



Pakeezah: Dreamscape of Desire

Richard Allen and Ira Bhaskar

Abstract: This article describes how Kamal Amrohi's *Pakeezah* distills the idioms of the historical courtesan film, poised as they are between the glorification of courtesan culture and lamenting the debased status of the courtesan; between a nostalgic yearning for the feudal world of the *kotha* and a utopian desire to escape from it. The article argues that *Pakeezah* self-consciously defines the particular "chronotope," or space-time, of the historical courtesan genre by showing that nothing less than a transformation of the idioms of that genre is required to liberate the courtesan from her claustrophobic milieu—whose underlying state is one of enervation and death—into the open space and lived time of modernity.

Keywords: courtesan, *kotha*, *mujra*, nostalgia

The courtesan genre in Bombay cinema is defined above all by the depiction of the lifestyle and milieu of the singer-dancer courtesan figure, one of ancient lineage in Indic culture.¹ It is a genre that can be positioned between the historical genre and the genre of contemporary life (the social), both of which often feature a courtesan figure. However, the courtesan genre differs from the other two in the manner in which the narrative is focalized through the point of view of the protagonist-courtesan.² The Muslim courtesan film, of which *Pakeezah* (1971) is a singular instance, can be distinguished from the Hindu courtesan film such as *Chitrlekha* (1964) or *Utsav* (1984), in that it locates its expressive cultural forms in a particular historical imaginary derived from nineteenth century Lakhnawi culture.³ This historical imaginary is centered on the *mujra* or the musical and dance performance of the courtesan; on the *mehfil*, or gathering to watch her perform; on the mise-en-scène of the performance space; on the *tehzeeb* or manners of the courtesan and her patrons; and on a particular *ada*, or grace and elegance of manner, articulated through gesture, movement, performance, and expression of emotion. Furthermore, a defining feature of the Muslim courtesan film is the particular status that the courtesan is accorded as an emblem of culture and refinement even as her circumstances are portrayed as morally compromised. Indeed, even when she is "fallen," she may—like Nargis in *Pakeezah*—manifest a spiritual purity like the woman in *purdah* to whom she is otherwise opposed, her



dance expressing a defiance of the circumstances that define her outer existence. Yearning for authentic love, the heroine of the Muslim courtesan film is trapped in a claustrophobic world not of her making that seems to exist in its own space and time. The courtesan genre celebrates that world even as the liberation of the heroine from her enslavement to feudal and patriarchal customs must entail its destruction.⁴

What distinguishes *Pakeezah* is the way it highlights and defines, to borrow Mikhail Bakhtin's term, the unique "chronotope" ([1981] 1994: 84) of the historical courtesan genre; that is, the discreet space-time of the courtesan's world that is disjoined from the space of the world outside, and from the temporal logic of the modern romance narrative that calls for the liberation of the courtesan from the prison-house of the *kotha* (courtesan's salon) into the chronological, future oriented time and the expansive spatial horizons of the romance narrative. So completely does *Pakeezah* reconstruct and inhabit the lifestyle and ambience of the *kotha*, it has the flavor of a "historical" courtesan film like the two films that were later made on the eponymous heroine of *Umrao Jaan* (1981, 2006). Yet the setting of *Pakeezah* is a contemporary one, and its moral condemnation of the double standards of a world that creates the courtesan only to condemn her, together with its underlying rescue narrative, is one that inspired other contemporary courtesan films like *Tawaif* (1985). Poised between a nostalgic and romantic intoxication with the past and the incipiently liberating transformations of the present, between the fetishization of the figure of the courtesan imprisoned in the *kotha* and frozen in historical memory and the realization of her agency and her freedom, *Pakeezah* self-consciously defines the particular chronotope that characterizes the historical courtesan genre by suggesting that it is nothing less than a generic shift in idiom that is required to liberate the courtesan from the feudal world of the *kotha* into modernity.

The resources of film provide Kamal Amrohi, the director of *Pakeezah*, a vehicle for staging and memorializing the performative idioms of courtesan culture that he bathes in a timeless, nostalgic glow. Yet the *kotha*—however alluring from the outside—appears from the inside as a prison whose underlying state is one of enervation and death. Against the desire that is staged for that world and the figure of the courtesan who lies at its center, *Pakeezah* dramatizes the desire of the heroine to escape it. This dream is a powerful one; indeed, it is more powerful than the enchantment of the courtesan world, for the heroine's desire in *Pakeezah* is the desire of the spirit to transcend material constraints and an entrapment in a merely sexual world in order to achieve fulfillment in love. The narration of *Pakeezah* acts on behalf of the heroine to preserve her purity at all cost. This agency is expressed through imagery that is hyperbolically phallic—rampaging elephants, a coiling cobra, and the ubiquitous train—as if it were only such a primal force aligned with

Although the vocabulary of Pakeezah is psychological, the gendered drama it stages is deeply historical in its dramatization of the transformative collision of the feudal world with the modern.

modernity that can wrench the heroine from the timeless feudal microcosm of the *kotha* into the modern world of adventure, romance, and fulfillment. Although the vocabulary of *Pakeezah* is psychological, the gendered drama it stages is deeply historical in its dramatization of the transformative collision of the feudal world with the modern. The courtesan's imprisonment within the *kotha* is also an entrapment within history, and the discovery of love is cast as a leap into modernity, the experience of lived time.

