

JINHEN NAAZ HAI HIND PAR:
THE HISTORICAL AND SOCIETAL COMMENTARY OF INDIAN FILM

Despite the fact that the plots of *Sujata*, *Mughal-e-Azam*, *Pyasa* and *Awara* revolve around what are ultimately love stories, all four films additionally focus on a number of societal, economic and political issues which are particularly significant in the context of a post-colonial India. Specifically, *Mughal-e-Azam* and *Pyasa* concentrate on the history and future of India, with particular (although often understated) attention paid to the colonial era. Conversely, *Sujata* and *Awara* tend to focus on the innumerable societal issues which Indian society faces in a time of transition into modernity. Throughout these works, the artistic styles employed by the films' directors emphasize the issues portrayed, employing the use of songs, settings, weather, and the stark juxtaposition of light and dark to create films which are both aesthetically and substantively significant.

In both *Mughal-e-Azam* and *Pyasa*, the overarching plots and relationships between characters are particularly relevant to the recent independence of India. However, *Mughal-e-Azam* is ultimately a film of the nation's past, whereas *Pyasa* primarily focuses on India's future. *Mughal-e-Azam* begins with a vision of India which speaks of its past, introducing the epic story of Akbar the Great, Saleem and Anarkali within a modern historical context. With its bright colors (specifically in the sections which are originally in color), lavish settings, overall epic nature and extravagant song and dance numbers, the film's style displays a rich history which modern audiences were able to take pride in. It is clearly a movie of the nation, and the portrayal of 16th century India and the great Mughal Empire establishes a vision of the past which reads as a

patriotic vision of the nation's great history, as well as one that is confident in its prospects for an independent future.

In particular, the tensions between Saleem and his father Akbar frequently act as a metaphor for the struggle for independence between Great Britain (the "father" figure) and India (the "son" figure). Released only thirteen years after India's independence (and after an alleged ten years of production), the battle for power between Saleem and Akbar is portrayed in a monumental battle scene near the end of the film. Although this battle is set in the era of the Mughal Empire, the tension between the father and son which materializes into physical combat clearly evokes the modern efforts of the Indian Independence movements (both violent and non-violent). Despite what can in some ways be seen as the ultimate victory of Akbar at the film's conclusion, Saleem's defiant defense of his beliefs is an essential symbol portrayed by the film. Though *Mughal-e-Azam* also touches on social tensions, such as the class difference between Saleem and Anarkali, its focus ultimately remains on the history of India within a modern context.

While *Pyasa* does not present itself as a historical film in such a clear manner as *Mughal-e-Azam*, it also speaks of India's past and current conditions. Although *Pyasa* does not focus on India's history as much as *Mughal-e-Azam*, or even on its recent independence, it pays particular attention to the economic and political ambivalence which exists within modernity. Most significantly, through the Vijay's poems and experiences, modern society in India is presented as full of "greed, corruption, heartlessness and capitalism" (Rockwell 17). To contrast these sentiments, the visual presentation of the film retains a simplistic style, and particularly focuses on the use of light, shadow, and stark silhouettes. The repeated use of silhouettes emphasizes the

solitary nature of the characters, and specifically, the isolation which Vijay feels in such a commodified, fraudulent society.

As in his other films, Guru Dutt constructs *Pyaasa* to reveal a certain disillusionment with the modernity of India and the myriad problems which plague its society. This sentiment is explicitly revealed in the song “Jinhen Naaz Hai Hind Par,” where Vijay “sings what is undoubtedly the most powerful indictment of Indian society” (Sardar 38). After a drunken Vijay staggers out onto the streets of the red-light district, the scene’s commanding pathos condemns a society which forces its poor (and particularly its women) to sell everything, including their bodies, just to survive:

These twisted streets, these notorious bazaars
These anonymous travelers, this clinking of coins
This selling of honor, these disputes over goods
Where are they? Where are they, those guardians of pride?
Where are those who have pride in India?

When juxtaposed with the extravagant songs and settings of *Mughal-e-Azam*, Guru Dutt’s relatively simple aesthetic does not present “tradition as though it were a utopian goal;” rather, the integrity of tradition is “prevented by traditional society in history as commodified and unframed by Westernized modernity” (Sardar 45). However, in the conclusion of the film there is the possibility of some resolution of these political, economic and social issues, though it remains somewhat unclear in what manner. As Vijay and Gulabo walk far away into the mist, the question remains: “Where is far? Towards death?...Perhaps the journey will take them far, as far as the location of the fourth silent character in the film: India, a new India” (Sardar 39).

Whereas both *Mughal-e-Azam* and *Pyaasa* focus on the history and future of India, *Sujata* and *Awara* tend to focus on societal issues within a strictly contemporary

context. In both these films, the importance of family and upbringing are presented as essential characteristics which can ultimately determine an individual's fate. *Sujata* mainly focuses on the issue of caste and its role within a modern society. This story clearly takes place within a somewhat more progressive, independent India, however steeped in traditional ways it may be. In particular, the Aunt represents traditional views associated with caste prejudices, whereas Sujata's father and sister Rama are more accepting of her birth caste. Sujata's mother is perhaps the most interesting character, representing the sentiments of a transitional society torn between its traditional beliefs and progressive modern ideals. Finally, the film mentions the historical reference to the myth of Chandalika as well as the modern movement against untouchability which Gandhi fought for, using both historical and contemporary examples to illustrate Sujata's societal struggles. Sujata is finally accepted as Adhir's wife, and although the film's conflict is largely resolved, it portrays the issues which continue to face untouchables in recent and current society.

In *Sujata*, the film often portrays the conflict between traditional and modern social issues by focusing on the weather: heat, wind, and rain all appear as symbols of disturbances in nature which parallel social predicaments. Specifically, after Sujata discovers that she is indeed an untouchable, she runs out into a stormy night, raindrops mixing with her tears. Parallel to these scenes, the portrayal of weather in *Awara* is a similarly important aspect of the film. *Awara* uses weather, and in particular, rainstorms, to symbolize and emphasize moments of personal and social confrontations. For instance, when Raj's mother is ordered to leave the house, she does so in a drenching

downpour, and finally gives birth to Raj (quite literally) in the gutter, full of rain and sorrow.

Despite the fact that Raj was actually born into what was seen as a good family, his life in the slums and the presence of Jagga have established his character as an unsavory thief. The debate of nature vs. nurture which is apparent throughout the movie portrays another societal issue facing a modern India. Almost opposite to the plot of *Sujata*, where she was born in bad circumstances but brought up in a good family, Raj has been technically born in a good family, and only brought up in bad circumstances. Ultimately, thanks to the logical reasoning of Rita and the somewhat progressive thinking of other characters, Raj is proven to be not guilty of murder, and receives a sentence of only a few years in prison. This conclusion illustrates the fact that while modern society may move forward with the logical reasoning and progressive thinking the film employs, traditional beliefs and “blind dogmas” are still troubling aspects of contemporary life which cannot be ignored.

In both *Awara* and *Sujata*, the conflicts between long-established societal practices and beliefs present enormous problems for the main characters. While both films are ultimately resolved and conclude with what may be seen as a progressive ending, the somewhat constricting traces of historical traditions nevertheless remain. Although *Mughal-e-Azam* mainly deals with the long-past Mughal Empire, it also addresses societal issues which are still relevant in societies around the world today. Whether depicting the lavish past or the hope for a brighter, progressive future, as *Pyaasa* does so masterfully, these four films portray the social, economic and political struggles facing a newly independent India as it develops into a nation of modernity.

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