

HUMANITIES INSTITUTE
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THE MOGUL (MUGHAL-E-AZAM) 1960

K. Asif

(Urdu)

Contents (Overview – Plot – Themes – Characters)

OVERVIEW

This film is one of the most spectacular in Indian cinematic history. It was seventeen years in the making; it is considered the costliest film ever, largely because of the technicolour used in key scenes; and it is routinely voted one of the top ten Indian films of all time. Its operatic excess, lavish sets and fabulous song-and-dance routines are what was required to represent the opulence of the Mughal court on screen. The story focuses on the conflict between Akbar, the emperor, and his son, Salim, a somewhat wayward prince. Akbar cannot allow the empire to be compromised by his son's foolish love for a dancing girl. But Salim will not allow his private affairs to be controlled by the state. And the girl, Anarkali, will not relent in her commitment to the purity of true love. The sensational story involves court intrigue, love rivalry, betrayal, a philosophical artist, war campaigns, maternal anguish, a near execution and a secret tunnel. Sit back and enjoy.

CULTURAL SIGNIFICANCE

A gravel-toned voiceover introduces the film with a map of India on the screen. 'I am Hindustan,' it says. 'Among those who loved this land was Jalal ud-din Mohammad Akbar.' Akbar (1542-1605, r. 1556-1605) was the greatest of the Mughal emperors. His son Salim (1569-1627) later ruled as the emperor Jahangir (r. 1605-1627). As a consequence, this is a 'state of the nation film', just as surely as the more famous *Mother India* (1957).

The film combines historical fact with filmic imagination in presenting Akbar as the troubled 'father of the nation.' Released in 1960, barely a decade after Independence, the film attempts to repurpose Akbar as a figure of national unity. Prior to the film, Akbar has been primarily portrayed as both a great secularist (he did advocate religious harmony) and an enemy of Hinduism (he conquered Rajput kingdoms and brought their women into his harem). Asif, the Muslim director, judiciously includes many scenes in which Akbar participates in Hindu rituals and relies on Hindu ministers. At the same time, in order to steer clear of the communal debate, the director keeps the focus on the domestic strife between father and son, allowing Salim to deliver powerful speeches against patriarchy and celebrating the freedom of love. Ultimately, the success of the film rests on its ability to present the grand historical narrative in terms of a family dispute, which also involves the extremely popular theme of impossible love (between a prince and a dancing girl).

STORY

Akbar The story begins in the reign of Mughal emperor Akbar, who goes on pilgrimage to pray for the boon of a son. Several of his sons have died in infancy and he is desperate for an heir to the throne. Looking more like an ascetic than a king, he walks barefoot over scorching sands, accompanied by a cavalcade of his courtiers and attendants.

Palace The scene abruptly shifts to the imperial palace in Delhi, where Akbar is treated to a spectacular (Bollywood-style) song-and-dance number suggesting pleasure and desire. Soon after, one of Akbar's wives brings news to Akbar that she is pregnant. Ecstatic, Akbar makes a promise, while placing his hand on the scales of justice, that in the future she can ask him for anything she wants.

Salim The prince, named Salim, grows up to be a spirited but spoiled young man, who flouts royal customs and disobeys his father. An angry Akbar decides to teach his son a lesson by sending him into battle in the Deccan (central India). Weeks later, Salim's armour is brought back to Akbar (usually a sign of death), but it turns out that while his army was defeated, Salim himself survived.

Salim returns Salim is promoted to general and takes to literary pursuits, writing poems on his sword and describing his battle wounds as flowers. Then, after many more years of warfare beyond the palace, scarred but victorious, he writes an account of his battles and sends it to his father. Akbar is pleased, announces that Salim is his heir and orders him to return to Delhi. However, the battle-hardened prince is very different to callow young man whom Akbar sent away fourteen years earlier.

Bahar and the sculptor The prince's homecoming is announced to Salim's mother by Bahar, a member of the royal family who has designs on the prince's affections. She is sent to the royal sculptor to plan a suitable image for the returning Salim. In true bohemian fashion, the long-haired, anguished artist speaks of the 'truth of art, which is the death of war.' He promises to sculpt an image that will make 'warriors put down their weapons.'

Anarkali Salim arrives at court in a grand procession, is welcomed by his parents and is invited to unveil the sculptor's image. He should unveil it at an auspicious astrological moment, but the young prince is too impetuous and cannot wait. Shooting arrows that remove the veil, he sees that the image is a real woman. She is Anarkali, a dancing girl, who excites Salim's passion. But he is cursed because he has not waited for the proper ritual moment. Salim pursues Anarkali, who is demure and refuses his advances. She says that she does not want to compromise his position, but he is unmoved.

