

**Images of a Decolonizing India:  
Bollywood's *Tawai'f* and the Postcolonial Muslim**

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Performing at her lover's wedding to another woman, the courtesan Sahib Jaan demonstrates her impeccable talents in Urdu poetry, song, and kathak dance. Demurely lifting her veil over her eyes, extending her undulating arm, wrist, and fingers to her male spectators, and raising her skirt above her ankles to emphasize the rhythmic beating, or *taktar*, of her bell-adorned feet, Sahib Jaan masterfully fulfills her role as the elite entertainment of the Indian wedding. Directing her sung *ghazal*, the traditional Urdu poem performed by the Muslim courtesan, or *tawai'f*, to her lover, Sultan, she sings of her longing for the acceptance and love of her listener. That acceptance and love is suddenly lost when Sultan exits the room during the performance, leaving Sahib Jaan rejected as a performer and as a lover. In a moment of startling power and agency, Sahib Jaan flings a glass chandelier onto her stage and furiously executes her intricate *taktar* over the shards of glass, stamping out blood as well as emotional turmoil. Sahib Jaan's aunt, catching and restraining her, screams to Sultan's family, "Don't you see how this oppressed woman's blood has bloomed, whose blood has dried up on your sleeves?"<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> *Pakeezah*, dir. by Kamal Amrohi, 2 hr. 6 min., Mahal Pictures Pvt. Ltd, 1972, DVD.

This film, *Pakeezah*, is one of many Hindi films to dramatize the life of the historic Indian courtesan. The courtesan genre of Hindi film enjoyed immense popularity in the twenty to thirty years following India's independence in 1947. A cultural figure thousands of years in the making, associated with both elite traditions and sexual depravity, the courtesan is "richly invested with allegorical possibilities,"<sup>2</sup> and thus, makes a great film character.

The courtesan's ancestry can be traced back to Hindu temple dancers, or *devadasis*, of the ancient Vedic period, but it is the *tawai'f* of India's medieval Muslim courts that inspires the image of the courtesan in Hindi film. However, the *tawai'f* of India's Muslim rule, dating from roughly the eleventh to the nineteenth century, differs greatly from the *tawai'f* of the screen. While both are highly skilled in the elite arts of Urdu poetry, song, and kathak dance, and both engage in sexual affairs with their courtly patrons, the historical *tawai'f* was largely free of stigma while the filmed *tawai'f* is constantly plagued by it. The real *tawai'f* enjoyed social prestige and autonomy;<sup>3</sup> the imagined *tawai'f* suffers denigration and is trapped by fate. The filmed *tawai'f* suffers internal hardships as well: she goes through identity crises, feels she belongs yet does not belong, and oscillates between yearning for and scorning the love of one man. She is a tragic and complex character, and thus, beloved by many Hindi filmmakers.

That her popularity in cinema arose after 1947 is extremely significant. In 1947, India changed suddenly and fundamentally. In that year, it gained independence from the British and also became formally fractured along religious lines. The partition of India,

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<sup>2</sup> Sumita S. Chakravarty, *National Identity in Indian Popular Cinema: 1947-1987* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1993), 270.

<sup>3</sup> Veena Oldenberg, "Lifestyle as Resistance: The Case of the Courtesans of Lucknow, India," *Feminist Studies* 16, no. 4 (1990), 262-264.

creating a Hindu India and a Muslim Pakistan, was largely the decision of Hindu nationalists in conjunction with the British colonial government. This partition was the final blow to the country's already precariously situated Muslim. Symbolically, partition "undermined...the values of religious tolerance and cultural pluralism" that both Muslim and Hindu followers of Gandhi hoped that postcolonial India would espouse.<sup>4</sup> Muslims who had lived for generations in the region that is now called India were suddenly cast as outsiders or worse, forcefully removed from their homes to live in a newly invented country miles away. As Mushirul Hasan explains in *Legacy of a Divided Nation: India's Muslims Since Independence*, partition "happened too soon, too suddenly, and on a scale beyond anyone's imagination."<sup>5</sup>

The Hindi film industry, or Bollywood, as it is popularly referred to, has been in existence and active since the first silent film of 1913.<sup>6</sup> Bollywood, as an art form tied to one nation, is a "meaning-creating apparatus that takes part in constructing [an Indian nationhood]."<sup>7</sup> Problems in national identity and the wounds of history are played out, reinterpreted, and renegotiated on the screen. Partition, as probably the single most traumatic event of India's modern history, was one such event that needed reinterpretation and renegotiation, especially for India's disenfranchised and downtrodden Muslim community.

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<sup>4</sup> Mushirul Hasan, *Legacy of a Divided Nation: India's Muslims Since Independence*, (Boulder: West View Press, 1997), 6.

<sup>5</sup> Hasan, 13.

<sup>6</sup> Rachel Dwyer and Divia Patel, *Cinema India: The Visual Culture of Hindi Film* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 2002), 13.

<sup>7</sup> Usamah Ansari. "'There are Thousands Drunk by the Passion of These Eyes.' Bollywood's *Tawai'f*: Narrating the Nation and 'The Muslim,'" *Journal of South Asian Studies* 31, no. 2 (2008), 292.

The oldest film in the courtesan film genre was released in 1955.<sup>8</sup> It took the courtesan so long to enter national consciousness because her salience is wrapped up in the consequences of partition: her historical associations lend her to embody the postcolonial Indian Muslim. Not always a Muslim in the films, the courtesan can almost always be “linked to certain tropes of Muslim cultural identity and historiography.”<sup>9</sup> Her identity crises are the identity crises of the postcolonial Indian Muslim; her sense of belonging and not belonging reflects Muslims’ sense of placement and displacement within India and Pakistan; her ambivalence toward the acceptance of one man is the Muslim’s ambivalence toward harmonious assimilation within India.

Many scholars of Hindi cinema have linked the courtesan’s emotional turmoil to those of India’s Muslims, seeing her as a metaphor for the postcolonial Muslim. They have made this claim by analyzing the plot and *ghazal* lyrics of the films. However, these scholars are missing a crucial component of analysis, one that would reinforce their claims and introduce new layers to their claims: the courtesan’s dance. As Bollywood films strictly censor explicitly sexual content, filmmakers use dance to convey the courtesan’s sexuality and her identity as a prostitute; thus her dance becomes the reason for her stigma and demoralization, the root of all her emotional trials. In four of the most discussed courtesan films, *Devdas* (1955), *Sahib Bibi aur Ghulam* (1962), *Pakeezah* (1972), and *Umrao Jaan* (1981), her identity as a dancer and the social implications surrounding her dance allow Muslims to identify with her struggles and allow Indians of all religions to renegotiate the aftermath of Partition. And in the films with a *tawai’f*

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<sup>8</sup> *Devdas*, prod. and dir. by Bimal Roy, 2 hr. 41 min., Eros International, 1955.

