

ALAIN DÉSOULIÈRES

## Historical Fiction and Style: The Case of *Anarkali*\*

### Summary

THIS PAPER looks at “historical realism” and some aspects of the language in the famous Urdu drama *Anārkalī* by Sayyid Imtiāz ‘Alī Tāj, with passing references to cinema. *Anārkalī* is the quasi-mythical character of a slave girl in love with the Mughal imperial heir Salīm (afterwards Emperor Jahangir), a love apparently passionately shared by the Prince. However, his father, Emperor Akbar, did not approve of such a debasing liaison and had the poor girl walled up alive in c. 1599 while the Prince was kept away. The “romantic” drama takes place in Lahore, at the Mughal Court, and legend has it that the new (and still grieving) Emperor Jahangir had a magnificent mausoleum built in her memory sixteen years after her tragic death. The “monument” is still standing and is very famous, as is *Anārkalī* herself, but modern historians contend that the famous monument is not her tomb. This legend inspired the Urdu writer Imtiāz ‘Alī Tāj, a native of Lahore, and his stage drama, as well as the popular *Anārkalī* character, have inspired very successful films from the 1930s almost up to the present day. It is important to note that, with the advent of talking films, Imtiāz ‘Alī Tāj modified his 1922 stage version for better adaptation to cinematic drama.

I shall first consider *Anārkalī*, the historical drama, within its cultural

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and historical context, with passing reference to the history of Urdu drama. Secondly, I will consider the question of the “historical sources” of the fabula or plot as conceived by Imtiaz ‘Alī Tāj and look at his attitude toward them. Thirdly, I will discuss the way historical realism is blended with a popular tale and attempt to identify elements of comparison with another tale, *Sassī Punnū*. I will also look at the importance of Imtiaz ‘Alī Tāj’s drama, and of recreated myth as a whole, for Indian (and also Pakistani) cinema. Finally, I will examine some of the linguistic resources Imtiaz ‘Alī Tāj used in writing his historical play and I will analyze the detailed description of the preparations for *Jashn-e Babār* (Spring Festival) given at the beginning of a key moment in the unfolding of the plot.

### Introduction

Language and style have always been important issues in the writing of dramas, and more so when the dramas were written not only for the stage but also for the screen. Artistic choices and commercial aims always require particular writing techniques as well as precise linguistic and stylistic choices to suit the mood of the drama. This is naturally true of Urdu drama and cinema, considering that Urdu stage drama has long been an important source of inspiration for Hindi and Urdu cinema.

### Anarkali, an Historical Drama by Sayyid Imtiaz Ali Taj

*Anārkalī* (first written in 1922, rewritten in 1931) is an historical drama, a modern prose genre that flourished starting with the European romantic drama of the nineteenth century and well into the twentieth century. Many historical films drew on this literary genre, as well as on the historical novel. This is true of Urdu as well as European languages.

Briefly, we might say that historical drama includes both light and serious drama and bears on a precise historical context. It has two constraints if it wants to achieve its aim to seduce and convince the reader: the first is to be realistic enough and the second is to have a well-identified romantic and tragic plot. Mirzā Muḥammad Hādī Rusvā’s novel *Umrā’ō Jān Adā*, first published about 1904, (which also contains historical anecdotes about the Kingdom of Lucknow) fits this broad definition as well. For the elaboration of the drama (just as Indian cinema would do later), historical reality was made more acceptable by using comic pas-

sages and even obvious anachronisms. From the linguistic point of view, it is obvious that realism must be achieved by using appropriate historical terms and relevant levels of language.

As far as historical fashion in the Urdu novel is concerned, let me mention a somewhat symbolic case. Premchand published his long Urdu story “Shaṭranj kī Bāzī” (The Chess Game) at about the same time as *Anārkalī*, around 1925, and his story, containing some dialogues, resembled a small historical drama. It was the only story Premchand wrote with a historical context, namely a post-Mughal context (the last days of the Kingdom of Lucknow). The story also became the theme for a famous film of almost the same name “Shaṭranj kē Khilāṭī” (Chess Players) directed by Satyajit Ray.

In the 1920s the historian of Urdu literature Ram Babu Saksena was complaining about the lack of serious inspiration in Urdu drama, which he considered decadent and vulgar. According to Saksena, Urdu drama lacked the inspiration of serious national themes (1927, 367)—one reason for the box office failure of the first version of *Anārkalī* as a popular stage drama in the 1920s was perhaps that it was too serious a drama for the time.

In 1922, when Imtiāz ‘Alī finished his first version of the play, it was not well received and he was heavily criticized. In his preface to the published play he states that it was not appreciated by the theaters; they suggested changes which he did not like. Soon afterward, the Lahore cinema studios were created and Imtiāz ‘Alī immediately tried to have a film made (eventually, he even appeared in it), but apparently the Bombay studios picked up the idea and the story and another film called *Anārkalī* was released in 1928 leaving the Lahore-made film looking like a pale copy of the well-financed and well-distributed Bombay film.

With the advent of talking films in 1931, initiated by the Bombay Talkies, Urdu stage drama—which specialized in historical dramas and was already affected by the so-called silent historical cinema—was left in shambles. At this time, Imtiāz ‘Alī decided to again modify his play and go to print, “considering the poor state of affairs in Urdu stage drama” (1931a, 7)<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup>All quotations from Imtiāz ‘Alī Tāj’s Urdu drama are from the Alhambra 2002 reprint edition except where stated as being from Lahore: Sang-e-Meel 1993 or 2003. The latter are also reprints of the 1931 edition but with some textual differences. The above quoted passage from the preface is not extant in the Alhambra edition.

It should be added that Imtiāz ‘Alī Tāj secured the help of two erudite local Lahorite historians to proofread his drama—at least this is what he says in the preface of his second edition (1931c, 7): Ghulām ‘Abbās and Maulānā Ćirāgh Ḥasan. Indeed young Imtiāz ‘Alī was barely in his twenties when he wrote the first version of the drama and, besides his intimate connection with the local legend (he was from Lahore and was living close to what is supposed to be Anārkalī’s tomb), he confesses that he was fascinated with Mughal history and the local history of Lahore. Indeed, in those days there was a strong tradition of Urdu and English local historiography, with Syad Muhammad Latif (historian of Lahore and Agra) and the famous architectural *Tārīkh-e Lāhaur* by Kanhayyā Lāl.

We can only imagine the revisions Imtiāz ‘Alī Tāj made in his drama. He did listen to some literary criticism, and he may have enlarged the descriptive passages of his play since they read like passages from an historical novel, with a plethora of colorful details—particularly the first introductory descriptive passage about the royal garden and daily life in the women’s quarters (1931a, 15–16) and the presentation of Salīm’s palace and apartments (*ibid.*, 27–28). Naturally these passages emphasize the local color and add to the realism of the play.

He must have also revised the poetic passages. Incidentally, two Persian ghazals<sup>2</sup> included in the play do not mention Imtiāz ‘Alī’s “nom de plume” (or *takhalluṣ*) Tāj. There is also a “gīt,” or poetic song, and occasional quotations of Persian verses. Let us say that poetry is also part, though a minor part, of the play. It is a part of the courtly décor and lifestyle, all dialogues being in prose with distinct levels of speech according to the social status of the different characters. Would Imtiāz ‘Alī Tāj want us to believe that we are reading an “authentic” Hindi “gīt” and Persian ghazals from the end of the sixteenth century?

This historical drama is built in three parts, or acts, called “*bāb*”: romance or passion (*‘ishq*), dance (*raqṣ*), and death (*maut*). Each part is divided into five scenes (*manẓar*), and every scene bears a title which is actually the name of the precise location where the action is taking place (these are listed at the beginning of the printed drama). For example, act one, scene one is enacted “between the imperial harem and the lower garden of the Lahore Fort” (*ibid.*, 12). These indications of the setting are given at the beginning of every scene, often including a precise description of the palaces and gardens.

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<sup>2</sup>The Alhambra 2002 reprint edition includes Urdu translations of all Persian verses at the end of the volume, pp. 150–52.

As far as the intrigue is concerned, we have the “eternal triangle” of two lovers and a jealous rival. We also have the compassionate mother and the irate father. Akbar symbolizes the ultimate contradiction between the loving father and the caring statesman. The tragic end of the heroine means the sacrifice of love for reasons of statehood and also the refusal of an aberrant marriage.

Thus we have a very classical dramatic frame, even respecting the well-known rule of the three unities (a pillar of classical Western drama): unity of action (the tragic romance of Prince Salīm and the slave girl Anārkālī from their first meetings to her tragic end), unity of place (all the action takes place inside the imperial palace of Lahore, and unity of time (the whole drama occurs “during the Spring season of 1599” (*ibid.*, 11–12).

