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Passionate refrains: the theatricality of Urdu on the Parsi stage

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ABSTRACT

The Parsi theatre is known to have contributed to early Indian cinema textual legacies of story and theme, genre and star roles. It also supplied technical expertise, personnel, and capital vital to the new industry. I argue that the aesthetic sensibility associated with the Urdu language was also of great importance, especially to the emergence of the Islamicate idiom in Bombay cinema. Beginning with the popular pageant, the *Indar Sabha*, Parsi theatrical companies embraced the poetics of the Urdu *ghazal* with its declarations of *ishq* (passion) and recurring *radifs* (refrains). Why did Urdu win out over English and Gujarati as the dominant language of the then Bombay-based theatre? The analysis traces the contribution of Urdu *munshis* (playwrights), who together with their more illustrious actor-manager employers, co-created a distinctive Parsi-Urdu theatrical style. The performance of Urdu poetry together with Hindustani music and dance is seen as enhancing the literary appeal and musicality of new dramas, imparting a commercial advantage. Moreover, changes in playhouse design and the conventions of melodrama called for a forceful, rhythmic style of delivery, for which actors trained in Urdu were well suited. The article concludes with a case study of Agha Hashr Kashmiri, author of countless dramas and screenplays, focusing on his historical allegory, *Yahudi ki Larki*, which was made into a well-known Bombay film in 1955.

KEYWORDS

Urdu; poetry; theatre; cinema; Agha Hashr

Introduction

India in the late nineteenth century witnessed epochal changes in urban lifestyles and entertainment. Each night capacity crowds filled European-style playhouses, drawn by the magic of the Parsi theatre. Dramatic fare organized by Parsi entrepreneurs brought an entirely new level of sophistication to the world of popular performance. Capitalizing on the technologies introduced from the West, the Parsi theatre paraded showy styles of acting, singing, and storytelling. Embracing innovation, it outfitted and popularized the proscenium stage as the appropriate venue for theatrical representation. This cosmopolitan entertainment spread from the colonial port cities to all corners of the subcontinent as roving theatre companies toured the provinces. The allure was so great that by the end of the century the Parsi theatre had become a ubiquitous part of India's public culture. It reached audience members from one end of the class spectrum to the other and knew no religious, linguistic, or ethnic bounds.

The era of the Parsi theatre's sway stretched from the 1860s through the 1930s. Even as the momentum began to wane with the coming of sound films, the Parsi theatre left behind a rich legacy that contributed to the formation of popular Indian cinema in a variety of ways. The sprawling repertoire of story and theme provided a ready cache of narrative material available to early film-makers. With its orientation towards middlebrow taste, the Parsi stage established

conventions of melodrama and comedy that would prove influential and enduring. Moreover, it bequeathed certain genres distinctive to the Indian environment. The mythological, the historical, and the social film were all indebted to their antecedents from the world of theatre. As an industry also, the Parsi theatrical enterprise had a major impact. It supplied experienced actors, writers and directors, technical and managerial expertise, and capital vital to the venture into cinematic production. Many a playhouse was converted to cinema hall, the most notable example being the old Gaiety Theatre which became the Capitol Cinema near Victoria Terminus in Bombay.

Some of these continuities will be explored in this essay. The central focus herein is on another aspect of the Parsi theatre's connection to Bombay cinema: the stylized structures of language, thought, and feeling associated with the Urdu language. The adoption of Urdu as the principal medium of the stage was a strategy that enabled the Parsi theatre to extend its audience far beyond Bombay. Urdu was much more than a *lingua franca*. The universe of Urdu culture conveyed idealized realms of romance, sweet speech, and lofty thought. It celebrated a distinctive sensibility by means of poetic utterance, particularly in the form of the lyric poem, the *ghazal*. Supplemented by the elegant rhythms and melodies of Hindustani music, Urdu expression gave the musical stage a tremendous aesthetic and commercial advantage. The Parsi theatre, in turn, exploited the sonorities of Urdu and enhanced Urdu's inherent theatricality. The aesthetic sensibility associated with Urdu created a foundation that still figures prominently and counts as a cornerstone of the Islamicate idiom in Bombay cinema.

In the first section of this essay, I introduce the Parsi theatre of the later nineteenth century and describe the process by which Urdu became its most popular language. Even before the Parsi theatre, the *Indar Sabha/The Assembly of King Indra* marked the starting point of the transmission of Urdu lyric and narrative poetry to the popular stage. Soon thereafter, professional theatre companies managed by Parsis were hiring Urdu playwrights or *munshis* in force. Together with their illustrious counterparts, the famed actor-managers of the day, they co-created the Parsi-Urdu theatrical style. In the second section, I review the urban topography of Bombay and the changing location of theatrical entertainment within it. European playhouse design and the new conventions of melodrama called for a forceful, rhythmic style of delivery, for which those tutored in Urdu were well suited. The third section provides some examples of the kinds of Urdu found on the Parsi stage, with a discussion of how Urdu poetry's rhythmic cadences and rhyming refrains enhanced the audience's experience. The article concludes with a case study of Urdu playwright Agha Hashr Kashmiri, focusing on his historical allegory, *Yahudi ki Larki/The Jew's Daughter*. This stirring melodrama treated the religious repression of the Jews in ancient Rome, with a cross-community love affair at its centre. The 1955 film version of the play, starring the Parsi actor Sohrab Modi, exemplifies the rich inheritance bestowed by the Parsi-Urdu theatre on the Bombay cinema.

Parsi pioneers and Urdu *munshis*

The Parsi theatre was named for its pioneers who were members of a distinct community in India. Zoroastrians by faith, the Parsis migrated from Iran to the coast of Gujarat in western India over a thousand years ago. A section of the community shifted to Bombay in the eighteenth century and due to a variety of economic and cultural advantages became agents and brokers for the British. By the nineteenth century many Parsis were leaders in the city's financial, educational, and social circles.

Social interaction between Parsis and their colonial counterparts led to the Parsis being exposed to English-language theatre and drama in the early nineteenth century. Theatricals, as they were called, were one of the principal diversions of European society. Evenings of drama, music, and dance were presented both by resident amateurs and by professional artists on tour, under the patronage of military and civil dignitaries. These shows caught the fancy of elite Indian spectators who accompanied their colonial colleagues on occasion. As students too, Parsis were

introduced to the English dramatic literature and avidly took part in school and college productions. The new passion for dramatics, conjoined with financial resources and entrepreneurial skills, inclined certain Parsis to organize the first modern theatrical companies in South Asia.

The audience for Parsi-initiated theatrical performances was heterogeneous from the beginning, with non-Parsis outnumbering Parsis. The Parsi theatre never promoted Parsi religious beliefs; it was secular in orientation. Over the decades of its evolution, Parsi theatrical management, especially of the large companies, remained under the firm control of Parsi businessmen, whereas increasingly the performers and stage crew were drawn from other communities. Thus the label 'Parsi theatre' is something of a misnomer. Some scholars would replace it with 'Company Natak', to facilitate comparison with other professional company-based troupes that developed in this period, especially in South India. Because of its origins in Bombay and its custodianship by a particular group, 'Parsi theatre' nevertheless remains the most appropriate and widely employed rubric.

