

3 CINEMA AND POLITICS

Khalil Qaiser and Riaz Shahid

SINCE THE LATE THIRTIES AND ACROSS THE PARTITION, PROMINENT writers and poets made influential contributions to the cultural left in Lahore. A broadly leftist orientation continued to characterize much of Lahore's cultural universe during the long sixties. This culture was sustained by intellectuals contributing creative and critical writing in journals, participating in literary circles, and writing screenplays, dialogue, and lyrics for the cinema. The commercial film remained an important platform for the exploration of socially conscious themes. The films that emerged from this crucible revisit many of the concerns of *Jago Hua Savera* in the context of alternative cinema made by personnel involved in the midcentury Marxist and leftist cultural scene of South Asia. Broadly speaking, in Bombay and Lahore cinema, the commercial cinema of the fifties through the later sixties embedded leftist ideas about social inequality, the examination of hierarchies between the bourgeoisie and the poor, and the gap between the rural and the urban, cast in narratives that picturized their appeal to larger and multiple publics. Many commercial films were based on formulaic plots, stock characters, and typage, and they included a variety of song modalities as well as villains and comic sidekicks. Nevertheless, they offered strong and appealing narratives on social justice, equality, and the possibility of love transcending entrenched social hierarchies.¹ These productions imbricated realism and fiction in a romantic register. They foregrounded a recursive theatrical modality that layered and collapsed history and fable, allied with specific production values, which included "dense close-ups, flaring light-effects, casting, cinematography and sound, and . . . set design," characteristics that Ashish Rajadhyaksha identifies with the Lahore effect.² As we have seen in chapter 1, even *Jago Hua Savera*, which strove to follow neorealist principles and was shot in black-and-white, nevertheless included a commercial segment, in the inclusion of a dance song in color for local distribution. As the long sixties progressed, Lahore became a major center of film production in the Global South, when measured by the number of films released every year.³

Khalil Qaiser and Riaz Shahid have been widely seen as forming a team, with commitments to leftist and “revolutionary” filmmaking.⁴ Other directors affiliated with many of the projects of Khalil Qaiser and Riaz Shahid are Iqbal Shehzad, Jamil Akhtar, and Hassan Tariq.⁵ Writers who contributed the story, the screenplay, and the dialogue to these projects included Riaz Shahid and Ali Sufyan Afaqi. Lyricists, many of whom were leading figures in Urdu literature, included the poets Tanvir Naqvi, Qateel Shifai, Faiz Ahmed Faiz, Saifuddin Saif, and Himayat Ali Shair.⁶

These and many others were involved in dozens of projects in this era. The genres they worked in are surprisingly diverse, such as the detective film *Raz* (The secret, 1959, dir. Humayun Mirza); *dastanic* and serpent films *Dosheeza* (Damsel, 1962, dir. Khalil Qaiser) and *Nagin* (Serpent, 1959, dir. Khalil Qaiser); the social films *Shikwa* (Complaint, 1963, dir. Hassan Tariq), *Sawaal* (The question, 1966, dir. Hassan Tariq), and *Maa Baap* (Mother and father, 1967, dir. Khalil Qaiser); historical films on resistance against colonialism, such as the Khalil Qaiser-directed *Ajab Khan* (1961), *Shaheed* (Martyr, 1962), and *Farangi* (The European, 1964) and the Riaz Shahid-directed *Zerqa* (1969); and films on sexual exploitation and class divides, like *Neend* (Sleep, 1959, dir. Hassan Tariq), *Clerk* (1960, dir. Khalil Qaiser), *Khamosh Raho* (Remain silent, 1964, dir. Jamil Akhtar), and *Badnam* (Disgraced, 1966, dir. Iqbal Shehzad). From this extensive corpus, the focus here is on a small subset of this oeuvre that foregrounds exploitation in modern everyday life. These are social films that examine the dilemmas of individuals and families through melodramatic and realist narrative tropes, songs, and typage.