### **Historical Sources of the Fabula as Conceived by Sayyid Imtiaz Ali Taj**

As mentioned earlier, in order to be realistic enough, the writer of historical drama needs a story that bears on a precise historical context and he needs to refer to a well-known romantic and tragic plot, mostly with well-known historical characters. The myth of Anārkālī in the popular historiography of Lahore provided that. Its characters, except for the heroine, were real historical persons who had lived and ruled in Lahore. The myth had a vague caveat from local historians and a tragic, serious and dramatic story relating to the tales of Western travelers that local historians loved to quote, especially during the Victorian era at the tail end of the nineteenth century. The tragic end of the slave girl Anārkālī walled up alive by order of the “cruel” Mughal emperor fits well with the Victorian and colonial ideology that needed to justify colonial exploitation by promising civilized and peaceful rule, especially after the severe and cruel 1857 repression.

Thus the historic tale chosen by Imtiaz ‘Alī Tāj contradicted the well-known, and mostly justified, Indian notion of Emperor Akbar’s clemency and sense of justice. At the time Imtiaz ‘Alī originally wrote the play, and even more so when he rewrote it without changing the plot, he must have been criticized for his “historical” choice that depicted Mughal Emperor Akbar, who came often to Lahore, as an irate father and an inflexible ruler. However, especially after having studied Western drama for ten years, our author likely thought it best to stick to his historical, tragic, and romantic tale—that was still fashionable, especially in the booming

cinema industry of those days with the advent of the “talkies”—when he decided to go into print, in spite of the opposition from the stage drama companies. Indeed, he likely also wanted to create a good screenplay.

Already in the introduction to the play, Imtīāz ‘Alī Tāj tells us that “as far as [he] could determine, [his] story has no historical base” (*ibid.*, 7). He then translates (from English) “the tale [*dāstān*] that is written in a frame on a wall of Anārkalī’s tomb by the Lahore Archeological Survey: the civil station of Lahore is known by the name of Anarkali” (*ibid.*, 6). Although the playwright does not say so, the translated English text he quotes is taken from Latīf’s history of Lahore:

The tomb of Anarkali: Anarkali (the pomegranate blossom), by which name the Civil station is called, was the title given to Nadira Begam, or Sharf-un-Nisa, one of the favorites of the harem of the Emperor Akbar. One day, while the Emperor was seated in an apartment lined with looking glasses, with the youthful Anarkali attending him, he saw from her reflection in the mirror that she returned Prince Salim (afterward Jahangir) a smile. Suspecting her of a criminal intrigue with his son, the Emperor ordered her to be buried alive. She was accordingly placed in an upright position at the appointed place, and was built round with bricks. Salim felt intense remorse at her death, and, on assuming sovereign authority, had an immense superstructure raised over her sepulchre. The sarcophagus is made of a block of pure marble of extraordinary beauty and exquisite workmanship. It is, according to Mr. Eastwick, “one of the finest pieces of carving in the world.” On the top are inscribed the 99 attributes of God, and on the sides is engraved the following Persian couplet, composed by Jahangir, her royal paramour: —

*Ta qayamat shukar goyim kard gaar e xavish raa*  
*Aah gar man baaz biinam ruu e yaar e xavish raa*

“Ah! could I behold the face of my beloved once more,  
I would give thanks unto my God until the day of resurrection.”

On the north side of the sarcophagus, below the ninety-nine attributes of the Deity, is the inscription: —

Majnuun Saliim Akbar

“The profoundly enamoured Salim, son of Akbar,” Salim being the name of Jahangir when a Prince.

The inscription shows how passionately fond Salim had been of Anarkali, and how deeply her death had grieved him. It is the spontaneous outcome of a melancholic mind, the irrepressible outburst of an affection-

ate heart.

(1892, 186–87)

Then Latif gives some details on the later history of the tomb, under colonial rule, with some architectural details, including the traditional inscriptions and chronograms showing the burial date and the completion date of the monument:

The date given in letters and figures is 1008 A.H. (1599 A.D.), which refers to the death of Anarkali. On the west side of the sarcophagus, above the words “In Lahore,” is another date, 1024 A.H. (1615 A.D.), which is the date of the building of the tomb. Akbar died on the 13th October 1605, and thus the building was completed ten years after his death.

(*ibid.*, 187)

Imtiāz ‘Alī Tāj does not mention Latif’s work and simply quotes the plaques and Persian inscriptions on the monument for the sake of his curious and cultivated reader—the intellectual Urdu-speaking urban class of Lahore, which also included British residents—but he must have read Latif’s work, like every cultivated Lahorite, fascinated by Mughal history as he was. (I should add that Latif’s work was in every potential reader’s mind so Imtiāz ‘Alī Tāj would not need to specifically mention it.) Of course, Imtiāz ‘Alī Tāj could certainly read and write Persian very fluently and would not need Latif’s work in order to read the Persian inscriptions or to hear about Anārkalī’s tale, but Latif’s work was a kind of necessary, well-known historical caveat, along with the Lahore Archeological Survey.

Latif was also the author of an impressive *History of the Punjab*, first written in Urdu and translated into English in 1891. Latif’s historical writings are usually extremely well documented and illustrated. He had an excellent knowledge of Arabic and Persian as well as Urdu and was also very good at English. In his *History of the Punjab* he does not mention the story of Anārkalī, though in his history of Lahore he does, but without quoting any authority. Thus he provides us with a solid historical context: the monument’s name, the dates and the Persian inscriptions, carefully noted and translated into English.

The lack of Persian sources, as well as the fact that Latif does not mention the story of Anārkalī in his *History of the Punjab*, suggests that he must have been aware that it was only a local legend based on hearsay from European travelers and adapted to the taste of the local population. But, just as Imtiāz ‘Alī Tāj was in quest of a romantic tale to please stage and cinema audiences, so Latif apparently thought it best to please his

English readership by not contradicting the doubtful testimony of European travelers, who themselves were relying on hearsay and perhaps on local oral tradition.

This is how Imtiāz ‘Alī Tāj concludes his preface for his cultivated reader, or prospective cinema director, allowing us to know the genesis of historical drama.

I do not know when and how this tale [*dāstān*] was invented. And the histories of Lahore that mention it do not say where they have taken it from. In the tale itself there are several weak points, judging by internal evidence, that prevent the reader from making a firm judgment. But historians can discuss these points better than me.

My drama is only related to [oral] tradition. I have been listening to the imaginary story of Anārkalī since childhood and thus the drama that my imagination saw in the pomp and splendor of the Mughal harem is expressed in this story of beauty and passionate love, with its failure and unhappy end. Thus far, whoever has listened to my drama has raised questions on this point: is this a tragedy about Anārkalī and Salīm or is this about Akbar the Great? But Anārkalī is such a heart-touching character that at the moment of choosing the name [and title] it was impossible for me to retain another subject.

(1931a, 8)

About the legend being spread by European travelers, it is indeed a remarkable coincidence that William Foster’s *Early Travels in India* (including accounts by Edward Terry and other European travelers of the Mughal era) was first issued in 1921, while Imtiāz ‘Alī Tāj wrote the first version of his drama *Anārkalī* in 1922. He may have read Terry’s “Voyage to East India” in Foster’s anthology, but we have no proof of that and he does not say anything about it.

Then, in order to add some flesh to his legendary heroine, Imtiāz ‘Alī Tāj requested his friend, the famous painter ‘Abdu’r-Raḥmān Čughtā’ī, to enliven “his dead words” with a portrait of Anārkalī, which provided a beautiful cover for his 1931 edition. He remarks:

My respected friend, the painter ‘Abdu’r-Raḥmān Čughtā’ī, who is the elegance and pride of India, has blended my dead words with his living touch of paint. Thus the printing of this drama has given me as much happiness as if it had been enacted on stage. Perhaps he does not think of it as such a great favor, but for me, I consider it a source of pride and honor.

(1931b, 6)<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>3</sup>The 1993 Sang-e-Meel reprint edition has the same cover, with the painting



Imtiāz ‘Alī Tāj’s choice of Čughtā’ī as an illustrator was particularly appropriate because Čughtā’ī’s style evoked for the reader both modern sensibility and the sensuality of the 1930s along with the general impression of courtly miniature paintings. Indeed the lack of perspective, the drawing technique preceding the filling in with color, the turban and the attire of the young and beautiful Anārkalī holding a flower (a frequent attitude for Mughal princely portraits)—all these traits tend to remind the reader of courtly miniature painting of the Mughal era.

