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DEATH AND THE MAIDEN: THE FLOATING COURTESAN IN *PAKEEZAH*

Hugo Ríos

“I am not a woman
I am a grave”

Ji í Walker

The Courtesan film occupies a particular position in the popular imagination of India. Its great popularity could be ascribed to its hybrid status, the character of the courtesan being hard to define. Sumita Chakravarty describes the character as “as dancing girl, nautch-girl, prostitute or harlot” and, above all, as both “celebrated and shunned” (269). Rachel Dwyer suggests the appeal of a “lost” Islamic element and the relationship between memory, loss and poetry and the *ghazal*¹ (88). Films such as *Tawaif*, *Umrao Jaan*, *Mamta*, *Amar Prem*, *Utsav*, *Ram Teri Ganga Maili*, *Bhumika* and *Pakeezah*, among others, serve as testimony of the vital force that emanates from the Courtesan Film but it is the last mentioned that packs all the elements of the Courtesan Film plus an interesting commentary on two seemingly unrelated issues: death and the floating condition of the courtesans.

My examination of these motifs will be focused on Kamal Amrohi’s 1972 film *Pakeezah*. My reading is nurtured by the idea that this film stands as a text that is both a performance of the genre as well as a critique of it.

My first viewing of *Pakeezah* was immediately affected by what seemed to be melodramatic excess. Peter Brooks’ definition of melodrama includes an interesting catalog of features, most of which make their way into the Indian film: “indulgence of strong emotionalism, moral polarization and schematization, extreme states of being,

¹ Of Persian origin, the *ghazal* is a musical poetic form whose themes revolve around unattainable love.

situations, actions, overt villainy, persecution of the good and final reward of virtue; inflated and extravagant expression; dark plotting, suspense and breathtaking peripety” (11-12). Vijay Mishra in his *Bollywood Cinema: Temples of Desire* concurs with this idea but he is careful to signal that it is not the only source of excess, pointing also to Parsi Theater and other “local” influences (36). Mishra also comments on the nature of Bombay melodrama identifying it as representing “cultural truths of a metatextual kind— truths that bind eternal laws together—and not truths of a representational (lifelike) kind” (39). *Pakeezah* follows this road and perhaps takes it a step further. Overall the film presents a plausible structure according to Hindi Film standards but the “excessive excess” it contains eventually burst out of the seams in several key scenes. But in order to talk about this excess it is necessary to establish what is happening in the film in terms of generic conventions.

The importance of the courtesan in Indian society has been documented by several authors, among them Veena Talwar Oldenburg and Mukul Kesavan. Oldenburg traces the cultural and political resistance that these figures embodied, especially after the rebellion of 1857. Also according to Oldenburg, this particular system shows a semi-autonomous hierarchy of women in control that operates without male interference. Their cultural role is highlighted as they seem to be in charge of education, or, as Kesavan puts it they, “catered comprehensively to the complicated needs of the cultivated man-about-town, a more accomplished courtesan, a sort of geisha” (253). The British rulers probably saw the problem with this establishment, a problem that had an inherent paradoxical nature in it. This was an institution in charge of transmitting tradition but as such it had to be controlled in order to start to reinforce the process of colonial education. In addition, courtesans had intimate contact with the Nawabs in the private sphere and this allowed them a direct access to power. Oldenburg goes as far as to describe the courtesans of Lucknow as “an influential female elite” (139). But on the other hand some of them provided what the British saw as affordable sexual service and therefore needed to be regulated but not abolished. This regulation according to Oldenburg “not only debased the profession, stripping it from its social function, but it also made sex cheap and easy for the men while exposing the women to venereal infection from the soldiers” (142). Another controversial aspect in the colonial eyes was that as a social institution the courtesan, called *tawaif*, “created a secular meritocracy based on talent and education accepting Muslims and Hindus alike” (151), which was obviously an aspect that had to be controlled in order to create the religious difference

that would first serve to keep a huge country under control and that would eventually explode to catastrophic consequences during the partition of India.

