



The Dancing Girls of Lahore

By Louise Brown
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Introduction

In Heera Mandi, the red-light district of Lahore, Pakistan, sociologist Louise Brown examines the fate of the beautiful and tragic dancing girls. Once the courtesans of kings, graceful and erudite, contemporary dancing girls find themselves in dire straits, clinging to an ancient romantic identity while facing a destitute future.

Central to Brown's study is Maha, a middle-aged dancing girl of increasing girth who must auction her daughter's virginity to the highest bidder. Tasneem, a young *khusra*, navigates the demarcation between male and female at will, yet is doomed to be less than either. Tariq, of the untouchable sweeper caste, Maha's increasingly uninterested "husband" Adnan, Laila, the former dancing girl turned promoter/pimp, and high-paying sheiks in Dubai are but a few of the people introduced in Brown's unflinching portrayal of a world that, much like Maha herself, veers between "rage and joy, cruelty and

gentle compassion."

Questions for Discussion

1. Consider the reversal of traditional Pakistani norms in Heera Mandi "in the *mohalla*, female beauty and sexuality are openly celebrated . . . lauded and envied." Why does Brown refer to "luxury of *pardah*" enjoyed by affluent families?
2. How do shame, honor and social status intertwine in Heera Mandi? How does Maha manage her "shame" and why does Brown say, "paradoxically, a veil can heighten rather than lessen a woman's power"?
3. With "no education and few skills" Nisha and Niha are trapped in a vicious circle of prostitution. Given the complicated realities of cast and class in Pakistan, would these girls have a chance even if they were educated? How does prostitution become an economic inevitability when one must support parents and siblings in a patriarchal society?
4. In Heera Mandi "love is a transaction conducted on the basis of an illusion." How do words such as "beloved" and "lover" maintain the illusion for both the *tawaif* and her *tamash been*? How do Iqbal Hussain, Mumtaz, and Hasan illustrate the manner in which even men born in this milieu are scarred?
5. When Brown decides to clean Maha's house, why do her actions signify an "irreconcilable culture clash"? Do you find Maha's dismay to be understandable in this context? In what other instances does Brown find her Western values and customs to be incomprehensible to the people of Heera Mandi?
6. Do you find Maha's behavior—the rages, the mystics, the Corex – to be self-destructive or coping mechanisms? In this setting, is self-delusion a survival requirement?
7. Brown observes that the women of Heera Mandi, "don't believe me when I tell them that the lives of the other women are equally blighted." By maintaining facades of prosperity, how do they inadvertently contribute to their own misery? Consider the double-bind: society demeans them, while their own community judges them as dirty or respectable based on stringent rules of behavior.
8. Who are the *khusras*? Do you find it surprising that they exist in a conservative Islamic society? How do the *khusras* fit in a society built on male privilege, honor and masculinity, excused from women's obligations, but never seen as men? Are they homosexual in the Western meaning of the word?
9. Why is Shiism "particularly suited to Heera Mandi"? Do you find it paradoxical that prostitution and particularly flagellating form of godliness coexist in this society?
10. When Maha agrees to send Neha to Sheikh Khasib in the Gulf, Brown faces a moral quandary: "I can't walk away from this situation without losing my integrity, but I can't stay and keep it going either." Is it possible to resolve this situation? What would you have done, and how would you justify your actions?