" (Joyce 1986, 3.32) against lines from Wajida Tabassum's "The Alms of Death" (Tabassum 2021, 53 and 95). The contrast offers insight into the different approaches that modernists, such as Joyce, had regarding the representation of the East. Joyce's reliance on Oriental imagery parallels Wajida Tabassum's own

2. Reema Abbasi, interview (2022): <https://www.platform-mag.com/literature/reema-abbasi.html>

representation of the world of the harem in India, where she draws on “literary descriptions” of descriptions.

Wajida Tabassum borrows inceptional energy from Urdu literary descriptions/idioms, either from hearsay or now lost material, which are supported at times with references to Arabic sources: “Arabic literature had sensuous imagery for women of beauty — ‘a cloth draped on a naked body should cover her bosom and hips, every other pore must throb for the cloth’” (Tabassum 2021, 95); or her description of the Nawab’s sexual foraging: “[a] *porcelain* young woman, as *fresh as dew*, had him hypnotized at first sight” (Tabassum 2021, 53). These images, combining the sacred and the profane, seem to participate in the commodification of women for the consumption of the male gaze. Afroz Taj notes how the cover paintings of *Shama* can be viewed through the same lens: the viewer, like Tabassum’s reader, is exposed to the “scopic pleasure of the female body” (Taj 2020, 187), where clothing accentuates rather than hides women’s figures. In either context, the idealised image of an eroticised “untouched” female is presented to the spectator/reader. At a first reading of these lines, what is evident is the eroticised representation of a woman whose body is exposed as it is concealed. Tabassum’s imagery here is closer to a harem odalisque than a Greek statuary. The sources remain widely unclear and obscure. However, their images signify the transitoriness and eroticism associated with Orientalist depictions of harem inmates, and we are uncertain as to whether these lines exist in the Arabic lexicon, are references to idioms or scriptures, or if these are apocryphal in nature. A potential additional source for Tabassum’s references to, or constructions of, visions of paradise and houris might stem from Ghalib’s ghazals. Tabassum’s allusion to Ghalib’s ghazal “*Taskeen ko hum na roye jo*” is first documented in her reflective piece titled “My Story” (Tabassum 2021, 118), offering a stronger possibility that Tabassum’s constructions of Eastern domestic spaces, and her use of poetic language, relates to or is influenced by her reading of Ghalib who embodies, as Priyamvada Gopal has argued, male desire (Gopal 2009, 144).

The Nautch-girl in Colonial Writing and Women Performers in *Sin* and *Ulysses*

In Tabassum’s *Sin*, one encounters the figure of the “nautch-girl” (Indian dancing girl, courtesan, or hereditary female performer) in the character of Gauhar Jaan, which stages the anxieties of the imperial imagination as well as the misrepresentative stereotypes surrounding the nautch dancer as a public woman. The nautch-girl has been the subject of descriptions in English colonialist representations, nineteenth-century treatises, missionary and reformist accounts, colonial iconography, and travel writings. Tabassum’s descriptions of Gauhar Jaan’s “coy ways” (Tabassum 2021, 9) replicate descriptions of nautch girls and their movements circulated in nineteenth-century treatises as coquettish or enticing (Walker 2014, 559). The

nautch has often raised questions of propriety since they possessed a higher degree of freedom than married women, had access to space and movement, and led a nondomestic and nonmarital lifestyle opposed to the “Angel in the House” role confining Indian and British women yoked to the empire while offering their performing bodies for the male gaze (Jagpal 2009, 253-254, 257). This has led to their representation in missionary literature as subjects of rescue work and narrative (Wallace 1998, 187). In Tabassum’s “Fallen Venus”, the courtesan Gauhar Jaan is invited to perform at weddings as a “centrepiece”, which is indicative not only of artistry in one sense but also the *performance* of class and sophistication in “wealthy” or “stately” homes associated with the nautch-girl. Gauhar Jaan performing the *mujraa* (singing and dancing by a prostitute, as in a wedding) is a “testimony to grandeur” (Tabassum 2021, 7). The crossing of acceptable thresholds by such figures has come to constitute the “defilement” of the “respectable home”, reinforced by nineteenth-century Victorian perceptions of performing women, tawaifs (courtesan), and devadasis (dances/musicians/consorts in the temple) as diseased, immoral, or fallen women, who were stigmatised by the British imperial regime in India based on racial, sexist, and Orientalist laws and literary productions. The presence of the nautch girl in “boundless” spaces such as the bazaar (unsanitized space as opposed to the confines of the respectable home) poses the threat of contamination by the “unregulated female body” (Jagpal 2009, 256), extending to a symbol of an exotic and deviant India. The recurring trope of the “fallen” woman in Joyce and Tabassum signifies to readers and consumers of Modernist fiction how prostitution and untouchability in these respective Modernist texts are represented both as ‘product’ and ‘problem’ of the empire. Tabassum’s “Chhinaal” in particular documents the misogyny infesting the colonial city of Hyderabad. For example, the men who stalk and scrutinise Dulhan Begum and who frequent brothels and project fantasies onto the nautch-girl are among the first to shame her for her profession, “You are as used as the flaccid remains of a flower” (Tabassum 2021, 13). This is a phenomenon which meets its precedent in Stephen in *Portrait*, “His lips would not bend to kiss her” (Joyce 1954, 114). The courtesan in *Sin* is often overwhelmingly pursued by the “infamy” of preconception as well as misfortune, which “stalks” her much like the men surrounding her and refusing to “leave” her (Tabassum 2021, 16).