<sup>9</sup> Ansari, 291.

protagonist, *Umrao Jaan* and *Pakeezah*, the *tawai'f* enacts agency through her dance, dancing and acting out the desires of the oppressed Muslims she has come to represent.

The Indian courtesan carries a unique legacy, straddling both ancient Hindu and medieval Muslim traditions. In all of her incarnations, she was highly respected as a custodian of religious and elite cultural traditions and enjoyed a stable place within the Hindu caste system and in the Muslim royal courts. The Muslim courtesan in particular was responsible for the development of kathak dance. With the advent of British colonial rule, however, the courtesan lost her respected status and thus, her identity.

Her ancestry can be traced farthest back to the *devadasi* and *ganika* of the Vedic period, roughly 1500 to 600 B.C.E., and she remained a valued social figure until outlawed in 1947.<sup>10</sup> A *devadasi* was a temple dancer who expressed devotion to the gods through her erotic dances, while the *ganika* was a secular courtesan, “an exceptionally civilized public woman, proficient in art and endowed with winsome qualities.”<sup>11</sup> Considered valuable embodiments and promoters of religious and secular traditions, *devadasis* and *ganikas* were provided with both education and a salary by the state. Her potent sexuality—the *devadasi* slept with men to bring them closer to the gods, while the *ganika* educated men in the arts of the Kamasutra—was cherished alongside her artistic and intellectual achievements, demonstrating ancient India’s “link[age of] artistic and cultural involvement with sexual activity.”<sup>12</sup>

The courtesan’s Muslim roots lie in the *tawai'f* of India’s medieval and early modern period, roughly the tenth to the nineteenth century, during which time India was

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<sup>10</sup> Doris M. Srivivasan, “Royalty’s Courtesans and God’s Mortal Wives: Keepers of Culture in Precolonial India,” in *The Courtesan’s Arts: Cross-Cultural Perspectives*, ed. Martha Feldman and Bonnie Gordon (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006), 162.

<sup>11</sup> Ibid.

<sup>12</sup> Srivivasan, 175.

chiefly ruled by Muslim sultans and Mughal emperors. Upon their arrival in India, the Mughal rulers “took an intensive interest in, and fostered the Indian arts.”<sup>13</sup> Blending their social values with the aesthetics of Indian art, the Mughals strove to shift the thematic emphasis of the *ganika*'s and *devadasi*'s dances from stories of Hindu myths and epics to commentaries on contemporary social issues. From her inception, then, the *tawai*'f's dance was a discourse on social issues; this tradition is particularly evident in the films I will analyze later.

The *tawai*'f was first and foremost a performer of Urdu poetry, who “sang, danced, and mimed poems.”<sup>14</sup> Her performance, or *mujra*, served both to welcome and impress her courtly patrons and to emphasize her sexual potency. In other words, the *mujra* was “a heightened musical frame for a dialogue between one woman and many men.”<sup>15</sup> Her home and performance space was the *kotha*, which can be most crudely translated as a brothel but carried far more cultural currency than simply being a place of prostitution; a more appropriate term, if not actually a translation, could be “salon.” *Kothas* were mainly located within central locations of Islamic rule, especially in Lucknow, capital of the north Indian kingdom of Awadh.<sup>16</sup>

Within the *kotha*, the *tawai*'f enjoyed complete autonomy. *Kothas* were owned by the *tawai*'fs and were run under a matrilineal system in which an elder, retired *tawai*'f, called the *chaudharayan*, managed and cared for the working *tawai*'fs. Although *tawai*'fs relied on their patrons for their livelihood, they “could exercise control over

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<sup>13</sup> Reginald Massey, *India's Kathak Dance: Past, Present, and Future* (New Delhi: Abhinav Publications, 1999), 21.

<sup>14</sup> Regula Burckhardt Qureshi, “Female Agency and Patrilineal Constrains: Situating Courtesans in Twentieth-Century India,” in *The Courtesan's Arts*, 321.

<sup>15</sup> Qureshi, 322.

<sup>16</sup> Srinivasan, 161.

proceedings and also over who should be admitted to the performance.”<sup>17</sup> *Tawai'fs* also held power beyond the *kotha*. Nobles, or *nawabs*, looked to the *tawai'f* for guidance on proper manners and morals and some high-ranking political officials even sought political advice from *tawai'fs*.<sup>18</sup> Finally, the *tawai'f's* sexual activities did not bring her disrespect, and in some cases, *nawabs* and *tawai'fs* married for short or extended periods of time.<sup>19</sup>

Arguably, the *tawai'fs'* most important legacy was their role in the development of kathak dance. Indeed, kathak owes its origins and sophisticated elaboration largely to the *tawai'fs* of India's medieval period.<sup>20</sup> Today, kathak is one of the major schools of classical Indian dance, and is characterized by a combination of extremely rapid yet subtle movements and weightless yet lush, languid movements. Containing the intricate eye, neck, and hand gestures common to most classical Indian dance schools, kathak's *taktar*, the rhythmic feet stamping, and *chakkar*, rapid pirouettes in succession, set the form apart from the nation's other main schools.

From their inception, India's courtesans—the Hindu *devadasis* and *ganikas*, and the Muslim *tawai'fs*—enjoyed a respected place in society. That place was fundamentally called into question with the advent of British colonial rule. Arriving in India with western conceptions of what constituted sex work, the British were unable to see courtesans as valuable members of society and instead “imposed the Victorian label

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<sup>17</sup> Qureshi, 318.

<sup>18</sup> Oldenberg, 262-3.

<sup>19</sup> Ansari, 294.

<sup>20</sup> Oldenberg, 263.

‘prostitute’ on [them].”<sup>21</sup> This labeling resulted in an actual change of identity for courtesans: the regulations, fines, and penalties imposed on their activities “signaled the gradual debasement of an esteemed cultural institution into common prostitution.”<sup>22</sup> As the British separated the historical linkage of art and sexuality, *devadasis*, *ganikas*, and *tawai’fs* were dispossessed of their cultural value and demoralized by the British.