It is not surprising then, that such a locus of power, tradition and controversy would become an interesting subject for Indian Cinema. As I mentioned before, the courtesan film is fascinating due to its paradoxical nature. Chakravarty describes it as “enjoying a wide and consistent popularity” and being a “favored subject of even the most respected Bombay filmmakers” (270). This can be explained not only as the fascination that the prostitute generates in audiences but also as an act of cultural resistance. The courtesan as purveyor of culture stands as a paradoxical paradigm: the welcomed pariah. This is a case of the insider/outsider, necessary to keep the communal rites going but also needed to stand as the Other in order to keep the conventions of society running.

Motifs that show the prison-like nature of courtesan/prostitute life and that likewise appear in Hollywood melodramas are blown out of proportion in courtesan films. Chakravarty goes on to enumerate several key elements that are woven into courtesan film like mirrors, caged birds, journeys, etc. Chakravarty also proceeds to divide them into three major types: the famous historical courtesan, the prostitute as embodiment of maternal love and finally the setting up of prostitution “as a result of unfortunate or impecunious circumstances” (275). Kamal Amrohi’s *Pakeezah* belongs to the last-mentioned category. But it also goes beyond this category as it seems to play a very conscious game of influence.

Before I begin with a close reading of *Pakeezah* it is important to formulate the ideas that will run through this analysis. Two issues concern me. One is the arresting elements of death that are prominently featured on this film. The other is the floating imagery that seems to filter the film and at moments take over the active representation of courtesans.

First, Death. It seems that in the film, death and the maiden are inextricably linked.

Dealing with Death and Islam, Lila Abu-Lughod explores the relationships of weddings and mourning: “Weddings (*afrah*), the word for which in Arabic also means celebration or happiness, are the epitome of joyous celebrations. It is considered an affront to celebrate weddings within the forty-day mourning period that follows the death of even someone in the neighbors’s family” (190). Although Abu-Lughod is working with Middle Eastern communities, the same could easily apply to the religious discourse that feeds *Pakeezah* and the film is

informed by a continuous discourse of death that is reflected not only in rituals but also in dress-codes.

The second idea is the “floating” motif. Interestingly enough, women who work in the male-entertainment industry are sometimes referred to as forming part of a “floating” element. For example, in Bangladesh, contemporary prostitutes not associated with an established house or pimp are called “floating prostitutes.” In Japan of the Edo period (mid 17th century) a particular type of Yoshiwara or pleasure center developed around the figure of Ukiyo. The ukiyo was the floating world and the main characteristic was the “highly stylized representations” of women “who literally and symbolically embodied physical beauty, cultural refinement and often erotic love” (Hibbett 23). As we will see below, *Pakeezah* partakes of this tradition in a very subtle but constant and efficient way.

According to Chakravarty, “*Pakeezah* has a curious other-worldly air that is in tension with the social and historical concreteness of the institution being portrayed” (291). This tension is already in position in the first scenes of the film. In the prologue, a musical number featuring Meena Kumari’s dance is interrupted by a grave masculine voice that dominates the voiceover. The voiceover carries over a few scenes telling the story of Nargis. First there is a fadeout of the title where the name of the director is featured and the viewer is thrown immediately into the scene. Meena Kumari as Nargis is featured in an American shot interrupted by a candle that is right on the middle of the screen and from where it seems she is rising. (This could be a possible foreshadowing to the phoenix resurgence of Nargis in her daughter or perhaps a commentary on the eternal recurrence of the motif of the prostitute). Nargis dressed in white (what in Hindu traditions is a color of mourning, widows and funerals) dances in an oddly-lit room. Two visible sources of light can be seen: The candle in the center and some glass chandeliers. The other prominent feature of the shot is a green door in the background. There is an audience, barely-visible, sitting on the floor and in the shadows. Nargis starts circling around the candle when the green doors open revealing a new source of light of perfect geometrical shape reflected on the ground and a man standing there. She walks into the light where her beloved (and future father of *Pakeezah*) Shahabuddin stands. As he walks in she starts moving back and the light of the chandeliers disappears. (Walking into or out of the light as well as a source of light being extinguished can all be seen as motifs of death) The scene ends in an apparent freeze frame that cuts to a street scene.