During centuries of residence in Gujarat the language of the Parsis had become Gujarati in a characteristic Parsi inflexion, and Parsi Gujarati was retained by the community after their move to Bombay. Gujarati was also the mother tongue of other trading groups in the metropolis, including the sizeable Muslim communities of Bohras, Memons, and Khojas, as well as Hindu and Jain Banias. Collectively, the business class of Bombay had a markedly Gujarati character, and Gujarati was the common tongue for trade in the city. Although English education made some inroads among the elite, in the middle of the nineteenth century most Parsi school children were first educated in Gujarati.

It is no surprise, then, that when the initial Parsi theatre troupe mounted a production in 1853, the centrepiece drama, a version of the classic tale of Rustom and Sohrab, was performed in Gujarati. Over the next two decades, plays performed in the Parsi theatre frequently dealt with themes like this one from the epic history of pre-Islamic Iran. These tales were ultimately derived from the *Shahnama/Book of Kings*, written in Persian around 1000 AD by the poet Firdausi/Ferdowsi. Episodes from the masterwork had previously circulated among the Parsi community in the form of oral tales and lithographed chapbooks in Persian and Gujarati. Another popular source for plays in the early years of the Parsi theatre was Shakespeare, and both his comedies and tragedies were performed initially in English by student clubs based at Elphinstone College. These soon gave way to adaptations of Shakespeare in Indian languages, especially Gujarati. The earliest printed book of play scripts from the Parsi theatre is *Shekaspir Natak/Shakespeare's Plays* by Nanabhai Rustamji Ranina (1865). The third type of play characteristic of the young Parsi theatre was the farce, a short piece presented after the main drama, typically in Hindustani.¹

Given that Gujarati was the Parsi community's principal language, and that it was the primary tongue used in the early days of the Parsi theatre, how did Urdu rise to prominence? For whom and by whom was it utilized, and how was it perceived? The story of Urdu and its association with the stage actually begins outside of Bombay, in the court of the last Nawab of Lucknow, Wajid Ali Shah. Here in the middle of the nineteenth century, Urdu drama (or at least a rudimentary form of it) originated in the *Indar Sabha/The Assembly of King Indra*. First penned by Agha Hasan Amanat, a poet attached to the court, the *Indar Sabha* marked the moment at which the Urdu *ghazal*, with its declarations of passion (*ishq*) in recurring refrains (*radifs*), entered the theatrical space in South Asia. The wildly popular *Indar Sabha* had a slim plot focused on a heavenly monarch identified with the Hindu deity Indra. He was attended upon by four beautiful *paris* or fairies, until the arrival of a prince named Gulfam who becomes smitten – almost fatally – with one of them. The story borrowed elements from several earlier *masnavis*, most notably the *Sihr-ul Bayan* of Mir Hasan and *Gulzar-i Nasim* by Daya Shankar Nasim. In addition to the *Indar Sabha's* countless Urdu *ghazals*, it featured *thumris* in Braj Bhasha, folk songs in Awadhi, and accompanying dances. Although the work debuted in Lucknow, it soon escaped aristocratic circles and was carried outside the city by travelling troupes. When it reached Bombay, it entered the repertoire of the Parsi theatre companies, and eventually gained even wider circulation, being

carried to South India, Ceylon, and Malaysia with the movements of the troupes. In the process it was reprinted countless times, transliterated into scripts as diverse and distant as Gurmukhi, Sinhala, and even Hebrew, and translated into German, Malay, and assorted Indian languages; it also spawned many imitations.²

Meanwhile, in Parsi theatre circles in Bombay, experiments were underway to familiarize audiences and performers with the possibilities of Urdu as an alternative to Gujarati for serious drama. The first Urdu play written for the Parsi stage was *Sone ke Mol ki Khurshed/Khurshed For the Price of Gold*, a translation by the journalist Behram Fardun Marzban of a Gujarati drama by Edalji Khorī. This play was commissioned for the Victoria Theatrical Company by its then director, Dadi Patel, in 1871. Dadabhai Sohrabji Patel, or 'Dadi Patel M.A.', as he was known, was perhaps the most highly educated Parsi attached to the early theatre. Along with introducing Urdu, he is credited with popularizing 'opera' or musical drama as a prestigious form, championing 'scientific' stagecraft, and professionalizing the relations between actors and theatrical companies.

Urdu or Hindustani, it must be recalled, was not the mother tongue of very many Bombay residents at this time. Parsis were acquainted with it only as a third language after Gujarati and English, and the Muslims of Bombay mainly spoke Gujarati. Even the translator Marzban acknowledged in his preface to *Sone ke Mol*, 'Hindustani is not the language of your humble servant, nor has he studied its grammar and rules.' Marzban's translation was published in the Gujarati script rather than the Arabic-based script commonly used (then and now) for Urdu. This curious hybrid printing practice set the standard for scores of Urdu plays written for the Parsi theatre in the next 20 years.³

Nasarvanji Mehrvanji 'Aram' was another Parsi and non-native speaker of Urdu who translated the plays of Khorī into Urdu in the early 1870s. In one of his prefaces he noted, 'neither Urdu nor Braj are my own languages, so there is no doubt that many errors must have been unknowingly introduced.'⁴ Newspaper reviews of these early plays commented on the audience's surprise at hearing Parsi actors enunciate the words of the Urdu language. Urdu poetry was considered alien and exotic by both spectators and performers, and Dadi Patel was deemed brilliant for successfully rehearsing his cast in a language that was not their own. As a result, the use of Urdu caught on as the latest fad. A series of Indo-Islamic romances cast in Urdu soon filled the playhouses of Bombay. In 1873, the Elphinstone Company mounted a lavish production of the *Indar Sabha*, and this gala event was countered by a Victoria Company production of the same play in 1874; both companies repeated these shows throughout the year.

The adoption of Urdu may well have been motivated by the desire to reach beyond the Gujarati-speaking audience and appeal to other classes of spectators. No doubt the profit incentive induced company owners to introduce this and other audience-pleasing novelties. The turn towards Urdu had an aesthetic purpose as well. It was part of a process of expansion in the musical, poetic, and visual economies of the stage. Urdu connected the theatre to rich narrative and lyric traditions, increasing its stature and pleasurability. More specifically, the Indo-Muslim cultural heritage offered an aristocratic alternative to the folk styles of performance that Gujarati speakers had previously patronized. An early task for the Parsi theatre was to decouple the notion of secular entertainment from groups of roaming street performers, such as the Khayalis and Bhavaiyas mentioned in the play prefaces, who were considered inferior and disreputable. That the actors in this period were educated middle-class youth from upstanding families certainly helped. The concern with upgrading the image of the Parsi stage similarly led to advocates equating their efforts with the principle of 'rational amusement' borrowed from English theatrical discourse.⁵

From the 1870s onwards, Urdu poets penned not dozens but hundreds of dramas for the Parsi-run companies. Many of these plays were extremely successful and were performed to packed houses. They comprised the staple of popular entertainment, providing the *masala* of song, dance, poetry, melodrama, and spectacle in the era before cinema. The earliest Urdu playwrights, to

review, were Parsis whose Urdu was imperfect. Following the efforts of Marzban and Aram to create a rough-and-ready Hindustani for the stage, Muslim playwrights with deeper moorings in Urdu and sometimes Persian entered the scene. Another Urdu playwright of record was Mahmud Miyan 'Raunaq', a prolific writer for the Victoria Company in the 1870s and 1880s. Raunaq may have been a Gujarati Muslim, despite the label 'Banarasi' sometimes attached to his name. In his sole preface, he says he was a purifier of the Urdu language, evincing a measure of self-consciousness in the use of Urdu that suggests formal study.⁶

