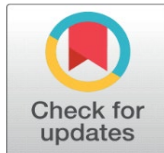


EXOTIC WOMEN: UNRAVELLING AESTHETICIZATION AND OBJECTIFICATION IN HEERAMANDI

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ABSTRACT

This paper examines how the tawaifs are portrayed in Sanjay Leela Bhansali's series, Heeramandi: The Diamond Bazaar. It focuses on their representation as objectified figures within the narrative under the pretence of depicting them as women with agency. It examines the colonialist portrayal of courtesans of India by exploring how the film reflects the fantasies of the West about the exotic Indian women by using opulent visuals and patriarchal themes.

This study focuses on the cinematic styles used by Bhansali, such as the use of luxurious sets, sparkling costumes, poignant music and other cinematic elements which together contribute to the film's splendour while maintaining a certain image of the East. Furthermore, the paper explores the historical context of the tawaif culture, drawing parallels between their representation in Heeramandi and their roles in historical narratives. The study employs Laura Mulvey's concept of the Male gaze to critique how Heeramandi constructs an objectified and spectacle-driven narrative of tawaifs. It also examines how Bhansali blurs out the historical realities of tawaifs in this series and uses the same traditional portrayal for global appeal.

Additionally, the paper explores the paradox of gender in the portrayal of tawaifs. It looks into the audience's perception of these portrayals and also on the social and cultural impacts. Thus, through this analysis, the paper aims to conduct a critical study to understand how the series contributes to the discussion of gender and identity politics.

Keywords: Objectification, Male Gaze, Exotic, Gender, Social and Cultural Impact



1. INTRODUCTION

Sanjay Leela Bhansali's historical drama series Heeramandi: The Diamond Bazaar explores the life of tawaifs in Lahore's red-light district of Heeramandi. The series is set in pre-independence India amidst the context of Indian nationalism and British colonial rule. It highlights the vulnerable lives of tawaifs who found themselves restricted by societal expectations while being respected for their skills as artists. The narrative showcases the tawaifs' relationship with their patrons and their sufferings in a male-dominated culture that subsequently honoured and

disregarded them. Along with its luxurious visuals, costumes, and complex storytelling, the series also captures the splendour of kothas. Bhansali, in this series, focuses on larger-than-life storytelling. He presents a world that is filled with ambition, passion, love and betrayal. The series aims to focus on the lesser-known accounts of Indian history by portraying tawaifs as not mere entertainers but as women whose lives were deeply entangled with the socio-political changes of the time.

The representation of tawaifs in Indian cinema, particularly in Bollywood, has been a topic of discussion. The previous studies on Bollywood's portrayal of tawaifs have a recurring pattern of victimization and objectification. Films like [Pakeezah \(1972\)](#), [Umrao Jaan \(1981\)](#), [Devdas \(2002\)](#) depict tawaifs mainly by romanticizing their sufferings. In these films, the tawaifs are caught between their dreams and the perceptions of society about their profession. Thus, in the end, this led to their tragedy. Heeramandi attempts to go beyond these stereotypical portrayals by incorporating historical elements. But still, their portrayal remains largely associated with the romanticization of their suffering and the objectification of their body. According to Laura Mulvey, mainstream cinema depicts women as passive objects of male desire. Instead of focusing on them as subjects of agency, the camera focuses on their function as a spectacle. The lavish sets and opulent visuals in the series reinforce this same tradition. Previous studies indicate that cinema often oversimplifies the historical figure, reducing them to tragic or fallen archetypes. The series attempts to acknowledge their political agency, but it is only granted towards the final episode which reduced their historical prominence. The narrative became largely bound with their desirability rather than their historical significance. It is equally important to analyse how Heeramandi is received by the audience. This helps in assessing whether the viewers recognize the historical limitations of the narrative or accept its portrayal at face value.

Even though the series tried to bring out a real-life dimension of tawaif culture from history, the focus of the same was blurred out. Thus, this research aims to examine how the portrayal of tawaifs in Heeramandi remained only as a spectacle rather than women with agency. It also analyses how the series has visually and narratively constructed their identities mainly as objects of pleasure and entertainment. This study seeks to understand how the representation of tawaifs within the series aligns with the concept of the male gaze. It also tries to explore how the series has reduced the image of tawaifs to visual pleasure for both the characters within the narrative and the audience.