While both the Hindu *devadasis* and *ganikas* and the Muslim *tawai’fs* suffered cultural debasement during India’s colonial period, the *tawai’fs* were hit especially hard. Middle-class Hindu nationalist reform movements that emerged in the late nineteenth century, backed by the British government, maintained the traditions of the *devadasis* and *ganikas* and discouraged those of the *tawai’fs*. For these reformers, the best postcolonial India was a Hindu India, and the best Indian woman was a woman who could secure Hindu lineage. While the *devadasi* and *ganika* could only exist as a prostitute, their dances were transformed by Hindu nationalists into Bharata Natyam, or Dance of the Nation, today one of the largest schools of Indian classical dance. Thus, a major part of the *devadasi* and *ganika* cultural inheritance was maintained, as the reformers of Bharata Natyam “encouraged girls from good families to learn and perform the dance”<sup>23</sup>—the “good families” clearly being Hindu families. Thus, in this new conception of India, “the keeper of culture and the keeper of pure lineage was to become one and the same.”<sup>24</sup> As neither keepers of Hindu culture nor keepers of Hindu lineage, *tawai’fs* had no role, no value as females, in postcolonial India.

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<sup>21</sup> Amelia Macisewski, “Tawai’f, Tourism, and Tales: The Problematics of Twenty-First-Century Musical Patronage for North India’s Courtesans,” in *The Courtesan’s Arts*, 334.

<sup>22</sup> Oldenberg, 260.

<sup>23</sup> Srinivasan, 177-178.

<sup>24</sup> Srinivasan, 178.

For the *tawai'fs*, the most tangible result of British colonial rule and the nationalist reform movements was the destruction of the *kotha*, the *tawai'f's* home, refuge, and autonomy. First, with the annexation of the Mughal kingdom of Awadh in 1856, the *tawai'fs'* patrons disappeared as the Muslim rulers and aristocracy were dethroned and exiled.<sup>25</sup> Secondly, the *kotha* was made illegal shortly after Partition in 1947. With the loss of the *kotha*, *tawai'fs* lost not only their physical homes, but also their ability to live independently under a matrilineal system.<sup>26</sup>

Thus, from the arrival of the British in the nineteenth century to their departure, the institution of the *kotha* and the stability of the *tawai'f* slowly deteriorated, and by 1947, the *tawai'f* of the Mughal empire's heyday had completely disappeared. In a few years, however, she was resurrected in film. Given the glamour and tragedy of the *tawai'f*, it is easy to see why she is a salient and exciting character. However, the fact that she is an interesting historical figure does not fully explain her presence in Hindi films. These films "represent a continuation of their culture's pre-cinema dramatic forms and stories"<sup>27</sup> as they are informed by multiple Indian narrative traditions. The structural and thematic elements of these narrative traditions accommodate the *tawai'f* in modern film as they prioritize the melodrama that echoes the *tawai'f's* historical experience, the song and dance that the *tawai'f* can naturally provide, and the social and political commentary that the *tawai'f* embodies.

For thousands of years, storytelling in India has been driven by melodrama enacted through dance. Hindi films have held on to the melodrama that characterizes

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<sup>25</sup> Oldenberg, 265.

<sup>26</sup> Qureshi, 325.

<sup>27</sup> Gregory D. Booth, "Traditional Content and Narrative Structure in the Hindi Commercial Cinema," *Asian Folklore Studies* 54 (1995), 172.

Vedic epics, such as the *Ramayana* and *Mahabharata*, and Arabic and Persian folklore and legends.<sup>28</sup> In general, melodrama is a narrative technique that enables the audience to “overcome the meaninglessness of everyday existence and find reassurance for their fractured lives.”<sup>29</sup> The *tawai’f* is thus an ideal subject for portraying melodrama as she herself is a fractured figure. As a dancer, the *tawai’f* is a useful film character because the melodrama in traditional Hindu storytelling was always enacted through dance, as temple *devadasis* danced scenes from the *Ramayana* and *Mahabharata*.<sup>30</sup>

While the use of dance for storytelling in Hindi films can in some ways be attributed to the traditions of the *devadasis*, this structural element is much more related to the Parsi theater of nineteenth-century Bombay. This theatrical style was completely “center[ed] on music and dance” and “emphasized skits, songs, jokes, and the attractions of the troupe’s female dancers.”<sup>31</sup> It is from this tradition that today’s Hindi films follow the same formulaic structure that they have followed from their inception: “two stars, six songs, and three dances.”<sup>32</sup> As the *tawai’f* is by definition a singer and dancer, her song and dance scenes in the films arise organically as an action that the character would naturally do. Thus, the *tawai’f* can provide the structural traditions of Parsi theater without artificially interrupting the narrative flow.

Finally, many of India’s traditional stories were given a political twist in their successive retellings. Bombay’s Parsi theater, the music-drama *tamasha* and *natyasangu* forms of the Marathi region, and the religious-drama *jatra* form of the region of Bengal

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<sup>28</sup> Booth, 172.

<sup>29</sup> Dwyer and Patel, 29.

<sup>30</sup> K. Moti Gokulsing and Wimal Dissanayake, *Indian Popular Cinema: A Narrative of Cultural Change* (London: Tretham Books, 1998), 100.

<sup>31</sup> Booth, 172.

<sup>32</sup> Booth, 171.

all “offered socially or politically relevant tales as well as melodrama.”<sup>33</sup> These traditions to include social commentary in drama enable the *tawai'f* to be a politically contentious character, one who carries a political message.

Thus, the *tawai'f* embodies all the characteristics necessary to represent the postcolonial Muslim. Her historical deterioration mirrors that of the Muslims in India, her artistic traditions are Muslim, and her place in postcolonial Indian society is as precarious as that of the Muslims themselves. In *Sahib Bibi aur Ghulam* (1962) and *Devdas* (1955), the *tawai'f* is a tertiary character to the main female and male characters; reading her as a subject of postcoloniality depends on her relationship to the main male character.