Khalil Qaiser began his career as assistant, along with Hassan Tariq, to the film director Anwar Kamal Pasha during the early and midfifties.⁷ Qaiser emerged as an independent director by the later fifties. He wrote the story for the film *Qismat* (Fate, 1956, dir. Nazir Ajmeri) and directed *Nagin* (1959), a fantasy film in the genre of the “serpent” film of South Asia, in which characters shape-shift between the human and the reptile.⁸ His first leftist film is *Clerk* in 1960, in which he was lead actor and director, and to which Riaz Shahid contributed the dialogue.⁹ Khalil Qaiser and Riaz Shahid’s collaborative work included *Clerk* (1960), *Dosheeza* (1960), *Shaheed* (1962), *Farangi* (1964), and *Maa Baap* (1967), the latter released after the death of Qaiser, whose life was tragically cut short when he was inexplicably murdered by unknown assailants in his home at night in 1966. Riaz Shahid also passed away early, from cancer in 1972. Nevertheless, Riaz Shahid’s stories, screenplays, and dialogue were used in films made as late as 1978, such as *Haider Ali*, directed by Masood Pervaiz.

Khalil Qaiser is best known today for directing a series of popular films on colonialism and imperialism. *Shaheed* (1962) is a historical story about a heroic resistance figure fighting against British colonialism, and in *Farangi* (1964), a figure loosely modeled on Lawrence of Arabia schemes to extend imperialism to profit from the discovery of oil in an unnamed Arabian locale. The trajectory of anti-imperialist filmmaking was carried forward after Qaiser's death in 1966 by Riaz Shahid when he directed the blockbuster film *Zerqa* (1969), to which he contributed the story and dialogue as well. *Zerqa* is reportedly inspired by the life of the charismatic Palestinian resistance fighter Leila Khalid.¹⁰ Its songs, written by noted leftist poet Habib Jalib and performed by the *ghazal* singer Mehdi Hassan, have become celebrated for their stirring lyrics, and for their coded resistance toward Ayub Khan's faltering government of the later 1960s.¹¹

Riaz Shahid, whose original name was Shaikh Riaz Ahmad, started his career as a journalist and writer, writing for newspapers and journals in the early and midfifties.¹² He published a novel, *Hazar dastan*, in 1955.¹³ By the later fifties, he was deeply involved in the cinema, apparently by the encouragement of poet Faiz Ahmed Faiz. Shahid was a multifaceted persona and a highly prolific writer, renowned for writing captivating stories and stirring dialogue.¹⁴ He reportedly started his film career by writing the story for the film *Bharosa* (Trust, 1958), by convincing the director, Jafar Bukhari, to accept him as a writer upon their very first meeting.¹⁵ He wrote the story, screenplay, and dialogue of the commercially successful and critically lauded film *Neend* (1959, dir. Hassan Tariq), a social film that examined sexual exploitation of a female employee by the owner of a coal firm.¹⁶ The film *Susraal* (The in-laws' home, 1962), which Shahid directed and for which he wrote the story and dialogue, perhaps his least programmatic film, is an affectionate look at the minor and flawed characters living in the Walled City in Lahore. And *Khamosh Raho* (1964), for which Shahid wrote the story, screenplay, and dialogue, and which is directed by Jamil Akhtar, is on the kidnapping of poor rural women and their prostitution in the city. The film *Badnam* (1966), directed by Iqbal Shehzad and based on a short story by the writer Saadat Hasan Manto, for which Riaz developed the screenplay and dialogue, also examines the nexus between class and sexual exploitation.

Riaz Shahid has become legendary for the speed and ease with which he wrote film dialogue, and the rhetorical force of his language, which cut across genres.¹⁷ His writing consistently deploys idioms and metaphors that abound in Urdu, and it creates dynamic scenarios by the use of

allusion, double entendre, and the mot juste. Mushtaq Gazdar notes, “Riaz Shahid had an uncanny talent for writing dialogues in rhythmic form. Perhaps he was influenced by Khalil Gibran’s diction and could enforce his argument through a jigsaw of vocabulary that would captivate the audience completely. He was the first screenwriter whose name was advertised on cinema billboards, posters, and newspaper advertisements.”¹⁸ In his writing and his later direction, Riaz Shahid represents an important attribute of Lahore cinema overall, in its emphasis on rhetorical flourishes and exclamatory force.

