



The Dancing Girls of Lahore: Selling Love and Saving Dreams in Pakistan's Pleasure District

By Louise Brown

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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.

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Editorial Review

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Starred Review Heera Mandi, the ancient red-light district of the Punjabi city of Lahore, Pakistan, is as distant as the moon from most Western experience, yet sociologist Brown renders an intimate portrait of one family there that is compelling in its strangeness and its humanity. Shuttling for months at a time between Heera Mandi and her middle-class world of Birmingham, England, Brown details the goings-on of Maha, her five children, and the people and places in their tiny universe. Maha, a fading singer-dancer-courtesan in her midthirties, must now depend on her eldest daughters to join the trade to help shore up the family's shrinking finances: Nisha, 14, who would literally rather die than come of age; Nena, 12, who appears to embrace the business with enthusiasm; and Ariba, 11, a dark-skinned pariah who hovers like a ghost over the household. To that end, Maha is busy making arrangements to sell Nena's virginity to a wealthy sheikh in Dubai. The family might have been spared this dilemma with help from Maha's husband, Adnan, but he is too drug addled and distracted with his other wife, Mumtaz, to care. Brown is unsparing in relating the casual violence Maha and her children inflict on one another, and that befalls them from their circumstances, but she also can't help but be invested in their futures. Readers of this excellent account will feel the same way.

Alan Moores

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Review

"Riveting and important. Even readers who don't think they're interested in Pakistani prostitution will find themselves engrossed." (Kirkus Reviews (starred review))

"A fascinating ethnography with Bollywood flair, even at its darkest moments." (Washington Post)

About the Author

Louise Brown is an academic at Birmingham University, England, and the author of several books on Asia. She frequently returns to Lahore, Pakistan.

Users Review

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