While the series attempts to emphasise the historical significance and agency of tawaifs, this paper argues that their portrayal remains confined to the objectified roles. The series seems to acknowledge their historical depth only towards its final part. Thus, the study explores how tawaifs are represented as spectacles in the narrative. The paper analyses the contrast between historical reality and spectacle and evaluates whether Heeramandi succeeds in representing the agency of tawaifs or celebrating their objectification. Therefore, it examines how the series has employed visual aesthetics, cinematography, and storytelling to reinforce this spectacle.

The study incorporates a qualitative analysis by examining the visual and narrative framework in which the tawaifs are portrayed in Heeramandi. It focuses on analysing the representation of tawaifs in the series as a spectacle through the lens of Laura Mulvey's male gaze theory. Additionally, the research also incorporates an audience reception study, using a survey to understand the

viewers' perception of the series. This reception study provides information about the contemporary viewers, whether they recognize objectification or understand representation differently.

The courtesan culture of India played a very crucial role in shaping history. Tawaifs, the courtesans of India, were celebrated for their extraordinary talent in music, dance and art. Dance has been a very integral part of culture and tradition in India, and together with music, it was considered to have a divine origin. "Etymologists believe that the word Tawaif comes from the Arabic word 'tauf' or 'tawaf', which means circling around and has no derogatory connotation attached to it. The word 'tawaf' or circumambulation of the holy Kaaba also comes from the same word 'tauf'" [Ray \(2022\)](#). They were considered highly skilled and more than just mere entertainers. It is also notable that they held a very distinguished sociocultural position in the pre-colonial era. In pre-colonial India, they were closely associated with the royal courts. They were the performing artists who entertained the nobilities and royal patrons, especially during the Mughal rule. According to [Gandhi \(2024\)](#), "The courtesans had earned great prestige for themselves as they were seen in the company of the high and powerful, and vice versa, as the elite felt a sense of pride when seen in their company" (p. 21). They were highly respected for their contribution to art and culture. They enjoyed a relatively autonomous and free life compared to other purdah-bound women of the time. They had agency over their lives, wealth and other assets. They also proved their excellence in politics and literature along with their mastery in arts.

The tawaifs, who were once regarded as dignified noble women, saw their status deteriorate and the public perceptions shift with a massive political change in the country [Gandhi \(2024\)](#). With the arrival of the British, the status of the tawaifs seemingly deteriorated. Thus, they transitioned from tawaifs to nautch girls. They were seen and addressed through the lens of Victorian morality. Due to this, their artistic legacy began to diminish, and they became objects of sexual desire. "The arrival of the Europeans brought about a vital change in the dance form, as it started to lose its identity as a classic form of art and entertainment and got restricted to pleasure and sexuality" [Gandhi \(2024\)](#). In the initial years of their arrival, the Englishmen were highly fascinated with their dance in the royal courts. They came to understand the social power of the tawaifs and realised that they were the highest taxpaying community of the time. They also attempted to imitate the lifestyle of the royals by making their own troupes of dancing girls, calling them nautch girls for entertaining the British gatherings. Towards the late 19th century, the Britishers started campaigning against these courtesans. They implemented the Obscenity Act in 1875 and the Contagious Disease Act in 1864, both aiming to defame them.

In South Asian cinema, the depiction of tawaifs (courtesans) is a powerful mirror reflecting and reshaping societal desires and norms. The tawaif, historically, was a highly skilled and educated courtesan in Indian society, trained in dance, literature, politics, social etiquette, and erotic stimulation [Dewan \(2022\)](#), p.2). Indian cinema has played a very crucial role in shaping public perceptions about tawaifs. They are depicted as women with immense beauty, grace, and passion and also constantly struggling for their existence within the confines of societal norms. Also, they are often portrayed as sorrowful, tragic characters by romanticizing their dilemma of unattainable love and their struggles. However, even though there are narratives that try to reclaim their identity, the tawaifs are still looked upon as exotic figures and their stories are shaped not in accordance to their will but by external forces.