In this respect, Lahore’s films differ from the cinema that was emerging in Dhaka during the sixties, which is arguably more cinematic in its drawing from folk aesthetics, a more fluid use of camera movement, montage editing, and lyric picturization of songs. In his book on Pakistani cinema, published in 1969, the film critic Alamgir Kabir accordingly noted, “Melodrama and ‘stagey’ production are the two prominent characteristics of Pakistani productions in general. The trends are stronger in Urdu or Punjabi films than in Bengali productions.”¹⁹ Most damningly, he notes that Lahore and Karachi productions fail as *cinematic* artifacts, as they rely instead on theatrical frontality: “Most of the West Pakistani productions force one to suspect that their directors would probably have been the happiest people on earth if such techniques as montage, editing, etc. did not exist. They like to concentrate only on getting clear, well-lit pictures keeping the actors as far as possible within focus. Shot compositions are the simplest practiced these days with the characters lined-up horizontally across the ‘frame’ in a way that is known as ‘frontoriented.’ For most part of the film, the camera photographs from chest level and unusual angles are avoided painstakingly.”²⁰

However, Riaz Shahid’s early film *Susraal* (1962), which he wrote and directed, emphasizes dialogue between characters but also pays close attention to cinematic style, with consistency in lighting and mise-en-scène, sophisticated match cut editing, and effective deployment of camera angles, pans, and choice of background music and sound. This film avoids typeage and foregrounds the discrepant lives of minor and flawed subaltern characters. Unfortunately, the film was not commercially successful—and these qualities largely disappeared in his next major directorial venture, *Zerqa* (1969), which adheres more closely to Alamgir Kabir’s depiction, but which did extremely well at the box office.

However, the larger question Kabir poses with regard to the aesthetic modalities of commercial cinema in Lahore is important to address.

Barring a few films, most notably *Jago Hua Savera*, Kabir is extremely critical throughout his book of the multiple failures of West Pakistani cinema—for its slavish adherence to the formulaic codes of Bombay cinema, its lack of cultural awareness, its gross plagiarism of Indian themes, its reliance on stereotypical characters and typeage, the absence of realism, and the display of gratuitous and vulgar sexuality.²¹ Kabir understands good cinema as being technically innovative and raising critical and unsettling questions regarding social dilemmas. He notes that even the conventional love triangle in commercial cinema that formulaically negotiates class divides has the potential to evoke larger questions of social inequality in the audience, provided it's framed in such a manner: "The filmic portrayal of those simplified ideals of life if presented with genuine social consciousness could still contribute substantially toward the content. But few efforts are ever intended to be so. A poor girl's moral right to love a rich, handsome young man is never presented as a social protest. The inhumanity of economic and social inequality is never brought to the fore. This is a serious deficiency and it reduces the love that is portrayed to a mere outpouring adolescence."²² Kabir stresses that good cinema requires audiences that possess cultivated critical capacities. In contrast, "in West Pakistani cities, where a middle-class with refined taste is a comparatively recent phenomenon in the social scene and too insignificant to make its presence felt, these [vulgar] films do very well."²³

Kabir believed in the capacity of cinema to develop a critical consciousness among its viewers. As a critic, Kabir was a fellow traveler with the filmmakers of the long sixties whose work he writes on. A critic is expected to evaluate the work of contemporaries with high expectations, and to be sharply critical and dismayed by the persistent reiteration of stereotypical and compromised works. But when the cinema of the past is under scholarly scrutiny, the critical task is not to lament what could have been and which now cannot be altered by critique but to explain actual concrete developments in infrastructural, social, and aesthetic terms and to analyze how cinema intervened in and intersected with the cultural politics of that historical conjuncture.