In the first few minutes we are introduced by the voice over to the story of Nargis. We learn about her escape from a brothel and her

secret marriage to Shahabuddin. She is picked up by a hearse-like carriage. Inside the carriage, Nargis' demeanor seems that of a dying woman. Her eyes look dead, her countenance seems pale and her words drop from her mouth slowly. We then witness her rejection by Shahabuddin's father, the patriarch of the family. Her second escape, triggered by this rejection, is filmed in a way that the camera does not leave the house with her but in a long-shot that acts also as another condemnation of her outsider status. Her second escape ends her unlikely route from the brothel to the house and then out of the house and into a graveyard. We get a shot of Nargis standing among the graves as ornamental as the red flowers that grow in the background. The voiceover returns and the scene dissolves into a close-up of Shahabuddin's face (focused on his eyes). We get another dissolve and we see Nargis' hand as she is writing a letter to Shahab. This is actually a superimposition because Shahab's eyes linger while we start seeing the letter. In this scene the motifs of the courtesan are written with light: the eyes of the man and the writing with the body and songs of the woman; the spectacle encapsulated in a few seconds of screen time. Later we will know that Shahab's eyes will not see the letter on time. What Nargis is writing is not only a letter to her lover but also her last will and testament. As a letter it fails to save her or prolong her life but as a will it saves her daughter from the brothel. In these few scenes that follow each other in rapid succession we get a prologue of the action and a set up of the movie within the tradition of the "man saving a woman from a life on the streets," a motif that seems to be universal and forms a trademark of patriarchal romanticism.

There is a cut and now we see Nawabjaan, Nargis' sister. She is discussing the purity/impurity of some gold coins with a merchant. The merchant asks: "How can there be anything impure in it? The gold coins are pure. It must be some minor dirt." This is an argument that anticipates the renaming of Sahibjaan and that according to Chakravarty is one of the thematic elements that define the courtesan consciousness (292). This is followed by the first recognition scene. A woman is selling a golden bangle that belonged to Nargis and Nawabjaan identifies it. This bangle stands as a token from the dead, another letter that reaches too late and by which Nawabjaan will find her sister. It is important that she is identified by something that labels her social position, not a book but an item that works like the "ghungroo" or anklet-bells will, later. These are the items of luxury that according to Oldenburg distinguished courtesans and caught the attention of the confiscating British authorities (174). The bracelet leads to the second cemetery scene. Nawabjaan's attention is focused on

the cries of a baby. The first days of young Sahibjaan were literally spent in a cemetery as her mid-period will be spent in a brothel and her later years in a marriage. After a while, Nawabjaan stands by the ground where Nargis is buried wondering about the silence that she must have endured in the necropolis. This silence is parallel to the public silence that she would have endured in the house of Shahab's father had she been accepted. But it is also a silence that stands as antonym of her vocation that of the singing/dancing courtesan. This is one instance where the vocation of a courtesan stands suspended between two forms of death and that only a real death seem to resolve at the time: the death to society that being a courtesan entails or the death to freedom that being a wife would mean.

The tokens of the dead keep being the circulating currency of the film when Nawabjaan authorizes an old woman to sell Nargis' personal items. And this in itself will lead to the second recognition scene. At this moment, the spectator is not aware of the time that has passed. An old man buys one of Nargis' books and inside he finds her letter to Shahabuddin. The old man decides to deliver it (an instance of the letter reaching its destination even if posthumously). We see then Shahabuddin reading the letter, the voiceover flooded with the voice of the dead Nargis. This is not an actual usurpation of the voiceover but rather Shahabuddin's consciousness replaying Nargis' voice: "I was not fortunate enough that I would've breathed my last on your door-step. Neither was I fortunate that you take my dead body to the graveyard. But I'd to leave your home and find a graveyard for myself." After revealing his paternity she states that "now we will meet on Doomsday." With these words Nargis makes an appointment to meet Shahabuddin in death, a deal that is sealed by the circulation of the body of their daughter. It is in the name of the daughter that the letter is written and it is because of the recognition of the daughter that Shahabuddin dies. In a way it is a bond that is sealed by death.