Such a portrayal is made by Sanjay Leela Bhansali in his series Heeramandi: The Diamond Bazaar. Bhansali's version of courtesan culture in Heeramandi corresponds with his usual style of luxury, grandeur and glorification. The series is deeply ingrained in Western fantasies, strengthening the image of tawaif as an exotic figure whose worth is predominantly defined by her allure. It presents different layers of tawaif depictions, attempting to highlight their resilience and agency but still confining to the orientalist and patriarchal way of narration. His depiction romanticises the lives of tawaifs, focusing on their beauty and glory, thereby giving least importance to the socio-political realities of their existence. Bhansali visualizes the courtesans through the luxurious sets and sparkling costumes, reinforcing an allure around the tawaifs. Therefore, this representation uses tawaifs as spectacle, reducing them to exoticized figures rather than historical agents. While Bhansali attempts to stress their agency and struggles, the narrative remains confined to tragic love stories and fate. He acknowledges their political involvement only towards the end. Thus, this makes their historical role as an afterthought rather than an important aspect of the narrative. This approach results in the prioritization of spectacle over historical accuracies. This primarily reinforces the idea to the audience that tawaifs were primarily objects of desire. Bhansali has internally exoticized the image of tawaifs without primarily focusing on undoing it.

Bhansali's cinematic style is usually made by grand aesthetics, vibrant colour palettes and a deep engagement with music and dance. His story often revolves around love, tragedy and sacrifice with a unique blend of realism. He often focuses on larger-than-life storytelling, which blurs the lines between spectacle and reality. Bhansali's film [Dewan \(2022\)](#), exhibits his signature style with a combination of melodrama with the storytelling. He often uses dramatic lighting and slow-motion sequences to elevate the aesthetic appeal. Music, along with the mujra performances, serves as a symbolic representation of the character's inner conflicts. He makes use of a saturated colour palette and visual styles. He predominantly uses different colour patterns to symbolise and contrast the lives of the female characters in the film. The tawaif Chandramukhi (played by Madhuri Dixit) is depicted in deep red and golden colours, signifying the sensuality and stigma attached to her profession. Paro (played by Aiswarya Rai), on the other hand, is in warm red, symbolizing her love for Devdas. But however, in her life after marriage, red becomes a major colour of her suffering and sacrifice. He also makes use of diffused light settings and dreamy atmospheres in moments of romance and sorrow. Through Chandramukhi, Bhansali highlights the emotional turmoil and hypocrisy endured by tawaifs. Even though she is admired for her art and beauty, she remains an outcast and is rejected beyond the walls of her kotha. Her story mirrors the fate of courtesans who were discarded in public despite their intellectual background. Over time, the idea of tawaifs and her unrequited love has become popular in Indian cinema. Their unfulfilled desires and heartbreak are strikingly portrayed through their mujra in films.

Laura [Mulvey \(1975\)](#) argues that "in a world ordered by sexual imbalance, pleasure in looking has been split between active/male and passive/female". This is crucial in understanding how Heeramandi constructs its female characters as spectacles, reinforcing their objectification. Here, Bhansali encapsulates the courtesan narrative through the main women protagonists Mallikajaan (played by Manisha Koirala), Bibbojaan (played by Aditi Rao Hydari), Fareedan (played by Sonakshi Sinha), Lajjo (played by Richa Chadha), Waheeda (played by Sanjeeda Shaikh) and Alamzeb (played by Sharmin Segal).

The story centres on Mallikajaan, the powerful tawaif head of Shahi Mahal, a prestigious brothel in Heeramandi. She is portrayed as an all-in-power matriarch who controls her kotha and the fate of other tawaifs under her control. But despite her power and control, she remains an entangled figure within the patriarchal structures that reduced her existence. From the outset, she is depicted as a woman who commands authority over others as she ensures that the tawaifs under her rule continue to captivate their wealthy patrons. Bhansali masterfully frames her within a world where power is performative and dependent on the pleasure of the male viewer. His grand aesthetics in her attires, heavy jewellerys and settings create an image of her status. But at the same time, it makes her an object of spectacle. Bhansali makes her presence grand and deliberate, but his frame lingers on her body, reinforcing that no matter her age and position she too remains a part of objectification, just as the younger tawaifs in her kotha. The narrative also exposes her illusions of power, where her authority seems definite within the walls of Heeramandi, but outside, she is just a woman serving in a system built by men. Mallika profits from the objectification of other young tawaifs in her kotha, yet she is unable to escape it herself. She is trapped within the system she upholds. This aligns with Mulvey's perception that women in power are still depicted within the patriarchal frames that determine their worth based on visual pleasure. Mallika does not own power, instead, she performs it. She commands respect only through performance where her presence, voice and gestures are always crafted to maintain her image. Bhansali ensures that Mallikajaan is never completely removed from objectification. She is shown through very carefully lighted frames and mostly shot from angles that highlight her grandeur instead of her individuality.