*Sahib Bibi aur Ghulam* (1962) chronicles the decline and fall of a land-owning aristocratic family.<sup>34</sup> Set in Bengal from the late nineteenth to the early twentieth century, the film comments upon the deterioration of the entire *zamindari*, or land-owning aristocracy, class and lifestyle, and its struggle to situate itself within the new industrial capitalist order.<sup>35</sup> *Sahib* opens with a scene in which a middle-aged man oversees the destruction of a large *haveli*, or *zaminari* mansion, with “shots of broken pillars and walls, cobwebs, and other signs of decay.”<sup>36</sup> Looking forlornly over the ruins of this *haveli*, the destruction of which he is in charge, the overseer is taken back to his youth, when he first came upon this *haveli* and was given refuge by the *zamindari* household. This flashback continues until the very end of the film; thus, the film itself is a memory, looking back to the past and emphasizing the inevitability of decline.

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<sup>33</sup> Booth, 172.

<sup>34</sup> *Sahib Bibi aur Ghulam*, dir. by Abrar Alvi, 2 hr. 32 min, Guru Dutt Films Pvt. Ltd., 1962, DVD.

<sup>35</sup> Vijay Mishra, *Bollywood Cinema: Temples of Desire* (New York: Routledge, 2002), 120.

<sup>36</sup> Chakravarti, 175.

This overseer, Bhoothnatt, came to the Chaudhari family from his small village to find work in the factories in this larger town. Although the Chaudhari family is Hindu, culturally, “its ambience is...straight out of *nawabi* Awadh”<sup>37</sup> as it portrays an elite family, whose son cares only for the decadent pleasures of his *haveli*, the *kotha*, and his *tawai’f*. However, it is evident in many ways that the Chaudhari family represents the *nawabi* elite in decline, not in its heyday. While staying in their *haveli*, Bhoothnath witnesses the depressing dynamics of the Chaudhari family: the youngest daughter-in-law, Choti Bahu, lives a miserable and lonely life, trying unsuccessfully to attract the attention of her husband, Chote Babu, an alcoholic who spends days and nights at a time in the *kotha* with his favorite *tawai’f*. Chote Babu’s parents appear once or twice; their absence signifies the decline of this *zamindari* household.

Two interrelated plotlines run side-by-side in *Sahib*. One chronicles the economic decline of the Chaudhari household, while the other chronicles their moral decline seen through Chote Babu’s association with the morally depraved *kotha* and *tawai’f*. On the economic level, Chote Babu must face the intrusion of capitalist developers and creditors who strive to appropriate the fortunes of *zamindari* lords like Chote Babu. As an alcoholic, Chote Babu does not have the moral strength to take these men and their threats seriously. At the end of the film, when Chote Babu finally realizes that his family will be evicted and their fortunes lost, he begins a brawl with some of the developers and is killed in the fight.

Chote Babu’s moral depravity contributes to the economic decline of his family and his fatal demise. In addition to alcoholism, his association with the *kotha* and his

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<sup>37</sup> Kesavan, 251.

*tawai'f* depict his moral demise. The state of this *kotha* and the characteristics of Chote Babu's *tawai'f* portray a morally bankrupt culture, one that no longer values high art forms but merely cheap eroticism. The depravity of the *kotha* and of Chote Babu's *tawai'f*, who remains nameless throughout the film, is portrayed side-by-side with the moral and economic decline of the Chaudhari family.

We first visit the *kotha* when Bhoothnatt comes to collect Chote Babu and bring him home after a night of debauchery. He is greeted at the entrance by a *tawai'f* who exclaims sarcastically, "a man such as yourself deigning to enter this place!", indicating that the *kotha* is not a place of refined entertainment but one which a decent man would not enter without shame. Bhoothnatt stops at the entrance of the room in which Chote Babu is sleeping and watches as his *tawai'f* wakes him up with her dance and song. She playfully caresses his head with her feet and twirls so that her skirt swoops over his head, the hem brushing his neck. Her song is clearly not a classic *ghazal*, nor is it even loosely based on Urdu poetry as it contains no complex metaphors or lofty, poetic language; instead, her song is very straightforwardly about herself as an object of pleasure, one that intoxicates Chote Babu like the wine he drinks. Her dance includes none of the virtuosic staples of classic kathak, only hip gyrations and quick chest popping that emphasize her body sexually rather than her skill as a master of an elite art form. Here, we see exactly how the *tawai'f* was conceived at the turn of the twentieth century: no longer a member of "an esteemed cultural institution" but an example of "common prostitution."<sup>38</sup>

The *tawai'f*'s dance, more than her songs, contribute most to her image as a prostitute. While the content of her song may be about something as culturally suspect as

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<sup>38</sup> Oldenberg, 260.

alcohol, she still sings about it in metaphors, demonstrating that a vestige of the *tawai'f's* age-old art still lives in her. However, there is almost nothing in her dancing that reminds the viewer of kathak. Instead, her dance is solely a display of her potent sexuality. She is a morally depraved character not because she sings about alcohol, but because she dances about sex.

The next time we see the *tawai'f*, she is performing a *mujra* for a number of men, with Chote Babu in the center, in a grand hall of the *kotha*. Again, her dancing is blatantly sexual. Her song is almost identical to the previous one, with lyrics about her body and eyes that intoxicate men like wine. Immediately after the completion of the *mujra*, someone screams, “The British are coming!” The men run out into the street and witness young British officials ransacking vendors’ carts and storefronts for fun. It is significant that we see the British literally destroying buildings immediately after the *tawai'f's mujra*: this juxtaposition makes a connection possible between the British destruction of the town and dispossession of the townspeople and the deterioration of this *tawai'f's* cultural value.

Although we do not see the *tawai'f* again after this scene, we are reminded of her and her low status through the portrayal of the other main women in the film. Scholar Arun Khopkar has argued that Choti Bahu and Jabba, Bhoothnatt’s love interest and Chote Babu’s younger sister, “complement each other and present a composite picture of Indian womanhood.”<sup>39</sup> Choti Bahu is beautiful and sensual, yet chaste; Jabba is strong, clever, and resourceful. The only other major female character in the film is the *tawai'f*, who has no such virtues. All that she has to offer is her highly sexualized dancing and

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<sup>39</sup> Chakravarty, 181-182.

singing. Next to Choti Bahu and Jabba, she is nothing more than a slut, excluded from the emerging “picture of Indian womanhood.”