The subsequent generation of Urdu dramatists who wrote and published plays for the Parsi theatre in the 1880s hailed from northern India. They were Muslims trained in the classical languages to which Urdu was heir. Karimuddin 'Murad' was born in Bareilly and was educated in Arabic and Persian. He was known as Maulvi Saheb even after joining the Parsi theatre around 1883.⁷ Amanullah Khan 'Habab' came from Fatehpur, where he was a court poet in the service of the Nawabs of Rampur and Rewari in the 1870s. He began writing plays for the Parsi theatre in 1881.⁸ Hafiz Muhammad Abdullah, like Habab, was from Fatehpur and was the son of a zamindar. Abdullah was educated in Arabic and Persian and was a *hafiz-i quran* ('protector of the Quran', one who has the entire book by heart). His plays date from approximately 1880.⁹

How did these men of the north make contact with the Bombay Parsi theatre? Murad is said to have been recruited by one Pestanji, who was sent north to look for *munshis* (professional writers) for Dadabhai Ratan Thunthi's theatrical company. Pestanji tested Murad's talents by having him compose new lyrics to a pre-existing melody, then negotiated his salary, and returned to Bombay with him.¹⁰ Habab moved to Jabalpur in 1881 and was attracted to the performances of the Original Victoria Theatrical Company. He offered his services as a poet and writer, and the company owners commissioned his play *Sharar Ishq/Spark of Love* and performed it. It is not clear whether he ever actually went to Bombay.¹¹ Abdullah first became a dramatist and actor with the Light of India Theatrical Company. In 1882, he founded the Indian Imperial Theatrical Company and became its managing director.¹² The patron of this company was the Maharaja of Dholpur, and its plays were published in Agra. Abdullah also appears to have been a *munshi* for the Alfred Theatrical Company of Bombay under the ownership of N.R. Ranina, and some of his plays were published by that company in Bombay.

The Gujarati script continued to be used in the Bombay publications of these Urdu playwrights. Habab's *Sharar Ishq* was published in 1881 in Gujarati script. Abdullah's plays commissioned by the Alfred Company were also printed in Gujarati script. However, Abdullah's plays written for his UP-based Indian Imperial Company were published in *nastaliq*, the version of the Arabic script ordinarily used for Urdu lithography, and three of the plays contain Urdu prefaces. When the seasonal tours of the Bombay companies reached northern India, spin-off companies sprang up in many cities and towns. Local publishers then ventured into bringing out Urdu plays, often aided directly by the companies. Library holdings show that as of 1890, Parsi theatre plays in Urdu were being printed in *nastaliq* and published from Agra, Meerut, Kanpur, Delhi, and Fatehpur.

A contemporary account captures the fervour with which Parsi-Urdu dramatic entertainment was awaited in the provincial towns of North India. The author is Radheshyam Kathavachak, a well-known playwright later associated with the New Alfred Theatrical Company. He writes of Bareilly, his hometown, in 1900:

The next year a company came from Agra to perform Munshi Nazir's drama, *Shakuntala*. I pleaded with father to go see it, but he wouldn't take me. The New Alfred returned next with *Dil Farosh*, but we were out reciting on tour and missed it. Then Aulad Ali's company arrived with *Gulru Zarina*, and Bareilly went wild. Unable to hold me back, father bought two tickets in the four-anna class and we went one night. Those actors were powerful singers who belted it out in a way seldom heard later. The company's style favored plenty of songs without much scenery or stagecraft and lots of encores or "once-mores." Sometimes a song was repeated four or five times. The show lasted till four in the morning.

Muslims were greater fans of drama than Hindus in those days, and the company management, actors, and writers were mostly Muslims too. Plays were written in pure Urdu, with sentiments of romance and beauty dominating. Even the dialogues featured refrains with end-rhymes like *amma jan, mehrban, qadran*. The chief playwrights or *munshis* were Murad, Ahsan, and Nazir.¹³

Radheshyam attests to the powerful appeal of touring theatre troupes that swept through the town, one after the other. He and his father, poor Brahmins who made their living by performing religious songs and tales, were part of the heterogeneous crowd of enthusiasts. Recalling the 'pure Urdu' of those days, Radheshyam mentions the then-reigning trio of Urdu playwrights. Nazir Beg Nazir, a disciple of Hafiz Abdullah, was active as an actor, director, and playwright between 1888 and 1913; he composed *Shakuntala* and *Gulru Zarina/Pretty Zarina*. Mehdi Hasan Ahsan, the descendant of a lineage of poets from Lucknow, was known for his Shakespearean adaptations like *Dil Farosh/Merchant of Hearts*, based on *The Merchant of Venice*. Murad Ali Murad, an Urdu playwright from Bareilly, was the leading dramatist of the Alfred Theatrical Company under Kavasji Khatau and later the New Alfred of Sohrabji Ogra; he wrote *Alauddin*, *Harishchandra*, and *Chandravali*.

By the turn of the century, the structure of the Bombay-based Parsi theatre companies reflected the unique partnership that had evolved over the preceding 50 years. Wealthy Parsis who were skilled in finance and had money to invest were the impresarios – the producers, promoters, organizers. Illustrious actors like K.M. Baliwala and Kavasi P. Khatau came from the less privileged class of Parsis; they rose to prominence as successful managers and directors. The Urdu playwrights or *munshis* comprised the creative staff. They conceived the new plots or adapted old ones, wrote original songs, and brought their imagination and talent to the stage through their scripts. Often too, they rehearsed the actors and worked with the musicians and dancers to develop the musical and choreographic components that ensured a production's success. Despite the stress of nightly shows and the rigors of travel, the companies operated amicably across lines of class, ethnicity, and religion. Collaboration in the theatre continued in the face of the fault lines that were beginning, under the impact of colonial modernity and nationalism, to strain inter-communal relationships in the surrounding society.

Sight and sound in the urban playhouse

The urban playhouses utilized by Parsi theatre companies in the nineteenth century offered unprecedented scope for theatrical production and reception. In contrast with the makeshift platforms in markets and temple courtyards where folk theatre was staged, or the large-scale outdoor topography deployed for religious pageants like the Ram Lila, the purpose-built theatre houses of colonial India allowed for a certain elegance and decorum. As enclosed physical spaces, these buildings by their nature restricted access. Their design incorporated principles of order and compartmentalization meant to maintain boundaries between various groups. The proscenium arch rose high above the stage, positioning the players within an expansive picture frame and separating them from the spectators. The spectators themselves were divided by their assigned seating, arranged by class and row, and priced according to the location. In a newspaper advertisement for a performance of *Rustam and Sohrab* in 1870, tickets for box seats were offered at Rs. 5, stalls at Rs. 3, gallery at Rs. 2, and pit at Re. 1.

The display of distinctions of class and status ensured that a secondary spectacle operated within the playhouse. Playgoers went to the theatre not only to see the play but also to see others in society and to be seen. On special occasions, British royalty and high officials attended as chief guests, increasing the level of pomp on view and recreating the atmosphere of the *darbar*. The interior spatial set-up in the playhouse had the effect of creating new social categories and modes of negotiating social distance. Newspaper ads and reviews acknowledged the composite character of the audience. In the Gujarati press, the public for theatrical entertainment was described through phrases such as *khas-o-am* (the elite and the ordinary).