Competition The love triangle—Salim loves Anarkali, and Bahar loves Salim—is beautifully dramatised in a singing contest. The two rival women, each accompanied by a chorus, sit opposite each other in the court and sing to the prince, who is the judge. The poetic songs include beautiful metaphors about love and suffering, in heavily Persianised Urdu. Anarkali concedes that love ends in suffering, but claims that it is enough if you are remembered after death. True love, in other words, is its own reward. Bahar, on the other hand, sings of the passion of love, which is ephemeral but exquisite. At the conclusion, Salim rises and announces that Bahar is the winner. He gives her a rose in full bloom. To Anarkali, who would rather suffer in love, he gives a thorn. But Anarkali has the last word: 'A thorn,' she says, 'does not wilt.'

Anarkali and Akbar Distracted by his love for Anarkali, Salim ignores threats to empire on its western flank in Rajasthan. Akbar discusses the serious situation with his ministers, while Salim sits in the garden and tickles Anarkali's face with feathers. When the jealous Bahar informs Akbar of this dalliance, the angry emperor summons Anarkali and orders her to renounce her love. Anarkali explains the situation to Salim, but she is seen by Akbar, who flies into a rage and puts her in prison. When Salim will not reject Anarkali, Akbar has her brought to him in chains and orders her to persuade Salim that her love is false: that is the only way that Salim will drop her and return to his royal duties.

Undying love At the same time, Bahar tells Salim that Anarkali has betrayed him by agreeing to become Akbar's mistress in return for freedom from prison. Salim believes this and renounces Anarkali. As proof of her betrayal, Akbar has her dance before the court. Anarkali, however, uses the public stage to sing of her undying and fearless love for Salim: 'We have loved, and we are not afraid.' Akbar admires her audacity in telling her story in this imaginative way, but he cannot accept disobedience and orders her back to prison.

Father and son Salim pleads with his father to release Anarkali, but the emperor says that he cannot indulge a son's love for the sake of the empire. Bahar gives Salim the key to Anarkali's cell and they attempt to escape but are caught. Salim says that his heart cannot be ruled by the emperor and asks his mother to intercede on his behalf. But Akbar swats away the mother's pleas and orders his son back to the battlefield.

Salim rebels Salim goes to war hoping that a great victory will move his father to release Anarkali. Back at court, Akbar tries to marry Anarkali to the sculptor, but the artist visits Salim in the war campaign and proclaims that 'truth in art is truth in love.' In other words, he will not marry Anarkali. Salim is victorious and declares his independence from Delhi and Akbar. He will rule his part of India as a separate king.

Akbar into battle Akbar goes to war against his son. Before leaving for battle, the queen, Salim's mother, is required by convention to hand the emperor his sword, but she cannot do that because it is the sword that will kill her own son. She eventually submits in great pain.

War On the eve of the great battle, Akbar visits Salim in his son's tent, which is an unusual move,

but the times are unusual. Akbar begs forgiveness for his actions but will not relent regarding Anarkali. In the middle of this tense standoff, Anarkali is brought to the tent (a courtier has freed her). Now there is no need for war, but Akbar feels the need to quell the rebellion. Akbar is victorious, but Salim is not killed.

Trial Salim is brought back to Delhi and put on trial as traitor. Akbar says that if he renounces Anarkali, he will be declared innocent and become the crown-prince. Salim refuses, saying, 'I cannot accept a crown that impales my heart.' Akbar then declares that since Salim will not produce Anarkali, he must die in her place.'

Execution averted Salim is tied to stake on top of a high tower, where he sings a rebellious song ('Death of Akbar is the triumph of love'), which is echoed by the crowd below. Hearing this public repudiation, Akbar feels shame and the execution is averted at the last moment when a minister shifts the barrel of a canon lined up to fire at Salim.

Anarkali as queen Anarkali appears on the scene and is captured. In a clever move, Akbar crowns her as Salim's queen (but only for a day) in order that Salim's promise to her (that she would become his queen) is not compromised. Salim and Anarkali enjoy a brief scene as reigning monarchs.

Finale After her brief moment of joy, Anarkali is taken away and walled up alive. Now, her mother goes to Akbar and redeems the pledge he gave her when she brought him the happy news of Salim's birth. At first, Akbar denies that he made such a promise, but then accepts his duty. Anarkali is released into a secret tunnel and goes away with her mother. Salim, however, believes that she is dead. If he thought she was alive, Akbar reasons, he would desert the throne and search for her.