Pakeezah opens with a smooth movement of the camera that cranes up from floor to above eye level framing a large burning candle centered in the foreground. Behind the candle is a dancing figure that seems to emerge from the candle as she dances, and her body in movement at times seems to fuse with it. As the credits end, in a second shot, the camera once again moves slowly upward in order to follow the dancing figure as she seems to rise from the candle like the flame itself and dances beneath the large chandelier at the center of the room. She is completely self-absorbed in the perfection of her dance. Not only is she the flame, she is also, in her white *kathak* (classical dance) costume, the moth that is drawn to it. She possesses an ethereal almost phantom quality, as if she were dancing above the ground. On the sound track, the earlier instrumental music gives way to her echoing, "acousmatic" voice (Chion 1999: 18), a voice that is neither non-diegetic, nor is it simply locatable as the song sung by the dancer; rather, it is a voice whose echo evokes the cavernous darkened interior of the *kotha* and suggests the condition of entombment of its inmates. The syllables that she enunciates: *ta-na-na dhir na, dheem dheem ta na na . . .*, are the classic syllables of the pure dance (*nritta*) units of the *kathak* dance that she is performing, and the use of syllables rather than lyrics in the song presents the performance of the *tawaif* (courtesan) in an abstract, aestheticized form.

Even though the courtesan is performing a *mujra*, the male figures that surround her are almost invisible in the darkness. Her dance thus appears wholly self-enclosed, even narcissistic, sealed off from the world like the space that she inhabits. Into this enclosed world enters the deep echoing, male voice-over narrator proclaiming that this is Nargis, the younger sister of Nawab Chand. "Her mesmerizing voice and the tinkling of her dancing bells are a sensation all over. There are scores of romantics who yearn for her attention but she doesn't bother in the least." Nargis's dance movements become languid as if in slow motion and her voice becomes soft and fluid in a way that evokes her hypnotic appeal. Then, the figure of Shahabuddin enters through gigantic black doors at the far end of the cavernous room, which, as they open, cast a shaft of light across the dance floor. The echoing voice-over proclaims that at the sight of this man, Nargis's soul pleads with him to free her from

this “impure” environment. Dancing back towards the camera, her ethereal voice still echoing softly on the sound track, she now spreads her arms in a gesture of entreaty, drawing Shahabuddin towards her, and nestles down next to the candle as if she were the flickering light itself, a flickering soul about to expire. Then, as Shahabuddin stands above her, the voice-over proclaims that the tortured and desirous passion in his eyes convinces Nargis that he will not allow her to melt away like the candle and will rescue her from her fallen state (Figure 1).

In this extraordinary opening scene, Amrohi gives hyperbolic expression to the terms within which the figure of the courtesan as Nargis/Sahibjaan is defined throughout the film. The deepest allure of the figure of the courtesan, Amrohi suggests, lies not in her sexuality per se, but rather in her exquisite mastery of the arts of dance and song, whose expressive purity conveys the essential value of the courtesan. However, as a courtesan she is enslaved or entombed in a world of deathly sexuality in the *kotha*. Her body is itself her tomb in the sense that although from her point of view her performative body is conceived as a pure expression of spirit—as evoked in the opening sequence, from the point of view of the largely unseen clients that she entertains, it is, at least incipiently, available for their sexual pleasure. Moreover, as a performer upon whose virtuosity the very existence of the *kotha* is dependent, she is trapped in a situation and context that will not allow her to escape. The metaphor of the *kotha* as tomb is strongly evoked in the opening shot of the gigantic door opening and streaming light onto a dingy hollow and echoing chamber, while the circling of the moth around the flame is a dance of death. At the same time, the opening of *Pakeezah* announces how this state of living death might be transcended through the rescue of the courtesan by the hero who is embodied in the iconic father figure, Ashok Kumar. He is the good *nawab* (Muslim nobleman) of so many Muslim socials, abstractly ren-



Figure 1. Nargis dances before Shahabuddin as both moth and flame.

dered as a towering phallic presence, who alone can fully acknowledge the heroine and redeem her purity and who is, in a sense, the analogue within the film for its narrator. This scene creates a chain of associations between the body of the woman and the physical space of the *kotha* and the gendered fantasy of the rescue narrative that informs the entire film. If the *kotha* is a tomb, it is also a womb-like feminine space in the sense that it is the place where the courtesan's pure spirit awaits to be born into the world by the agency of the rescuer.

Pakeezah's significance as a singular expression of the courtesan film lies not only in the hyperbolic way it stages the performative idioms and mise-en-scène of the genre to express a logic of desire both of and for the courtesan, but also in the manner it dramatizes the double bind that is attached to this logic, one that is both psychological and historical. The artistic achievements of the courtesan ineluctably arise from what the film perceives as the morally compromised material circumstances of the *kotha*. Amrohi's vision is thus that of an aesthete in the precise sense that the perfection of aesthetic idioms achieved by courtesan culture seem to arise not in spite of human corruption but because of it. The opening sequence of the film expresses that corruption as an atmosphere of death even as it captures the courtesan's exquisite dance and song, and the dominant representations of courtesan culture in the film in the *kotha* at Delhi and the Pink Palace of Lucknow are deliriously aestheticized. Yet even as *Pakeezah* hyperbolically represents the allure of *kotha* culture, it simultaneously undercuts the grounds for that allure in the sense that if the rescue narrative is to be effective and the figure of the courtesan liberated from the *kotha*, her purity acknowledged and redeemed, and the degradation of that environment exposed, then the conditions that made possible the culture that *Pakeezah* celebrates will be irretrievably lost. The heroine's rescue requires a fundamental transformation in her circumstances that ironically threatens to undermine the terms upon which she appears desirable in the first place. *Pakeezah* is thus informed by a nostalgia for the feudal world of the *kotha* and for the fantasmatic image of the feminine that informs it: the very world from which the heroine and the film seek deliverance is also one that the film desperately and lovingly recreates.