The enclosure provided by the playhouse permitted theatre as an art to assume an enlarged social value in comparison with previously available forms of entertainment. The structure and location of early playhouses affirmed the importance of theatre to civic life. The Bombay Amateur Theatre, established in 1776, was prominently situated in the British colony. Near to the Government House and the church, it was built on the Bombay Green, later known as Horniman Circle, at the intersection of the main streets leading from the three city gates. In 1840 the construction of a new playhouse was mooted, and a group of leading citizens submitted a petition to the Governor of Bombay, pressing for theatre as an enhancement of civil society.¹⁴ This time the building came up at the growing edge of the so-called Native Town far from the European quarter. The shift of theatrical entertainment to the northern part of the city suited the growing Indian public, and Grant Road was shortly populated by a number of other theatre houses, including the Victoria Theatre built in 1870 (Figure 1). The area rapidly developed into a thriving commercial district, although the Grant Road vicinity remained distinctly downmarket.

Claims to elite status and access to elite patrons were reaffirmed when Parsi company owners opened two new theatres near the Victoria Terminus (Chhatrapati Shivaji Terminus). As Bombay acquired its metropolitan skyline in the 1880s and became linked to the hinterland through the railways, these theatres assumed renewed significance as urbane venues for leisure and sociability. The Gaiety Theatre was built by C.S. Nazir, a leading Parsi actor-manager, in 1879. Designed by an architect named Campbell, its stage dimensions were 70 by 40 feet with a curtain height of 22 feet. In anticipation of its opening, the newspaper *Rast Goftar* provided details of the construction:

In this theatre on the first floor there are private boxes with four seats each. The amount of the season tickets for these is Rs. 3400, but Mr. Nazir has promised that this money would be kept in a bank to pay the actors coming from abroad. This tells us that the large sum of Rs. 20,000 will be spent to pay the actors for just one season. The cost of the reconstruction of the theatre would come to Rs. 40,000. At the top a small dome will be built above the theatre. In the lower portion will be the stalls and the third class. In total there would be a

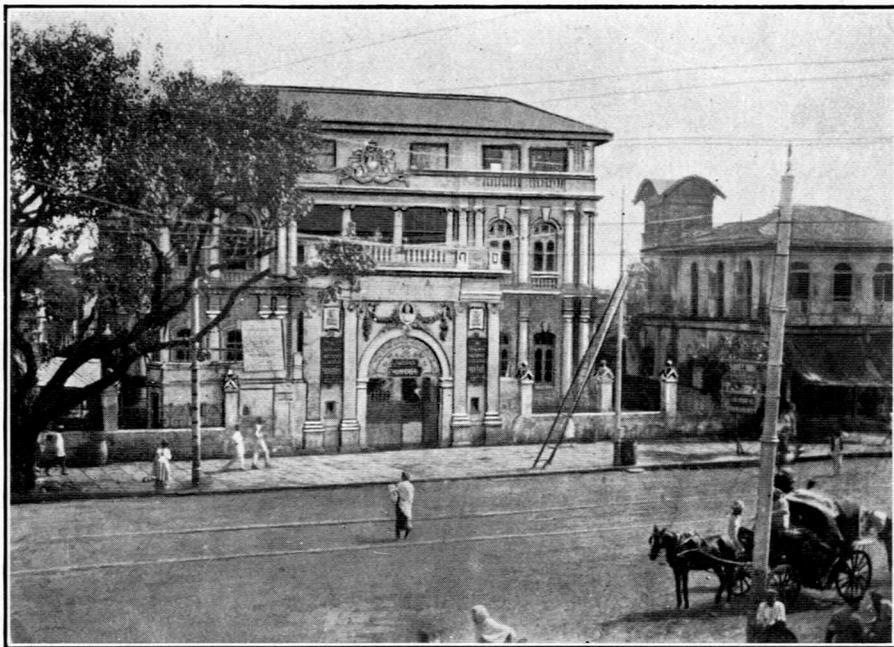


Figure 1. Victoria Theatre, Bombay.

Source: Charles Jasper Sisson, *Shakespeare in India: Popular Adaptations on the Bombay Stage*.

seating arrangement for about 800 people. The boxes have been constructed in such a way that all spectators will be able to see from all sides. With the same intention, the height of the stage has been increased. The height of the roof being nearly 30 feet, the whole set of the play can be accommodated very easily.¹⁵

The Novelty Theatre, constructed by the Victoria Company's owners and Moghul in 1887, was even larger, with a stage size of 90 by 65 feet. It seated 1400 people. Following a benefit performance by the Victoria Theatrical Company in aid of the Indian Medical Women's Fund, the *Times of India* praised its appearance:

There can be no doubt that the best expectations of Lord and Lady Reay [the presiding dignitaries] were realised, inasmuch as the whole house was filled to its utmost capacity by an audience of an influential character, consisting of all castes and creeds. The grounds in and about the theatre were most tastefully decorated and brilliantly illuminated with myriads of *buttee* lamps and coloured lanterns. The passage on the north side of the house, through which H.E. the Governor's carriage was to pass, was lined on both sides with Venetian masts, and there was besides a large display of flags, buntings and festoons of banners in front and on the sides of the building. The interior of the house was also prettily decorated.¹⁶

The late nineteenth century was the height of the Victorian age in England, and colonial administrators, educationists, and missionaries disseminated the discourses of morality, utility, and reform to the populace in India. Influenced by the dominant ideology, the early Indian thespians viewed theatre as a rational amusement and promoted its educational potential. They particularly sought to distinguish it from the morally ambiguous entertainments associated with the courtesan's salon or *kotha*, the locus of refined leisure and sociality for the post-Mughal aristocracy. In actuality, the Parsi theatre retained ties with forms of music and dance that flourished in the north Indian *kotha*. Composers made use of Hindustani ragas and talas for their song genres, and orchestras featured tabla, sarangi, harmonium, and other musical instruments. The theatre also recirculated the verbal art of the *kotha* by adopting Urdu and the stylized expression of the *ghazal* as its *métier*. Continuities in formal vocabularies and structures of feeling persisted as the Parsi theatrical idiom entered the cinema in the twentieth century. Nonetheless, as if buttressing the distinction between the Victorian playhouse and the feudal *kotha*, the grand proscenium stage and its technological possibilities broadcast the Parsi theatre's superiority and advancement.

Here the players strutted on a vast platform framed by a soaring arch. A massive painted curtain provided the background upon which densely detailed scenic representations were projected. In front, the 'drop curtain', also elaborately painted, was raised and lowered to demarcate the start and finish of the several acts of the drama. Transformation sets were employed that shifted between scenes. Flying machines enabled the descent of heavenly figures, just as trapdoors below the platform allowed creatures from the netherworld to suddenly appear onstage. Lavish costumes and precious jewellery created a sumptuous atmosphere. Even amenities such as refreshment rooms and intervals added a sense of civilized decorum to the proceedings.

The size of the stage and technical innovations increased opportunities for melodramatic spectacle, then in vogue in Europe. Conventions of Western melodrama reached India via travelling actors and the circulation of published plays. Notices in Bombay newspapers in the 1820s mention Gothic melodramas being performed locally. Thereafter, military, equestrian, and nautical melodramas were imported. These were joined by domestic melodramas like Bulwer-Lytton's *The Lady of Lyons*, which was adapted into Gujarati and performed in 1868. Crime melodramas proliferated on the model of English melodramas, beginning with Raunaq's play *Khun-i Ashiq/Lover's Blood*.