Bhansali's depiction of Lajjo in Heeramandi is a stark representation of how tawaifs are objectified and consumed as visual spectacles. He reinforces Mulvey's male gaze, where women exist primarily for the pleasure of the male audience. She is portrayed as an ultimate object of desire, where she is introduced in soft lighting and slow sequences elevating her beauty and charm. Lajjo represents the ultimate vulnerability in the lives of tawaifs. Her existence is purely for the pleasure of others and offers a severe end of objectification. She is desirable only when she performs, but once she succumbs to addiction, she becomes completely disposable. She is always lost in the intoxicated dreams of marrying her love of life, Nawab Zorawar Ali Khan (played by Adhyayan Suman), who does not reciprocate her with the love and attention she craves for, instead left her after attaining his sensual desires and is about to marry another elite woman of his class. Lajjo escapes this pain by day-dreaming and fabricating stories among other tawaifs about her love life with Zorawar, which she inherently knows is not true and is never to happen. Yet, till the last moment of her fall, she desperately keeps hope in her heart, which also gets shattered through an unexpected revealing. Bhansali frames her in relation to the male gaze as she is introduced through moments of dance and intoxication. Her suffering itself becomes a spectacle which echoes Mulvey's idea that women in cinema are often made tragic figures whose pain serves to enhance the narrative. Her death is not simply a personal tragedy but a representation of patriarchal reality in Heeramandi.

Bhansali's portrayal of Waheeda, the younger sister of Mallikajaan is presented as a disruption to the male gaze but the character itself is crafted by him in such a way that she strives to get objectified. Bhansali strategically interrupts her desirability through a scar on her face. In response to this, he crafts Waheeda not as rejecting the system that marginalised her, but instead seeking to re-enter it. Instead of rejecting the male gaze, she internalizes its power and acknowledges the

need to be objectified out of necessity and strives to reclaim it. She is seen in constant conflict with other tawaifs, especially with Mallikajaan, in terms of achieving assets for herself rather than living under the rule of her sister. She even competes for her youth and beauty with her own young daughter, Shama. Waheeda forbids Shama from calling her 'ammi' (mother) aloud and demands that her to address her as 'appa' (elder sister). Her character arc points out the idea that a courtesan loses her worth once her desirability is lost. It can be observed that Bhansali has tactically produced these aspects to show how Waheeda actively seeks her objectification and is not merely imposed upon her, which practically seems to be Bhansali's aim with such a character to transform her into an indirect spectacle.

Fareedan, another crucial figure in Heeramandi, is sculpted by Bhansali with rage, betrayal and the need for dominance in a space that seeks to banish her. Even though her agency is rooted in manipulation and control, she is still framed within the lens of objectification and in Mulvey's idea that women in power still function as a visual spectacle. Bhansali has crafted Fareedan as a character who commands attention through her dramatic costumes, calculated actions and sharp dialogues. He places her in a dimly lit space, symbolising her layers of vengeance. Fareedan's look is striking with her dark, intense clothing enhancing her aura unlike the traditional softer feminine appearance of other tawaifs. Her every glance and moments of rage are framed to ensure they are aesthetically pleasing. Bhansali ensures that even in the most aggressive moments, she remains visually appealing. Though her anger is intense, her sensuality is never stripped. Fareedan embodies a contradiction where she is a dominant force and an object of spectacle. Her space never goes beyond the reach of the male gaze that ultimately decides her fate.