However some significant details connect the painting precisely to Imtiāz ‘Alī Tāj’s drama and to modern times. In contrast to the classic landscape typically used as a background for so many Mughal miniatures that depict women, here we have a uniform background, the color of which matches the complexion of the heroine who is portrayed; and the background is studded with thinly drawn pomegranate blossoms. Even more revealing of the dramatic theme of the picture is the quite unusual, almost defiant demeanor of the lady—like so many Mughal princes and princesses, she is holding a flower in her right hand, but that flower is broken. Also instead of looking straight ahead, her head is turned to the left, in contrast to the orientation of her body which is facing the spectator. Her face is seen in profile, and although her traits are the traditional ones (revealed by the way the painter has drawn her lips, nose and eyebrow), she is depicted as looking at someone else. Also her jewelry does not remind us of the jewelry in vogue among low-class dancers of the Mughal Court, there is too much of it. And the style of the painting evokes “art nouveau” portraits; for example, the long, elaborate locks of her hair, one of them being parallel to the rather unusual loose curving end of her turban that underlines her breast in the absence of a veil.

In other words, this picture suggests a kind of Mughal portrait, but with a modern, somewhat defiant, feminine love with a broken flower, or destiny, in hand. No wonder Imtiāz ‘Alī Tāj felt so happy and proud of this work of art, inspired by his writings, that would convey to the reader his stylistic attempt to blend realistic historical writing with romantic, contemporary, popular taste. The picture as a whole is an ideal representation of the crux of the drama. For Imtiāz ‘Alī, that picture would serve

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reproduced in color. The original picture can be seen in the Lahore Museum. The Alhambra edition has a black and white cover (a still, perhaps taken from the film *Anārkalī* by R.S. Choudhury, 1935), does not reproduce this painting, and also omits this paragraph of the preface.

the purpose, while he was being refused by the Lahore stage companies, of introducing his writing as a potential script for the newly-born talking cinema and also as an authentic, Indian-inspired, literary drama following Saksena's recommendations for a new, more creative Indian drama. That is, illustrating and rewriting the play with very precise descriptions and many historical details was a unique artistic attempt by Imtiāz 'Alī Tāj to save his play from being pirated by cinema directors.

He concludes his preface with this paragraph:

And I cannot finish this preface without offering heart-felt thanks to my friends Ghulām 'Abbās Ṣāhib and Maulānā Āirāgh Ḥasan Ḥasrat who have proofread this edition with so much kindness and hard work along with their other editing tasks.

*(ibid.)*

Imtiāz 'Alī Tāj refers here to his efforts to present a play that has been carefully edited by two learned individuals from Lahore and tries to reinforce his claim of historical realism. In short, Imtiāz 'Alī Tāj published a play, against many odds, that was inspired by local history and yet contained enough locally-inspired fiction from oral tradition to be entertaining. No doubt, Imtiāz 'Alī, following Saksena's recommendations, was going against two trends in Urdu drama: (1) translating from English drama, which presented stories that did not suit an Indian audience, and (2) following the popular Parsi dramas, which presented light plays that relied on Persian mythology and traditional Hindi mythological plays (*natak*). This explains why he took so much care with the language of his characters, as well as with the descriptions of the locale in his drama and a precise evocation of Akbar's Court.

### **Historical Realism Blended With Popular Tale**

I have suggested that the European travelers (for example, Bishop Herbert, William Finch and Edward Terry) who contributed to the creation of the myth of Anārkālī, as related by some local Indian historians, may have been inspired by local tales. Indeed Imtiāz 'Alī Tāj, as we have seen, claimed to have relied mainly on "tradition." Of course, he refers to oral and, perhaps, family traditions, in addition to the "histories of Lahore" that he claims to have consulted. I found it quite revealing to briefly compare a popular Punjabi legend that was translated into Urdu, which Imtiāz 'Alī must have heard of and perhaps read in Urdu, with the tale of Anārkālī.

I am referring to the famous Punjabi tale of *Sassī Punnū*, which contains some striking similarities to the *Anārkalī* tale used by Imtiāz ‘Alī Tāj. These cannot be mere coincidences since he must have known the *Sassī Punnū* tale familiar to almost every educated child of Lahore. Here are some common points:

1. The subject of both stories is an impossible (feminine) love. Sassī, like Anārkalī, is the heroine and the unfortunate victim of her love for a man who is incapable of defending her.
2. Both heroines are from humble families and appear fated to suffer for having dared to love men who belong to the aristocracy.
3. In both tales, a key element of the plot is the intoxicating liquor used by enemies of the unfortunate couple to destroy and kill their love.
4. Sassī and Anārkalī are also both punished and killed for their audacious love by being buried alive. Sassī is buried by a storm in the desert while desperately looking for her lover Punnū, and Anārkalī is walled up by bricks while separated from Salīm on the Emperor’s orders. This mode of execution is not, to my knowledge, recorded as being in use during Akbar’s reign and Imtiāz ‘Alī Tāj must have been reproached regarding this detail, but, as he says, he remained faithful to the tale heard during his childhood.

Many other small details, particularly regarding the secondary characters, could be added for a fuller comparison of the two tales. Those too are important similarities and it is obvious that Imtiāz ‘Alī Tāj knew the popular Punjabi tales: they were narrated within the family circle, read in Urdu (in his social milieu), and also acted out in natak (popular plays). These tales also inspired Indian stage drama and, later, cinema, so, no matter how much our author may have been influenced by local historians and accounts taken from European travelers, it seems to me that popular tales influenced him more decisively and captured his imagination, and that he was able to balance his love for the official Mughal history of Lahore (as he states in his preface, quoted earlier) with the charm of the popular tales.<sup>4</sup>

He was so fascinated by the Anārkalī legend that he did not hesitate to write in his preface to the second printing:

In the meantime, countless reviews have been written on this book.

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<sup>4</sup>Comments are based on a 1980 Urdu edition (Lahore: Nirālī Kitābēh) and oral Punjabi tradition.

Often gentlemen would, in their articles or letters, express a very critical view. Quite a few persons did not like it. I am thankful for both praise and harsh criticism. In the second printing I have made use of suggestions that seemed fruitful and have neglected the ones I considered unimportant. I agree with some literary critics, the others will, with the passing of time, agree with me.

(*ibid.*, 7)

We now have a clearer view of Imtiaz ‘Alī’s literary design. He was writing what he thought would be a successful story, using popular and scholarly documentation alike, within a serious literary and “historical drama,” and he no longer concerned himself with whether it would be performed by the local stage company. With the help of some local scholars and a famous painter, he published and republished his literary drama, trying to attract both the élite and the popular audience, and including such a wealth of linguistic and historical detail in the long descriptions that introduce every act of the play that it would also seem he had readied it for the screen.

### Imtiaz Ali Taj Drama and Cinema: A Powerful Myth

As mentioned earlier, although Imtiaz ‘Alī Tāj failed to produce his own film in Lahore and was soon outdistanced by the Bombay studios, his story, nevertheless, had much success—not only from the literary point of view (as indicated by the many reviews it precipitated and by the fact that his play is constantly republished)—in spite of being rejected by the Lahore stage companies of his time. The story inspired quite a few films and television dramas, not to mention English translations and adaptations in Urdu, including one in verse, and other Indian languages. Given the scope of this paper, I cannot list all the films and television productions he inspired. However, I will mention four films that are known to have been inspired by his drama even though they adapted it or did not acknowledge the influence.

1. *Anārkalī* (also known as *Loves of a Moghul Prince*), directed by Prafulla Roy and Charu Roy (1928, silent)
2. *Anārkalī*, directed R. S. Choudhury (1935)
3. *Anārkalī*, directed by Nandlal Jaswantlal (1953)
4. *Mughal-e A‘zam* directed by K. S. Asif (1960)

Even though this list is not complete, an old Pakistani *Anārkalī* Urdu television drama of the 1980s (partially inspired by the Imtiāz ‘Alī drama) and a Pakistani *Anārkalī* Urdu film of the 1970s cited by Mushtaq Gazdar (1997) in his chronology of Pakistani cinema should be added.

Asif’s *Mughal-e A‘zam*, although taking most of the plot created by Imtiāz ‘Alī Tāj, preferred to have a different ending, a happy one showing Akbar’s clemency. On the whole, Asif’s film, which was very successful, presents a more politically correct version of Akbar’s reign. B. D. Garga (1996) notes:

Again, in his anxiety to show Akbar as a compassionate king, and to provide his film with a “happy ending,” Asif changed the popular legend by letting Anarkali escape through the false bottom of the wall which opens out into a tunnel. This defies the internal logic of the tragic situation.

(176)

Salim Arif, in the *Encyclopaedia of Hindi Cinema* (2003), has an interesting comment on the subject of “historical realism” in Asif’s film:

This attitude towards historical characters and events resulted in films that violated authenticity for the sake of effect, of which K. Asif’s *Mughal-e-Azam* is the best example. Based on Imtiaz Ali Taj’s play *Anarkali*, *Mughal-e-Azam* had a predecessor in Filmistan’s 1953 production of *Anarkali*. The same story, with changed emphasis and excellent production values and performances, made *Mughal-e-Azam* a landmark in Hindi cinema.