The final cemetery scene occurs with Shahabuddin kneeling in front of Nargis' burial ground. It is possible at this moment to recognize the very few times that Nargis has been standing on her ground. We almost never see her standing still or resting. She is dancing or running, sitting or buried under ground. This could be read as a statement of the floating characteristics of the prostitute, a figure that almost immediately is repeated in the courtesan milieu that follows.

An abrupt cut sends us to the place where Nawabjaan is living with Sahibjaan, Shahabuddin's daughter. We get a first glimpse at the tightly organized hierarchy that functions in the milieu of the prostitute. We see many spinning wheels for sharpening knives. But

Nawabjaan stands above all of them as an overseer, possibly as the Chandharayan, the owner or manager of the brothel (Oldenburg). We see her exercise authority by expelling a man from the place and even threatening him. Even more interesting than her towering authority and independence is the saturated background that Amrohi presents. Every niche in the background is filled with color but above all with movement. In a majestic *mise-en-abyme*, the floating prostitute makes her first open statement about her condition. There are no women on the ground floor, all of them stand (or rather dance, run, float) on the second and third levels of buildings: a truly floating world.

Descending to meet Shahabuddin, Nawabjaan opens the meta-discourse about courtesan films by asking him, "Now which prostitute do you intend to rescue from hell?" This is plot-wise, a reference to the Nargis affair and her previous escape from the brothel but it also stands as a commentary on courtesan films where the hero's ambition is to rescue the woman, to bring her back to society. In the conversation that ensues between Shahabuddin and Nawabjaan, she says "some graveyard must have requested you to bring her dead body." This statement continues Nargis' discourse of the body of the prostitute as a dead body. This idea will later be retaken by Sahibjaan.

After promising Shahabuddin to return his daughter but only after her last performance Nawabjaan takes Sahibjaan with her on a train journey: the bodies of the courtesans being transported at high speed from the threat of normalcy of family life to another courtesan space. Their escape opens the door for the appearance of the "hero" Salim Ahmed Khan. In the train scene Salim stumbles upon the sleeping Sahibjaan, reads her book, steals her bookmark and becomes enthralled with her feet. In this scene, one can hear the questionable sound of bells that may or may not be diegetic. If it is not then are we dealing with the first instance of psychological sound? Is the sound of anklet bells or "ghunghroo" the sign of an inescapable nature that floating in the soundscape points towards her bonds?

Two almost insignificant elements stand out at the end of the train scene. When the train stops, it does so at a station called "Suhagpur" (we can read a sign through the window behind Sahibjaan). This means something along the lines of "place of wedding". It is in this place that she discovers her feelings towards one mysterious man that at the moment is not more than a few words on a note.

But she also discovers the note tucked into her feet. If we read this scene in a western sense, her body has been identified with a morgue

tag. Sahibjaan, the dead body transported away from her father to avoid recognition, is now identified by a stranger; it has been labeled not only as a beautiful body but also as a floating one. The content of the note plays an important role in the whole death/ethereal subtext of the film. The writer with a polite imperative commands her not to put her feet on the ground. This achieves a dual purpose: it keeps her feet from being defiled by the ground but it also condemns her to a floating existence.

When they get to the new place it has the same characteristics as the place they just escaped. Every nook in the background is occupied by a dancing woman and you barely see women on the street; they are always upstairs. These women are mostly shot sitting on beds or standing on tables their feet almost never touch the ground. One can also see women on the rooftops, their conversations, floating from building to building.

