



## Exclusionary Practices and Images of Performing Women in Indian Theatre and Film: *A Tale from the Year 1857: Azizun Nisa and Pakeezah*

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### ABSTRACT

This study illustrates the representation of performing women as the cultural or societal Other in India before and after independence. It focuses on disciplining the female body while also addressing the shifts in ideologies pertaining to its representation on stage. This study examines how “social identities are signaled, formed, and negotiated through bodily movement” (Desmond 29) bringing into discussion the inclusions and exclusions of the performing women within the social fabric. It focuses on plays and films that interrogate the shifting identities of such women during and after colonial rule through feminist perspectives. In doing so, I also examine the images of women as portrayed in Rabindranath Tagore’s *Natir Puja*, Tripurari Sharma’s *A Tale from the Year 1857: Azizun Nisa*, and Kamal Amrohi’s legendary film, *Pakeezah* to explore whether the female protagonists under discussion resist or reinforce dominant conceptions of gender. I further investigate whether the female protagonists reinforce the essentialized notions of gender or represent female subjectivity as transgressive or subversive while interrogating the cultural politics associated with the representation of the performing women, and the discursive constructions of their bodies.

**Keywords:** Performance, gender, body, subjectivity, transgressive

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## Introduction

Women as courtesans or performers have been vilified in South Asia, especially in India and Pakistan, but this marginalization is nuanced and represents such women as desirable and despicable, alluring and repelling simultaneously. Their status has undulated through the ages; they have enjoyed the status of a prima donna like *devadasi* in the pre-colonial era, or have fallen as low as a “nautch girl,” a derogatory term coined in colonial times by the British. As Jonas A. Barish notes, this “anti-theatrical prejudice” (295) or disapproval of the performers has existed since the age of Plato till the present times. Barish enumerates the derogatory expressions that are drawn from theatrical activity that tend to be pejorative, and belittling, for instance: “*acting, play acting, playing up to, putting on an act, putting on a performance, making a scene, making a spectacle of oneself*” (1; emphasis in original). This question, Barish rightly notes, is not restricted to the Western world alone, as in “India, until recent times, actors belonged to the despised castes, and were subject to crippling social disabilities” (2). Barish has not specifically referred to the gender of the performers, but it should be noted that if male performers are denounced, how can women performers not be looked at with prejudice?

This study analyses the status of performing women in India and attempts to depict the ways the identities of performing women transitioned even as the ideologies and power structures changed before and after independence in 1947. It briefly discusses how women have been associated with the ‘body’ in Western and Eastern cultures including India and Pakistan. It also briefly examines Rabindranath Tagore’s play, *Natir Puja* and mentions a few films that depict images of courtesans in different eras. However, the major focus remains on Tripurari Sharma’s play, *A Tale from the Year 1857: Azizun Nisa*—originally published as *San Sattawan ka Qissa: Azizun Nisa*—and Kamal Amrohi’s film, *Pakeezah*. This paper also traces how performance styles are coded with social identities, and how bodily movements can be signifiers of resistance within specific contexts. Thus, it interrogates the cultural politics associated with representation of the performing women, and the discursive constructions of their bodies.

Another objective of this paper is to illustrate changes in ideological discourses concerning this issue as the culture in India developed after independence. Another question which is explored is whether the female protagonists in the plays and film under discussion resist or reinforce dominant conceptions of gender and whether the female subjectivity is therein portrayed as transgressive or subversive. Before proceeding to the discussion of the plays and giving the cultural background, my paper discusses how women have always been

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associated with the body, and how this approach impacts the way they are viewed when they perform on stage or in front of male audiences.

Women have been perceived as the body, and visualized as sex objects, while the body's desires have been coded as feminine; the body and its desires have been considered a threat to society, and not only that, it has also been associated with animality and baser instincts as opposed to soul or mind in Western thought. The question is what happens when the female body is displayed within the parameters of a specific (public) space? It may disrupt the dominant ideology; it may be perceived as a threat to social norms prescribed for an honourable woman. As Janet Wolff posits,

the preexisting meaning as a sex object, as object of male gaze, can always prevail and reappropriate the body despite the intentions of the woman herself. . . .