Though the *Mughal-e-Azam* characters have become a part of Indian cinema folklore, the film was anything but historically accurate in the matter of textual details, costumes, sets, and music. For instance, thumri, a 19th-century musical form is used along with khatak costumes in a court supposedly in the late 16th-century India. Even the Sheesh Mahal (the royal bath of the actual queen) is enlarged into a dancing hall of the Mughal emperor, Akbar. Anarkali could have been one of the numerous dancing girls of the Mughal harem; whether the Mughal prince Salim fought his father over his beloved is not documented in history.

(233)

And to these I will add that, while it is obvious that Asif had the story of Anarkali arranged according to his own imagination, nevertheless Imtiāz ‘Alī Tāj’s fatal triangle (the couple and the rival) is still there, as is the dominating figure of the irate father. And, naturally, the historical Mughal frame and décor imagined by Imtiāz ‘Alī Tāj are there as well. Moreover, one can ask what is left of Imtiāz ‘Alī Tāj’s language and style

in Asif's film? It would require a lengthy study of the dialogues to answer this question precisely, complicated by the fact that, by 1960, the myth of Anārkalī already had a cinematic tradition of its own. We could say that Imtiāz 'Alī Tāj's experiment was carried further by K. Asif: the essence of a compromise with historical reality giving priority to dramatic effects is already present in Imtiāz 'Alī's writings.

Although the authors of the *Encyclopaedia of Hindi Cinema* do acknowledge Imtiāz 'Alī Tāj's influence, they do not classify *Mughal-e A'zam* as an "Urdu language film." The Urdu or Hindi label does not make much difference for the cinema directors, but it is an indication of the level and style of the language inspired by literature. "Urdu literature influenced films" or "Urdu literary films" strikes me as a workable concept for classifying films.

### Linguistic Tools and Historical Realism

**Names and Titles:** When writing historical drama, an author has to use proper historical names and titles as well as correct terminology in order to make the drama seem real. In this play we are dealing with the Mughal empire during the reign of Emperor Akbar. The author situates his fabula precisely in CE 1599 in the Royal Fort (or Palace) of Lahore in the Punjab, where the Mughal Court is said to have sojourned, particularly for the Spring Festival (*Jashn-e Nau Rōz*), the author here uses the Persian name of the festival instituted by Akbar at the Court. However, the presence of Akbar in Lahore at that time is not well documented.

A good summary of the different names and titles used by the author is naturally to be found in the initial "dramatis personae," or cast of characters, here simply called *af'rād* (individuals). Imtiāz 'Alī Tāj briefly names and defines the characters of his drama. This was a technical point and a way of drawing the reader into the Mughal historical atmosphere. If we examine the kinds of names, titles and terminology he uses, we can begin to see the different terms of address, titles, etc. used by the author in the different scenes of the play and we can look at their different meanings.

**The Mughal Emperor (Akbar):** The first character listed is the Mughal Emperor, who is called here by his reigning title Jalālu'd-Dīn Akbar (an Arabic periphrase literally meaning "the splendor of religion" coupled

with his personal name Akbar meaning “the greatest”). “Akbar” is the term used in the drama’s directions to designate the character Akbar, not his title.

All of this is fairly accurate, though Imtiāz ‘Alī Tāj did not bother to retain the full official reigning title which included the traditional Muslim name for kings, Muḥammad (Arabic meaning “the praised”). The full title with personal name should have been “Jalālu’-d-Dīn Muḥammad Akbar.”

Imtiāz ‘Alī’s historical definition of the character, “Shahanshā-e Hind,” is the traditional Persian (with an *izāfat*) and Urdu phrase for “Emperor of India,” though it is doubtful that this was in official use during Akbar’s time. It is not usually mentioned in the official Mughal *farman*’s (edicts) and seals.

More realistically, in the dialogues, when mentioned or addressed by a character, the Emperor is referred to or called by real Mughal titles from that time. For example, in act 1, scene 2 (1931a, 32) the Imperial Physician (Ḥakīm Ṣāhib) calls Akbar “Zill-e Ilāhī” (Shadow of the Divinity), which fits with the “Dīn-e Ilāhī” (Divine Religion), the syncretic religious order that Emperor Akbar had promoted. I would not argue that the connection between the two phrases is a historical fact, but rather that Imtiāz ‘Alī reproduces a realistic historical feature that may echo in the mind of the cultivated reader.

In the same dialogue, Salīm, in the presence of the Ḥakīm Ṣāhib, addresses his father as “Jahāñ Panāh” (literally “Refuge of the World” or “Protector of Society”), which was a common Persian Mughal imperial title. On the other hand, I doubt that the Arabo-Persian phrase “Akbar-e A‘zam,” as heard in the mouth of the Prince’s confidant (*ibid.*, 30), would have been heard in a courtly Indo-Persian conversation of those days. Linguistically, it looks like a tautology since the two Arabic terms have very similar meanings. Beyond that, it sounds like a term used by Urdu historiographers, rather than being drawn from courtly language. It is even more surprising to hear the character Akbar ironically refer to himself as “Akbar-e A‘zam” in a replica where he plays the statesman tired of the flattery of the servants “who had so many emperors made *Akbar-e A‘zam*” (act 2, scene 3 in *ibid.*, 76). Here we may have a conscious anachronism from the author, a kind of historical joke.

Finally, Akbar is also addressed as Mahābalī (Sanskritic title meaning “most powerful”), especially by his Rajput wife. This term may have been in use in Akbar’s Court, given the political alliance with the Rajput princes. In any case, it strengthens the image of an Indianized Mughal Court and fits the realistic approach of the author.

**The Crown Prince (Salīm):** The next character to be mentioned in the “*dramatis personae*” is Salīm (Arabic meaning “the pacifier,” “the savior”), but popular history has it that the name was chosen by Emperor Akbar in memory of the Sufi saint Salīmu’d-Dīn Čishtī after a pilgrimage to his hermitage to seek his aid to have a son. In the scene directions for the play, the Prince is simply referred to as Salīm, but in the dialogues his father calls him by his familiar surname Sheikhū (*Shaikhū*), using an Indo-Persian diminutive suffix with the Arabic term “*shaikh*” (a mature Muslim man, but not of Arabic ascendance). The surname seems to be accurate enough, at least as far as popular historiography is concerned.

Salīm’s role is explained as being “Akbar’s son, Crown Prince.” The phrase for Crown Prince being “Valī-e ‘Ahad” (two Arabic terms with a Persian *izāfat* (the Persian annexation case expressed by “e”) literally meaning the “governor of the reign,” which is the standard modern Urdu term for a crown prince or heir apparent, but here the Urdu terminology betrays history). At the time there was no such thing as an official Crown Prince since there was no official rule of succession to the throne in the Mughal Sultanate. In the dialogues, Salīm is referred as Šāḥib-e ‘Ālam (two Arabic terms with a Persian *izāfat* literally meaning “Master of the World”), a realistic historical Mughal title. Sometimes Anārkalī calls him “Shahzāda” (in the vocative form “Shahzādē”), Prince, which also seems appropriate given their supposed relationship (e.g., refer to act 1, scene 4 in *ibid.*, 49).

**The Queen (Rānī):** In the list of characters the Queen is simply called “Rānī” (the queen), and her role is simply defined as “Akbar’s Rajput wife and Salīm’s mother.” The term “Rānī” suits her well—she was the Rajput princess Rānī Jōdhā Bā’ī—better than the standard Urdu term (from Arabic) “*malika*.” In the dialogues Akbar addresses her by that name (Rānī), and even as “Mahārānī” (great queen), and she answers calling him “Mahābalī” (see above) and even Mahārāj, (see act 2, scene 4 in *ibid.*, 75–80). Again, this could also be interpreted as an attempt to convey some sense of complicity or familiarity between the two characters, given the modern use of the terms (*mahārāj* being also used to address a husband), instead of using cold official terms. It is interesting to note that in the directions for this scene the queen’s character is also called Mahārānī, instead of Rānī.



**Anarkali (The Slave Girl):** First of all, we should note that if her name is taken from the popular legend, it is not inconsistent with Indo-Persian popular culture: “*anār*” is the Persian term for pomegranate and “*kalī*” is a common Indian and Hindi term for flower bud. It seems that Imtiāz ‘Alī’s imagination was carried away by the poetic charm of the name. He almost says as much when explaining (act 1, scene 1 in *ibid.*, 14) how Akbar gave the poetic surname to the beautiful slave named Nādira (feminine Arabic adjective meaning “the exceptional one”). While Anārkalī is inherited from the legend, Nādira is the realistic (also poetic and feminine) one invented by the author. Also, the name Anārkalī, a metaphor by itself, is used for poetic and romantic passages in the mouth of Prince Salīm (act 1, scene 2 in *ibid.*, 30–31). It has been suggested that the probable origin of the name Anārkalī was that it was the name of the Mughal garden where the alleged tomb of Anārkalī was later built, or that the style of the cupola suggested a pomegranate bud.