What work does commercial film do in a rapidly modernizing society? The long sixties were governed by politically authoritarian but socially liberal regimes that repressed overt leftist political and cultural forms, where social and economic divides were becoming sharper, and where an uneven but influential top-down effort was underway to manage the cultural life of both West Pakistan and East Pakistan. Gazdar notes that by 1969, the

decade-long rule of Ayub Khan “had created feelings of provincialism amongst the middle classes and socialistic tendencies among peasants and laborers.”²⁴ Popular commercial cinema does make important interventions in this era in articulating new conceptions of self and community. This transformation of consciousness across the sixties is a response to intertwined and conflictual forces, in which the work that cultural forms do is never marginal or incidental. Kamran Asdar Ali has analyzed at length the imbrication of leftist political movements with literary developments in Pakistan from the fifties through the early seventies.²⁵ Cinema was very much a fellow traveler in this journey. Leading filmmakers were affiliated with or influenced by progressive writers. However, their films had to submit to the ideological and ham-fisted decisions of the government-appointed Censor Board before they could be released, meaning that even the most socially committed filmmakers had to work under significant constraints.²⁶ The reportedly heavy-handed censoring of *Yeh Aman* (1971), directed by Riaz Shahid, is seen to have contributed to his disillusionment and subsequent death in 1972. This example is but one of numerous structural impediments and diminished possibilities for realizing bold, socially meaningful cultural projects.²⁷

Kabir published his book in 1969. The emergence of cultural studies as a discipline since has reformulated questions that one can ask of the critical capacities of popular and mass cultural forms that rely on repetition, seeming accessibility, and apparent lack of dissonant criticality. For example, Fredric Jameson notes that expectations of sedimentation and repetition are crucial for the audience when they encounter popular cultural forms.²⁸ Jameson argues for the imbricated yet seemingly disjunctive interrelationship between elite cultural forms and popular genres, and he stresses that neither elite avant-gardist forms nor popular artifacts uniquely or solely possess critical potency: “You do not reinvent an access onto political art and authentic cultural production by studding your individual artistic discourse with class and political signals.”²⁹ Rather, popular forms, in their genre repetition and typage, do “transformational work on social and political anxieties and fantasies,” by managing them or by repressing them, “gratifying intolerable, unrealizable, properly imperishable desires.”³⁰ And for midcentury Bombay cinema, Aarti Wani has argued that individualized romantic love in melodramas of the fifties constituted “a fantasy of modernity,” in which individuals were no longer bound by traditional kinship or national obligation but where “the modern couple . . . freed from family structures and at liberty to love and desire helped envision a

fantastically free zone of romance with intimations of an alternative community.”³¹ Can a “mere outpouring adolescence” on screen nevertheless still manage to evoke aesthetic and political concerns, in which the implied addressee becomes freer to imagine possibilities beyond customary affiliations, no matter how far-fetched or unrealistic these may appear?

Popular culture is a field of ongoing contestation. The landscape of practitioners from the midfifties to the later sixties was undoubtedly deeply shaped by official forces and elite expectations, but it was not fully delimited by these. Writing on popular culture, Stuart Hall underscores a “double-stake,” or the “double movement of containment and resistance, which is always inside it.”³² For Hall, all modern cultural forms are “contradictory . . . composed of antagonistic and unstable elements,” and the analysis of popular cultural forms consequently needs to view them as a field of relations crosshatched by tension and a struggle over hegemony.³³ In examining the films of Khalil Qaiser and Riaz Shahid, this chapter correspondingly sees how their works excavate multiple fault lines across a dynamic and processual social formation marked by antagonisms and fractures.

While our emphasis here is on the films that focus on contemporary life and issues of sexual exploitation and class divides rather than their more famous anti-imperialist films, a well-known anecdote associated with the film *Zerqa* (1969) exemplifies how popular imagination sutures a sensibility of political resistance with popular aesthetics. *Zerqa* focuses on Palestinian resistance. A very well-circulated song in the film, “Raqs zanjir pahan kar bhī kiyā jātā hai” (You can dance even in fetters), was written by noted poet Habib Jalib and memorably rendered as a film song by leading *ghazal* singer Mehdi Hassan. Jalib’s reminiscences on the process of composing poetry for Riaz Shahid’s films are noteworthy for the close relationship and common horizon they both shared:

I worked with good producers also, such as my friend Riaz Shahid, who would urge me on saying, “I’ll picturize the biggest insult you can level against existing society.” He used to lock us up in a room for four or five days, the music director, him, and myself. We would be very casual and informal with one another. I would write verse and Riaz Shahid would retort, “what rubbish have you written, don’t you know what good poetry is?” We would eventually settle the matter. He would then ask [the singer] Mehdi Hassan to come, and all four of us would sit together and compose the film song.³⁴

“Raḡṣ zanjīr pahan kar bhī kiyā jātā hai” is picturized on the Palestinian heroine, who is forced to dance in chains by the Israeli general. The heroine is played by the actress Neelo, who had become Riaz Shahid’s wife in real life (see figure I.2). Neelo had evidently been forced to dance for the Shah of Iran during his visit to Pakistan in 1965, and accounts of this incident were in wide circulation.³⁵ Jalib himself viewed this incident in geopolitical terms, stating to Riaz Shahid that “Neelo *begum* has performed a major anti imperialist role, by refusing to dance for the Shah of Iran, who is US imperialism’s biggest police chief in this region.”³⁶ Characteristically, this comment sutures melodramatic aesthetics with social critique. The poem that Jalib contributed to the film was a slightly modified version of the one he first wrote to mark Neelo’s coercion by the state.³⁷ Jalib’s original lyrics included

Tū keh nāvāqif-i-ādāb-i-shahanshāhi thī
Raḡṣ zanjīr pahan kar bhī kiyā jātā hai

You are unaware of the tenets of imperialism
You can also dance in fetters

Jalib modified these lyrics for the film as follows:

Tū keh nāvāqif-i-ādāb-i-ghulāmī hai abhī
Raḡṣ zanjīr pahan kar bhī kiyā jātā hai

You are unaware of the tenets of slavery
You can also dance in fetters³⁸

The film song has become very famous, further lending this incident a rich afterlife far beyond the film itself.³⁹ Indeed, today, the mention of Riaz Shahid’s name evokes this incident prominently and repeatedly in popular discourse, while even a short description of his more “artistic” film *Susraal* (1962) is now hard to find in contemporary discussions, even though it was awarded first place at Pakistan’s twenty-fifth anniversary program by the Pakistan Television Corporation.⁴⁰

Can we understand the film *Zerqa*, and specifically the song “Raḡṣ zanjīr pahan kar bhī kiyā jātā hai,” as an exemplary popular form possessing the affective capacity for political awareness under authoritarianism? The film deploys the commercially oriented song-and-dance sequence to suggest a

link between repression within Pakistan and resistance in Palestine. Here, the Palestinian context is narrated by blending realism and fantasy, and it serves as a political allegory of Pakistani society during the sixties. A commercial film drawing from repetitive tropes and emphasizing declamatory prose and the rhetorical tropes of Urdu poetry rather than fluid camera movement may not conform to expectations of critical and avant-gardist cinema, but its potentialities for evoking “unrealizable, properly imperishable desires” need be to situated in the specific historical and social contexts of its production and reception.⁴¹

The constant imbrication of realism and fable, narrative and lyric, event and literary trope, is also characteristic of the Lahore effect, as film historian Ashish Rajadhyaksha has argued.⁴² Because the songs of *ghazal* singers like Mehdi Hassan and writings of leftist writers and poets like Habib Jalib and Faiz Ahmed Faiz traverse the registers of high cultural forms—as the latter wrote stories, dialogue, and lyrics for song-and-dance sequences in popular films—the division between elite culture and popular genres is also productively breached. Habib Jalib wrote profusely for the cinema, but he is legendary as the author of highly influential poems that questioned authoritarian decisions by the Ayub regime and later governments, as well as for his outspoken public activism, for which he was jailed multiple times in his life.⁴³ In the verses above, for example, the trope of the dance in chains cuts across the levels of popular and high-cultural forms. This is evident in the use of the same trope in the prominent poem by Faiz Ahmed Faiz, whose diction is considered more elevated and refined than Jalib’s:

āj bāzār meṇ pā-ba-jaulāṇ chalo
dast-afshāṇ chalo mast-o-raḡṣāṇ chalo

Walk through the bazaar in your shackles
With open arms, in a trance, dancing!⁴⁴

As a trope in Urdu poetry, the bazaar can be understood as an instantiation of the public sphere, in which dissent might be expressed in an affective register, rather than a space for making civic demands rationally and discursively. Significantly, the bazaar is also a commercial space, an arena of transactions between strangers and across commodities and ideas. In Urdu, the term *bāzārī* has the connotations of being lowbrow, ordinary, or common, as opposed to the sense of elitism and exclusion. A *bāzārī* ‘*aurat*

(a woman of the bazaar) is a courtesan or prostitute. Rather than a rational public sphere, the bazaar public sphere can be posited as both a discursive and an affective realm, in which ideas and bodies transact in mutually imbricated ways with charged affect.⁴⁵ Keep in mind that early cinema in South Asia emerged from the bazaar matrix, rather than from the salon or the elite realm of art, as Kaushik Bhaumik has shown.⁴⁶ Thus the politics of cinema in South Asia historically was not confined only to art and alternative cinema but cuts across genres and the hierarchy of cultural forms, which encompasses the commercial film.

As Stuart Hall has theorized, the terrain of affective popular politics is crosshatched with multiple fault lines.⁴⁷ Neelo is the screen name of Cynthia Alexander Fernandez, who was born in a Catholic family and adopted Islam only later, after her marriage to Riaz Shahid.⁴⁸ The place of religious minorities in Pakistan has never been secure, yet here the travails of an actress of a Christian background becomes a synecdoche for wider oppression under authoritarian rule.⁴⁹ The year of *Zerqa's* release, 1969, also marks Ayub Khan's abdication and Yahya Khan's assuming power among growing disturbances in both wings of the country, but especially in East Pakistan, which eventually led to the liberation of Bangladesh in 1971 after a bloody struggle. Many factors contributed to the breakup of Pakistan, including economic and power imbalances between both wings, but cultural and affective elements were also central and included widespread everyday expression of racial and cultural superiority by West Pakistanis against the inhabitants of East Bengal. The imposition of Urdu and the denigration of Bengali language was a key facet of this domination.⁵⁰ Emphasis on Urdu rhetoric in Lahore cinema by filmmakers may also have unwittingly contributed to shoring up the widespread West Pakistani assumption of the superiority of Urdu.⁵¹ As cultural studies has demonstrated, popular cultural affectivities are thus not singular or uniformly progressive in their political valence but inhabit and project the riven and divided character of the social formation they inhabit.

The relation between popular cultural forms and leftist activism was already in place well before the long sixties. The impact of the leftist cultural movements in India since the midthirties, including the All-India Progressive Writers' Association and the Indian People's Theatre Association (IPTA), as well as the impact of neorealism during the fifties on commercial cinema, has been discussed in chapter 1. The engagement by the IPTA-affiliated filmmakers in the fifties commercial Bombay cinema

was not purely realist but rather melodramatic and social. According to Manishita Dass, this cinema was “characterized by a populist approach to the experiences of the urban poor; broad strokes and emotive flourishes; an accessible lyricism; a combination of naturalistic acting styles, expressionist modes of performance, and agitprop techniques borrowed from leftist street theatre; and . . . extensive use of songs and dances as narrative devices, means of emotional expression, vehicles of social critique, and tools of urban exploration.”⁵² These approaches continue in the projects of the Lahore-based filmmakers examined in this chapter across the long sixties. The subsequent discussion focuses on projects that Khalil Qaiser and Riaz Shahid worked on together or with others, specifically their films that tackle everyday exploitation, rather than their historical or anti-imperialist films.