Thus, throughout *Sahib Bibi aur Ghulam*, we see the cultural dispossession of the *tawai'f* juxtaposed with the cultural and economic dispossession of a family that closely resembles the Muslim elite aristocracy of Awadh. Chote Babu's powerlessness in the face of those who wish to take away his power, representing Muslims' situation at the time, is mirrored in his *tawai'f's* shameful existence: both have experienced a fall from grace. For Chote Babu, capitalist creditors whose interests resemble those of the British are the root of his demise. While we do not see how the *tawai'f* lost her art, and also her cultural value, her cheap, sexualized dancing serves to emphasize this loss. While *Sahib Bibi aur Ghulam* is set at the turn of the twentieth century, the trials of two of its main characters, Chote Babu and his *tawai'f*, might as well be those of Muslims in postcolonial, post-Partition India.

The *tawai'f* of the other film with a courtesan subplot, *Devdas* (1955), is very different from that of *Sahib Bibi aur Ghulam*. Like the *tawai'f* of *Sahib Bibi aur Ghulam*, Chitralkha has an extremely low status in society. However Chitralkha's character is more developed, enabling the viewer to see that she yearns for the love of one man and is willing to change her entire identity in order to receive his love. Thus, Chitralkha represents Muslims having one very specific desire: acceptance and assimilation within India.

An older version of *Devdas* was in fact released in 1935; however, this version achieved little success and was not widely released or well known. The 1955 *Devdas*, on the other hand, immediately gained enthusiastic national acclaim and is known today as

one of the most important Bollywood films, further emphasizing the fact that the courtesan genre was only salient in India after Partition. *Devdas*, set in a small Bengali village at the turn of the twentieth century, established one of the most enduring characters of Hindi cinema: the tragic, romantic hero.<sup>40</sup> This hero, Devdas, and his childhood friend, Parvati, are engaged in an impossible love affair, impossible because Parvati has been betrothed to another man since childhood.<sup>41</sup>

To find relief from his never-ending struggle with unrequited love, Devdas goes to the *kotha* and meets Chitralkha, a highly skilled *tawai'f*. Chitralkha is very clearly a professional performer, but she is also a woman of means and independence. As a performer, she engages with spectators while displaying her virtuosic *chakkar* and *taktar*. She owns the *kotha*, employs bodyguards at its doors, and is able to refuse entry to certain customers. However, her intense infatuation for Devdas signals her underlying vulnerability.

At the *kotha* for the first time, Devdas is distracted during Chitralkha's *mujra* and uninterested in her; Chitralkha, on the other hand, falls in love with Devdas immediately. When Chitralkha tries to speak with Devdas after her *mujra*, Devdas refuses to linger with her, asking her, "shameless girl, you take money from men, don't you?" She responds, "Yes, but professionally..." but is interrupted by Devdas, who says, "Enough... I hate your sort" and leaves before she can finish her sentence.<sup>42</sup> Chitralkha wants Devdas to see that she is a legitimate professional who deserves respect, but to Devdas, she is nothing more than a prostitute.

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<sup>40</sup> D.R. Nagaraj, "The Comic Collapse of Authority: An Essay on the Fears of the Public Spectator," in *Fingerprinting Popular Culture: The Mythic and Iconic in Indian Cinema*, ed. by Vinay Lal and Ashis Nandy (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006), 90.

<sup>41</sup> *Devdas*, dir. and prod. by Bimal Roy, 2 hr. 41 min. Eros International, 1955, DVD.

<sup>42</sup> *Ibid.*

Over the course of the film, Chitralkha struggles with her identity and tries to renegotiate her social standing so that Devdas will return her love. She even goes as far as renouncing her identity as a *tawai'f*. After spending a few months away in Calcutta, Devdas returns to find Chitralkha a reformed woman. He visits her in what used to be her *kotha* but is now stripped of its elaborate décor and male customers. She is dressed modestly in a plain, solid colored sari without any jewelry. In one of the rooms that used to be where her sexual liaisons with customers took place, there is an elaborate Hindu shrine complete with small statue of a Hindu god, burning incense, and ceremonial flower wreaths. Here, by inserting Hindu religion into the *kotha*, a space of Muslim traditions, Chitralkha not only rejects her profession as a *tawai'f* but also symbolically erases her association with Muslim art and culture.

After failing to attract Devdas as a chastened woman, Chitralkha once again transforms herself into a *tawai'f* and her house into a *kotha*, but refuses entry to everyone except Devdas. One night, Devdas stumbles by in a drunken stupor. Chitralkha implores him to enter the *kotha*, but he is only interested in finding more alcohol. When Chitralkha tells him that she has alcohol inside, he enters, but soon discovers that she only wants to perform for him. As soon as she begins dancing, Devdas gets up to leave; she stops dancing, begins singing, and Devdas turns around and sits down again. She sings, "Where will I get the status for you to accept me?" From this subtle shift, it seems that the first step in attaining that respectable status is to stop dancing: when she starts dancing, he cannot stand to be with her; when she stops and entertains him with anything else, he is willing to stay in her presence.

In a moment of sobriety, Devdas compares Chitrlekha with Parvati, saying that Chitrlekha, in terms of her character, is actually a more pure, more virtuous woman than Parvati: “Parvati is argumentative, you are sober and docile; Parvati accepts nothing, but you endure everything. Yet everyone loves Parvati and everyone hates you.” Thus, even though Chitrlekha is actually closer to the “good Hindu woman” that Devdas, and postcolonial India, favors, she cannot shed her identity as a dancer, nor as a carrier of Muslim artistic lineage. By the end of the film, Devdas is still pining for Parvati, and Chitrlekha remains alone. Chitrlekha’s “tragedy is confirmed through her impossible longing for respectability and the unattainable love of a single man.”<sup>43</sup> In this way, Chitrlekha’s tragedy mirrors that of postcolonial Muslims who desire respectability within India so extremely that they are willing to renounce their religious and cultural heritage. But, Chitrlekha’s case proves that renunciation is not enough, because in fact, nothing could enable reformed *tawai’f* dancers or Muslims to gain acceptance in postcolonial India.

The next two films I will discuss, *Umrao Jaan* (1981) and *Pakeezah* (1972) are period films that depict the *tawai’f* most literally and with historical accuracy. In these films, the *tawai’f* is the heroine, an extremely nuanced and complex character whom the audience has no choice but to sympathize with.