The historical context against which Amrohi stages the nostalgic allure of courtesan culture is one where, by the first decade of the twentieth century, the anti-naught movement launched by British missionaries and enthusiastically supported by Indian social reformers and nationalists had dealt a fatal blow to courtesan culture (Neville 1996; Vijaishri 2004). Furthermore, the break-up of the princely states in 1947 transformed the patronage system of courtesan culture causing many courtesans to migrate from princely and feudal states to urban centers where patronage was sharply different from the princely and *nawabi* forms. Although courtesan lifestyle did not vanish com-

pletely, its existence was seriously under threat, and the salon performances of old by *tawaiifs* (courtesans) in their *kothas* or in their own opulent residences had more or less disappeared by mid-twentieth century. Musical cultures were changing; the post-independent state authorized the reclaiming of traditional musical forms from “infamous” *tawaiifs* and *devadasis* (dedicated temple dancers) and courtesans attempted to recast themselves as respectable married women and professional singers who distanced themselves from their *tawaiif* past.

The pervasive mood of nostalgia in *Pakeezah* is evoked in part through temporal conflation in the mise-en-scène wherein the past of the *kotha* is recreated, but self-consciously so, in a manner of something that, while seemingly preserved, is also artificially constructed in the present, and therefore somehow encased outside time, immune to historical change or transformation. In this respect, it is impossible to give precise temporal coordinates to the opening shot of the film. The dance of the courtesan is emblematic of an action that has been continually repeated, evoking the sense that the tomb of the *kotha* is a place outside time. Later in the film, when Nargis’s grown-up daughter, Sahibjaan, is taken to the Pink Palace of Lucknow, it seems to exist in a timeless space. Its architectural idioms are of uncertain vintage, and its physical space appears as an entirely self-enclosed and self-consciously fabricated world. The Delhi *kotha* that is staged at the film’s opening has the feeling of a historical reconstruction, and the primary means of transportation is the horse-drawn carriage; yet the fact that Shahabuddin wears modern thick-lensed glasses and, later on, dark glasses, is a tell tale sign that the setting of the film is, at least superficially, contemporary.

The temporal ambiguity that evokes nostalgia is also registered in the repetitions and parallelisms that inform the romantic rescue narrative of the film. Shahabuddin does indeed rescue Nargis at the beginning of *Pakeezah*, but only to have her rudely rebuffed by his patrician father who cannot tolerate, in his house, the presence of a public woman considered no better than a common prostitute. Unable to escape the stain of her identity, she can only run away to a graveyard, which becomes her literal tomb. Thus Shahabuddin never comes to know Nargis outside the *kotha*. At the graveyard, Nargis gives birth to a daughter linking, in a hyperbolic manner, the procreative body of the courtesan—her womb—with the tomb. Nargis’s tainted offspring is born already into a world of living death as she is taken from the graveyard to the *kotha* by Nargis’s sister, Nawabjaan (Veena) and brought up there as Sahibjaan (also played by Meena Kumari), in a manner that reinforces our sense of the *kotha* as existing in a condition of historical stasis or limbo. For, as played by the same actress, Sahibjaan appears a reincarnation of her mother, underscoring the sense that Nargis has been recreated or reborn in Sahibjaan, doomed to repeat her past life in the nether world of the *kotha*, while at the

same time evoking the thought that Nargis, through her daughter's life, might be redeemed.

Before her death in the graveyard, Nargis writes to Shahabuddin about the birth of their daughter, but the letter remains unread because it arrives at its destination seventeen years later in a manner that is symptomatic of the way in which the figure of the courtesan in *Pakeezah* lacks the capacity for agency beyond the world of the *kotha*. This delay has the further effect of blurring past and present and forges an identification between mother and daughter in their relationship to Shahabuddin, a broken man, who belatedly comes in search of his daughter, late one evening. As he arrives at the *kotha*, his sister-in-law asks sarcastically, "Now which *tawaif* do you intend to rescue from hell?" as Amrohi evokes a visual metaphor for hell in the sparks created by a knife sharpener installed beneath the space of the *kotha* that reflect on the pale green *dupatta* (head scarf) of Nawabjaan. It is as if his visit, motivated as it is by the desire to rescue his daughter, is impelled by Shahabuddin's nostalgic desire to return to and rediscover his beloved Nargis in his daughter. In a sense, Shahabuddin has arrived seventeen years too late, for Sahibjaan has already been inducted into the life style of the courtesan. Furthermore, her confident debut performance that we witness after his departure reveals nothing of the entombment and yearning for escape that informed Nargis's dance.