There is every reason to propose the body as a privileged site of political intervention, precisely because it is a site of repression and possession. The body has been systematically subjugated and marginalised in the Western culture, with specific practices, ideologies, and discourses controlling and defining the female body. What is repressed, though, may threaten to erupt and challenge the established order. (82-83)

Wolff's observation can be rightly applied to South Asian societies, especially in Pakistan and India, where women have to mould themselves according to the dominant ideology. As Mary Douglas notes, "the body operates as a symbol of society across cultures, and the rituals, rules, and boundaries concerning bodily behaviour can be understood as the functioning of social rules and hierarchies" (qtd. in Wolff 83).

Since the body is evidently marginalized in Muslim communities, dance is inherently a subversive activity. The marginality of dance as an art form in the Muslim majority states of India, compared with acting, singing and other modes of performance, has had no considerable appeal. The performance of a Muslim woman on stage or in film is in itself, transgressive. However, ambiguities and contradictions still exist and have always prevailed regarding the perception of the female dance performer in the sub-continent. Following is a brief synopsis of how female performers were perceived in Indian culture before independence and how they have undergone transitions with the passage of time.

### **Status of Performing Women in the Pre-Colonial Era**

Before colonial rule in India, dances were mainly performed within temples, by *devadasis*, the independent servitors of the temples (Nijhawan 102). *Devadasi* or "royal dancer's body", as Amita Nijhawan puts it, "is another popular site of

contestation and is linked mythically to her *apsara* (mythic dancing girl, seductive and alluring) archetype, from whom she is said to have descended” (102). These dancers were patronised by the elite and notable families of the time, and were not allowed to marry as they were considered ‘servants of the gods’ or ‘married’ to the deities, devoted only to worship. *Devadasis* devoted their time and energy not only in perfecting their art but also providing sexual services to their sponsors which was a socially accepted custom in that era. The point to be noted is that *devadasis* were not stigmatised or debased in pre-colonial times, but were accorded a high social status. As Anna Morcom puts it, “Because they will never be widowed—something seen as highly inauspicious in Hinduism—they are particularly auspicious, or ‘always auspicious’ (*Nityasumangali*), which is key to their role in temples” (7). However, in Nijhawan’s view, the figure of a devadasi is treated by the academics as a “ghost of all Indian dancers, oppressed, misunderstood, reformed” (102). She further adds:

Colonial and nationalist discourse colluded in the middle nineteenth to early twentieth centuries to debase her and reduce her to the lot of a prostitute (whose story is less well documented) and lead her to disease, poverty and general misery. Social reformists then reawakened her in art in order to save her from the nationalist anti-nautch movement and in the first half of the twentieth century brought her to the concert stage to make her ‘respectable.’ As academics woke up to the damage caused by obliging social reformers who collaborated (in a spirit of apparent rebellion) with colonial power, the devadasi’s story became a convenient emblem of a spiritual-erotic pre-colonial nation that was apparently lost because of colonialism. (102)

In the same vein, the history of Muslim courtesans is not dissimilar to that of *devadasis*. Yet, unlike most *devadasis* who performed within the space of temples, Muslim courtesans performed within the space of their *kothas* (salons) or public spaces on special occasions like wedding ceremonies.

However, plays written about those times, still reflect the social bias that existed against performing women. I argue that performing women were marginalised even in precolonial times, contrary to studies that depict their elevated social status before the arrival of the British in the subcontinent. Morcom rightly observes about the status of courtesans in precolonial times, “While courtesans such as Sahib Jan, [protagonist of the film *Pakeezah*], did not have an equal status to their patrons, they did have an important role in society and culture. They had the potential to gain wealth, esteem, skill, and—in significant ways—respect” (3). Morcom further notes that courtesans enjoyed the luxuries bestowed on them by their patrons and earned ‘respect’ but still, I argue, they were not and could not be assimilated into the mainstream society by getting married to respectable

men. They existed along the periphery, and could not be accorded the status and honour that ‘respectable’ married women enjoyed. In a way, they were glorified and erased, desired and denounced simultaneously.