In the list of characters, Anārkalī’s role is summed up as “a slave girl of the royal harem who caught the King’s eye,” which means a favorite, or rather a slave (*kanīz*, Persian word for a female slave) selected from the harem. The term does not imply that she was a courtesan, but her duties are to dance and sing, especially for the royal festivals.

**The Names of the Women of the Imperial Harem:** Imtiāz ‘Alī Tāj takes the names for the women of the harem mostly from Indo-Persian and Urdu traditional names for girls. The girls are defined as slave girls from the harem, but they may have gained some rank through the King’s favor. There are also female confidants for the heroines, a universal feature of classical drama.

The rival of Anārkalī is Dilārām (“comfort of the heart”). She is referred to as “the former favored slave girl of the Emperor,” and her name is very much a symbolic one, but also one that deceives, as she happens to be the betrayer of the lovers. Indeed we see the Emperor asking for a slave girl (Dilārām) to “come and dance and sing very slowly ... like falling snow flakes ... to soothe his burning mind” (*ibid.*, 78), but she fails to do so, invalidating her own name, or rather surname, thus the symbolic name here is used as a kind of reverse metaphor.

Anārkalī’s little sister is called Śuraiyā. It is an Arabic name, fitting with Anārkalī’s Arabic name of Nādira. It originally meant a group of seven stars, but also symbolized enduring feminine friendship and sisterhood. It also evokes a kind of earring or pendant depicting a bunch

of fruit, “*ḡhumkā*,” which is also called “*ṣuraiyā*” in Urdu. Indeed *Ṣuraiyā* is both the dearest and the most faithful sister of the heroine: “I would die of love for you” she tells Anārkalī (*ibid.*, 40). Fruit/flower names for girls is a classical dramatic feature, a common metaphor, for female characters.

Ladies of the royal harem are referred to as “*bēgam*” (lady, a feminine form of the Turkish title “*bēg*,” lord) which is the appropriate historical term. The *bēgams* are served by the “*kanīz*.” In contrast we also have Anārkalī’s mother who has no proper name except *Mān* (mother). This implies that she is a simple woman from the enslaved population. We do not hear of any father for Anārkalī, who, as a slave, does not need to know her origins.

**The Name of a Eunuch of the Harem:** One of the eunuchs of the harem is a minor character and has a funny name. He is quite an effeminate person and is designed to give a somewhat comic touch. In the list of characters he is called Khvāja-Sarā Kāfūr. “Khvāja-Sarā” is a Persian title meaning both eunuch and guardian of the harem, and the term “*sarā*” or “*sarā’ē*” is close to the English “seraglio” which was itself borrowed from Italian and Persian. *Kāfūr* is an Arabic noun for “camphor,” a word that carries the meaning of evaporated or transparent in Urdu, quite a funny and suitable name for a eunuch.

Being an effeminate character, he is mocked by the slave girls whom he is supposed to command. They call him “*Bī Kāfūr*,” (*Bī* is an abbreviation of *Bībī*, actually a respectable title for a married lady, but here used ironically for Madame Kāfūr) and he talks about himself in feminine, not masculine, terms (e.g., act 1, scene 1 in *ibid.*, 17–19). Imtiāz ‘Alī plays with both historical Persian titles and Urdu grammatical features—which allows clear feminine speech through the agreements of the verbs, a feature that Persian, which is supposed to be the Court language, does not have. But here we are bordering on the so-called “vulgarity” of popular Urdu drama that Ram Babu Saksena was so critical of.

The institution of the Imperial Harem, the “women’s quarters,” slavery, eunuchs—these are all historical features (and are also well documented, including by European travelers whose accounts were fashionable reading in those days) of the Mughal Courts and palaces. Imtiāz ‘Alī Tāj also uses well-documented terms for Court officers and servants—like the “*darōgha*” (or *dārōgha*)—who were attendants of the royal mills, prisons, etc.

### The Language of the Characters

I want to turn now to an analysis of the speech and the different levels of language used by the characters in Imtiāz ‘Alī Tāj’s drama, with attention given to the social status of the characters and the requirements of historical drama. Witty dialogues may alternate with somber speeches and, naturally, the proportion of Arabo-Persian phrases and terms may vary considerably. I also want to look at when the character recites poetry or sings, whether it is the Hindi/Urdu “gīt” or the “classical” Persian ghazal. In addition to the plot and the literary models, the correct linguistic and stylistic features of the drama are also found in the films, although transformed (e.g., Persian ghazals are not heard in the above-mentioned films). The “style” of every important character may also change according to the mood of the character—as, for example, Emperor Akbar’s manner of speaking in private with his family differs from his pronouncements as a severe and irate ruler.

Let me look first at the different styles in the dialogues involving the character of Emperor Akbar. First in act 2, scene 3: sitting in a state room of the Imperial Palace, the Emperor (with the Queen) is watching dances, but he seems to take this moment of relaxation to reflect on his life. He talks to the Queen (whom he ceremoniously calls Mahārānī here and she calls him Mahābalī) about his dreams for the Mughal monarchy. He gives voice to some bitter reflections on his personal failure to find a proper Crown Prince to succeed him. Being disappointed, he recounts all the glories of his armies, his conquests, the Court and the Empire, as if dictating his memoirs to an official chronicler. Then, unexpectedly, he uses quite a strong metaphor: “Hindustan is licking my foot like a vile dog, but the greatest dream of my life is yet to be seen, and I cannot find enough determination within myself to give it birth” (*ibid.*, 79). He adds that he feels very lonely and then laments that this same determination and inner strength are lacking in his own son. Then the Emperor gradually begins talking like a father to the mother of his son. Now he calls her Rānī (my queen) and refers to his son by his informal name, Sheikhū. We can also notice that he now addresses the Queen using the familiar form *tum* (you), dropping the ceremonious Mahārānī.

In the following scene of the same act we find Akbar and his son playing chess and, but for the occasional “Zill-e Illāhī” (Shadow of the Divine), used by Crown Prince Salīm to address his father, the dialogue between the two is quite ordinary. The father calls his son Sheikhū and they have a pleasant and normal chessboard conversation—though the

technical terms are the ones used in Akbar's India before the introduction of the present European version of the game. Historical realism is represented by the use of such terms as "vazīr" for the chess "queen," and the royal pieces give orders to living pawns, which also fit the "historical" scene directions given by the author. He tells the reader that the chess-board is as big as the courtyard and the pawns are in the form of slaves, as was noted by nineteenth-century local historiography about Akbar's reign. The use of the official "Z̤ill-e Illāhī" by the Crown Prince to address his imperial father is a revealing contrast to the pet-name Sheikhū used by his father in addressing him.

In the very last scene of the play (3:5), when the ill-fated Anārkalī is sent to be buried alive on the orders of the irate imperial father who could not bear the idea of his son courting a slave, we hear a desperate Salīm address his father in quite a familiar and unceremonial tone, while the father is equally desperate because of his failure to regain his son's affection.

(Akbar enters in a hurry from the outside door, climbs the steps quickly and comes near Salīm) "What is it, Sheikhū, what's happening to you?"

(Salīm stares silently at Akbar for a moment) "Who are you?"

(Akbar looks at his son with worry) "Don't you recognize your father?"

(Salīm averts his gaze and turns his head away) "Sheikhū has no father. Father of the State [*daulat*], you are a murderer. Anārkalī's murderer. Salīm's murderer. There are traces of blood on your forehead. The flames of Hell are burning in your eyes. Your breath smells like a dead body."

(Akbar's face changes color) "Sheikhū, my child, come to your senses."

Salīm: "Sheikhū is not your child. Look, your daughter is standing there (he gestures towards Dilārām), go and embrace her and shed your tears on her."

Akbar: "Dilārām!"

Salīm: "Yes, she is the key of your jail, the very seal of your blood, your crushing stone!"

Akbar: "Oh Lord, this day was also to be seen ..."

(*ibid.*, 146-47)

The words "your crushing stone!" are, for the viewer, a clear allusion to the complicity of Dilārām in the walling up alive of Anārkalī. If we read these lines carefully (and the following ones, though they are less striking) we see that the author has managed to write a very harsh dialogue, with strong, shocking images for the many admirers of the proverbial compassion and sense of justice of the aging Mughal Emperor. Even if this fit of anger suits the character of the rebel Crown Prince, he is very

unlikely to ever have spoken to his father in such a manner, especially in front of courtiers.