CLERK (1960)

Clerk is an early collaboration between Khalil Qaiser and Riaz Shahid. Qaiser directed the film and also played the lead role as Anwar, a clerk working along with a handful of other employees in a grim office belonging to the wealthy, lecherous, and cruel Seth Abdullah. Riaz Shahid contributed the dialogue to the film, whose story was penned by Yunus Rahi. The spare and grim low-budget aesthetics of the film accord with the theme, which focuses on the monotonous lives of petty office employees, who barely earn enough to make ends meet, are often in debt for petty sums, and are unable to cover medical bills and education expenses of their family members. The delivery of dialogue also evokes the gray flatness of their existence. Although the dialogue is rhetorically powerful and is composed of phrases of irony, metaphor, and double entendre, its enunciation by the characters is rarely declamatory or flamboyant. As a lead actor, Khalil Qaiser does not cut a dashing handsome and charismatic figure but presents a dour man weighed down by the responsibilities he has to bear. The film was not commercially successful due to its grim theme and the gray aura it evokes, as well as the absence of star power, despite Musarrat Nazir’s lead role as Najma (figure 3.1).⁵³

The film opens with Anwar working alone at his desk on the office floor, with only the *chaprāsī* (office boy) in attendance. The clock on the wall confirms that it’s past 9 p.m. Anwar eventually asks the office boy to take a bundle of files that he still needs to work on and tie them on his bicycle rack. At Anwar’s home, the camera pans from a shot of his mother sitting on the floor preparing dinner for Anwar, who enters through the door with his



FIG. 3.1. Publicity poster of *Clerk* (1960), with Rattan Kumar (top left), Musarrat Nazir (right), and Khalil Qaiser (bottom).

bicycle. She urges him to eat dinner as he sits down, but he is immersed again in the files. In anger, she dramatically flings a file into the air. Its papers become detached and fly across the camera, leading to the opening credits, which appear on suspended sheets of paper that successively flit by the camera, pausing momentarily to reveal the credits in simple English calligraphy. The animated character the paper sheets possess contrasts with the manner in which life itself is sucked out of the clerks, by a job that

requires them to work long hours in tedium and poverty. Over the course of film, we get glimpses of the other lives on the office floor. Every character faces financial challenges or the inability to find time or resources to attend to family emergencies. The *qawwali* song-and-dance sequence on the office floor, “Ghar se chitṭhī ā’ī” (A letter from home has arrived), humorously laments their thwarted lives. The sole exception is the Anglo-Indian secretary, the steno, the only female employee, whose desk is also on the office floor, and whom the other employees attempt to court with flirtatious body signals and innuendo-laden dialogue that goes nowhere. As it turns out, the steno is cozy with the boss when they are alone in his office. For women, therefore, to work outside the home is to risk such dishonorable encounters and liaisons.

Anwar is romantically involved with Shamim, a poor young woman who lives with her sister. On the prowl for young flesh, Seth Abdullah asks his madam to procure someone new for him. The madam convinces Shamim’s sister to have her married to Seth Abdullah against her wishes. Shamim loves Anwar, and she grieves with his photo when she realizes that she no longer has a future with him. Anwar learns of Shamim’s plans when he visits her one day with an engagement ring. Their encounter sequence is shot through a window that opens into Shamim’s bedroom, which is covered with newspapers in place of wallpaper, foregrounding her grim conditions. The window has steel bars reminiscent of jail cells, suggesting how both characters are imprisoned in their miserable lives and are destined to remain separated from each other.

Earlier, in the streets, an adolescent Amjad (played by Rattan Kumar, see figure 3.1) robs Anwar. Amjad is dressed in a striped shirt and a bandana, like a street-smart pickpocket from the films of the fifties, following Kumar’s own roles as a child star playing a street kid in Bombay films such as *Boot Polish* (1954, dir. Prakash Arora).⁵⁴ Anwar chases Amjad to his home, a dark and run-down interior whose only decor is film posters pasted on the shabby walls. Here, Anwar encounters Najma, Amjad’s elder sister. It turns out that Amjad has been unable to find a job and has resorted to crime in order to provide for his sister. Anwar convinces Amjad to become the new office boy, and Amjad abandons the life of street crime in exchange for petty but honorable employment in Seth Abdullah’s office. Eventually Anwar agrees to marry Najma, as Shamim is no longer a possibility for him. By marrying Najma, he would rescue a young woman whose poverty barred her from marriage to a well-to-do groom.