*Umrao Jaan* is the “quintessential courtesan film of the Bombay cinema.”<sup>44</sup> The film’s “attention to detail and painstaking recreation of the glories of Awadh, in particular

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<sup>43</sup> Sangita Shreshtova, “Swaying to an Indian Beat...Dola Re Dola Goes my Diasporic Heart: Exploring Hindi Film Dance,” *Dance Research Journal* 36 (2), 96.

<sup>44</sup> Chakravarty, 287.

in terms of sets and costumes, has never been equaled.”<sup>45</sup> Based on the 1899 novel *Umrao Jaan Ada* by Mirza Mohammed Hadi Ruswa, the film is set in the last years of Lucknow’s glory, concluding in 1857, one year after the annexation of the *nawabs* into the British Raj.<sup>46</sup> As the world falls apart around her, Umrao Jaan, the film’s main character and *tawai’f*, struggles unsuccessfully to claim a home and identity for herself.

Umrao Jaan, originally named Amiran, was kidnapped at a young age from her home in Faizabad, a smaller city in the Mughal kingdom of Awadh, and taken to a *kotha* in Lucknow, the capital city of Awadh.<sup>47</sup> This name change already points to one of Umrao Jaan’s major struggles throughout the film: her given name is changed to Umrao Jaan, which is not a name but simply two suffixes marking social status, much like “Madam” or “Lady,” elevating her social status at the expense of her identity. In the *kotha*, she is raised by the *chaudharayan*, Khanum, and taught to sing, write poetry, and perform kathak each day. From her early days in the *kotha* throughout the movie, Umrao Jaan is never fully comfortable in the *kotha*: as a young girl, she tries to run away a few times, and as an adult, she relies on her male patrons to enable her to leave. While Umrao Jaan’s “body is trapped within the walls of the pleasure palace, her thoughts range far and wide as she dreams of love and romance and personal fulfillment.”<sup>48</sup> The way that the film is shot enables the viewer to share Umrao Jaan’s sense of entrapment: because the film rarely takes the viewer beyond the confines of the *kotha*, “the effect is simultaneously one of claustrophobia and intense involvement.”<sup>49</sup>

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<sup>45</sup> Dwyer, 128.

<sup>46</sup> Dwyer, 126.

<sup>47</sup> *Umrao Jaan*, dir. by Muzaffar Ali, 2 hr, 48 min, Adlabs, 1981, DVD.

<sup>48</sup> Chitralekha, 290.

<sup>49</sup> Ibid.

Early on in the film, a young prince, Sultan, visits the *kotha* and is entranced by Umrao Jaan and her simultaneously seductive and intellectually stimulating *mujras*. The two begin a passionate love affair that is eventually thwarted by Sultan's parent's efforts to marry him to his cousin. Sultan's father's attitude toward his son's involvement with Umrao Jaan is particularly revealing of the changing conceptions of *tawai'fs* and the *kotha* during the late nineteenth century. In discussing his son's match with his wife, his father says that he must marry soon because "he is going astray. He visits courtesans." His wife replies, "Where have you been till now? ...You still visit that Khanum," the *chaudharayan* of Umrao Jaan's *kotha*. He then contradicts himself by justifying his own behavior, saying, "visiting courtesans is an aristocratic tradition." His ambiguity concerning the morality of visiting *tawai'fs* reflects the overall culture's growing ambiguity, as the stability of the *kotha* is beginning to deteriorate and the social standing of the *tawai'f* is being questioned for the first time.

Umrao Jaan is ambiguous herself about her identity as a *tawai'f*. She clearly wants to escape the *kotha*, but her methods to do so involve using her skills as a *tawai'f* to attract men who are able to take her away. Her deep attachment to Sultan is actually somewhat questionable. While it seems that she does have genuine romantic feelings for him, her rage at his marriage to his cousin seems to be just as much about heartbreak as it is about a lost chance for escape. Her attachment to her next patron, Faiz Ali, is overtly motivated by her longing for escape: she agrees to elope with him while saying, "take me away. This place is stifling me." Her reliance on Sultan and Faiz Ali to help her escape from her life in the *kotha* as a *tawai'f* could be read "as merely a reinstatement of

patriarchy (because it leaves Umrao Jaan dependent on men).”<sup>50</sup> However, “she is using her skills as a *tawai’f* to attract them.” Her dance and poems, both of which she creates herself, are then enactments of her agency; her own talent, especially her dancing, is her vehicle for freedom and autonomy.

When she performs a *mujra* for Sultan and a group of other men, for example, she sings about all the thousands of men who desire her, but her dancing reveals that she performs for Sultan alone. For all the other men, she wears veil over her face, but when she faces Sultan, she uncovers her face to reveal the seductive lifting of her eyebrows. She gestures toward him, using her fingers to direct his gaze into her eyes. When she spins, or does *chakkar*, she uses Sultan as her spot, returning to him again and again. She acknowledges her power in her *ghazal*, singing that while “there are thousands drunk by the passion of these eyes/It is I alone, only my eyes can offer drink.” In her *mujras*, she possesses the power to attract the men who will enable her never to perform a *mujra* again. In this paradox, we see her own inner conflict about her identity as a *tawai’f*.

Mirroring Umrao Jaan’s turmoil about herself as a *tawai’f* and her place in the *kotha*, political instability and the threat of British takeover remain a constant theme throughout the movie. When Faiz Ali comes to comfort Umrao Jaan after Sultan has left her, he says, “Why weep for him? They are all like this.” He then abruptly changes the subject without a response from Umrao Jaan and begins a political tirade, spitting, “The English have made our stupid King useless. The nobles are immersed in luxury. I tell you, soon the British will come in. Then all their aristocracy will vanish.” He means to comfort Umrao Jaan by assuring her that nobles like Sultan will soon experience the loss

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<sup>50</sup> Ansari, 306.

that she feels now. What he does not realize is that her loss is integrally tied to Sultan's imminent loss: the British influence, diminishing her respectability, has prevented Sultan's family from accepting Umrao Jaan as a wife, just as the dethronement of the *nawabs* will eventually deprive them a place in postcolonial India. By making a statement about the imminent loss of the *nawabs* directly after one about Umrao Jaan's loss, Faiz Ali helps the viewer understand that the two statements are not unrelated but actually interdependent.