In Tabassum, “fallen women” go by many names. Various metaphors of clothing are often deployed as descriptors of perceived purity: thus, the harlot is also the “tainted woman” (Tabassum 2021, 11), “*sullied* woman” (Tabassum 2021, 12), and the “cheap slut” (Tabassum 2021, 11). Gauhar Jaan, representative of the nautch-girl, is commonly perceived as a prostitute: this is reinforced as intrinsic colonial thinking, which one gleans from access to the inner thoughts of several characters, primarily her lover Sabir and his mother Amma Bi: “[f]or days on end, a battle raged in his mind. ‘How can I lose my heart to a nautch girl

who serves hearts and bodies. How?” (Tabassum 2021, 7). His mother, Amma Bi, who “prays five times a day, observed fasts, and went into seclusion during Ramzan” (Tabassum 2021, 11) objects to his conjugal union with “a tainted woman from a brothel” (Tabassum 2021, 11) — “[t]hey destroy homes, how can she nurture one?” (Tabassum 2021, 11); elsewhere, “Son, feet that know the thrills of a mujra cannot be still within the four walls of a home. How can a woman who has seen countless men, be satisfied by just one?” (Tabassum 2021, 12). Where she is invited into wealthy homes to entertain and seduce, within the ritualistic household of Amma Bi, Gauhar Jaan is shown as “contaminating” the house. Gauhar Jaan crosses the threshold from being the “precious commodity” of a “brothel” (Tabassum 2021, 15) to an untouchable body in the heteronormative twentieth-century household; her very presence is feared to defile and disrupt the sanctity of the home. Amma Bi’s description of Dulhan Begum’s construction as “superfluous body” is witnessed in various textual instances, thereby demonstrating the conflation of “performing women” with “prostitute” and “contagion”: “I always say, a whore, like chickenpox, cannot stay inside the house,” (Tabassum 2021, 11; Tabassum 2021, 12; Tabassum 2021, 16). Such an association of the “nautch girl” with contagious disease has its roots in British colonialism and twentieth-century Hindu social reform theories. Through the medium of print (pamphlets and newspapers), nautch girls were increasingly associated with bringing about bodily weakness and disease in the twentieth century. The fear of female sexuality and the breaking down of spiritual succour and bodily immunity can be discerned in Amma Bi’s palpable apprehensions about the presence of Gauhar Jaan in the house. Court rhetoric in the Indian context of the twentieth century has traditionally conflated the image of a prostitute with moral and physical contamination (Rai 2024, 164). Amma Bi’s conflation of the prostitute with disease is thus rooted in colonialist discourse, which found its way into the law and literature paradigm in the second half of the twentieth century.

The representation of the “nautch abode” (that is, the abode of the “nautch-girl”) in “The Fallen Venus” is a curious occurrence in Tabassum as it indicates a reference to “literary descriptions” (Tabassum 2021, 7) over an actual place as in Joyce’s own reference to the “Orient” as embodying a set of descriptions rather than actual topos, one that could even be rooted in colonial and/or Orientalist iconography: “...a madame, a tutor, musicians, seated on ivory sheets, against plush, velvet bolsters” (Tabassum 2021, 8). From this particular textual instance, one can infer that Tabassum may be building on the exotic and Orientalist spectacle of the “dancing girl”, which has conventionally captured the imagination of Western sojourners. What is noteworthy is how Tabassum’s imaginative portrayal of a nautch bride confronting the false respectability of the noble household becomes an unconventional subject of twentieth-century fiction, at the same time, which raises productive questions about

the insubstantiality of constructed identities such as the “nautch girl”. Contrary to the normative gender norms in twentieth-century Hyderabad, Tabassum’s construction of the “nautch girl” attempts to reconfigure questions of “respectability” in modern times. Tabassum stages the courtesan as the “centrepiece” of the house, not only in the storyworld, but also on a symbolic level to lend readers access to the courtesan’s own voice — one among many symbolic voices that British imperialist discourse sought to erase, and limit almost entirely to their merit in sexual transactions.