But besides the ethereal characteristics that they share there is also a common economic ground where they stand. They are independent economically speaking. Nawabjaan acquires the pink palace from the indebted Gauhar Jaan and it is here where she hides Sahibjaan from the inquiries of Shahabuddin.

Sahibjaan becomes an instant success and draws the attention of Nawab Zafar who instantly falls for her the same time that she is becoming increasingly restless with her memories of the train note. This leads eventually to a boat scene where nature directly intervenes to keep her away from men and drives her into the hands of her mysterious stranger. She is floating on the river after being “bought” by the Nawab. We assume that her virgin status remains intact and that this will be the time when she will have to fulfill her “duties.” All of a sudden a herd of wild elephants threatens the boat. The Nawab shoots at them making the elephants angrier. They destroy the boat separating Sahibjaan from her owner and setting her adrift for some time.

Walking on strange ground, she enters an empty tent where she discovers a diary and in it the book marker stolen before. The bookmark is a feather, a perfect symbol of a floating condition. She reads the diary. Then when she discovers that the author is the same mysterious stranger from the train, the film can no longer contain the cinematic excess and it erupts into a sequence of nature takes, birds flying and sunsets that lead inevitably into a song.

Right after this, exhausted from her rediscovered or newly focused sexuality, she stumbles on his bed. Then surprisingly Sahibjaan appropriates the voiceover momentarily. We get direct access to

her thoughts. In the midst of her excitement and desperation death shows up again although this time minimized as part of the romantic discourse when she claims that she will die without ever gazing at him. "I'll die on your bed, in front of your eyes."

The narrative excess continues with the hero galloping on his horse accompanied by the music of a western song with echoes of Spanish guitar or perhaps flamenco music. After a series of improbable events (an untimely separation once again orchestrated to Spanish music and an even unlikelier "rescue" by Nawabjaan) Sahibjaan returns to the Pink Palace where she is unable to perform for the men gathered around her. This is followed by another gap of melodramatic excess that could be read as a dream sequence. The contractor shows up in Sahibjaan's chambers, threatening her. Here all the melodramatic motifs show up in a distorted way: cages suspended from the ceiling fall to the ground revealing snakes, water fountains, the curtains hints a storm raging; nature is taking over as both his lust and her fear clash on the unlikely stage.

She escapes and ends up getting stuck between the train tracks. She ends up being rescued by none other than Salim himself (his presence was already anticipated by the hero's guitar motif buried on the chase/train music sounds). Sound is becoming much more meaningful as the film progresses, as we will see in the first marriage scene.

The journey after the rescue is practically a copy of the first scenes with Shahabuddin and Nargis: She is dressed in white lying on his lap while he is looking at her. The meeting with the grandfather is also another restaging of the earlier scene but while Shahabuddin fails to confront the patriarch, Salim appear to have a much stronger attitude towards tradition, at least momentarily. (Interestingly, the camera once again sides with the household, since the scene ends up with a long shot of the lovers walking away.)

The following scene takes place in front of a waterfall. Sahibjaan is visibly affected by the earlier scene struggles with the information about her past that at the moment she is withholding from Salim. Finally, she confesses that she is a courtesan. Her confession ends in an echo that seems to be the sound of someone that falls. When she is finished speaking the sound of the waterfall invades the space in what sounds like a train whistle. Even if as a train it can't be part of the diegetic soundscape, the train/waterfall link probably hints at her psychological departure from the land of hope. She falls to his feet and he picks her up and reaffirms his commitment. The whole nature scenery—they seem to be suspended above the river, on some

sort of bridge—contributes to another melodramatic staging of the emotions of the characters.

In her dialogue during the waterfall scene she summons images of death to conjure her emotions. She tells Salim: “Every single day you’ve been pulling away my soul from my body,” an image that conjures up both the soon to be dead body of the courtesan and the floating of her soul being lifted from the body. Then she adds “I would have died aspiring for you but you never let me die too.” Suspended between the love that kills and the hope that keeps alive, Sahibjaan surrenders her whole life to the judgment of the hero. This is followed by the inevitable musical number to give vent to the cascade of emotions just unleashed.