Tagore’s play *Natir Puja* illustrates this point well. Rabindranath Tagore, Nobel Laureate, poet, playwright and novelist, wrote *Natir Puja (Dancing Girl’s Worship)* in 1927, which P. Muralidhar Sharma notes, “is informed by the revivalist rhetoric of dance which sought to found a spiritual base for dance forms like Bharatanatyam and Kathak” (96). *Natir Puja* is the story of a “worshipping palace-dancer,” it dates back to the era of King Bimbisara (c. 546-496 B.C.), a contemporary of Buddha and the founder of the empire of Magadha. Tagore transformed a Buddhist legend into a beautiful musical drama, interspersed with dance performances and devotional songs. He has painted the dancing girl, Srimati, in a very unique and exquisite colour as a devotional Buddhist who is looked down upon by the queen, Lokeswari, and the princesses owing to her lowly profession, and her devotion to Buddha. Tagore has turned Srimati’s dance performance into an extreme kind of devotional and spiritual practice, creating a different image of a dancing girl on stage. Srimati’s performance stuns all the onlookers as she discards her ornaments and dazzling outer garments one by one, revealing her saffron garment of the Bhikshus in the end. In the Foucauldian sense, Srimati as a subject is controlled, regulated and prohibited from making choices according to her own free will. Srimati becomes “the juridical subject” that is produced through certain “exclusionary practices that do not ‘show,’ once the juridical structure of politics has been established” (Butler 2). In other words, Srimati becomes the subject who is produced and then “restrained” by the regulatory hegemony of the state, but at the same time, she is the one who stands before the law—defiant. Tagore’s play highlights the discriminatory attitude of the aristocracy towards dancing girls even in King Bimbisara’s age which substantiates the argument that this bias against performing women has existed almost in every era.

As mentioned earlier, the *devadasis*, that is, female temple dancers of South India, were something of a celebrated case in the colonial history of India, but as colonial rules and regulations started being imposed in India, their practices of dance and ritual were banned during the social reform movement of the 1890s, with the sole objective of ‘civilising’ Indian women. These regulating practices, suppressing and banning indigenous dances under colonial rule, are “an index of the significance of dance as a site of considerable political and moral anxiety” (Reed 506). Thus, *devadasis* in that era were regarded as not only a moral

threat to society, but also a political threat to the colonial regimes. Drawing from the observations and works of Jean Comaroff and Deborah Kaspin, Susan Reed notes that “Local dancers were viewed as excessively erotic, and colonial agents and missionaries encouraged and sometimes enforced the ban or reform of dance practices” (506).

Gurajada Appa Rao was a Telugu playwright who sought to bring social reforms through the medium of theatre and believed that in order to reach the masses, literature should be written in the spoken dialect (P. Sharma 83). Rao’s *Kanyasulkam* (*Girls for Sale*), written and produced in 1897 and reproduced in 1909 is a critique on anti-nautch reforms initiated by the English, which was later on perpetuated by the middleclass Indian men. The character of Girisam, an Englishman, asserts P. Muralidhar Sharma, deconstructs the conception that it is the “English educated, urban, middleclass men who are the agents of reform” (86). The play reveals that along with the British, middle class Indian men also supported the social reforms concerning the *devadasi* culture.

As Sharma notes, “It is an orthodox Brahmanical patriarchy that has set up this institution and now demands its abolition to further its agenda of social reform” (90). Also, the institution of marriage is a licence for a woman to *respectability*; a woman needs a *male* saviour in order to survive. *Kanyasulkum* documents the ongoing debates concerning the status of *devadasi* and courtesans, a dying culture in colonial India. On the one hand, she represents the nationalist trope of chaste Indian womanhood, and on the other, she has to cleanse her image of the corporeality and sexuality attached to *sadir*, a dance tradition associated with *devadasi* tradition.

The role of religion in regards to women and performance in India has remained ubiquitous, and the traditional *sadir*, a form of dance performance which gradually degenerated into a corporeal practice associated with Hindu temples and religious rituals, acquired the status of a highly esteemed spectacle representing the Indian nationhood after independence. On the other hand, in Pakistan as in all Islamic countries, the relationship of Islam to all forms of arts, including drama, has been equivocal and remains a controversial issue. Along similar lines, art and artistes witness a great deal of antagonism from Muslim communities even in India.

This profound anti-cultural bias of the Muslim middle class left behind in India and those who migrated to Pakistan after partition, “has resulted in a contempt for dance and theatre, which are seen as ‘borrowing’ elements of ‘Hindu’ culture and life” (Afzal-Khan 2). However, Irna Qureshi argues in her

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study on female performers in Pakistan that professional singers, dancers, and actresses are known as ‘Kanjar’ and are associated with Hira Mandi—the Red Light Area—Lahore’s vice district. “So despised is their occupation in Pakistan that the ethnic marker ‘Kanjar’ is a common term of abuse, not dissimilar to the English ‘whore’” (Murphy qtd. in Qureshi 183). The same bias and antagonism towards Muslim performers existed in India before and after the partition.