When her elopement with Faiz Ali fails, Umrao Jaan returns to Lucknow to find the British attacking the city. Escaping as a refugee with the *nawabs* that the British have dethroned, she makes her way back to her native Faizabad and is given refuge in a large mansion. She sings a *ghazal* for the refugees, in which she asks, "What place is this, friends?" Ironically, this place, the mansion, is actually her childhood home. After a tearful reconciliation with her mother, her brother scorns her, saying, "You brought glory to our house. But you should have drowned yourself." He has no respect for her and kicks her out of her home. In the last scene, we see Umrao Jaan back in the Lucknow *kotha*, picking through the ruins of the ransacked building, looking at her reflection in a mirror with bewilderment.

By the end of the film, Umrao Jaan has no home, and no place in a society whose rules have changed. Nor does she have an identity: with her *kotha* destroyed, she can no longer be a *tawai'f*, and with her banishment from her childhood home, she is no longer a member of that family. Everywhere she is an outsider. Her bewilderment at her image in the mirror emphasizes her utter displacement within this new colonial world and reflects that of Muslims as a whole:

The memory of dominant Muslim cultural modes being historically fractured is symbolically represented by Umrao's return to her *kotha* after it is all but destroyed by the British. While she stares at her dusty reflection in the mirror, a (classed) configuration of Muslim memory is reflected back to the audience—covered with dust to suggest a blurred and almost lost link to the past. This is a way to make sense of the fractured existence of South Asian Muslims—fractured between nations and occupying an uncertain positioning within the Indian nation and its official historiography.<sup>51</sup>

Throughout the film, Umrao Jaan “encapsulates the decline of the urbane North Indian Muslim subject: Umrao's surroundings, clothing, linguistic abilities and ultimately tragic narrative encapsulate discursive tropes of Muslim decadence, refinement, decay, and displacement.”<sup>52</sup>

Like *Umrao Jaan*, *Pakeezah* (1971) is also often referred to as the quintessential courtesan film because of its attention to historical detail and tragic narrative chronicling another beautiful yet fatefully doomed *tawai'f*.<sup>53</sup> Set in Lucknow, again in the capital city of the great Mughal kingdom, Awadh, at the turn of the century, *Pakeezah* focuses solely on its *tawai'f* protagonist, Sahib Jaan; political disturbances do not enter into the plot of the film, as in *Umrao Jaan*. However, Sahib Jaan is very much a political subject, embodying India's contradictory feelings toward its Muslims citizens and Muslims' own ambivalence regarding their place in India, social worth, and identity.

*Pakeezah* begins with the story of Nargis, Sahib Jaan's mother. When the family of her fiancé, Shahbuddin, rejects their marriage because she is a *tawai'f*, a “society girl,” Nargis moves into a graveyard and waits to die. Before committing suicide, Nargis gives

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<sup>51</sup> Ansari, 313.

<sup>52</sup> Ansari, 303.

<sup>53</sup> Ansari, 303.

birth to Sahib Jaan, who is taken to Nargis's *kotha* by Nargis's sister, also a *tawai'f* in that *kotha*. Like Umrao Jaan, Sahib Jaan does not have a real name, only suffixes.

While Sahib Jaan is sleeping on a train as a young adult, a man enters her compartment accidentally and is entranced by her henna-painted, anklet-adorned feet. He tucks a note between her toes, reading, "Forgive me. I happened to come inside your compartment. I could see your feet. They are very beautiful. Do not place them on the ground. They will become dirty." For the rest of the film, this note is the main source of Sahib Jaan's simultaneous joy and anguish. The note inspires many contradictory feelings in Sahib Jaan: at first, she is elated by this man's attention. Then, she convinces herself that he cannot love her because his conception of her purity is wrong: as a dancer, her feet are literally dirty, making her figuratively dirty, as her constant barefoot dancing on the ground reveals her as a socially impure *tawai'f*. Still, she becomes so obsessed with the letter that she begins to think of herself as the woman that the letter's author saw: an anonymous pure woman. Yet she is conflicted about taking on this new identity, saying to a friend in distress,

Since several days, I get the feeling that I am changing. As if I'm undergoing an unknown journey and that I'm going somewhere. I'm leaving everything. Sahib Jaan is slipping away and I'm being distanced from Sahib Jaan.

When Sahib Jaan and this man, Salim, actually meet, her ambiguity regarding his love for her becomes only grows. After a rafting accident, Sahib Jaan washes up on the shore of Salim's beach hut. Afraid to reveal her identity as a *tawai'f* to him, she pretends to suffer amnesia from the accident. When Salim takes her to his family to get married, we find out that Salim is the nephew of Shahbuddin, Sahib Jaan's mother's lover. Salim's grandfather refuses their marriage because Sahib Jaan, pretending not to know

her true identity, “has no name.” Despite all this, Salim is determined to marry Sahib Jaan, and trusting him, Sahib Jaan reveals her identity as a *tawai’f*. Like his uncle, he does not care and surprises her by setting up an impromptu marriage ceremony in a field. During the ceremony, the priest asks Sahib Jaan to state her name and when she pauses, Salim says for her, “Pakeeza,” meaning “pure.” At this, Sahib Jaan screams, “No!” and runs away; “she cannot accept this title because it contradicts how she understands herself.”<sup>54</sup> Like a postcolonial Muslim, Sahib Jaan would rather maintain her degrading identity than become someone else and achieve respectability.

Even so, she is not fully comfortable with this decision, either. Back in the *kotha*, she explains to a friend, “my vagabond dead body has returned to be buried in this colorful tomb... Every *tawai’f*<sup>55</sup> is a dead body. I am a dead body.” Life is impossible for Sahib Jaan: either she accepts Salim’s love and her identity dies, or she lives without his love and leads an empty life devoid of emotional fulfillment.

Without Sahib Jaan, Salim plans to marry another woman his family has chosen. He requests that she dance at his wedding, and it is here that we witness the dramatic scene I described in the beginning of this essay. Sahib Jaan’s dance “reveals the power *tawai’fs* have—not only in enacting agency in very public ways, but also in holding a monopoly over shame.”<sup>56</sup> While her dance is clearly an expression of her agony over her shame, it also allows her to shame others: her spectacle forces the male spectators to realize their part in causing her pain, “how this oppressed woman’s blood...has dried up

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<sup>54</sup> Ansari, 304.

<sup>55</sup> The film translates this as “whore” but *tawai’f* can be heard in the dialogue. I write “*tawai’f*” to maintain accuracy and consistency.