THEMES

Love versus duty The principal theme of this extravaganza is the conflict between love and duty. In many Indian films, this tension takes the form of an arranged marriage, in which one of the parties is forced to suppress his/her love for the good of the family. In *The Mogul*, however, this conflict is heightened by the fact that the family in question is the ruling family of the Mughal empire. We can identify three strands to this dominant theme in the film. First and foremost, there is the struggle between individual love and public duty, that is, Salim's love for Anarkali versus his obligation to serve the empire. More than once, Salim declares that his inner life should not be controlled by his duties as a prince. This is what puts him on a collision course with the emperor, who is relentless in his persecution of Anarkali. Here, we see the second strand of the theme—the conflict between family obligations and imperial needs—which is dramatised in Akbar's and his wife's inner torment. Akbar is both father and emperor. He doesn't want to harm his family, but he wants even less to harm the empire. This second strand is demonstrated in the scene between Akbar and his wife on the eve of his departure to war. She is, by convention, supposed to bless her husband's sword, but how can she when that weapon might strike her own son? Toward the end of the film, we see the third strand, a straightforward argument between father and son, who face each other across the battlefield. There appears to be no resolution to this conflict, until the director pulls off a cinematic sleight of hand and allows Salim's and Anarkali's love to triumph, but only for a day. In the end, the needs of the empire trump those of the individual.

Forbidden love A second major theme, lying underneath the first, is that of forbidden love. Salim's love for Anarkali is trouble not only because it distracts him from his imperial and filial duties, but also because she is not of royal blood. She is a mere dancing girl, not worthy of a prince's attentions, let alone a position in the court. Ancestry, lineage and blood lines are emphasised throughout the film, not only among the Mughals but also their Rajput allies and ministers. At one point, Akbar refers to 'the blood of Tamar (Tamerlane) that runs in [his] veins.' But it is Anarkali who embodies the suffering inherent in forbidden love. In the famous scene, where she competes with her rival, Bahar, in a song contest, she represents herself as a thorn. Not as beautiful or desirable as the rose (Bahar), but more durable and reliable. While Akbar and Salim dominate most of the important scenes and themes, many viewers and critics consider Anarkali as the star of the film.

CHARACTERS

Akbar Akbar is the emperor of the Mughal Empire. Akbar is a magnificent character. He is all powerful but beset by inner doubts. He is a strong leader, with the love of his country/empire foremost in his heart, but he is also a father who is forced to treat his son harshly. He stands for authority against anarchy, for reason against emotion ('I do not wish to hear depositions on love inspired by madness'). He is a man defined by dualities: compassionate and cruel, father and emperor, husband and emperor, man and figurehead.

Principled Akbar's commitment to the principle of public duty is repeatedly displayed in the film. Perhaps the most dramatic example occurs when Anarkali sings her defiant song of true love, which forces Akbar to have her thrown in prison a second time. After she is taken away, Akbar confronts Salim, who pleads with his father to consider him as a 'son and not as a prince.' Visibly moved, Akbar says that, yes, he is 'a father of a beloved son, but that he cannot sacrifice an empire for a son.' Drawing himself up, he declares that he cannot 'ignore his duty as Emperor.' He will not, he says, 'play with the fate of the empire for the sake of a son's romance.' Salim makes an impassioned speech about true love, but again Akbar dismisses it as 'mere fantasy' and again states his commitment to the empire. He is troubled, but he will not budge from what he sees as his duty.

Tormented A man's strength, it is said, is also the cause of his suffering. So it is with Akbar. In the second half of the film, he is a man tormented by the knowledge that his actions harm his own son. He disowns him, he imprisons his lover, he goes into battle against him and he orders him to be executed. The most poignant moment of inner suffering comes toward the end, on the eve of the great battle between father and son. Akbar enters Salim's tent, and the two men dressed in armour face each other. 'Has the emperor come to pardon the rebel?' Salim asks, a little sardonically. Akbar answers: 'This unfortunate father, whom the world calls the emperor, has come to talk to his son. To ask for his love.' Salim rejects his overture of reconciliation, reminding him that he has destroyed his own love. Akbar is shaken and puts a trembling hand on his son's shoulder. 'The Emperor never weeps,' he says, 'but there are tears in the father's eyes. The father is helpless before the emperor's principles. I am not an enemy of love, but I am a slave of duty.' It is one of the most moving scenes in Indian cinema.

Salim Salim is Akbar's first son. Salim is equally tormented, not because he holds power but because he does not. He is the crown prince who is still a son beholden to his father. He embodies the spirit of youth, rebellion and love ('Times change. Empires change. Emperors change. In this world of flux, when one finds unwavering love, one is blessed'). He is loyal to Anarkali and tries to remain loyal to his father ('Embrace me as your son, whom you love, not as crown prince'), but the competing loyalties tear him apart.