European melodrama in its theory and practice was closely affiliated with painting, especially the realistic depiction of scenes from everyday life known as genre painting. Diderot emphasized that a painting should represent an instant, capture a moment in time's passage. He introduced the notion of *tableau*, the signature of European melodrama, 'where the actors strike an expressive stance in a legible symbolic configuration that crystallizes a stage of the narrative.'¹⁷ In the Parsi

theatre, tableaux or arrested pictures were used to punctuate the end of an act, just before the 'drop' fell. With this new pictorialism came the visual convention of perspective, often combined with architectural motifs such as receding arches or vaulted ceilings that feature in late nineteenth-century photographs from India.

The frontal arrangement of performers onstage was in part a legacy of the pictorial mode of composition. It was also imposed by the technical limitations of the lighting scheme. Footlights fuelled by piped-in gas were placed at the edge of the stage, in close proximity to the actors who stood almost directly above them with the curtain only a few feet behind. This strategy was necessary to illuminate the actors' faces and the painted scene, but it had the effect of casting eerie and exaggerated shadows that reinforced the players' heightened emotions. In a photograph of a Parsi theatre production of *Romeo and Juliet*, the foreshortened distance between the footlights, the actors' feet, and the painted backdrop is apparent (Figure 2). The tableau here illustrates the so-called 'pointed style', the freezing of bodily movement in elongated or angular poses that suggest the conclusion of a dance-like sweep of movement.

Given the large dimensions of the playhouse and the remote position of the viewer, the actor needed to enlarge his presence to fill the space. Outstretched arms, pointed fingers, and bent knees were intrinsic elements of the exaggerated acting technique favoured in this period. These gestures were accompanied at the level of sound by declamatory speech-making, projected at high volume to reach the farthest corners of the playhouse. Newspaper reviewers sometimes commented unfavourably on the loud din created by the shouting and bellowing of Parsi theatre actors. The tendency was attributed to the immature histrionic art of natives who had not yet come up to the European standard. Other reports in the press noted the excessive noise and rowdy behaviour that occasionally erupted among the spectators during dramatic performances. Outbreaks of fighting among performers onstage were also not unknown. The aura of discipline and progress signalled in the architectural design of the playhouse, it appears, could not suppress the boisterous energies of live theatre.

Meanwhile, the enormous gulf between the stage and the boxes demanded that actors make ample use of their lungs and vocal cords. The challenge of being heard and understood became a significant problem for actors in the Parsi theatre. Whereas stage lights could illuminate the actor's figure, there were no mechanical means available for amplifying sound. The matter was not left entirely to the actor's vocal technique, however. The use of formulaic language, composed in



Figure 2. *Romeo and Juliet*, Act I, scene 2, Bombay.

Source: Charles Jasper Sisson, *Shakespeare in India: Popular Adaptations on the Bombay Stage*.

recognizable cadences with rhyme as a regular feature, assisted the audience in following along. Poet-playwrights composing in Urdu adopted the practice of putting dialogue into rhyming prose and couplets. Both prose and verse exploited the characteristic feminine rhyme pattern of Urdu prosody, whereby line-ends are punctuated by a highly audible and predictable set of syllables known as *qafiya* and *radif*. The *radif* is the syllable or syllables which terminate the line and remain constant throughout. The *qafiya* is the single syllable leading into the *radif*, which is joined with other syllables to make a *qafiya* word. It is the anticipation of the *radif*, signalled by enunciation of the *qafiya*, that prompts the audience to supply the anticipated syllable or syllables and thereby complete the line.

The ubiquity of devices of sound in the Urdu dramas of the Parsi theatre facilitated a high degree of audience participation. Members of the crowd would guess the rhyming words at the end of each line and shout them out vociferously. Verbal response from the spectators during a show was expected and was taken as a sign that the performance was going well. *Dad dena*, the oral display of audience approval, took other forms as well. Appreciation and praise of poetic speech, songs, dances, and even fight scenes would be shouted out using typical Urdu turns of phrase. In the Parsi theatre, a particular practice of expressing praise emerged, the famed 'once-more'. When this English phrase was interjected loudly by spectators, the sequence just completed – be it a *ghazal*, a dance, or a fight unto death – was always repeated, sometimes multiple times if so demanded. The constant interaction between players and spectators heightened the excitement as the performance advanced, bridging the physical distance in the playhouse and drawing the audience together into a community of listeners.

Registers of Urdu

With hundreds of dramas in the repertoire, it is beyond the scope of this essay to document the language used in the Parsi-Urdu theatre with any claim to being representative or comprehensive. Urdu is a language of great versatility, and although best known for its prestigious high register, it also serves well for commonplace oral exchange. Both ends of the continuum are on display in the small sample of scripts examined for this essay. The character of the Urdu varies from simple Hindustani to speeches full of Persianate constructions. The register may move back and forth within a single dialogue, as witnessed in an exchange between Ezra and his daughter Rahil in Agha Hashr's *Yahudi ki Larki/The Jew's Daughter*:

Ezra: *Bata, tu duniya aur din, donon men se kis chiz ko pasand karti ho?*

Rahil: *Abba jan! Dukh bimari aur digar takalif se bhari hui duniya ke liye haqiqi masarrat aur javedani surur se ankhen band karun? Lal ko thokar mar kar patthar ko pasand karun?*¹⁸

Ezra: Tell me, of the two, which do you like better, the world or the faith?

Rahil: Father, dear! Should I shut my eyes to eternal happiness and everlasting joy for this world full of pain, trouble, and suffering? Should I trample on the ruby and choose the stone?

The Persianate phrases *haqiqi masarrat* and *javedani surur*, 'eternal happiness' and 'everlasting joy', referring to the rewards of religious belief, elevate the tenor of Rahil's speech, whereas the Hindustani phrasing used to contrast the ruby and the stone make the point in a down-to-earth way.

In the tradition of the *Indar Sabha*, songs and invocations were often written in dialects of Hindi, such as Braj Bhasha and Awadhi. In *Yahudi ki Larki*, a number of scenes begin with Hindi romantic songs sung by a chorus of girls, such as:

*Sakhi joban ke mate hain
Kaise tikhe pyare najariya ke ban.
Jin nainan ke sang chher kare
Vare apni jan.*¹⁹

Girlfriend, he's mad with the pride of youth.
How sharp are my darling's arrow-like glances!
Beware, those who dare flirt with his eyes:
They put at risk their very lives.

Language was often used to mark differences between characters. A common structural device of these plays was to match a dramatic main plot with a comic subplot. Serious scenes featuring high-status characters tended to alternate with buffoonery featuring servants or other lowly figures. Partly this was to allow for the change of sets and scenery in the background, and partly to maintain audience interest. In the subplot, farce, slapstick, and obscenity reigned, while in the main plot, the tone was more exalted. In an inversion of colonial hierarchy, the English language was ridiculed by its comic use among low-status figures, such as the barber-turned-postmaster Ghasita, who sings this song in *Yahudi ki Larki*:

*Nai se tie lagakar bana main kaisa gentleman,
Chhori hai desi line, mujh se darte hain ab postman.
Vah-va, jisko ho ik mah men three thousand income,
Usi malika ko banaun main apni madam.*²⁰

Putting on a tie, what a gentleman I've become!
I left the barber business, now am feared by the postman.
Wonderful! Whoever has three thousand a month income,
I'll marry that queen and make her my madam.