Yet, if Shahabuddin has arrived seventeen years too late, he has also arrived in the nick of time, for while Sahibjaan has been introduced, she has not yet had her first client; thus she remains expressively pure, a fantasy of pure femininity. Indeed, she is just as he might have imagined Nargis to have been long ago, before she had "fallen." Sent away by Nawabjaan that evening because Sahibjaan is about to perform, Shahabuddin arrives the next morning in a horse-drawn carriage in a manner that evokes the scene seventeen years earlier when he had escorted Nargis in a carriage away from the *kotha* to his father's house. As he enters the empty open hallways of the *kotha*, with the wind rustling in the trees outside, it is the ethereal voice of Nargis that he hears echoing through the empty space, as if it were her spirit that still seeks to be redeemed through the rescue of her daughter. But Nawabjaan has already smuggled her away to Lucknow where she installs her in the resplendent Pink Palace under the guardianship of Gauharjaan, ready to set the city on fire with her beauty and her art.

Sahibjaan's musical and dance debut in Nawabjaan's Delhi *kotha* reveals how well her aunt has trained her, and becomes, like her later performances at the Pink Palace, the occasion for Amrohi to stage the allure of the *tawaif*'s world as a theater of desire. This world is evoked first on the soundtrack when Shahabuddin arrives to claim his daughter. As his horse carriage draws into a busy street, we hear various strains of *thumri* that continue throughout the scene.⁵ As the carriage waits, in the far background we see replicated dancing

figures swirling to music, one above the other, visible through the proscenium of open multifoil arches against the background of luminous pinks and pale greens. Different strains and snatches of music and the sound of *ghungroos* (dancing bells) are heard in the middle register, creating a sonic envelope that evokes the sensuous ambience of the *kotha*, although not without the hint of unease suggested by the sound of the knife sharpener's grinding stone. After Shahabuddin leaves with a promise from Nawabjaan that he can take his daughter away the next morning, Amrohi cuts to Sahibjaan seated for her *mujra* on a mirrored floor with her back to the camera while the *mise-en-scène* of the courtesans' "infamous locality" is arrayed before her and the viewer as a theater of sights and sounds. Sahibjaan begins to sing a refigured traditional *dadra*: *Inhin logon ne . . .* (It is these people . . .). The fast beats of the *dadra*, the mischievous lyrics laden with suggestive innuendo, and the zest with which Sahibjaan performs her *mujra* against Amrohi's lavish composition of the Bazaar-e-Husn (The marketplace of beauty) set create a saturated image of the *tawaif's* world (Figure 2). Sahibjaan's song, sung by Lata Mangeshkar, erases the voices of the other *thumri* singers in a manner that demonstrates the assimilation of the *thumri* repertoire into Bombay film music. As the husky elaborations of the *thumri* give way to Lata's sweet lilting melodious tenor, the very quality of her voice purifies the *dadra* she sings of the disrepute associated

with the *kotha* and suggests the purity of Sahibjaan herself even in the disreputable quarters of the *kotha*.⁶

The Gulabi Mahal (the Pink Palace) at Lucknow evokes a more rarified atmosphere. In Amrohi's imagination, the space of the *kotha* is here fused with the idea of a Greek temple where the central colonnaded performance space doubles as a space of worship to the divine feminine, and discrete spaces are orchestrated in a theatrical hierarchy from the outer court with its fountains at the entrance to the inner sanctum sanctorum, which houses the bedroom of the courtesan, essentially off limits to all but the chosen client, and separated from the main performance space by a lighted causeway between reflecting pools of water. The Pink Palace is a sublime temple of femininity, whose fountains, atriums, reflecting pools form a microcosm of artifice that rivals that of the natural world. Indeed, even the moon appears artful in this



Figure 2. The *kotha* at Delhi: a saturated image of the *tawaif's* world.

landscape and the saturated deep blue sky, a studied backcloth to the whole. The contrast between the Delhi *kotha* and the Pink Palace reflects the distinction Amrohi draws between the figure of the *tawaif* and that of the *deradaar*, both of whom he evokes through the same character (Saari 1977). The *tawaif* lives in the bazaar and “sells her body less and her arts more,” while the *deradaar* lives in a mansion usually maintained by the nobleman whose faithful mistress she is. When Sahibjaan sings *Inhin logon ne*, she is in the bazaar and her music caters to the clientele of that space. However, when she is in the Pink Palace, her music is more classical and she performs the traditional *thumri* composition *Thade rahiyo o banke yaar re, Thade rahiyo* (Wait, O my love, wait a while) in the classical *kathak* form. Through the dance, Sahibjaan moves around the performance space, sometimes dancing, sometimes seated, and using her hands and facial expressions to evoke the conventional metaphors and procedures of the love play of the erotic *shringara rasa* (Figure 3).



Figure 3. Framed by decorative, multifoil arches, Sahibjaan performs a *mujra* at the Pink Palace of Lucknow.

While Sahibjaan is performing for a different clientele at the Pink Palace from that of the *kotha* in the bazaar in Delhi, she has not yet been exclusively claimed by any nobleman as his mistress. When one of the nobleman leaves, she pirouettes after him, and as the curve of her dance is echoed by the camera movement and the circular fountain around which it moves, taking in the curved arches of the pink and white palace in the back-

ground under which she dances, the camera movement and performance conspire to create a unified and utterly mesmerizing *mise-en-scène* of desire.