Imtiāz ‘Alī Tāj has produced a skillful crescendo in the violence of Salīm’s words that contrasts sharply with the diminishing vigor and authority of his father’s replies, especially if compared to the preceding dialogues. Salīm’s impotence is matched by his growing anger and hatred for his father, but only at the very end of the play. The cruel death inflicted on Anārkalī (a very unlikely death sentence from Akbar) is not portrayed on stage, but the violence of the dialogue is a powerful and dramatic substitute. Here the violence of the dialogue is a stylistic device of the stage drama.

The two most famous films using Imtiāz ‘Alī’s fabula—*Anārkalī* by Nandlal Jaswantlal (1953) and *Mughal-e A‘zzam* by K. S. Asif (1960)—depict the anger and rebellion of Prince Salīm in a much more detailed manner, and the former shows the dramatic walling up alive of Anārkalī with Salīm arriving too late to prevent it. As noted earlier, in the latter, Asif chooses a happy ending in order to show Akbar’s clemency. Neither film dares to reproduce Imtiāz ‘Alī’s harsh and shocking dialogue

We have seen how Imtiāz ‘Alī, through the use of forms of address and endearing terms, is able to suggest gradual changes in the mood of the character, and how his use of metaphors may reverse universally accepted beliefs about Akbar’s clemency (e.g., here the marks on Akbar’s forehead are no longer the symbolic Hindu “*tilak*,” the sign of “*ṣulḥ-e kull*,” the general reconciliation between the different faiths of the Empire, but rather, here they are metaphorical blood stains that betray injustice and cruelty.

### **A Case of Historical Reconstruction by Description: Prince Salīm’s Palace**

I want to turn next to the realistic and picturesque description of a Mughal palace provided by Imtiāz ‘Alī Tāj. This description goes well beyond the usual instructions for set-makers and stage indications. It describes a landscape, has a slow approaching movement, and then enters the palace before going into minute detail regarding the inner decoration and style. Such a description could only be achieved through an elaborate stylistic and linguistic technique that requires a proper knowledge of the architectural technical terms (notwithstanding the fact that Imtiāz ‘Alī Tāj knew the Lahore Fort and could have read descriptions of it, even in

Urdu).<sup>5</sup> Combining technical/historical terminology with a well-structured description having clear logical and topological sections was a way to present to the reader a kind of reconstruction by means of literary description.

Indeed we have a small introductory part which gives us the exact location of the palace, with its customary name.

**Act I, Scene 2: Salim's Hall [*aivan*]**

The North-Western Royal Hall [*aivān*] of Prince Salīm's Palace [*maḥal*]. Within the Imperial Lahore Fort [*qila'-e lābaur*], his Palace is situated outside of the enclosure [*čārdīvārī*] of the Seraglio [*ḥaram sarā*] but very nearby. This is the Hall that is fronted by the *Mušamman Burj* (the Octagonal Tower) with its Mughal latticework balconies [*jḥarōkē-dār*]. Outside, the landscape is so full of greenery and freshness, and has become such a charming and delicious abode that no Mughal [prince] can, in the whole Palace, choose another place for spending his moments of leisure.

In the distance, the declining sun is mixing its purple hues with the blue sky. From a long alley of thick bushes the dark silent palm trees tilt their high heads. In her robe of waters, the Ravi is trying to bring all those faraway flowing colors up to the wall of the Fort. Through the western balcony [*jḥarōkā*] we can see part of the white cupola and red minarets of a mosque.

Inside, in front of the Tower, there is a marble-paved terrace [*čabūtrā*] that is as wide as the Hall. On both sides of the terrace are Mughal-style arched doors [*mughalia andāz kī meḥrābēnī*]; the one on the right goes to the Royal Harem, the one on the left to the outside. Three stairs, covering the whole width of the terrace, lead to the Gallery. On the right and left walls of the Gallery there are doors opening onto other parts of the Palace.

Priceless carpets are spread in the Hall. On top of these carpets, a royal seat [*masnad*] with gold-threaded cushions sits prominently on a throne [*takht*] studded with jewels. Decorative pieces are few but very elaborate. Although there is great simplicity in the ornamental work and, being a Royal Hall, it appears quite empty, if one looks at the design on the walls, the handicraft of the latticework of the balconies [*jḥarōkā*] of the Tower, and the octagonal tables [*basbt pablū mēzēn*] with studded flower vases on top, the heart cannot remain impervious to the charm of Mughal splendor.

(1931b, 27–28)

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<sup>5</sup>See Kanhayyā Lāl (1884), description of the Lahore Fort pp. 337–40. Rā'ē Bahādur Kanhayyā Lāl was an architect working for the Lahore Municipal Corporation and the Punjab Provincial government.

Indeed, we have a very precise description of the palace with many technical and historical terms (in square brackets in the above translation). In the historical/architectural semantic field, terms like “Hall” (*aivān*), “the enclosure (*čārdīvārī*) of the Seraglio (*ḥaramsarā*),” Prince Salīm’s Palace (*maḥal*) sit in opposition to the Imperial Lahore Fort (*qila<sup>c</sup>-e lāhaur*), a typical Indo-Persian phrase with an *izāfat*. We also see the interesting semantic opposition between two historical terms: *masnad* (royal seat) “with gold threaded cushions” and *takht*, in this context a “throne studded with jewels.” *Masnad* is an Arabic locative noun that replaced the Indian term *gaddī*, and *takht* is the Mughal and Persian traditional term.

Again, in the architectural field, the author prefers to use proper terms for the palace, e.g., the *Mušamman Burj*, a proper noun used by the inhabitants of Lahore who often refer to it as the “*Saman Burj*,” an abbreviated popular form of *mušamman burj*. Octagonal Tower is the literal translation of the Arabic terms *mušamman burj*, which is in fact a Persian-built compound noun, and *jḥarōkā* (used for the typical windows with balconies) is an Indian term. In addition, the *Mušamman Burj* is said to be *jḥarōkē-dār*, literally “having a *jḥarōkā*,” an Indo-Persian adjective (Indian noun plus a Persian possessive suffix) that describes very aptly the architectural reality. Let me also mention the terrace (*čabūtrā*) (an Indian term in a Persianized form that we can find in Persian chronicles about the Lahore Fort and the Arabo-Persian phrase *mughalia andāz meḥrāb darvāza* (Mughal-style arched door) which has divided arches. In any case the use of Indian as well as Persian terms fits quite well with the hybrid style of Mughal architecture. The “Gallery” evokes the courtyard bordered with Mughal arches and doors. As far as “Mughal pieces of furniture” are concerned, I have already mentioned the royal seat and the throne, to which can be added the rather sophisticated “octagonal tables” (*basht pablū mēzēñ*), a refined Urdu phrase taken directly from Persian with an Indian nasalized plural form.

We should remember that this realistic and technical visit to the historical palace—from the wide-angle view to the close up of the furniture—is introduced and balanced by a short description of the landscape that provides a poetic and romantic, rather than realistic, atmosphere. But more is involved. In spite of all these archeological details, we are actually reading fiction. The buildings and the palace described never existed in Lahore during Akbar’s reign, they were built during Jahangir’s reign! Many readers and critics must have objected to this since it was common knowledge among educated people. For

example, see *Kanhayyā Lāl* (1884, 337). As far as the *basht pablū mēzēñ* are concerned, it seems these octagonal tables were fashionable in the nineteenth century. But what matters for the author is to give an *impression* of historical reality using the selected terminology.

### The Jashn-e Bahar Festival Description

At the beginning of every scene Imtiāz ‘Alī Tāj gives us a very detailed description of the location and the atmosphere. Act 2 “Dance” (*raqs*), scene 4 “The Hall of Mirrors” presents the preparation for Spring Festival.

Here, in Imtiāz ‘Alī’s introductory description, I give the archaic Urdu terms that the author uses in the otherwise modern Urdu text. They are all Indo-Persian terms or lexemes peculiar to the Indo-Mughal reality. He does this in order to recreate an atmosphere and to increase acceptance for a realistic historical play that would not be easily created on stage and was rejected by Indian drama troupes.

#### Act II, Scene 4: The Spring Festival in the Hall of Mirrors [*Shish Mahal*] in the Fort [*qila*] of Lahore [*qila-e Lahaur*]:

For the celebration of the Spring Festival [*Jashn-e Nau Rōz*], the whole City [*shahr*] and the Fort become the very reflection [*ā’ina-bardār*] of Mughal [*Mughalia*] pomp and magnificence. Wherever one looks he can see intoxicated people, surrounded by the pleasures and joys of spring-time, quite forgetful of themselves. But in the imperial harem [*ḥaram shāhī*], there is a delightful coming and going with such pomp and magnificence that the eye is dazzled by its splendor.