One peculiar aspect of Urdu's theatricality was the prevalence of rhymed prose. This stylized practice, whose technical name is *nasr-e muquaffa*, was borrowed from *dastans*, long narrative works written in Persian or Urdu. Rhymed prose had the effect of raising ordinary speech to the level of oratory and declamation. Its use was appropriate given the size of the playhouse, lack of amplification, and ever-present noise. Actors would shout their lines at volume, often using a high pitch register to enhance the effect. Rhymed prose made dialogues somewhat artificial, but by accentuating the rhythmic qualities of the language, it created a special kind of collective enjoyment.

Here is an example from the climactic scene in Agha Hashr's *Silver King*. The profligate husband, Afzal, has just returned to his wife Parvin, only to anticipate his own arrest. Note three lines of rhyming prose, followed by a *she'r* or couplet in verse:

*Afsos ke siva aur kuchh nahin, thori der men subah hogi.
Police hathkari aur warrant le kar mere liye ati hogi,
thori der ke bad police mera nam le kar darvaza khatkhatati hogi.
Kiran suraj ki, lekar maut ka paigham ati hai,
Sahar ati nahin, ye zindagi ki sham ati hai.*²¹

Except for sorrow, nothing is left. Shortly it will be morning.
The police will come for me with handcuffs and a warrant.
Soon now, the police will knock and call out my name.
The sun's ray enters, a messenger of death.
This is not dawn: 'tis the twilight of life.

Parsi-Urdu playwrights incorporated the *ghazals* of the classical masters of poetic art, known as *ustads*. The dramatists openly acknowledge in their prefaces that they cribbed from earlier poets and lifted their verses. Familiar refrains and metrical templates (*zamims*) were adjusted to fit the new placement. Following the passage just cited, Hashr appended a *ghazal* based on a famous composition of Bahadur Shah Zafar:

*Jo khazan hui vo bahar hun, jo utar gaya vo khumar hun,
Jo bigar gaya vo nasib hun, jo ujar gaya vo singhar hun.
Main kahan basun main kahan rahun, na ye mujh se khush na vo mujh se khush,*

*Main zamin ki pith ka bojh hun, main falak ke dil ka ghubar hun.*²²

I am the aftermath of autumn's desolation, I am the gloom after intoxication.
To what has spoiled, I am the heir. Of what is ruined, I am the relic.
Where shall I settle, where can I stay? No one cares for me, neither this man nor that.
I am the load that burdens earth's back; I am the dust at the heart of the sky.

Compare the famous opening couplet and parallel verses of the original (with identical phrases marked in bold):

*Na kisi ki ankh ka nur hun, na kisi ke dil ka qarar hun;
Jo kisi ke kam na a sake, main vo ek musht-e ghubar hun.*

*Mera rang rup bigar gaya, mera yar mujh se bichhur gaya,
Jo chaman khazan se ujar gaya, main usi ki fasl-e bahar hun.*

*Na to main kisi ka habib hun, na to main kisi ka raqib hun,
Jo bigar gaya vo nasib hun, jo ujar gaya vo diyar hun.*

I am the light of no one's eye, I am the solace of no one's heart.
A thing of use to no one, I am a mere handful of dust.

My health and form are gone to ruin; my loving friend is shorn from me.
I am the spring harvest of the garden wrecked by autumn.

I am no one's favourite, I am no one's rival.
I am the heir to what has spoiled, I am the land that lies in waste.

This poem is especially renowned because it is associated with the British takeover of the Red Fort in Delhi in 1857 and the humiliating exile of Zafar, the last of the great line of Mughal emperors, to Burma. It was sung and recorded by many vocalists, notably Mohammed Rafi and Iqbal Bano.

The Parsi theatre in this way became a repository of the Urdu poetic tradition, of conventions of love, *ishq* and *muhabbat*, along with the despair and self-effacement that accompanied them. Through the Parsi theatre, *sha'iri* circulated among a broader audience in terms of both class position and geographical location. The public sphere for Urdu was thus enlarged through the institution of theatre, as was aesthetic appreciation of Urdu poetry's Islamicate cultural moorings. The extended performative reach of Urdu poetry was to have enduring effects on the development of Indian cinema, especially on the figuration of love and desire.

By the same token, the discriminating taste once fostered within the ranks of esteemed poets and the Urdu cognoscenti could not be sustained. One of the chief complaints against the Parsi-Urdu theatre was that it dissolved the boundary between high and low art. Its dramas were meant for enjoyment by the public at large, and as a result the playwrights were easygoing in their use of language. The literati may have decried the weakening of critical judgment, but this democratizing effect arguably endowed Urdu with the flexibility and utility it needed as a language of cinema.

Agha Hashr and Yahudi ki Larki

Agha Hashr Kashmiri, the most prolific playwright of the Parsi-Urdu theatre, was one of the important figures connecting the Islamicate culture of the stage to its successor form, the Bombay cinema (Figure 3). Hashr's achievement rested firmly on the foundation of popular playwriting in Urdu that had already been established. He pushed the theatrical potential of the medium even further by developing the core structures and style of melodrama in relation to different generic conventions. His contribution to the early cinema is particularly significant in view of the numerous screenplays and song lyrics he composed and his close personal relationships with leading figures of the stage and early cinema.²³

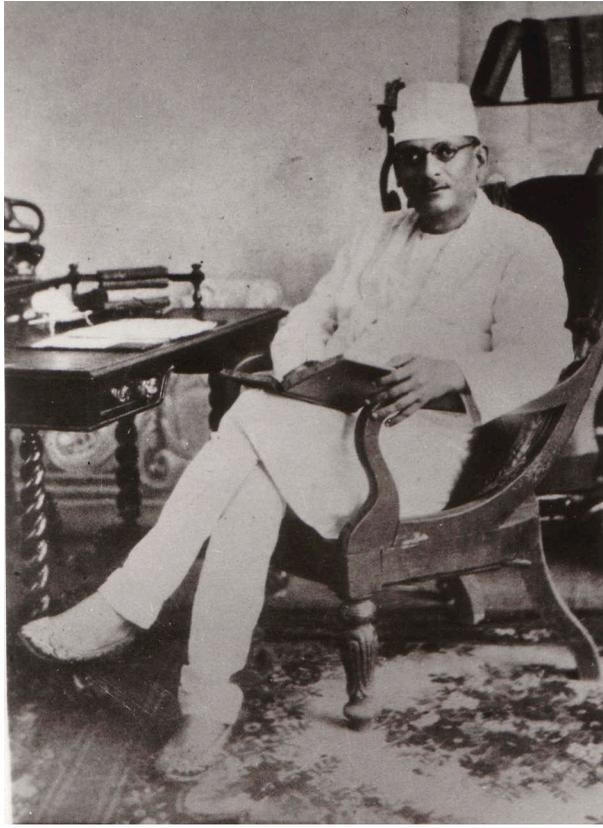


Figure 3. Agha Hashr Kashmiri, Urdu playwright.
Credit: Natya Shodh Sansthan, Kolkata.