If one kind of yearning in the film is a yearning for the courtesan and her world that is dramatized in Amrohi’s stagings of the *mujra*, a second kind of yearning, equally palpable, is the yearning of the courtesan to escape from the *kotha*, even as the world beyond its perimeters appears but a dream. Unbeknownst to everyone at the Pink Palace, Sahibjaan’s heart is already lost to an unknown admirer, one she can only wonder about for she missed an encounter with him. When she is traveling by train to Lucknow, a young man—Salim (Raj Kumar)—boards her carriage at night by chance when Sahibjaan and her aunt are both asleep. According to the dream-like logic of repetition and substitution that governs *Pakeezah*, Salim appears as a replacement for Shahabuddin, who can fulfill the role of the rescuer that Shahabuddin had attempted for Nargis, and who turns out to be Shahabuddin’s nephew. Salim, unlike Shahabuddin, has no association with the *kotha* and no inkling that

Sahibjaan is a courtesan. Salim watches as Sahibjaan turns in sleep and her foot emerges from within the bedclothes to the sound of the tinkling of tiny bells on her anklet. Sahibjaan moves in time with the rocking movement of the carriage and the bottom of her foot is turned up. It is colored red with *aalta* (color used on feet by women) and rocks gently as he rocks too and looks at her foot. The scene reminds us of the earlier moment when Shahabuddin took Nargis away and they gently rocked together in a carriage to the sound of the *shehnai* (wind instrument), music that is suggestive of marital union. Salim picks up the book that Sahibjaan has been reading and reads out a verse of Ghalib's.⁷ The sound of the train's whistle mixes with the music of the sitar and the sound of the anklet that evokes the walk of the woman at home, in an extremely subtle evocation of Salim's desire. When Sahibjaan wakes up, she finds a note between her toes: "Forgive me. I happened to come inside your compartment. I saw your feet; they are very beautiful. Do not place them on the ground; they will become dirty. Your fellow traveler." These words are ironic for, as a *tawaiif*, she has to place her feet on the ground in order to earn her living. But Salim's wish for her also evokes the ethereal place of the pure feminine, as if Sahibjaan should float above the ground as Nargis appeared to do in the dance of the opening scene. When Sahibjaan looks out at the platform of the station where the train has halted, Salim has gone, and thus a hole of yearning is created around which her own aspirations to transcend her surroundings take shape. The name of the station where the train has stopped is "Suhagpur" (the place of marriage), which, like the sound of the *shehnai* in the earlier carriage scene with Nargis, is a subtle articulation of Sahibjaan's desire. Thenceforth, in Sahibjaan's imagination, the train comes to embody and figure her desire to escape the condition of entrapment in the feudal world of the *kotha*, the chronotope of historical and temporal stasis, and reach for the great beyond of freedom and fulfilled desire.

Meanwhile, for Sahibjaan whose desire for self-fulfillment has been awakened, the Pink Palace becomes a prison. In a metaphor that recurs in the film, and echoes throughout the genre, she is likened to a bird in a gilded cage from which she yearns to escape. The comparison of the women of the *kotha* to birds is made early in the film when the local hoodlum and strong man in the Delhi *kotha* says to Shahabuddin when he comes to pick up his daughter that the birds must have flown to a new perch. When we are introduced to a gathering of women in the Pink Palace, we hear the throaty sounds of birds. Nawab Zafar Ali Khan who courts Sahibjaan presents her with a bird in a gilded cage, a bird that sings, to which a woman of the *kotha* responds: "It's not a bird, it's our dear sister." At the same time, this image of entrapment is

If one kind of yearning in the film is a yearning for the courtesan and her world that is dramatized in Amrohi's stagings of the mujra, a second kind of yearning, equally palpable, is the yearning of the courtesan to escape from the kotha, even as the world beyond its perimeters appears but a dream.

transformed through an extraordinary visual metaphor. Sahibjaan has a piece of hair jewelry made in the shape of a little box so that Salim's letter is installed by her ear at all times for her to listen to its contents in her mind. We repeatedly hear his voice reciting the contents of the letter as she is reminded of them. This golden box is the double of the gilded cage. The sound of Salim's voice that issues in her imagination from this little box beside her ear, and seems to exist beyond the confines of the Pink Palace mirrors her desire for liberation. His voice gives the lie to her entrapment that is so forcefully registered by the presence of the bird in the gilded cage that hangs above her head, unseen by her, as she gazes at her box jewel reflected in a pool of water. But when the caged bird flutters, as if it were the fluttering of her restless heart inspired by Salim's voice, she takes down the cage from the tree and frees the bird in an expression of her own desire to escape (Figure 4).

Sahibjaan's desire for Salim begins to inhabit her performances for Nawab Zafar Ali Khan, and transforms her relationship to the space that she inhabits. The quality and texture of her performances for him are now markedly different from her earlier ones. Gone is the vivacity and vibrancy of an *Inhin logon ne* or a *Thade rahiyo* as she mournfully sings the haunting *Chalte Chalte*, which articulates her desire for freedom and happiness. Yet it also returns us to the pathos of her entrapment in a manner that evokes the equation of the courtesan and the flickering flame that opens the film. At the conclusion of the performance, as she sings *Yeh chiraag bujh rahein hain / Mere saath jalte jalte* (These lamps are fading / As they burn with me), she hears the screech of a train whistle. It is impossible initially to discern whether it is somewhere physically off-screen or within her mind. The camera cranes upward from the floor to the red chandelier, recalling the red *aalta* of her feet. The lights darken as the escalating screech of the train whistle resounds through the performance space, taking over the song and abruptly bringing the dance to an end.