Golden tapestries [*zarbaft*] and silk brocades [*kamkhvāb*] seem to set walls and doors on fire. Carpets [*qālin*] from Iran and Turkestan make the floor appear to be a garden. On the doors, curtains from China and Tartarstan [*Čīn-o-Māčīn*] with beautiful pictures seem to hold the secret of some magic. Through chandeliers [*jbār*], glass-shaded candles [*fānūs*], round-shaded lanterns [*qumquma*] and candelabras [*qindīl*], the ceilings of the vast halls appear like the sky of the world of poetry.

In the large courtyard of the harem palace [*ḥaramsarā*], the excitement that prevails for the Weighing of the Emperor [*tulā-dān*] or other official ceremonies [*rīt-rasm*] is not found. Nevertheless, there is an extraordinary atmosphere of excitement. Novel and amazing displays of fireworks [*ātish-bāzī*] are brought together. The performance only awaits the coming out of “the Shadow of the Divinity” [*Zill-e Ilāhī*] (the Emperor). Trusted servants [*muqarrabīn*] come one after another bringing news of his arrival. Whoever comes out of the Palace is surrounded by a crowd.



Imperial ladies [*bēgamēñ*] and princesses [*shabzādiyāñ*] looking like Aphrodite [*zobra-jamāl*] are dressed with nicely cut, light-colored shalwars covered by glittering robes [*peshvāz*]. They are wearing priceless jewels [*javabarāt*]. One is covered with a fine linen [*shabnam*] stole, another is adorning her head with an elegant plumed turban [*kalghīdār pagrī*]. They look like Birds of Paradise [koels from the Garden of Iram].

All are waiting very impatiently. Some of those who are tired are sitting or walking along coquettishly, hand in hand, in groups. Others are sitting in groups looking unconcerned and exchanging laughs. In some groups they are playing charades and reciting double entendre limericks [*pahēliāñ mukarniāñ*], some are exchanging gossip and jokes. Parodies are performed [*savāñg bhārā jātā hai*] and many women gather to have a look. In some places colorful dances are taking place; tambourines, drums and tambours are playing. In another place evening rites are being celebrated and alms are distributed.

Abyssinian, Turkmen and Qalmuq women [imperial harem lady guards] are quite noticeable with their brightly-colored dresses. Slave girls [*kanī-zēñ*] are hurrying about, eunuchs [*khvājasarā*] are running in all directions. One is calling out, another is shouting back. Someone is lifting a tray [*khvāñ*], someone is distributing betel nut with cardamom [*pāñ ilā'icī*], and someone else is serving sweet drinks [*sbarbat*] to the noble ladies invited (to the harem). Outside, the musicians have taken over the whole Fort.

But the noises of such agitation do not reach inside the palace of the Hall of Mirrors [*Shīsh Maḥal*]. If there is any noise there at all, it is only the sound of pleasant melodies, a gentle lullaby played by the flutes [*sur nai*] and pipes [*shahnā'ī*], that filters inside. Here and there are fashionable candelabras with one branch or several. Through the lampshades, elongated flames can be seen, some are straight, some are convoluted, they may be white or colored [*rañgīñ kāfūrī*]. Scent-diffusing [*nikhatbēz*] clouds of refreshing [*rūḥafzā*] amber perfumes are wafting from gold and silver incense burners, and from the mirrors comes the effulgence of glaring lights. Everything contributes to creating the atmosphere of a dream world [*ālam-e khvāb*].

(1931a, 84–85)

### The Use of Terminology for Mughal Institutions and Ceremonies

These terms, though still used in modern speech, are to be understood here within a “Mughal” context with a peculiar semantic marking. For example, the simple offering of betel leaf was almost a ceremony in itself

at that time and therefore, in that context, even the word betel [*pān*] carried another meaning in the realm of Mughal etiquette. The author knows that once he has instilled in the mind of his reader a curiosity for the “Mughal atmosphere,” through the accumulation of details in his description, then he has won over that reader. The fact that some technical terms may be obscure for some readers does not matter; they are numbed or clouded by the sum of “historical” features (or semantic markings). A reader can just let his imagination work, or, if he is a stage or cinema professional, his curiosity will be stimulated and his ability will be challenged.

*Qila*<sup>‘e</sup> *Lāhaur* (the Mughal fort at Lahore), an Urdu phrase with *izāfat* (or genitive case), denotes not what is known as the “fort” but the Mughal Palace of the itinerant Court of Akbar. Imtiāz ‘Alī Tāj revives the old opposition between the Mughal city or town [*shahr*] and the Fort/Palace. These two terms are to be read and understood within a very precise historical context, rather than with the modern perception of a “town,” and naturally the reader must put aside the archeological vision of the Fort [*qila*]. Here it is no longer a monument; it is the Palace, the center of political life and, from the point of view of the stage, the unique *locus dramatis*.

*Shīsh Maḥal* (Hall of Mirrors) is perhaps the most famous feature of Mughal forts or palaces. It is interesting to note that the author uses the popular form of this Arabo-Persian compound word, which, if written in its original and literary form, would have been *shīsha maḥal* (literally the “mirror palace”) combining a Persian noun with an Arabic noun to describe an Indo-Mughal referent. But there is a limit to archaism, and the author, who was probably aware of the original literary form, prefers the universally accepted term here.

*Jashn-e Nau Rōz* (Persian New Year Festival). This is perhaps the best remembered (and is also still celebrated) Mughal and Persian festival. Instead of simply mentioning *Nau Rōz*, the author gives us the complete Persian phrase with the *izāfat* construction marked by “e” (the Indo-Persian annexion for nominal compounds). By using this historic label, Imtiāz ‘Alī Tāj signals that he intends to recreate (or evoke) the atmosphere of the Mughal courtly ceremony, the way it was codified by Akbar, in a spirit of religious reconciliation, the reader should forget his own perception of *Nau Rōz* as it may be celebrated, mainly by Shī‘a or Persian-speaking minorities in the 1930s in Northern India.

*Tulā-dān* (Sanskrit phrase, originally a gift of gold made to a Brahman). This weighing ceremony was practiced for a long time in the

Mughal Empire and later even in the princely states of colonial India. The ceremony is often depicted in miniatures where the Prince is weighed on the auspicious occasion of his birthday. The Prince (or the Emperor) sits in one pan of a large scale [*tūlā*] and the nobles and other important persons of the Court have to fill the empty pan, in turns, first with diamonds, then gold, silver, grain, etc., each time until the scale is balanced. The amount of wealth thus collected increases the prestige of the Prince and allows public charity. The nobles themselves are presented with symbolic gifts. Travelers have often reported this scene and it served as an occasion for grandiose feasts and ceremonies. This short and very approximate description is what the cultivated reader has in mind when he reads the words “*tulā-dān*” associated with another classical and official term like “*jashn*.”

*Rīt rasm* is an interesting Urdu compound used by Intiāz ‘Alī Tāj to evoke Mughal Court etiquette and ceremonies. For the sake of his general readers, he uses this popular cliché *rīt-rasm*, a doublet, which is the usual way of making Indo-Persian popular lexical compounds by associating a Sanskritic lexical unit with an Arabic or Persian unit having the same meaning. The repetition of two equivalent words has an emphatic effect. Had our author been writing history, he would have used the literal Arabic plural *rasm/rusūm* in its Urdu meaning of custom or wont.

*Ā’ina bardār* evokes the word *ā’ina dār* (mirror holder), an officer at the Mughal Court. It also echoes the well-known *ḥuqqa bardār*, the attendant entrusted with holding the water pipe for the nawabs of Lucknow. The metonymy or simile for the concept of “the very image of ...” is particularly consistent with courtly etiquette and usage. Again the imagination of the reader is solicited.

*Haram shābī* (the imperial harem or seraglio). This Mughal “women’s quarter” is a Court institution (not peculiar to the Mughal Court, or even to Muslim royal courts) that has always been tantalizing for European travelers and a favored item for readers of their accounts. The fabula of *Anārkalī* owes something to those travelogues and our author is well aware of that. He also knows that a cultivated audience expects an evocation of the “seraglio” (to use the colonial term), and he skillfully writes *ḥaram shābī*, a familiar contraction of *ḥaram-e shābī*. He is both recreating an historical reality and using the fashionable décor of the “imperial harem,” like so many European operas, dramas, and indeed films had done before. To do so, he used very precise expressions and technical terms for the costumes of the ladies (see, for example, the term *pēshvāz*, a more common form than the classical *pēshvaz*, for the outer,

translucent garment or robe). He also retrieves the exact (or supposed) terms for the different categories and stock characters of the “ḥaram”:

*bēgamēñ* (imperial ladies and wives), the Turkish word implies that they are from the imperial family and married, some of them to the Emperor.