### ***A Tale from the Year 1857: Azizun Nisa***

Tripurari Sharma, a notable playwright, actor and director has been working in the field of theatre since 1979, is associated with a theatre group, ‘Alarippu’, and also with traditional Indian theatre forms (Mukherjee, “Women in Hindi Theatre” 119). As Nandi Bhatia observes in her book *Performing Women/Performing Womanhood: Theatre, Politics, And Dissent in North India*, “Sharma’s work has remained committed to the depiction of characters, many of whom remain relegated to the fringes of society. These characters range from lepers in *The Wooden Cart* to working class women in *Bahu* (1979), courtesans in *San Sattawan ka Qissa* and Anglo-Indian women in ‘Traitors’ (2001)” (101).

Sharma’s *A Tale from the Year 1857: Azizun Nisa*, though written and staged in the late twentieth century, tells the tale of a nineteenth century courtesan who donned the garb of a soldier to fight the British during the Mutiny of 1857, a consequential event in Indian history. The play, according to Bhatia, is a dramatization of history, which “involves a conscious subversion of not just elite forms of historical production but entails a reworking of historiography in ways that enable an interruption of both dominant and alternative narratives which gloss over the stories of women who exist on the margins of history” (*Performing Women* 101). Hence the play based on the actual story renders Azizun Nisa who was a renowned courtesan, visible as a freedom fighter during the momentous rebellion of 1857. Bhatia notes that the historical moment of 1857 attracted considerable theatrical attention, and numerous plays were written and staged. Films were also made including Dion Boucicault’s *Jessie Brown: The Siege of Lucknow* which was also staged in New York, Gurcharan Das’s *Larins Sahib*, B. Ahmed’s *The Rani of Jhansi*, and Upal Dutt’s *The Great Rebellion, 1857*. Other women who fought against the colonial rule, including some Dalit Viranganas, “war heroines belonging to low caste communities”, have also received recognition in literature. But, the complete invisibility and exclusion of courtesans is noticeable when figures like the Rani of Jhansi are given more prominence in film and theatre (Bhatia, *Performing Women* 105).

*A Tale from the Year 1857* traces the transition in the status of courtesans after the anti-nautch movement started and the traditional courtesan culture patronised by the aristocracy that is, the nawabs, began to decline. Lucknow was the hub of culture and a centre of aesthetes and connoisseurs of art. The opening scene in the play illustrates this transition from the grandeur and splendour of the palaces of Lucknow to the dirty and noisy bazaars of Kanpur where British and native soldiers, instead of the aristocracy, visit the courtesans, not to be entertained by high art and culture but for their sexual gratification.

The opening lines in the play, spoken by Azizun reveal her determination and strong will power that a woman of her stature is unlikely to possess. The play opens in Azizun's home where she is playing the board game, *chauparr*, with Adila, before whom she proclaims: "Look here, Adila. I can't lose. Whether it's you or circumstances... victory pursues me like a supplicant imploring for a meeting" (T. Sharma 120). At another point, in the first part of the play, Azizun discloses that unlike other courtesans of her time, she would not submit to a nawab (prince or an aristocrat): "I would've stayed back in Lucknow, Adila. But obeisance to any prince is not possible for me... and it was becoming progressively difficult to avoid it. Even though I wasn't one of the hundred lights of the sheesh-mahal [a palace built using cut glass]" (T. Sharma 121). Sharma disrupts the stereotypical representations of courtesans as seductresses, and portrays Azizun as a woman who dares to challenge the British, and valiantly fights in the battlefield along with other freedom fighters.

The play paints the displacement of Azizun as a highly sophisticated and admired courtesan from Lucknow to the murky bazaars of Kanpur, from the private and comfortable space of her salon to the battlefield, and her transformation from an aesthete to a soldier who does not detest the sight of the gory arena where mutilated bodies of soldiers greet her. *A Tale from the Year 1857* unfolds amid the vociferous bazaar in Kanpur. Azizun's salon is frequented by merchants, moneylenders, as well as the British and native soldiers alike. The exchange between Azizun and Adila illustrates this point well:

AZIZUN: The money-lenders are to run the household; the soldiers are for entertainment.

ADILA: They will always come to your *mehfil* (the music and dance soiree of a courtesan); that enhances their prestige. No sooner than a few gold coins come in their hands, they think they have acquired royal taste. But where can they get refinement and the culture? That comes only with tradition and custom. And you are wasting your treasures on such as these hoping that they would some day learn to appreciate your art. But they are controlled by foreigners and foreigners care nothing about honour and respect. (T.