Figure 4. Like a bird in a gilded cage, but guarded by a snake.

When the camera cranes down again, the dancers have disappeared from the floor. The camera then tracks forward towards the fountains that abruptly stop playing as the whistling ends. It is as if the space in which she dwells, her erstwhile tomb, is now cut to the measure of her desire. She rushes to the balcony to see the train she has seen before, but this time it is motionless, silhouetted against the sky, almost as if waiting for her to come to her balcony before it can leave. Though real, the train appears as if in a vision, so detached is the spectacle from the space she inhabits. What is finally required for Sahibjaan to escape her sealed world is a transformation of environment and character of a magnitude that challenges the tone in which the film has hitherto been cast.

Sahibjaan's first escape coincidentally takes place when the narrative seems set for the consummation of her relationship with the Nawab, and for her to finally lose her virginity. Just as he realizes that her mind is on someone else (and he is reminded of this by her reprise of the song *Chalte Chalte*), elephants invade the river, capsizing the pleasure boat in which the couple have been cruising, and causing the death of the Nawab. The elephants appear as a kind of primal and elemental force of nature, a source of phallic power, which objectifies Sahibjaan's desire to be free, and acts as an agent on behalf of that desire. Cast adrift, she awakens in the morning to alight on the shore of an island where miraculously the man who embodies her desire to be truly loved, a forest officer—Salim—is encamped. As an auspicious wind blows, and we hear music suggestive of the Arabian nights, she falls asleep on his pillow in the tent. She awakens to see a feather quill that she recognizes as her own—it is the one that she had used as a bookmark in the book she had been reading on the train—and reads in his diary his account of their encounter and his yearning for her. She is framed against a glorious nature world, a prelapsarian utopia completely opposite to the artifice she has hitherto been encased within and sings a song *Mausam hai aashiqana* (The season is intoxicatingly romantic) that evokes the longing of a woman in love within a contemporary romance. When Salim returns to find her asleep, he talks to her from the other side of the tent as if to respect the purity of a woman in *pardah* and narrates to her again the story of their encounter. Sahibjaan is thus catapulted from a feudal world of sexual enslavement and the idioms of the courtesan film that express that enslavement to the world of modern romance, even as that romance retains its traditional configuration. As Salim rides off to work on horseback along the riverbank and Sahibjaan waves goodbye, it is as if *Pakeezah* suggests that nothing less than a generic shift, a complete transformation of idiom is required to articulate Sahibjaan's desire for fulfillment that suddenly seems so possible. This shift is cued by a change in the score of the film to western style musical forms and instruments. However, Sahibjaan's first liberation is short-lived because the women of the *kotha*, searching the river for the lost boat, discover her on the shore and return her to the Pink Palace.

Her second escape from the *kotha* is again marked by the eruption of a primal force now in the form of a “snake.” A snake first appears in the film with the introduction of the caged bird and remains lodged on the tree even when Sahibjaan releases the bird to freedom. At first it seems as if the snake, lurking unseen, symbolizes the reality of sexual assault that awaits her in the *kotha*, but it is in fact another avatar of that fearfully powerful phallic force of nature that acts to protect Sahibjaan’s purity. On her return, when Sahibjaan is set up for the usual evening *mujra*, she finds it impossible to perform and sing *Inhin logon ne* to the group gathered for the *mehfil*, so radically has her inner being been transformed by her encounter with Salim. Thereupon, she invites the cold ire of her guardian, Gauharjaan, who cannot brook this non-conformity and challenge to the norms of the *kotha*, for their very existence is dependent on the success of Sahibjaan. In a symbolic gesture she brings in a new bird, clips its wings, and places it in the cage expressing once again Sahibjaan’s imprisonment and the impossibility of her escape. The disciplining of Sahibjaan takes a further sinister turn later at night. As the wind blows through the chilled empty corridors and into Sahibjaan’s inner chambers, doors seem to open by themselves, the lights dim as the camera pans around Sahibjaan’s rooms, and we hear the eerie, mournful echo of Nargis’s voice, as Sahibjaan awakens with a start to find a stranger in her bedroom. The contractor has been invited, presumably by Gauharjaan, to teach Sahibjaan a lesson about the real identity of a *tawaij*. While Sahibjaan backs away in horror from the would-be rapist, the cobra slithers down the bird cage and coils itself with its unfurled hood striking terror into the contractor who completely loses control imagining the snake everywhere. In the chaos that follows, the logic of cause and effect breaks down in scenes of expressionistic excess. The space of the rooms is violently and completely destroyed, and the contractor, fearful of his life, finds himself mysteriously trapped by locked doors, attacked by various objects, and falls to his death by drowning in the scented bathing pool in an ironic and symbolic act of fatal immersion in the *kotha*. Meanwhile, Sahibjaan has rushed from the *kotha* onto the adjacent railway track where she gets her clothes caught in the track. The train she has longed for finally approaches her frantic body, fusing the iconic image of her desire with death. But the train turns out to be a third avatar of a benign, all powerful phallic force, albeit modern. Miraculously it stops, allowing none other than Salim to alight from the carriage to comfort and save her. They are back together in the train carriage, rhythmically moving in a manner that recalls their first meeting. Again, the logic of events takes on the quality of delirium. Sahibjaan observes: “I wonder if it’s my dream or have I gone mad. I don’t know when this dream will be shattered and which desolate place I’ll end up in. I wonder when I will regain consciousness.” Salim’s answer is prophetic for the film, and immediately comforting and reassuring for Sahibjaan: “Wherever you will regain

consciousness, my eyes will be looking at you. And the key to your dreams will be found in my eyes.”