*shahzādiāñ* (imperial princesses), in Persian literally “daughters of the king,” with Urdu feminine plural, but in fact high-ranking princesses, not married, and not allowed to go outside the harem.

Abyssinian, Turkmen and Qalmuq women (imperial harem female guards). This third type of feminine character is represented by the tribal ladies who guard the harem from intrusion by unauthorized persons. They are also an historical fact, but our author is perhaps too precise in elaborating the ethnic terms.

*khvajasarā* (eunuchs in charge of the harem [*sarā*]), trusted servants. The author also uses the technical and historical term *muqarrabīn* (Arabic noun with Arabic literary plural) for “trusted servants.” One of the eunuchs is personified as a humorous character (see above).

*kanīz* (literally a slave woman of the harem), this Persian term is used with an Indian and Urdu plural *kanīzēñ*, not the unfamiliar Persian plural *kanīzān*. Normally such women occupy the lower position in the imperial harem. In the play, these women are not courtesans, a state above abject slavery, they are, rather, depicted as servants (in this context, the modern Urdu term from Arabic *khādima* (female servant) would have been more appropriate). They also happen to be musicians and dancers of the harem, where male artists were not admitted (a situation that may not be inconsistent with historical reality). However, for the reader of Imtiāz ‘Alī Tāj’s day, *kanīz* describes someone who would belong to historical chronicles or novels, or even traditional fairy tales. In writing a play inspired by local legend, Imtiāz ‘Alī does not bother to check the actual function and status of a *kanīz*, and from the very beginning, in the dramatis personae, readers know that the heroine Anārkalī is a *ḥaramsarā mēñ Akbar kī zēr-e naẓar kanīz* (female slave of the seraglio reserved for the eyes of Akbar). In other words, a singer and dancer chosen by him. Some other characters are also termed *kanīzēñ*. For example, the rival of Anārkalī, who is the former favorite dancer of Akbar (see above).

In these descriptions we have the whole hierarchy of the Mughal harem with the proper technical and historical terms: *bēgamēñ* are served by *kanīzēñ* and are watched over by eunuchs, etc. However, again we have a sort of artificial reconstruction, a mere décor, especially if we consider the impact of those “slaves” or female servants in the drama. They play a major role and act with initiative and freedom, as servants of an

Italian classical comedy would do. Two of them even have a “confidant” or *rāzdār* (mentioned in the *dramatis personae*), another feature and technical term that is appropriate for comedy. Imtiāz ‘Alī’s historical evocation enhances the dramatic action, but the plot involving the *kanīzēn* is far from historical realism.

Traditional games are also mentioned: *savāṅg bharā jāta hai* is archaic for *saṅg bharāna*, that is, mocking someone by mimicking. The Indo-Persian phrase *paheliān mukarniān*, for playing charades and reciting double entendre limericks, is an allusion to a well-known and long cultivated poetic game in Urdu, inherited from the Persians.

What our author does in this rather long introduction, which would seem more suitable in a novel than in a stage play, is to present, by way of an accumulation of historical and archaic terms, a refined but incomplete description of the Spring Festival. In fact, we have only the preparations. Imtiāz ‘Alī is here suggesting an atmosphere with crowds, sounds, lights, costumes, and many historical details, references and stock characters of the Mughal Court, but he is not describing the action on the stage. Indeed, this introduction is followed by a paragraph that describes the scene, the position and activity of the actors, as is usual in scenic directions. On the contrary, his “dream world” (he uses the Urdu phrase *‘ālam-e khvāb*) is the concluding impression of his long “historical” description. He knows that stage drama cannot do justice to it—this “dream world” could only be recreated by cinema.

### A Playwright’s Trick: the “*Shish Mahal*” Act and the Cinema

It should be remembered that in the economy of the drama, the “*Shish Mahal*” act is the pivotal moment of the plot—the destiny of Anārkalī is sealed because her “guilty and forbidden” love for the Crown Prince is revealed by the mirrors reflecting her unrestrained (her rival has poured liquor in her drinking water) mimics during her *Nau Rōz* dance. The author wants us to have the proper festival atmosphere and décor here in order to make a dramatic contrast with the prison where the unfortunate Anārkalī is sent immediately afterward.

The films *Anārkalī* and *Mughal-e A‘zam* have both retained these moments of glory and happiness (with sequences showing the appropriate costumes and décor) and contrasted them with Anārkalī’s sad moments in the dungeon. It is very revealing to see that the filmmakers have followed Imtiāz ‘Alī here. He drew this contrast in a short but

realistic description when introducing the second scene, called “Prison,” in his third act. The situation of the heroine in the prison is perceived as all the more tragic because the author makes an exact counterpoint between the atmosphere and luxury of the harem and the *Shīsh Mahal* and the atmosphere of the prison—cries where there was laughter, darkness and obscurity where there was light, and so on. What the playwright achieves with words, the camera does with the same effect. That is the classical relationship between playwriting and film scriptwriting, but what is surprising is the fact that the filmmakers not only borrowed the main features and the heroine of the fabula, they also tried to reproduce this key episode irrespective of whether they chose a sad or happy ending for the plot.

It would also seem not to be a coincidence that, for the purposes of historical fiction, Santosh Sivan, in his film *Ashoka* (2001), uses many Sanskrit words in archaic phrases within most of the Hindi dialogues. It is a kind of “historical style” that conforms to the style of most of the Urdu dialogues of both Imtiāz ‘Alī Tāj’s stage drama and K. S. Asif’s film. This is evidenced even in the titles: *Ashoka* is a Sanskritic form, rather than the popular form *Ashok*, and *Mughal-e A‘zam* is an Indo-Persian phrase, although more a fabrication of chroniclers and historians than a real imperial title. In Santosh Sivan’s case, the idea is perhaps to create a feeling of “historical realism” by suggesting “Sanskritic” dialogues from Ashoka’s era while at the same time using modern Hindi for most of the conversation. I found very few words that belonged to the Urdu linguistic register of historical films—one that occurs a few times in the dialogues is the Persian *khūn* instead of the Hindi *lahū*. Similarly, the courtly language used by Imtiāz ‘Alī Tāj is plain Urdu with many archaic Persian terms and phrases—including Indo-Persian courtly terms of address mixed with some Sanskritic terms from the Court etiquette allegedly introduced by Akbar, and even including Persian poems that are recited during the *Nau Rōz* festival scenes—to create in the mind of the reader/viewer the atmosphere of the Mughal Court in Lahore.

Indeed, it would be quite interesting to closely compare the language of the dialogues in *Ashoka* with the language in *Mughal-e A‘zam*. Naturally the two films have little in common as far as the history of India is concerned, nevertheless parallels can easily be found in the main characters and in symbols. Thus, even if linguistic distance might appear important in comparing the writing of the dialogues, still the linguistic and stylistic techniques used to reconstruct and imitate the past would certainly have many points in common. This linguistic technique, linked with

what I have termed “historical realism” is a common feature with Imtiāz ‘Alī Tāj’s Urdu drama.

### Concluding Comments

I have said above that historical drama is a genre that carries with it the constraint of realism in the writing, but can also contain funny and tragic elements that may not be historical at all. This holds true in the play of Imtiāz ‘Alī Tāj. There are some dances, some rather humorous dialogues, and even puns, all blended together in an atmosphere that evokes the late-sixteenth-century Mughal Court. In choosing names and technical terms, Imtiāz ‘Alī Tāj also adhered to the rules. He included traditional and historical names and titles, whether they were Indian, Indo-Persian, Arabic, or something else, exemplifying the blend of cultures Emperor Akbar tried to promote. In the drama, it is clear that the style and type of language play a central role in the author’s attempt to reconstruct the past. Historical realism along with the tragic ending to the plot are important elements used to captivate the spectator’s/reader’s attention and win his sympathy.

It is interesting that in both of the famous films inspired by the same legend—*Anārkalī* by Nandlal Jaswantlal (1953) and *Mughal-e A‘zam* by K. S. Asif (1960)—we find a common plot and the same main characters, including their names and titles with the same symbolic and traditional meanings. Also the language of the dialogues in both films uses the very same technique of mixing archaic and “historical” Indo-Persian terms with the modern form of the language, especially when the action requires a reconstruction of the Mughal Court. Nevertheless, neither film acknowledges the inspiration of Imtiāz ‘Alī Tāj’s drama in their credits.

The historian of Urdu literature must search out and bring to the forefront the important, though often unacknowledged, role played by Urdu literature and drama in the construction of some of the more pervasive and potent myths of the Indian cinema. In the *Anārkalī* play of Sayyid Imtiāz ‘Alī Tāj we have a fine example of the interaction between this literature and the cinema. □

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