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Sharma 122)

As Reed asserts, and the play illustrates, “dance was also a site of desire, and colonial accounts record that male colonists were often captivated by the ‘native dancers’, sometimes even joining them in dances. Thus, in many colonial arenas, dance tended to generate multiple and contradictory policies and attitudes” (506).

Azizun’s lover, Shamsuddin Sawar, an Indian rebel and former soldier in the army who is wanted by the British, also frequently visits the salon. Azizun’s prudence and prowess in her dealings with the British and the elite are revealed in the scene when a British soldier arrives at her salon, unannounced, to look for her lover and traitor, Shamsuddin. Azizun happens to meet Shams and his rebel comrades, close to the river, vowing to assist them in their struggle for independence. The narrative of the play disrupts the conventional representation of a courtesan by revealing her in this new light:

MOHD ALI: The matter is not of your interest.

...

MOHD ALI: We’re preparing for a battle.

AZIZUN: That which has begun in the lanes of the city. My home is in one of those. How the situation changes I can see from my windows, the whole day. What don’t I feel? The helplessness of slavery? The sense of despair? The slowly aggravating coldness?

...

MOHD ALI: You might disapprove of my manner but what is a woman’s interest in matters of war?

AZIZUN: As in her life.

SHAMS: This isn’t love; it’s war.

AZIZUN: And I love this war that has already knocked on my door. (T. Sharma 143)

Sharma’s representation of Azizun Nisa adds a new dimension in the conventional portrayal of dancing women or courtesans, and in the historiography of the mutiny which is “replete with many myths” (Bhatia, *Performing Women* 110). The play focuses mainly on the unprecedented contribution of a courtesan in the struggle for independence, unrecognised so far. Azizun is not portrayed in her professional role as dancing, singing or luring men with her seductive charms, rather she is revealed combating hand in hand with the rebel soldiers, disguised as a man.

Another stereotypical image of women, as nourishers or life-givers, is also dismantled in this play as Azizun is not portrayed in this light proving Bhatia’s point that Sharma has created an image of ‘virangana’ or warrior, not a woman too full of the milk of human kindness. Sharma subverts this conventional image at various points in the play, for instance, the first is based on the true story of the

Anglo-Indian daughter of General Wheeler, who lost her life during the mutiny. Azizun does not even spare her in her passion for revenge and wrath against the injustices perpetrated by the colonial rulers. At another point in the play, Azizun remains adamant in spite of Zubaida's pleadings and allows the assassination of British women and children who are sheltered in the *bibi-ghar*—the house of the ladies—during the battle. This image of Azizun, as an unscrupulous and heartless warrior, in Bhatia's words, "complicates her position," while also depicting "power play and gender politics to comment on the extremes of war and the misuse of power even by women like Azizun" (*Performing Women* 111).

At various points in the play, Azizun abandons her traditional gender role by opting to perform like men, proclaiming to have renounced her identity: "That woman is not unkind ... she's just toughened herself ... as tough as a man" (T. Sharma 157). Later in the play, after a fierce combat with a soldier, Azizun asserts: "I must complete what I've set out to do. I'm not a mere woman. He should have treated me like a soldier. Fought and killed me ... But no, in his eyes I remained a mere woman" (T. Sharma 166). The dynamics of gender and power have been illustrated throughout the play as Azizun refuses to play her prescribed social role as a woman. In part VII of the play, one soldier pleads Azizun to perform her socially assigned role as an entertainer using her seductive charms. On the contrary, her response challenges his assumptions:

SOLDIER: Who would know better than you, Azizun, how bad this spectacle is. Why don't

you become gracious to your admirers again?

AZIZUN: I...? No. I don't remember those things anymore.

...

SOLDIER 2: Ravish your admirers again with your charm.

...

AZIZUN: No. Talk now of sword and ammunition. (T. Sharma 167)

Lata Singh writes, in her article "Visibilising the 'Other' in History: Courtesans and the Revolt", that the collective impact of these regulations imposed by the British triggered the loss of patronage. Subsequently, the courtesans also had to face material penalties for supporting the rebels during the mutiny which brought about their fall from the esteemed position of a cultural institution to the status of debased prostitutes (1679). Tripurari Sharma in one of her interviews also commented in this regard:

That these women are treasure houses for culture and expressions are devalued, conveniently forgotten and consequently lost, and they are seen merely as entertainers and available for sex work. These are two distinct things. The *kothas* (salons) had music, dance and entertainment but the courtesans were not available for all. Their relationship was of choice. This