Alamzeb, the youngest daughter of Mallikajaan, is the most innocent of the tawaifs, making her a crucial character in understanding the spectacle and the male gaze. Through her, Bhansali creates an allure of the untouched and the inevitability of objectification with the kotha. Alamzeb represents the trope of the untouched woman as the ultimate object of desire. Unlike the other tawaifs living in the system of pleasure, she represents a spectacle that is in waiting. According to Mulvey, women in cinema are either erotic objects that are already consumed or erotic objects that are to be claimed. Here, Alamzeb is in a state where her potential and value are to be objectified. The men of Heeramandi are made aware that she is on the verge of transformation by announcing her nath utrai, which is followed by the grand preparations for her first mujra. This makes her presence even more tantalising. The elder tawaifs, especially her mother, Mallikajaan, are seen forcing her to be submissive in the system, but her adoration of books over ghungroos shows deviance from becoming a courtesan. Though she never wants to be a tawaif and wishes to be a shaeirah (poetess), her innocence itself becomes a performance. This does not protect her from the gaze but rather enhances it. Bhansali crafts her with softer costumes and naïve expressions and focuses on her youth, purity and her interest in poetry writing. She is framed in a diffused dream-like setting always embellished with books in her hand. Unlike other tawaifs who have accepted their fate, she still longs for love, freedom and life outside the kotha. Her love with Tajdar Baloch (played by Taha Shah Badussha), son of a nawab becomes doomed because of the very system she was born into. She is met with betrayal, social rejection and the harsh realization that she can never belong to a world outside Heeramandi. Thus, her character arc is a commentary on how women are made to become objects of spectacle whether they wish or not. She is not able to escape the gaze for which she has been designed for. Her journey shows

a slow descent into objectification, explaining how the male gaze does not simply consume women but prepares them to be consumed.

Bhansali frames Bibbojaan, the elder daughter of Mallikajaan, with a complex intersection of spectacle, objectification and rebellion. She is portrayed as the most seductive tawaif of Shahimahal, who harbors strong anti-British sentiments and supports the independence movement. At initial glance, she appears to embody resistance and agency aligning with Bhansali's attempt to bring a new tawaif trope that challenges the traditional perception of courtesans in Indian cinema. But this gets gradually blurred out due to the high spectacle range used in depicting her. He frames her body within a visual structure by bringing her presence in a sensualized way using soft focus closeups, slow camera movements and heavy lightings that bring out focus to her physical beauty rather than agency. The focus on her rage and rebellion gets dissolved due to the portrayal of her cultivated walk to maintain the allure as per the expectation of the male gaze. The high aestheticization of her Gajagamani Walk reinforces her objectification under the male gaze. The frame lingers on her movement, focusing the to-be-looked-at-ness. Thus, her character shows the rage of rebellion that is built on a system of objectification, thereby making her political activism not a true agency but instead making it another spectacle for people around her.

Bhansali intricately explores the themes of gender, identity and nationalism, however not in an equal frequency. It dominantly focuses on gender and politics of objectification, followed by the struggles of identity as a secondary concern, as they remain intertwined with their gendered struggles. Even though nationalism is involved, it does not act as a driving force of the narrative. The hierarchy in the portrayal of these themes highlights Bhansali's interest in aestheticizing women in a patriarchal society. The nationalism functions more as just a historical background rather than a central idea.

Bhansali has intricately woven gender in Heeramandi not only for shaping individual characters but also to shape the narrative structure, visual aesthetics and the sociopolitical framework of the series. He uses gender as a paradox, where the tawaifs hold a level of influence and power, but this is purely confined to their desirability and their ability to perform within a patriarchal system. The tawaifs of Heeramandi are placed in a space where their femininity is both a power and a curse. Their worth is measured by their desirability, and despite their mastery and skills, they lack the power of autonomy over their own body and fate. One of the most striking aspects of gender can be explored through the male gaze and politics involved in looking. Mulvey's concept of to-be-looked-at-ness is deeply ingrained in the visual language of this narrative. Here, the tawaifs are constantly watched and admired by men in the narrative and also by the audience. Bhansali does not simply portray the tawaifs being objectified by men but also ensures that their spectacle becomes more visually mesmerizing, such that the audience themselves become dissolved in it. This raises the contradiction that rather than challenging the oppression of tawaifs Bhansali uses it in a way to make it marketable. Also, his treatment of these tawaifs is not only about power and oppression; instead, it is also about selling an aestheticized version of their life. His obsession with embellishments, luxuries and grandeur turn the plight of these women into a highly exoticized and romanticized spectacle, making it more marketable. While the series attempts to highlight how tawaifs are confined in the economy of patriarchal desires, it highly romanticizes the same economy. Bhansali presents gender through the characters' internal exoticization of their femininity and desirability, actively accepting their own objectification to make themselves more attractive both inside and outside the narrative. By aestheticizing their pain,