However, the transformation of social attitudes that this romance narrative requires is an extremely difficult one to effect, as manifested earlier by the refusal of Shahabuddin’s father, a feudal patriarch, to accept his son’s marriage to a *tawaif*. Repeating Shahabuddin’s gesture of bringing Nargis home, Salim brings Sahibjaan to his house and introduces her to his female relatives as an oppressed woman who has lost her memory and cannot remember where she comes from. The women are hesitant but not unwilling to let her into the closed family circle. Salim’s greatest challenge, however, is his grandfather, the very patriarch who had rejected Nargis and whom Shahabuddin could not oppose. Unknown to all, Sahibjaan is in her mother’s situation. The old patriarch is not willing to accept Salim’s explanation that he is responsible for her because she has taken refuge in his care. In an ironic and powerful reprise of the earlier confrontation, the grandfather makes it clear that the family’s reputation cannot be compromised by Salim’s association with an unknown woman. However, Salim refuses to accept that his actions will bring ignominy to the family; if anyone’s reputation is effected it will be his and even if he is related to the family, this matter is a personal one and the grandfather has no connection with it. Salim’s responses to his grandfather are in sharp contrast to those of Shahabuddin’s earlier. Salim articulates a sense of selfhood that is quintessentially modern, in which individual desire and choices are not conditioned or compromised by the claims of tradition and community, and he rejects the ancestral home, the seat of feudal power, on the grounds that it cannot take care of its individual members. Much to the horror of the family, Salim condemns his grandfather’s law as oppressive and unnatural, and against the echoing sound of Nargis’s poignant voice, he escorts Sahibjaan from the family mansion.

Yet Salim’s defiance of patriarchal law and his defense of Sahibjaan are made in ignorance of her true identity, and when Salim transports his love away to another idyllic nature world by a gigantic waterfall, Sahibjaan confesses her status to him. Her announcement that she is a *tawaif* reverberates across the landscape and seems to bring the whole world to a standstill. Salim is stunned for a few seconds by the revelation before embracing and accepting her, and now, as they glide together on the water under the moon and the stars, the whole universe seems to corroborate their desire. However, again her liberation is short lived, for she has still not freed herself from the constraints of the past, as if, like a slave, she has internalized the condition of her own subjection. Salim resolves to marry her and is not shaken by a fracas with a passerby who recognizes Sahibjaan, the well-known *tawaif*. Yet, faced with the taunts of the crowd that ring in her ears in a manner that echoes her own sense of unworthiness, Sahibjaan cannot assent to marrying him, and scream-



Figure 5. *The kotha as a tomb; the courtesan trapped like a kite brought down to earth.*

ing her refusal, runs away from the mosque to which they have repaired, and returns by her own volition to the *kotha*, which is now fully possessed with the deadness of a tomb. Almost perversely, Sahibjaan accepts her condition and identity as a “living corpse” existing in the graveyard of the *kotha* as if no other condition can be permitted for her (Figure 5).

Hurt and mystified by the fact that his Pakeezah, meaning the “chaste one” (a name he has given her), has rejected his love, and in an ironic act of forgetting, Salim agrees to marry another woman. In a cruel gesture, he invites her to perform at his wedding: “since you are famous for your singing and dancing.” In this last *mujra*, dressed in white, Sahibjaan seems a virtual embodiment of her mother as she brings to life Nargis’s opening dance. The sequence reverberates with parallels between the two pairs. Furthermore, it seems to reenact the rejection of Nargis by Shahabuddin’s father. Not only cast again as a girl who dances for men’s favor, but one who has to bear the insult of appearing before her beloved’s family not as his wife, but as a humiliated *tawaif*, Sahibjaan sings, directing her bitterness and irony at Salim. She taunts Salim about his inability to meet her gaze and about his fear even of the beating of his heart, though of course she is speaking as much of herself. Stunned that Salim leaves the gathering during her performance, Sahibjaan shatters the glass of the chandelier and dances on the shards, every painful step of her dance etched in blood, in a literal realization of all the humiliation and suffering that she and her kind have received at the hands of *nawabs*, and as an act of defiance against the role in which she has been cast (Figure 6). This gesture of symbolic suicide sets the stage for her rebirth. Her aunt, Nawabjaan, forces the issue of Sahibjaan’s recognition, by presenting the daughter of Nargis and Shahabuddin to the family. Shocked, but thrilled at the same time, Shahabud-



Figure 6. *Sahibjaan performs her dance of death on shards of shattered glass.*

din will not allow his father to destroy his daughter and the sign of his love a second time. He takes the bullet meant for her by his father, and before he dies, he betrothes her to Salim, now at peace that his daughter will at last come home. The old patriarch who all those years ago had rejected Sahibjaan's mother, mourns the loss of his son caused by his pride, and in a final gesture of penance and reconciliation attends Sahibjaan's wedding at the *kotha*, accepting the *tawaif* as his granddaughter-in-law.