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has done a great deal of damage to these women, their bodies, their identity and culture. (qtd. in Singh 1679)

The policies of the British remained duplicitous towards courtesans, dispossessing them of their wealth, maligning them, and simultaneously, using their services for entertainment. In a bid to reduce their control over nawabs, the new government gained access over most of the real estate bestowed by nawabs on courtesans, and “discredited the nobility who associated with them as dissolute and immoral. Yet when it came to matters such as using these women as prostitutes for the European garrison, or collecting income tax, the eminently pragmatic British set aside their high moral dudgeon, and decreed rules to make this possible” (Singh 1679). This debasement of courtesans and the subsequent elimination of their culture, created a community of prostitutes and sex workers who were available to soldiers and commoners alike.

Hence, the resentment and acrimony that courtesans felt during the colonial era was justified, and most of them supported the nobility battling against British rule. However, only viewing their sacrifices for independence against colonial rule in this context would reduce their contribution, and further perpetuate their invisibility in history. As Singh asserts, “Looking at their participation in the 1857 revolt merely from the point of view of such anger would be to overlook the courtesan’s political consciousness and agency” (1679). In the play, Azizun Nisa reveals her political awareness and prowess in such matters several times and her strength in taking decisive action at the appropriate moment is also emphasised. As Tripurari Sharma points out in her interview that she deliberately painted Azizun Nisa from a different angle: “Azizun Nisa’s contribution was a call of conscience and not a craving for personal gain or political power... Her stake seems to be that of conscience, more of a desire to transcend” (qtd. in Singh 1680).

Azizun Nisa, as a woman and not only as an artiste, transcends her essentialist role, and emerges as an iconoclastic, rebellious figure, able to challenge the British and Indian patriarchy alike. Sharma, in her portrayal of Azizun Nisa, has given voice to all those women who remained invisible, either due to gender bias or because of Hindutva ideology of the 1990s (Bhatia, *Performing Women* 115).

This study would remain incomplete without mentioning a few Indian films, all mega-hits in the history of Indian cinema, that have represented courtesans or dancing women as protagonists. *Anarkali*, *Mughal-e-Azam*, *Devdas*, *Pakeeza*, and *Umrao Jaan* are films that have achieved monumental success at the box office and are considered classics of Hindi cinema. One common aspect

among all these films is the depiction of courtesans or performing women and their exclusion from society. Moreover, the movies also portray how their salons transformed into brothels as their status dwindled downward. Thus, women performers occupied a liminal social status, as Morcom notes, and their exclusion from mainstream was absolute.

### ***Pakeezah*: The Purity and Respectability of a Performing Woman**

*Pakeezah*, produced in 1972 by Kamal Amrohi, was another classic and one of the most successful films in the history of Indian cinema. Amrohi created a dreamlike atmosphere, with palatial spaces where the performances of the courtesans took place, accompanied with splendid music which enthralled the viewers when it was released after more than a decade of production. The film narrates the story of a Muslim courtesan, Sahib Jan, known for her mesmerising beauty, melodious voice and dancing skills, and is played by the famous Meena Kumari. The first scene reveals Nargis, the late mother of Sahib Jan, performing a beautiful dance in *kathak* style, and the burning candle in the background denotes her state as a woman whose life is wasting away drop by drop until it is finally extinguished. Richard Allen and Ira Bhaskar argue that the opening shot depicts a dingy and claustrophobic chamber, which evokes the metaphor of the *kotha* (salon) as a tomb, “while the circling of the moth around the flame is a dance of death” (23). In the same manner, the graveyard is an important signifier, which depicts Nargis languishing away, after her ouster from her husband, Shahab-ud-Din’s home; his family had rejected her as a daughter-in-law. Nargis breathes her last in the graveyard after giving birth to a daughter who later transforms into the bewitching Sahib Jan. From the very outset, the film sets the tone and atmosphere of a prison-like existence of the heroine. The imprisoned bird in the gold cage guarded by a black serpent is a recurrent motif in the film, symbolic of the asphyxiated state of Sahib Jan who feels entrapped in that kind of living.

Sahib Jan’s first performance in the film accompanies the song, “Inhi logon ne le laina dupatta mera” (These are the Men Who Snatched My Scarf) castigates the whole patriarchal hierarchy from the dyer to the sepoy/soldier, who have dishonoured her. As, the scarf or *dupatta* is a symbol of honour for a woman in the Muslim and several Eastern countries, stripping a woman of her head scarf denotes a grave offence and infamy. In other words, performing in front of men brings disgrace and notoriety as it is considered inappropriate for women hailing from noble families.