Hashr was born in Banaras in 1879, a descendant of shawl merchants from Kashmir. He wrote professionally for numerous Parsi theatrical companies, including the Alfred, the New Alfred, and the Corinthian in Calcutta. He established and ran several companies himself, such as the Indian Shakespeare Theatrical Company, but these did not endure long. Over his lifetime, Hashr composed in a number of different genres: romantic, historical, social, and mythological.

He began with imaginary tales, focusing on idealized beauties and their tortured admirers. These plays were highly lyrical but largely derivative and unrelated to social reality. In his next phase, Hashr produced a number of adaptations from Shakespeare. His strategy involved relocating a given story within a pseudo Indo-Islamic milieu, renaming the characters, and adjusting the plot to bring to the foreground elements of melodrama and miraculous spectacle. These plays were set in imaginary time and space, but unlike his youthful romantic dramas, they projected individual dilemmas and solutions. Hashr's interaction with changes in the surrounding society developed in his middle years. Beginning with *Khubsurat Bala/Beautiful Affliction* (1909), he made dynamic use of the Shakespearean style but integrated it within the format of contemporary social drama. The melodramatic structure of his 'socials' followed the familiar formula. It provided the satisfaction of clearly delineating good and evil and heightening moments of dramatic climax through the device of the tableau, while evoking social themes and familial relationships.

Yahudi ki Larki (1913) began a larger project of critique of the colonial state, albeit set in a historical framework. The strategy of temporally displacing the narrative was a necessary one imposed by strict codes of censorship. In an implicit allegory with British rule, Hashr set up a

conflict between the oppressive Romans of ancient times and the victimized Jews who were compelled under threat of death to worship idols and engage in pagan revelry. Other dramas that expressed patriotic leanings include *Hindustan Qadim o Jadid/Hindustan Old and New*, *Gharib ki Duniya/The World of the Poor*, and *Bharat ki Pukar/India's Cry*.

From 1915 onwards, Hashr wrote a number of mythological plays retelling episodes from Hindu epics and legends. Plays such as *Bilvamangal* or *Bhakt Surdas/Surdas, the Devotee*; *Sita Banvas/Sita's Exile* from the *Ramayana*; and *Bhishma Pratigya/Bhishma's Vow* from the *Mahabharata*, show the inclusive scope of his craft. Writing primarily for the Madan Theatres in Calcutta, Hashr in these plays turned increasingly to Hindi expressions over Urdu ones. Late in his career, Hashr similarly extended his range to the traditional narrative corpus of the Parsi community. In *Rustam o Sohrab/Rustom and Sohrab* (1928), a play that is still performed, he commemorated the primordial struggle between the two warriors who were father and son.

Hashr also figured importantly in the construction of the early Bombay cinema, adapting his plays for the screen and writing memorable songs to accompany them. Most of Hashr's screenplays were based on his early set of dramas. During the silent film era, his socials and mythologicals, such as *Ankh ka Nasha/Eye's Delight* and *Dhruva Charitra/The Tale of Dhruva*, were significant contributions to their respective genres. Unfortunately, none of the films of this period survive. With the coming of sound, Hashr's genius as script-cum-songwriter could be most fully realized. His dialogues and lyrics for *Shirin Farhad/Shirin and Farhad* were famously enacted by the singing duo Kajjan and Nisar. Several of his plays came to life on screen with the famous actor Sohrab Modi in title roles.

His most influential play, *Yahudi ki Larki*, was remade several times as a film. In 1933, New Theatres released a version starring Kundan Lal Saigal as Marcus, the Roman prince, and Rattan Bai as his Jewish beloved (Figure 4). Hashr wrote the screenplay, and the plot followed the drama closely. Several songs from the film, including a rendition of Ghalib's well-known *ghazal*, *Nuktachin hai gham-e dil*, are available on youtube.com. In the late 1950s, Hashr's play reappeared in multiple filmic avatars: as *Yahudi ki Beti* directed by Nanubhai Vakil, as *Yahudi ki Larki* directed by S.D. Narang, and most memorably as *Yahudi* directed by Bimal Roy in 1958. The latter was co-written by Hashr and Nabendu Ghosh, and it starred Meena Kumari, Dilip Kumar, and Sohrab Modi. The music was by Shanker Jaikishan, and Helen and Cuckoo danced.

A closer examination of Hashr's original drama alongside the 1958 film (available on DVD) reveals how conventions of melodrama reinforced by the sonorities of Urdu enabled new modes of imagining Indian history, myth, and nationhood. *Yahudi ki Larki* is a cross-cultural romance between a Roman and a Jew set in pre-Christian times. When written, it was most likely intended to encode critique of British colonial rule. Recently, the play has been staged to counter Hindutva through the equation of the Jews with present-day Muslims. It has been revived for drama festivals in Delhi and Chandigarh, earning renewed acclaim as a representation of India's composite culture.²⁴ The plot may well have been taken from *The Jewess*, a historical drama by William Thomas Moncrieff.²⁵ Moncrieff's play in turn was an adaptation of *La Juive*, a French opera composed by Halévy with libretto by Scribe. The opera presented a parable of religious intolerance, focusing on Rachel, the putative Jewess who fell in love with a Christian in mediaeval Switzerland and was eventually martyred.²⁶

In both *La Juive* and *Yahudi ki Larki*, events unfold in a historical epoch when the state was engaged in oppressing religious minorities. Hashr's play transports us to the ancient world and the dominion of the Romans, intent on imposing their polytheistic religion. Against them stands the Jewish patriarch Ezra, played by Sohrab Modi in the 1958 film. He views the Romans as oppressors and declares himself a rebel. Arguing for justice and freedom of religion, he refuses to bow down.

*Siva khuda ke kisi ke age na dil jhuka hai na sar jhukega.*²⁷

Except before God, I have never bowed my heart, nor will I bow my head.



Figure 4. Cover of publicity booklet for film *Yahudi ki Larki*, 1933.

Credit: B.D. Garga Collection.

Manshiya, the hero of the play (Marcus in the film), is a Roman who has disguised himself as a Jew in order to woo Ezra's daughter Rahil (Hannah in the film). He espouses religious tolerance, insisting that the Romans treat everyone the same:

*Yahudi ho ya isai, purab ka bashinda ho ya eshiyai, bad ho ya nek,
Magar khuda ke rahm-o-karam ki nazar sab par hai ek.*²⁸

Whether the man be Jew or Christian, Easterner or West Asian, evil or good,
God casts his gaze upon each one with the same mercy and kindness.

After Manshiya reveals his true identity and Rahil rejects him, he invokes the universal spirit within man and places love above all else.

*Yahudi hun ki roman hun, main nuri hun ki nari hun
Koi hun kuchh bhi hun, par teri surat ka pujari hun.*²⁹

Whether a Jew or a Roman, born of light or from the fire,
Whatever I am, however I am, I'm a worshipper of your countenance.

The Romans thus represent the politically repressive state that attempts to impose its religious orientation on all subjects. The Jews appear as a largely defenceless minority who refuse to bow to

persecution. Understood as a historical drama, Hashr's play recalls a period in which conflict raged between these two peoples. But there is also an obvious allegory that operates together with the historical mode of telling – not displacing it but supplementing it – whereby the Romans represent the West and the Jews the East. (Somewhat oddly, in the verse the Christians are termed 'Asian', *eshiyai*.) By extension, the conflict is between the European colonial regimes and the peoples of the Orient, or more specifically the British Raj and India. This elision of identities is apparent in the 1958 film, wherein the costuming, hairstyles, and dance moves of the Romans often gesture towards the European manner. The wedding ceremony in the film, which provides the setting for the climactic confrontation between Hannah and the Roman king, looks to be Christian.