If nothing less than a transformation of the courtesan genre is required to enable the rescue of the courtesan from the world of the *kotha* into the world of the modern romance, the ending of *Pakeezah* reveals the nature of the historical fantasy that such a rescue requires in order not to abandon the genre. For what takes place at the conclusion of the film, strictly unimaginable from a historical perspective, is that the world of the *kotha* is retrospectively redeemed in the eyes of feudal patriarchy, embodied in the figure of the grandfather, from the taint that defines it at the film's opening, and recast as the grand palace of the bridal home where the groom's party arrives to take the bride with the grandfather's blessing. The narration of *Pakeezah* stages a dreamscape of desire. It yearns for the world of the courtesan in its meticulous realization of performance idioms and its delirious imagining of the *kotha*, yet it also seeks to realize the yearning of the courtesan to escape from that world of deathly claustrophobia into a utopia of fulfilled desire in the open space of nature and lived time. That this escape is only made possible by the "divine" intervention of the narrator figured as a force of nature that disrupts the narrative logic of cause and effect, and seems to magically free the heroine from the constraints of feudal order, suggests at once the power of that yearning, as well as the extent to which its realization is but a dream. Such a freedom is not possible for the heroine (or the genre) to realize, for the heroine cannot marry without the blessings of her husband's family and without the redemption of her status and her world. This redemption requires that the fissure between the feudal and the modern, enacted through the transformation of the idioms of the courtesan genre itself, be retrospectively erased. Such is the fantasy that is staged at the conclusion of the film, which brings the marriage party to the *kotha* to wed the *tawaif*. This fantasy is a radical gesture, as Amrohi points out (Saari 1977), that indicates clearly the impact of a modern worldview on the conventional mind-set of feudal patriarchy of which the *tawaif* is herself a figuration, even as it conserves the authority of that patriarchy in modernity.

Richard Allen is Professor and Chair of Cinema Studies at New York University and **Ira Bhaskar** is Associate Professor of Cinema Studies at Jawaharlal Nehru University, New Delhi. They are co-authors of *Islamicate Cultures of Bombay Cinema* (2009).

Notes

¹ The authors thank Patrick Hogan and an anonymous reviewer for their comments on this article.

² Films about courtesan culture are found in other Asian cinemas, most notably in Japanese cinema, such as the works of Mizoguchi and Naruse, and these films exhibit a number of commonalities with the courtesan genre in Bombay cinema, though the emphasis in Bombay cinema on the courtesan's mastery of the arts of performance is arguably distinctive.

³ The culture of Lucknow, the seat of the noblemen of Awadh, of whom the most well-known figure was the poet, dramatist, dancer, and aesthete Wajid Ali Shah, the last Nawab of Awadh, who was banished by the British when they annexed Awadh in 1856.

⁴ For further discussion see Bhaskar and Allen (2009) on which this article partly draws.

⁵ The *thumri* is a form of light classical music central to the courtesan tradition that is rooted in the romantic and erotic love-play and the conditions of *viraha* (separation) that define the love of Radha and Krishna. The *dadra* is similar to the *thumri* but faster in tempo with a beat cycle of six.

⁶ For a discussion of the texture and quality of Lata's voice and its symbolic value as the pure feminine voice of the nation, see Sanjay Srivastava (2006).

⁷ Mirza Ghalib, the most well-known Urdu poet of the nineteenth century, famous for his *ghazals*.

References

- Bakhtin, M.M. [1981] 1994. "Forms of Time and of the Chronotope in the Novel." Pp. 84–258 in *The Dialogic Imagination: Four Essays*. Austin: University of Texas Press.
- Bhaskar, Ira, and Richard Allen. 2009. *Islamicate Cultures of Bombay Cinema*. New Delhi: Tulika Books.
- Chion, Michel. 1999. *The Voice in Cinema*. New York: Columbia University Press.
- Neville, Pran. 1996. *Nautch Girls of India: Dancers Singers Playmates*. Paris and New York: Ravi Kumar.
- Srivastava, Sanjay. 2006. "The Voice of the Nation and the Five-Year Plan Hero: Speculations on Gender, Space and Popular Culture." Pp. 122–55 in *Fingerprinting Popular Culture: The Mythic and the Iconic in Indian Cinema*, eds. Vinay Lal and Ashis Nandy. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Saari, Anil. 1977. "Kamal Amrohi explains why his films take so long to make." *Screen*, March 18, 10.
- Vijaishri, Priyadarshini. 2004. *Recasting the Devadasi: Patterns of Sacred Prostitution in Colonial India*. Delhi: Kanishka.

Filmology

- Ali, Muzaffar. 1981. *Umrao Jaan*. India.
- Amrohi, Kamal. 1971. *Pakeezah*. India.
- Chopra, B.R. 1985. *Tawajif*. India.
- Dutta, J.P. 2006. *Umrao Jaan*. India.
- Karnad, Girish. 1984. *Utsav*. India.
- Sharma, Kidar. 1964. *Chitrlekha*. India.
-