Disobedient From the very beginning (and as documented in the historical record), Prince Salim was a disobedient boy. His waywardness is displayed in an early scene when Akbar entrusts him with a manuscript, which he (Salim) is expected to memorise and then recite in court. The manuscript records the words of Babur, the first Mughal emperor, on the principle of justice. 'How profound,' the teenage prince sneers and asks, 'Is this an order?' When told it is a request, he calls a serving girl, puts the manuscript in her hand and says, 'Throw this garbage in the river.'

Romantic The young prince's rebellious spirit also fuels his romanticism. In several scenes, he challenges his father's authority by claiming that the state has no authority over his personal feelings. He also displays his romantic feeling in a scene memorable for its discreet eroticism. He has summoned Anarkali to a nocturnal tryst in a garden, where he sings provocative songs. They sit close, but do not kiss or touch, although Salim playfully caresses her cheeks with white feathers. Pleasure lights up on her face, and we are left in no doubt that they are deeply in love.

Steadfast The rebellious youth and romantic young man later proves to have more steel than we might have expected. In a dramatic scene, when he is summoned to face his father on the throne, he defies the emperor and refuses to give up Anarkali. Akbar then disowns him in public and Salim replies, in his characteristically poetical language, that he will accept his banishment from Delhi but adds a note of defiance: 'I will not accept the throne that sits on Anarkali's grave. Nor the crown that holds my heart hostage.' Salim is prepared to lose everything rather than renounce his love for Anarkali. His steadfastness is as impressive as it is unexpected.

Anarkali Anarkali is a dancing woman in Akbar's court. Anarkali can be seen as a composite

character, possessing the best qualities of Akbar and of Salim. Like Akbar, she is strong-minded and selfless. Like Salim, she is controlled by passionate love. She is also a clever and talented person, able to employ classical poetry and song to express her point of view. In the end, her selflessness achieves a sort of victory.

Modest Although Anarkali is condemned by Akbar as a clever whore and an ambitious 'gold-digger', we know that she has a pure heart. Her honesty and her modesty are demonstrated in her first major scene. When she has been summoned by the prince to meet him in a garden at night. Having admired him from afar for a long time, she is anxious to join him, but she refuses his summons. She places a note inside the petals of a lotus and floats it down the length of a reflecting pool to the waiting Salim. When he opens it, he sees her refusal, expressed in simple terms: 'You are a prince; I am a dancing girl. I do not want to ruin your life.' Ignoring this, Salim goes to her, who warns him not to bring dishonour on himself by consorting with her. Salim presses her to allow herself to love him, and again she withdraws. She does love him but she knows that such a liaison is doomed and does not want her dream to die.

Courageous Similar to Salim, Anarkali is courageous in love. Although she rejects his advances at first, eventually she falls desperately in love with him and will not reject him despite facing death at the hands of the emperor. The most spectacular demonstration of her bravery is enacted in a scene where she dances before the court. She has been released from prison under the pretext that she has renounced her love for Salim and has become a member of Akbar's (rather large) harem. Instead, though, she sings a song in front of Akbar and Salim that uses poetic metaphor to announce that her love is undying. 'We have loved; why should we fear death?' she asks. She dances up to Salim and sings: 'In desire for him, I shall burn.' In other words, 'no matter what you might do to me, oh, king, I will never renounce my love.' With mirrors gleaming everywhere, it is the most spectacular scene in a spectacular film. It is also a bold statement of love, conveyed in metaphor and expressed in song and dance. A memorable display of courage.

Selfless Anarkali's selfless love is the power that drives most of the plot and it is displayed in full force toward the end. After Salim's execution has been averted, Anarkali offers to die in his place. She is taken to Akbar, who orders her death, but she can only praise the mercy of the ruler. 'Mercy' may seem like a strange word for her to apply to her executioner, but it is apt. She knows that Salim will never renounce her and that his refusal would lead to his own death at the hands of his irate father. Thus, she must die in order to set him free.

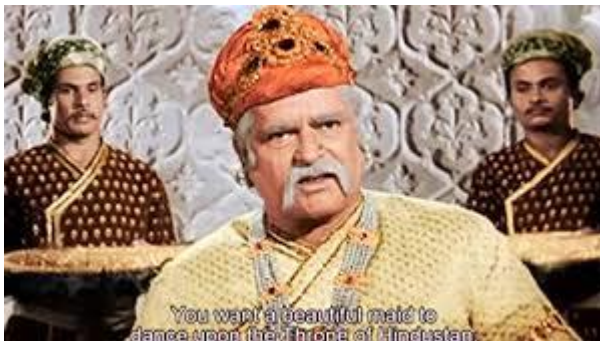
Maharani Jodha Bai Maharani Jodha Bai is Anarkali's mother.
Bahar Bahar is a young princess at court.
Sculptor The sculptor is the royal artist at court.



(Anarkali during her bold statement of love to defy the Emperor).



(Salim woes Anarkali)



(Akbar in one of his angry moments)