The representation of women performers extends to *Ulysses*: “where lots cocottes beautiful dressed much about princesses like are dancing cancan” (Joyce 1986, 15.3885). Cancan dancing is associated with high-kicks that reveal the petticoat and the leg, and the cancan performers Joyce has in mind here have also been represented as middle-ranking courtesans. Joyce’s text demonstrates the collapse of the entertainer identity with the category of the courtesan, where performing women are reduced to their sexual appeal alone, as in representations of performing women in Tabassum. These performing women were also reported to have many “conquests”. The courtesan is a construction of the male gaze, even as Molly or Gerty remain constructions of pornographic fantasy. Readers are introduced to the “nautch girl” in *Sin* primarily as a textual construction of the dominant power group (men) gazing at her at a *mujra* gathering. One must pay close attention to how she remains mute as the story progresses, with her voice emerging only at the end of the story, demonstrating the stark difference between how she is projected (“Prostitutes have the same eye for everyone” Tabassum 2021, 9) and her own identity, which eludes representation. Here, it is worth noting that this is reminiscent of the Oriental woman model: “she never spoke of herself, she never represented her emotions, presence, or history. *He* spoke for and represented her” (Said 1995, 6).

In *Ulysses*, the courtesan is conjured in sexual fantasies: “What possibility suggested itself? The possibility of exercising virile power of fascination in the not immediate future after an expensive repast in a private apartment in the company of an elegant courtesan, of corporal beauty,” (Joyce 1986, 17.1849). There is an emphasis on the carnal beauty of the courtesan (her body and desirability) at the same time in which readers are presented with the misogynistic ideal that male sexual power, encompassing procreativity and vigour, extends to the male power of imagination. Virility in the specific context of “Ithaca” could also be associated with the performativity of self-control, emanating from proximity to a courtesan within an enclosed space (a brothel or, as in this instance, a private apartment). The word “virile” here is redolent of the conventions of romance novels and sentimental fiction previously encountered in “Nausicaa”, where Gerty details Bloom’s most “virile” moments as a man exercising immense self-control: “Passionate nature though he was Gerty could see that he had enormous control over himself.

One moment he had been there, fascinated by a loveliness that made him gaze, and the next moment it was the quiet gravefaced man, selfcontrol expressed in every line of his distinguishedlooking face” (Joyce 1986, 13. 540-543). In the particular context of “Ithaca”, Orientalist language and misogynist ideals intersect to depict the courtesan’s body as an exoticised, unrealized imaginative territory (“fascination”), which calls out for the self-possession of the “virile” male reader, who is invited to a heightened state of arousal. In “Circe”, the immortal beauty of the Nymph presents itself in dark contrast to the “corporeal beauty” of the courtesan, with Bloom in undue praise of her “classic curves” (Joyce 1986, 15.445).

Conclusion

Literary magazines such as *Biswin Sadi* and *Shama* played a significant role in the cultivation of the Urdu cosmopolitan ideal in the context of South Asian modernity, which allowed modernists such as Wajida Tabassum to articulate and negotiate “modes of modernity” alongside holding up a “proverbial mirror” to society beyond Hyderabad (Taj 2020, 179). In this article, I have shown how James Joyce drew on dominant circulated images of the Orient and the Oriental to convey the experience of the East and to represent the East as *topos*, as Wajida Tabassum looked to more local sources (Urdu, classical Persian poetry) for her representation of domestic colonial spaces. The conversations that emerge from such a comparison may well serve as a foundation to emphasise the “whiteness” and the “cultural capital” of *Ulysses* (Ward 2022, 337), which has ensured the continuity of research and work on Joyce. I measure this capital against Tabassum’s positionality as a writer of colour and an Indian Muslim, whose archives have stagnated despite advancing a modernist aesthetic that resonates with aspects of Joyce’s own in the Indian continent, even as it demonstrates its own distinct aesthetic qualities as a specimen of peripheral modernism. The article offers a brief commentary on the dissonance between the exotic “text” that Orientalists study on the one hand, and socio-cultural and religious realities on the other. Orientalists’ marked contempt or disinterest in the object of their research is evident in the Englishman’s engagement with the nautch girl. Anecdotal or oral accounts of nautch girls in English colonialist history reveal deep-seated colonial prejudices, which are reproduced in *Sin* and *Ulysses*. The courtesans referred to by Joyce and Tabassum do not confine themselves to heteronormative gender roles implicit in the sacred boundaries of the respectable home. This, among other factors, becomes the basis of the courtesan’s association with fast-spreading contagion as an “unregulated” female body. As Malcolm Sen has shown, Orientalism relies on the intertwined web of references that gain authenticity through repetition of symbols and motifs (Sen 2008, 59). The article attempts to study the recurrence of the “fallen woman” trope in *Sin* and *Ulysses* in a comparative context, aiming to explore how Orientalist imagery is informed across these texts.

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