After the song, there is a dissolve and we find Salim and Sahibjaan driving around in a tonga through the dusty roads of a city. They stop and Salim goes to buy flowers while Sahibjaan remains in the vehicle (with her feet off the ground). While Salim waits for the flowers a man stops by to greet the visibly embarrassed Sahibjaan. It is obvious that she is dealing with a former customer from her courtesan days. Salim intervenes and a scene ensues where the hero is eventually forced into confronting the man. Now what seems interesting about the whole sequence is that Salim takes longer to react than the average Indian cinema hero, taking an awful beating before finally deciding to join in combat. While all of this is happening Sahibjaan stays in the tonga. After being arrested they are paraded through the streets while the mob starts calling her “a tawaif.”

After they are released from the police station Salim and Sahibjaan ascend some stairs to an open field where they meet an old man who will perform a marriage ceremony for them. The old man asks her name and we hear the crowd as psychological sound shouting “she’s a whore.” Salim intervenes and tells the old man her name, a new name. This is the moment when she is renamed Pakeezah, “the pure one.” The scene of the gold coins is brought back with Salim’s declaration. She is pure one even with some minor dirt. By accepting her with her “impurity,” this becomes Salim’s truer, but also final, gesture as a “hero.”

When the old man asks Sahibjaan if she would accept Salim, she does not answer. This is, according to Muslim unwritten conventions, a sign of modesty. But when he asks her a third time she, who has been hearing the psychological sound/chant of the crowd all along, gets up and runs away. As she runs the black veil she was wearing becomes loose, flies away in the wind and falls at Salim’s feet. There is a graphic match between two flying objects. First the black veil and after a cut we see a kite flying close to a tree to which is eventually stuck. While the symbol of their marriage, meant for her head, flies away and becomes

soiled when it falls to the feet of Salim, the kite, a symbol perhaps of a detached nature, a floating symbol of courtesans is stuck and ends up suspended away from the ground. With the kite, the viewer is back to the Pink Palace that now seems to lack the luster of the earlier scenes. It is an empty space with no gorgeous fountains and timely reflecting surfaces. Sahibjaan breaks down and cries on the shoulder of her cousin. Then the following exchange occurs: -My vagabond dead body has returned to be buried in this colorful tomb.

—Hush what dead body?

—Every prostitute is a dead body. I'm a dead body and you too! This marketplace is a graveyard of women whose souls are dead but the bodies remain alive. These mansions are our tombs in which the living coffins of we dead women are kept after being decorated. Our tombs are left open so that....

—Keep quiet. Keep quiet.

—I'm a restless body of one such open tomb which is lured by life again and again.

The camera slowly pans to the right in order to make the kite reappear in the background. Then the cousin goes looking for a comb and returns. Sahibjaan talks about her rejection of Salim because of her fear: "The ground of that world was such that wherever I set foot, the ground used to sink at the same spots." At the beginning, this seemed to ruin the whole floating metaphor that has been carried nicely all along the film. It suggested weight rather than lightness. But the emphasis is on the ground. It is the ground that is unstable not her weight that affects it. It is a ground that will sink even for a weightless being. It is the weight of tradition that makes the ground unstable and her feet sink.

The discourse of death and the dead body of the courtesan gets stronger with this thematic bridge between mother and daughter. The body of the tawaif is subjected to the tension between need and rejection, submission and liberation. As mentioned before, the Pink Palace has become gray and lifeless; gloomy walls and eerie lights stand now instead of the glittering objects and mirror-like surfaces. Then Sahibjaan compares herself to the kite: "that kite is so much like me, cut away, like I am."

