Audiovisual Project on the South Asian Mujra

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In Lucknow, India, a group of middle class Hindu girls, ages eight to fourteen, slam their bell-clad feet on the floor with the beat of the tabla and the rhythmic clapping of their teacher as a harmonium repeats the same sixteen bar melody over and over again. *Ta they they tat/aa they they tat…!* In Lahore’s red light district, Heera Mandi, another group of young girls in ankle bells perform almost the same steps to the exact same harmonium melody. What is the difference between these two sets of girls, and what does that difference signify? Later, at home, girls from both groups might watch TV, and see Aishwarya or Rekha or even Helen or Bipasha Basu performing the same steps. What is the difference between the performances of Roop (considered vulgar or even lewd), Umrao Jaan (historical tradition glorified in an expensive Bollywood film), and the prostitutes of Heera Mandi? To invert the question, what are the similarities, and in what systematic way are they ignored?

In this project, I hope to explode these distinctions by distilling the repeated visual imagery in film as well as live performance that embodies the trope of the tawaif and her mujra performance. The bodily postures, the costumes, the chiming anklets, whether highly refined or bawdy bordering on lewd, all popularly recognized meaningful items that serve to index her position as tawaif, generally as an object of desire but with very specific cultural connotations about her complex social status, artistic relevance, and especially in an Indian context the often politicized significance of her ethnic/religious affiliation (Muslim) and the discourses surrounding the connection of the mujra to the historical flowering of high Islamicate culture in South Asia. Where are the boundaries of the mujra genre and who defines them? Why has this meaning diverged in India and Pakistan, and how is that difference expressed in popular media? By exploring these questions visually I want to problematize the dichotomies of popular/classical, immoral/honorable, and vulgar/decent.