<sup>56</sup> Ansari, 306.

on [their] sleeves.”<sup>57</sup> Their conceptions of her are truly the cause of her identity crisis, her paralysis in the face of accepting or denying love, her vision of herself as dead. When the British dehumanized the *tawai’f* profession, they caused others to see the *tawai’f* as less than a human. Because of this, Sahib Jaan is “a dead body.” Similarly, with Muslim disenfranchisement came a certain kind of death as well. In *Pakeezah*, Sahib Jaan’s final dance shames her spectators as well as us as exterior viewers when we realize that Sahib Jaan’s enactment of her own agency is an impossibility for most of India’s similarly oppressed Muslims.

However, Sahib Jaan’s dancing, while expressing her anger, does not resolve her confusion nor allow her to act on her anger and make a change for herself. After her aunt screams at Salim’s family, Salim’s uncle, Shahbuddin, comes forth and admits to everyone that he is her father. Shahbuddin then tells Salim that he will marry Sahib Jaan as a way to make up for Nargis’ death, something that he feels partially responsible for as she killed herself after they did not marry. During this whole conversation, Sahib Jaan neither speaks nor is even included in a film shot. Although her marriage to Salim will change her life and her identity, others decide the marriage for her. At the wedding ceremony, Sahib Jaan is enclosed in a palanquin, heavily decorated under thick garments and weighty jewelry. When the priest asks her if she accepts the marriage, she pauses a few moments before quietly saying, “yes.” Viewers cannot help but wonder if she is only accepting because she is literally trapped to do so inside the marriage palanquin.

Sahib Jaan of *Pakeezah* is the only *tawai’f* out of all four films who marries. Even so, her marriage is conditional: she is allowed to marry into a noble family only

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<sup>57</sup> *Pakeezah*.

when the family discovers that she is related to them. Her marriage is also not her choice, and whether or not she truly desires the marriage is unclear. If marriage represents the ultimate way for Muslims to gain respectability, these films show that it is either impossible to gain respectability or that respectability comes with a cost. Marriage for *tawai'fs* may not result in the kind of respectability the *tawai'f* truly desires, because while it de-stigmatizes them and frees them from their oppression as social outcasts, it creates another type of oppression: living with a lost and subjugated identity. Marriage for *tawai'fs* or assimilation for Muslims is not the ultimate way to gain respectability. Curiously, these films do not suggest a solution.

The nameless *tawai'f* of *Sahib Bibi aur Ghulam*, Chitrallekha of *Devdas*, Umrao Jaan of *Umrao Jaan*, and Sahib Jaan of *Pakeezah* retell the story of Muslims in colonial and postcolonial India. *Sahib's tawai'f* is the pitiable butt of a British colonial joke, an empty character who supplants the ambience of decay and seemingly deserves to be on the fringe of society as she only offers vulgar sexuality. Chitrallekha is pitiable as well, yearning pointlessly for the acceptance of a cruel man, placing him above her to the extent that she reconfigures her identity to please him. Their dancing is what makes them pitiable: *Sahib's tawai'f's* dancing illustrates her depravity and emptiness, and Chitrallekha's dancing is what repulses Devdas. Regardless of their underlying character—something we do not even get the chance to see in *Sahib*—the identities of these women are ultimately reduced to their profession. Like Muslims discriminated against because of their religion, these *tawai'fs* are discriminated against because of their dancing.

Umrao Jaan's and Sahib Jaan's dancing serves the opposite purpose. Instead of reducing their identities to clichéd notions of immoral sexuality, their dancing enables the viewer to understand their identities in all their complexities. The dance is a heightened forum for the expression of these *tawai'fs'* desires, conflicts, and pain. In other words, their dance expresses their humanity. It forces the viewer to see them as fully human, and to reexamine his or her own conceptions of what victimhood, oppression, and patriarchy really mean.

While their dancing does not create any real change for them, resolve their inner turmoil, or help them achieve the kind of respectability they desire, it shows that they need change, resolution, and respectability, and voicing that need is the only way to *begin* to fulfill it. Thus, while these films do not explicitly suggest ways for the *tawai'fs*, or Muslims, to gain true respectability, they do inspire viewers to begin thinking about those ways themselves. If Sahib *Bibi aur Ghulam* and *Devdas* set the nation up for the *tawai'f* as a pitiable colonized subject, and *Umrao Jaan* and *Pakeezah* break that image down, can these films and their “courtesan narrative suggest decolonization?”<sup>58</sup>

The *tawai'f* genre serves many purposes. In one major way, it is an outlet for nostalgia, a means to “recapture the ‘magic’ of a deceased institution and a lost art” and to “provide a sense of continuity, a connection with the past that is glamorous and erotic.”<sup>59</sup> In some ways, the films reinforce negative images of *tawai'fs* and Muslim culture as a whole, but the insertion of a political narrative allows the viewer to understand that these groups are not truly so immoral and depraved themselves but are portrayed that way because of externally imposed racist, anti-Muslim stereotypes. These

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<sup>58</sup> Chakravarty, 272.

<sup>59</sup> Chakravarty, 304.

films are both a lamentation for the disintegration of Muslim culture and power and an opportunity for outsiders to listen and respond to that lamentation. They do not angrily call for a specific kind of change; they invite others to engage in a dialogue about change. In this way, these films do not suggest nor demand decolonization, but are decolonizing agents in themselves, opening up a road for Muslims and non-Muslims to work together to ensure that all achieve acceptance, tolerance, and full agency within modern India.

## Appendix:

## Translation of Hindi and Urdu Terms

*Chakkar*: a series of rapid spins on flat feet oriented toward the viewer done in kathak dance

*Chaudharayan*: a retired *tawai'f* serving as the owner and manager of a *kotha*

*Devadasi*: a Hindu temple dancer of India's Vedic period

*Ganika*: a secular courtesan of India's Vedic period

*Ghazal*: an Urdu poem

*Haveli*: an upper-class mansion

*Kotha*: *tawai'fs*' house, performance space, and locale for sexual liaisons with patrons

*Mujra*: a performance that includes song and dance conducted by *tawai'fs* for Muslim nobles in medieval India

*Nawab*: a noble of the Mughal empire

*Taktar*: a rhythmic technique in kathak dance in which the sound of the feet stamping creates rhythmic patterns

*Tawai'f*: a Muslim courtesan

*Zamindar*: Medieval India's land-owning, feudally-based aristocracy

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