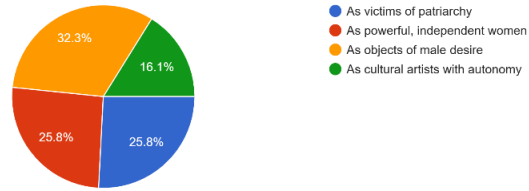
struggles and oppressions through grand music and mujras, he makes this gendered suffering visually intoxicating. This extends the internalized exoticization beyond the narrative, ensuring that the audience is attracted by the tragedy. Their world is portrayed as visually stunning in rich fabrics and sensualized movements, making the viewer perceive their oppression as a form of opulent entertainment. This comes in alignment with Bhansali's cinematic style; there the tawaifs' pain is transformed into visually appealing. This exoticization is a very conscious directional choice which ensures that the series flourishes in the global market. Bhansali understands that this gendered oppression, when wrapped in luxury, becomes a commercially viable product. Thus, the series is not simply a feminist tale, instead, he makes it a product of consumption that makes up for every way of objectification it claims to critique.

Heeramandi holds a very crucial socio-cultural relevance in society. It explores the artistic and historical representation of tawaifs, who have long been misinterpreted by society. Bhansali attempts to bring their narrative to the mainstream attention by highlighting their agency, political significance and struggles during the pre-independence era. However, how Bhansali presents them as custodians of art but gives major focus to them as objects of spectacle raises a complex discussion on gender, identity and historical accuracy. Another major impact of Heeramandi is its role in bringing up the historical discourse and their place in India's colonial past. Bhansali reintroduces the forgotten history of tawaifs in Heeramandi, where they occupied a sociopolitical space and had influence in art, music and nationalist movements, despite being traditionally dismissed as prostitutes. But still the series raises questions about whether it truly restores their lost identity or rebuilds them for cinematic spectacle. The cultural impact of Heeramandi is bound with its representation of gender. It makes the audience reconsider the role of tawaifs in history, but on the other hand, it largely reinforces the male gaze in the storytelling. The series portrays them as powerful women who navigate a male-dominated world. But this very power is depicted as rooted in desirability rather than true autonomy. This duality where their beauty and talent are appreciated but still restricted within the patriarchal structures depicting the gender dynamics in contemporary Indian society. This sparks discussion on whether the series serves as a reclamation of tawaifs or if it exoticizes them for entertainment. Furthermore, the series has influenced public perceptions through debates on its authenticity versus aestheticization. [Agnihotri \(2024\)](#), criticizes Heeramandi for romanticizing courtesans' lives and brothels instead of acknowledging their struggles. He argues that such places have never been centres of grandeur but rather symbols of human injustice, pain and suffering. Bhansali's heightened sense of opulence romanticizes the tawaif culture in Heeramandi rather than portraying the harsh realities. This raises questions about whether the series educates the viewers about their struggles or if it brings an exaggerated retelling that focuses on spectacle over substance.

The audience reception study conducted on Heeramandi revealed different ranges of perspectives. An online survey was conducted with 33 participants across various age groups. The participants ranged from below 18 years to 36 years and above to ensure the diverse representation of viewers. The survey was designed using Google Forms with responses gathered in one week. This was circulated through academic circles and social media platforms to ensure a diverse range of respondents with different ways of familiarity with the series. The participants were asked a series of questions focusing on their perceptions of the series' storytelling and authenticity. This data is analysed to examine the dominant perspectives in audience reception. The findings are divided into four aspects:

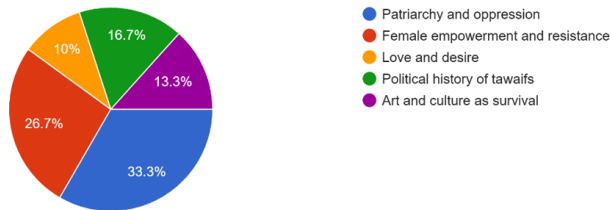
Perceptions of Tawaifs as Spectacle

4. How do you think Heeramandi portray tawaifs?
31 responses



A significant group of participants perceive Heeramandi as a narrative reinforcing the idea that tawaifs are portrayed as objects of male desire and not individuals with agency. 32.3% of the participants stated that tawaifs were primarily depicted as objects of male desire. This reinforces the argument that even though there were attempts to showcase their struggles, the series largely presented them through the lens of desirability and spectacle. The framing of tawaifs in this series leans more on aestheticized suffering, where their pain is depicted visually rather than explored in grounded reality.

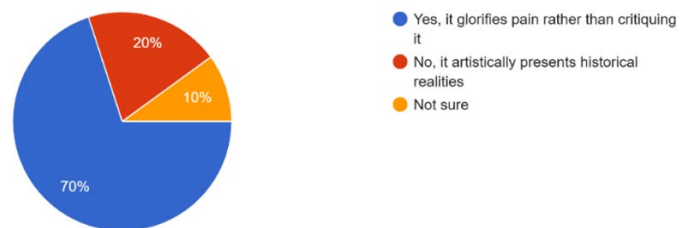
7. Which themes did you find most dominant in Heeramandi?
30 responses



33.3% of the viewers identified patriarchy and oppression as the most dominant themes of the series. This indicates that while the series does point out the social constraints placed upon tawaifs, their representation remains highly dictated by external forces rather than their own agency. The structure of the series still places male control and desire at the centre of the tawaif's lives. This reinforces their spectacle-like status instead of fully exploring their roles outside the walls of kothas.

Aestheticization and costuming as a tool for objectification

11. In your opinion, does Bhansali's focus on visual beauty and suffering romanticize oppression?
30 responses



The excessive focus on extravagant visuals, costumes and settings in the series raise concerns regarding the aestheticization as a means of reinforcing objectification. 70% of the participants agreed that Bhansali uses grand visuals and

suffering to romanticise oppression. This suggests the series' artistic choices to prioritise spectacle. The fantasy-driven representation makes the pain and exploitation of tawaifs secondary to the aesthetics used.

54% of them believe that Heeramandi romanticized and distorted the realities of tawaifs. This highlights the concern that instead of providing an authentic portrayal of their struggles, the series crafted a dreamlike vision that glorified their oppression rather than critiquing it. This reinforces the trope of beautiful tragedy by portraying women adored in rich fabrics, lamenting their fate and their hardships, which are cinematically glorified instead of being a realistic examination. [Adil \(2024\)](#) critiques Bollywood's portrayal of tawaifs, arguing that filmmakers have created a fantasized version of tawaifs without historical accuracy. He specifically points out that Bhansali is among those who perpetuate this depiction.

Therefore, this extends to the perception of visual styles in the series, where 41.4% of the participants felt that the series prioritized visual spectacle over meaningful storytelling. The cinematographic focus on the slow-motion angles and the rich textured backgrounds, which are stunning, diluted the raw depth of the tawaifs' lives. It fetishized their suffering through poetic dialogues and music, making them visually pleasing.