To the extent that the drama proposes a resolution to communal conflict, it is through a discourse of justice (*insaf*) that knows no distinctions of class, community, or religion. The twist is that this justice is to be found in Roman law (*roman qanun*). A major turning point occurs when Rahil/Hannah makes an impassioned complaint before the Roman king to prevent Manshiya/Marcus from marrying his intended, Desiya/Octavia. Accusing her lover of infidelity, she demands capital punishment – an extraordinary sentence for the 'crime' of jilting her. Put on the spot, the Roman king declares his commitment to justice. He announces his impartiality to the status of the petitioner, agreeing to hear out Rahil/Hannah even though she is a Jewish commoner.

In the 1958 film *Yahudi*, this scene forms the dramatic climax that showcases the histrionic talents of Meena Kumari and Sohrab Modi. Importantly, it is here that the Roman state appears in a more favourable light. The possibility of a moral order beyond religion and community is suggested as Meena Kumari moves outside her father's authority and appeals directly to the king. In the course of her impassioned speech in soaring Urdu, spectators may be reminded of Meena Kumari's own Islamicate heritage and her career in several classic Muslim socials. She was born Mahjabin to the Muslim Parsi-theatre actor Ali Bux and his wife Prabhavati, who as a dancer took the name Iqbal Begam. Meena Kumari's body of work encapsulated the composite culture of the Bombay entertainment industry of the 1940s and 1950s, and she herself projected Urdu's elegant sophistication.

The great actor, Sohrab Modi, another veteran of Parsi theatre, also appears at the height of his powers, declaiming in rhymed couplets in true Parsi theatre style. Accusing the king of a double standard, he ironically intones:

*Tumhara gham hai gham, mufalis ka sadma ik kahani hai.
Tumhara aish hai aish aur hamara aish fani hai.
Yahan bachpan burhapa vahan burhapa bhi javani hai.
Tumhara khun hai khun aur hamara khun pani hai.³⁰*

Your sorrow is true sorrow, the misfortune of the poor but a story.
Your enjoyment is a way of life, and ours merely momentary.
We go from childhood to old age, but for you even old age is youthful.
Your blood runs pure, and our blood is but water.

The grand theatricality of the *mise-en-scène*, the broad physical gestures, and the frontal address of the actors before the camera emphasize the connections between the film and its dramatic roots.

In the end, Roman *qanun* proves adequate to the demands for justice – the rhetoric of *insaf* – that rings throughout the play. The impartiality of Roman law, put to the test through the freighted act of a father sentencing a son, offers an overarching order in which religious communities may coexist. The melodrama's resolution draws religious rivals together under the banner of equality and mutual dependence: they have, after all, fostered each other's children. The clever interweaving of family loyalties and romantic alliances with themes of political oppression and religious persecution distinguish this play as a mature example of melodrama in

the Parsi theatre. Such high-pitched, overwrought narratives continue to engage theatrical and cinematic audiences today. Their emotional appeal remains a powerful tool for gathering audiences together in moments of mutual recognition and cohesion across lines of difference.

To conclude, the legacy of the Parsi theatre is evident in the Bombay cinema's preference for Urdu and its Islamicate poetic tradition. Poetic utterance in Urdu as passed down from the canon of the nineteenth century entailed an exalted tone, abundant metaphor, rhyme, rhythm, and ornate speech. In the twentieth century, litterateurs and critics attempted to diverge from classical *ghazal* style in order to make Urdu literature modern. Yet, theatre audiences and their successors, the spectators in the cinema halls, relished the grandiloquent gestures of the old *ustads*. To some extent, their preference evinced nostalgic yearning for feudal certainties and for the pleasures associated with the precolonial courts. Considering the deep sense of loss and powerlessness that colonialism induced, it is obvious why an alternative zone of cultural affirmation appealed so strongly.

Urdu expressivity might also be considered as harbouring an element of the timeless. The stylized language of Urdu poetry infused the Parsi theatre and Bombay cinema with beauty and grace. It had the power to arouse passionate and sentimental responses in those who sought entertainment on stage or screen. Audiences revelled in the sense of elevation, exaggeration, and excess. In this regard, the predilection for Urdu poetry reveals an attraction to a heightened state of aesthetic enjoyment, anticipated much earlier in the theory of *rasa* presented in Sanskrit treatises. As a scheme to explain the transformative effect of dramatic poetry, the concept of *rasa* stresses the distillation of emotion into a 'juice', taste, or essence. Although genealogically alien to the Urdu poetic tradition, Sanskrit aesthetics also elaborates the notion of the connoisseur, the *rasika* or *sahridaya*, 'one with heart', identifying a superior capacity to respond to intense feeling. This understanding has guided the concept of the ideal audience member in India across regions and eras. The Bombay cinema continues to work within this framework, valorizing the production of feeling within the boundaries constructed by particular forms. The patterned structures of Urdu poetry allied with its colourful emotional palate provided one of the avenues for this continuity to develop. Through Urdu, the Parsi theatre and its heir, the Bombay cinema, gained a distinctive sensibility that is still widely enjoyed and appreciated.

Notes

1. Hansen, 'Languages on Stage', 386–388.
2. Hansen, 'Indar Sabha Phenomenon', 97–99.
3. Hansen, 'Languages on Stage', 395.
4. Taj, *Urdu ka klasiki adab*, Vol. 2, 365.
5. Hansen, 'Languages on Stage', 393.
6. *Ibid.*, 397–398.
7. Taj, *Urdu ka klasiki adab*, Vol. 7, 3–4.
8. Taj, *Urdu ka klasiki adab*, Vol. 8, alif-ye.
9. Taj, *Urdu ka klasiki adab*, Vol. 10, 1–3.
10. Taj, *Urdu ka klasiki adab*, Vol. 7, 3–4.
11. Taj, *Urdu ka klasiki adab*, Vol. 8, alif-ye.
12. Taj, *Urdu ka klasiki adab*, Vol. 10, 3.
13. Hansen, *Stages of Life*, 113.
14. Hansen, 'Place of Public Amusement', 359.
15. *Rast Goftar*, 16 November 1879, 771.
16. *Times of India*, 1 March 1888, 3.
17. Meisel, *Realizations*, 45.
18. Kashmiri, *Yahudi ki larki*, 89.
19. *Ibid.*, 12.
20. Azmi, *Agha hashr kashmiri ke chuninda drame*, Vol. 2, 189.
21. *Ibid.*, 56.
22. *Ibid.*, 57.

23. Gupt, *Parsi Theatre*, 84–86; Rajadhyaksha, *Encyclopaedia of Indian Cinema*, 123.
24. Hansen, 'Staging Composite Culture', 162.
25. Singh, 'Kahan se li urja aga hashr ne', 51.
26. Valman, *The Jewess in Nineteenth-Century British Literary Culture*, 2.
27. Kashmiri, *Yahudi ki larki*, 22.
28. *Ibid.*, 29.
29. *Ibid.*, 39.
30. *Ibid.*, 66.

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