Sahib Jan, along with her aunt, moves to the Pink Palace in Lucknow,

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to establish a new settlement to escape her father, who has been searching for her ever since he learnt that he had had a daughter from Nargis. During the long journey by train, a forest officer, Saleem Ahmed Khan encounters Sahib Jan in the compartment while she is asleep, and captivated by her beauty, he leaves a note in between her toes, admiring the beauty of her feet and imploring her not to get them dirty. Reading this note is the precise moment when Sahib Jan becomes aware of what being in 'love' means, and starts dreaming about her unknown lover. The train journey transforms her whole existence and she becomes reluctant to perform before men. As she becomes acutely aware of her shameful existence after settling in Suhagpur, notes Anna Morcom, "her mode of performance becomes increasingly disembodied" (4).

The next performance by Sahib Jan depicts a transformed individual who with her restrained movements, focused only on her feet, takes small measured steps, appropriate to the theme of the song, "Chalte chalte, sar-e-rah, yunhi koi mil gaya tha" which translates as "While Walking along, I Came across a Traveller by Chance." She performs *Abhinay*, moving only the upper part of her body, notes, Morcom, while remaining seated on the ground, and making expressive gestures through her hands (4). This kind of performance is controlled and restrained in a way which is not meant for sexual arousal. As Sahib Jan becomes deeply entrenched in her new found love, she keeps drifting away from her previous life as a courtesan.

Every time the train passes by, rumbling and hooting, it evokes in Sahib Jan an incredible urge to meet her unseen romantic lover. The hooting train serves a dual purpose for, on the one hand, it creates in Sahib Jan a desire to renounce this life, her corpse-like existence and on the other hand, it reminds her of her impurity and the fact that she would not be accepted by a respectable man. "The 'male rescuer' provides the space where the courtesan figure can dream about the possibility of attaining an untainted life and true love" (Morcom 2).

Sahib Jan's final performance is the most dramatic scene in the film where her feet, which are fetishized throughout the film, literally get tainted with blood when she deliberately stamps her feet in rage over the broken shards of glass. The performance takes place at her father's residence which happens to be her lover's abode as well; it is his wedding function. Here the denouement and recognition scene takes place and finally, she is accepted by her blood relations, not because her being a courtesan is forgiven but due to her family origin. 'Pakeezah' means 'pure' and she remains unsullied, body and soul for her husband, which is the norm in a patriarchal society.

According to Morcom, the so-called happy ending of the film, and Sahib Jan's marriage with Salim, who turns out to be her cousin, depicts "modernity as a savior" (2). "Salim as a forestry officer," notes Morcom, "represents a professional new order, contrasting in attitudes to feudal patriarchs such as his father and grandfather" (2). Morcom further adds that the train, emblematic of modernity in a number of Indian films, represents the space where new relationships can possibly be developed. Likewise, the film subverts the old order where married men could "enjoy extramarital relationships with women who could not themselves marry" (2). However, social reality was significantly different from what was depicted in the film, as courtesans, after partition, were no longer deemed as respectable as they had been before the colonial era. Moreover, their salons had transformed into brothels as their status dwindled downward. Thus, women performers occupied a liminal social status, as Morcom notes, and their exclusion from mainstream was absolute (3).

Furthermore, as Allen and Bhaskar argue that *Pakeezah* is an instance of the Muslim courtesan film, whose "defining feature 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" (20). This line of argument validates my stance that dancing women were considered morally debased even while they enjoyed a life of luxury, refinement and elevated status as artistes. Poonam Arora rightly argues that despite the fact that the film ends on a positive note, it is not without a streak of gloom and a sense of pessimism that is embedded in the whole film (66).

*Devdas*, *Sadhna*, *Umrao Jaan*, and scores of other films also demonstrate courtesans as excluded figures, living along the margins, and considered unacceptable by society. Moreover, *Sadhna* is another film that ends happily when the heroine, a performing woman and prostitute, is rescued by a man who accepts her as his wife after many trials and tribulations. Umrao in *Umrao Jaan*, and Chandralekha in *Devdas* both depict the courtesan protagonists as solitary, tragic figures, rejected by their lovers and society. Moreover, Arora notes that the protagonists of both *Pakeezah* and *Umrao Jaan* yearn to be reunited with their kindred and live honourably through marriage with the men they love (67). But, unlike Sahib Jan, Umrao's hopes to find her love remain thwarted and she is shown in the final scene of the film looking at her own reflection in the mirror, companionless (Arora 67). On the other hand, Sahib Jan's veil in the final scene of the film is lowered to signify that her face will no longer be the focal point and target of the male gaze which also marks her acceptance into respectable society.