15. Which of the following best describes your reaction to Heeramandi's aesthetic style?

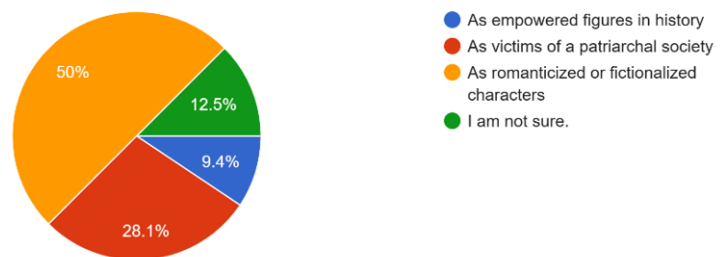
29 responses



Romanticization of the courtesan life

16. How do you think the general audience perceives tawaifs after watching Heeramandi?

32 responses

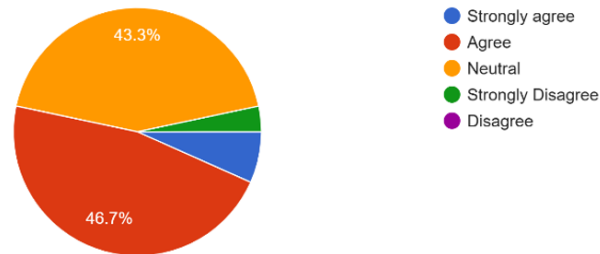


A constructed fantasy of the tawaifs' lives is evident in how audiences perceive them after watching Heeramandi. A significant 50% of the participants believe that tawaifs are depicted as romanticized and fictionalized characters, thus strengthening the idea that the series prioritizes aesthetics over authenticity. This aligns with the concern that rather than providing a historically grounded depiction, Heeramandi altered tawaifs into mere aesthetic symbols. The romanticization of courtesans is not a new phenomenon in cinema, but

Heeramandi takes it a step further by placing their suffering in an excessively glamorous framework.

10. Do you think Heeramandi reinforces a Western fantasy of the “exotic East”?

30 responses

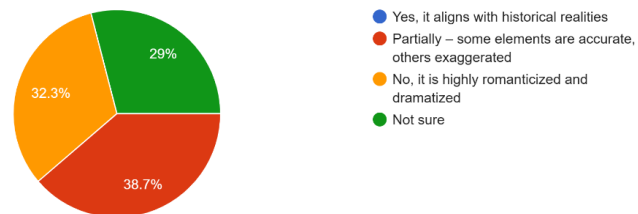


Furthermore, 46.7% of participants agreed that Heeramandi reinforces the Western fantasies of the exoticised Indian courtesans. This suggests that the narrative functions with a framework of cultural exoticization, which aligns with long-accepted orientalist tropes. The choice of visuals in the series seems to cater to the long-standing Western perceptions of India. [Kapuria \(2024\)](#) argues that Bhansali's portrayal of Lahore's courtesans in Heeramandi relies on stereotypical depictions, missing an opportunity to authentically represent their rich cultural legacy. She noted that the series is immersed in visual extravagance and uses outdated Orientalist tropes in the narrative.

Dichotomy of agency and objectification

9. Do you think Heeramandi presents an accurate depiction of tawaifs' lives in history?

31 responses



While Heeramandi does depict moments of resilience, the question arises as to whether this limited instance of agency is sufficient to negate the dominant gaze of objectification. Another key perception about the accuracy of this series is that 38.7% of them believe that while some elements are accurate, others are exaggerated. This exaggeration produced out of the creative liberty of Bhansali distorted the realities for cinematic effect.

Thus, the audience reception study provides significant insights into how Heeramandi frames its tawaifs. The survey results indicate that even though the series attempts to explain the story of tawaif's struggles and resilience, it heavily strengthens their objectification through several cinematic choices. The majority of viewers recognize these elements as pivotal to the series' visual setup and support the argument that Heeramandi primarily constructs its tawaifs as spectacles rather than historical figures with agency. Thus, the reception study serves as an essential tool in demonstrating how Heeramandi ultimately reinforce objectification under

the pretence of artistic expression and conforms to the stereotypical portrayals that focus on spectacle and tragedy rather than exploring their agency in a meaningful way.

Therefore, in the broader discourse of gender and identity politics, Heeramandi contributes to the discussions about the representation of marginalized women in history and popular culture. Through the framing of tawaifs within a highly stylized narrative, the series raises questions about their agency and the male gaze in contemporary storytelling. It highlights the tension between reclaiming the forgotten histories and manipulating them for the cinematic appeal. Moreover, the series' global appeal complicates its role in shaping the perceptions of Indian history due to the exoticization of courtesans by aligning with the orientalist tropes. Heeramandi stands at the crossroads of aestheticization and representation. While it brings the narratives of tawaifs into the mainstream, it is often done in a manner that prioritises visual grandeur above historical integrity. As Indian cinema continues its exploration of historical narratives, a crucial concern remains; whether the future portrayal of women like tawaifs genuinely reclaim their voice and identity by moving beyond the aestheticized objectification. Heeramandi, therefore, sets the space for this conversation, but its impact will depend on whether it fosters a deep involvement with the politics of representation or simply becomes another example of history being reintroduced through the lens of patriarchy.

CONFLICT OF INTERESTS

None.

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