An abrupt cut shows an isolated moment, unlike anything shown in the film before. For seventeen seconds the image of Salim's tent on the fields is shown burning. What does this mean? Could this be Salim's self-immolation where he is burning his heroic stance against tradition and his return to the family as a prodigal son?² Taking into

² Although as a Muslim Salim would not be cremated, this could well appear to be a funeral pyre in the context of the audience.

consideration his first action after his return this is very probable reading of this enigmatic scene.

Back at the Pink Palace, the passage of time is shown by the decay of the kite that is still stuck in the tree—we must keep Sahibjaan's comparison in mind. Twice we see Sahibjaan's point of view focused on a passing train. This is the moment when the letter from Salim arrives. Twice Salim writes to her: first the note, condemning her to a floating existence and then the letter inviting her, in an act of spite, to perform for him at his wedding.

The wedding takes place in a big white hall, adorned with garlands and chandeliers. Lots of musicians scattered on the floor ready to play and Sahibjaan dressed in impeccable white ready to perform. This is where the final recognition scene will take place. Sahibjaan dances with fury challenging Salim's gaze. Her dancing "unwrites" her mother's fate in a gesture that is both victory and defeat. Eventually she knocks over some lamps but, the shattered glass is not an obstacle to her dancing. She dances on glass and her blood stains the floor. She is writing a letter like her mother did at the cemetery. This is also her last will and testament. Nirmal Puwar in her "Multicultural Fashion: Stirrings of another Sense of Aesthetics and Memory" describes this dance as a gesture of sufferance, defeat and defiance at the same time" (84). Peter Mercer in his book on melodrama also examines the excess of this scene calling it a "hysterical dramatic scene [...] the catalyst of the revelation of Pakeezah's true identity and a satisfactory conclusion to the film whereby the heroine is freed of the shame of her current existence and reunited with her lover in marriage" (96). My own reading is somewhat different. Living in the suspended/ethereal state, while it allows for some financial flexibility at least in the codes of this particular movie, also condemns the tawaif to an undead life. Like the vampire, she can enjoy the privileges of being undead but she can never escape that form of life. Only through real death can she actually escape life. In Nargis' case, death is total and literal. In Sahibjaan there is a twist that presents a double alternative and that stands as a way for the text to comment on itself.

Nawabjaan recognizes Shahabuddin in the crowd and addresses him directly. "It's your daughter's blood on which you put your feet." The camera matches Shahabuddin's stare directed at the bloody feet and stained floor. "Did you see how that oppressed woman's blood has bloomed—whose blood has dried up on your sleeves?" At this moment the patriarch intervenes and tries to silence her with a gun but what he achieves is to shoot his own son. Shahabuddin falls to the ground. Before he dies he recognizes his daughter, making her part of the family and linking her to Salim again. Therefore we have

a death to liberate Sahibjaan from her undead existence. The death of the father acts like an atonement for the death of Nargis but also stands as a symbolic death that liberated the courtesan from her past allowing her to marry. In a beautiful scene the body of Shahabuddin is brought before his daughter and his grieving father wails in repentance. Death shows up at the wedding and presides over it.

The ceremony is also a partial redemption for Salim, one that comes as he accepts his new role not as a hero with Spanish music in the background but perhaps as a supportive and understanding husband. But then we also can read this as a passage to an even deeper death, that death that is symbolized by marriage. She will sink now. She will gain the weight of a different body, no longer ethereal but no longer free it falls now within the direct control of patriarchy. Is it then another type of death that liberates women? In this way the text comments on its own nature by showing that all the paths available to women lead to one form of death or the other.

The problem that this solves on one hand remains untouched on the other since the courtesan is not accepted with “some minor dirt” because the viewer knows that she is really the “pure one” but also this acceptance comes as a result of her being part of and accepted by a powerful family. Sahibjaan is not taken in as a courtesan and we can only wonder about her future associations with Nawabjaan.

In an unexpected move, the camera that has previously sided with tradition by remaining behind as both transgressive couples were leaving, Shahabuddin with Nargis and Salim with Sahibjaan now stay behind too but this time it stays in the brothel while Nawabjaan watches as the wedding procession departs.

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