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However, the status of performing women in India evolved after Independence as the nationalist discourse transformed the role of the courtesans and female actors considerably. India and Pakistan view the performing women differently, with their increased visibility in the former and extreme invisibility in the latter. After independence of the Indian subcontinent in 1947, performing women in India were elevated from the status of ‘nautch girls’ or ‘prostitutes’ to that of India’s cultural and national icons, using Bharatanatyam as their mode of performance, a dance form that was basically developed by *devadasis* in the past. “Classical performing arts” in Morcom’s view, “have now become a middle class preserve, an important form of cultural capital, and a respectable career for women” (109). Female performers of Bharatanatyam, Odissi, and many other forms, are being celebrated as national icons and images of “Incredible India.” The most important factor that has legitimised and established the classical performing arts as a “respectable, middle-class zone” is the exclusion of hereditary, “disreputable” female performers. It was only after the exclusion of the low class, sex worker/prostitute from the arena of performing arts that the “respectable” women started to actively embrace the art form (Morcom 109-111).

The same can be said about the performers in the Indian film industry, they gained recognition and respect only after the industry was ‘sanitised’ by eliminating the female hereditary performers from this zone as well. Filmmakers and directors started to hunt for reputable female artistes or high-class courtesans to gain respectability (Morcom 115).

## Conclusion

To conclude it is imperative to add Amita Nijhawan’s take on the current status of dancing women in Indian popular culture, and in her view, dancers in India tend to stimulate a “curious confusion in the minds of the audience or perhaps filmmakers, choreographers and censors... a collision of fascination on the one hand and fear on the other” (100). In Nijhawan’s observation, dancers in India exist in “a ‘fantasy’ space, and are often denied ‘realness,’ and yet it is a space with potential for production of emerging cultural and gender ideals” (100). Morcom further notes:

From the 1990s, however, Bollywood dance became popular in Indian diaspora communities in the developed world and in India itself. Middle class girls now perform what are often sexy numbers in public in sometimes skimpy costumes, without being seen as disreputable or equivalent to prostitutes, but rather as normal and trendy. Thus, Bollywood dance has become a new, legitimate zone of national culture—a genre in the real world as opposed to just in or for movies. (117)

Acting in Bollywood films today is considered prestigious and lucrative as it grants stardom and affluence which the majority of aspiring young women from the middle classes dream about. Bhatia traces this transition in the identity of an Indian female performer in her article, “Nautanki and Hindi Cinema: Changing Representations”, examining the Bollywood film *Main Madhuri Dixit Banna Chahti Hoon* (*I Want to Become Madhuri Dixit*). She analyses the changing representations of *Nautanki* (a traditional form of folk theatre in India, based primarily on myths, folklore and stories from Mahabharata, and Ramayana) in Hindi cinema. *Nautanki* were mainly performed in village squares where performances would continue all night long with song and dance elements to amuse the audiences. Bhatia notes that “Nautanki remains largely marginalised” and has lost prestige, and even if films foreground the Nautanki to target broader audience appeal, they ultimately reaffirm “hierarchies that operate in the cultural realm” (“Nautanki” 18-19). The film, *Main Madhuri Dixit Banna Chahti Hoon*, attempts to establish that cinema is “the appropriate cultural medium for fulfilling the Nautanki actress’s desire for greater social success” also maintaining that Bollywood is being recognized and acknowledged globally as a growing and popular industry (Bhatia, “Nautanki” 11). This hierarchy in the cultural realm also validates my stance that actresses performing on stage are not accorded prestige even in India where Nautanki continues to shrink and lose its appeal in the audiences, and Nautanki actresses face derision and bias which still exists to some extent.

However, at the core of the contemporary zones of performing arts lie the conflicts that female performers confront in patriarchal cultures. Dramatists like Tagore and Sharma have endeavoured to represent performing women from a different angle, that is, as rebels crusading against the established patriarchal system. This representation is against the grain if considered from the standpoint of stereotypical images portrayed in films and drama. The selected films and plays illustrate that not much has changed in India after independence, especially when it concerns the way women are represented in the media.



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