After a simple wedding ceremony attended by very few people, Najma comes to live with Anwar and his mother. While Anwar's ailing mother is joyful in welcoming Najma, Anwar is initially distraught at having assumed another responsibility that he cannot fulfill and avoids coming home, staying late hours in the office. Anwar's mother, however, convinces him that by ignoring Najma, he is doing injustice to both himself and Najma, who has become deeply depressed. Their marriage is consummated only then, after a day of riding on his bicycle together, walking in a park, jauntily riding a tonga, going to a film theater, and finally moving to their bedroom, accompanied by an intimate song by Najma. But unlike the usual scenario in social films where extended meetings in public places accompanied with songs eventually leads to marriage and union later, here these rituals of courtship are reversed, come well after the marriage, and are kept very brief in the whole film. In the song sequence "Kyūn jagāte ho mere sīne meṇ armānoṇ ko" (Why do you awaken desires in my breast?), sung by Najma, Anwar and Najma are framed in a close-up with their backs against each other, but they turn slowly in sync with the camera to be framed in profile, and eventually face-to-face, suggesting their reconciliation and intimacy.

Najma gives birth to two children. As they grow up to the age when they need to attend school, Anwar feels more and more incapable of providing for them and paying their school fees. One day, after being denied entry into school due to nonpayment of fees, Anwar's sons show up to his office when he is with Seth Abdullah, who, instead of expressing sympathy, accuses Anwar of orchestrating this drama. Amjad decides to help by becoming a pick-pocket again, but he is arrested at his very first aborted attempt and put in jail. Next, the desperate Anwar steals money when counting a wad of notes in Seth Abdullah's office, but he is caught and also placed in jail in the same cell as Amjad. Najma, dressed in black, mourns his absence in the song "So jā so jā dard bhare dil ab to so jā" (O mournful heart, sleep at last!) as the camera frames her in close-up and alternately pans across the dilapidated home, now with almost no furnishings except for the reed mats the children are asleep on with their schoolbooks and *takhtī* (writing slate). Anwar's bicycle serves as a substitute for his actual presence, the camera's framing of the spokes of the bicycle wheel reminiscent of the bars of the jail cell in a match cut. Najma and the children are now without any means of livelihood. The children first sell off their prized school textbooks then resort to begging in the streets, as they adamantly refuse to let Najma go to work as a domestic servant. Recall that the audience has already encountered the

steno's flexible morality and has accordingly been primed to the dangers that working women face.

Subsequently, the camera tilts from a close-up shot of a large signboard placed on top of the entrance of the People's Orphanage, whose patron is none other than Seth Abdullah, to the ceremony inside. Seth Abdullah is presiding and is being lauded as the patron behind this noble venture. Najma arrives outside with her children and requests the organizers admit them even though they are not strictly orphans. Seth Abdullah agrees, as he is now smitten with lust for Najma, having already tired of Shamim and having sent her back to her sister's home. Seth Abdullah suggests that Najma come to his home as he has a job for her sewing clothes. When Najma arrives the next day, an intoxicated Seth Abdullah traps her inside and attempts to rape her. Meanwhile, Amjad, who has been released from prison, manages to track down Najma, arrives just in time to prevent Seth Abdullah's assault on her, and murders him in a fit of rage.

Shamim visits Najma and informs her that while she had been informally engaged to Anwar earlier, things have moved way past their earlier attachment. Shamim has inherited Seth Abdullah's considerable fortune, and she is interested now in helping Najma and the children. Anwar is released from prison, but by now he has been driven to lunacy by the mental anguish he suffered as a victim of circumstances. He wanders into the orphanage behaving like a deranged man. The children heckle him, bringing him to the attention of Najma and Shamim, who are visiting the orphanage that day. Najma recognizes Anwar, they reconcile, and soon he is fully rehabilitated.

Najma, Shamim, and Anwar now embark on an ambitious plan to provide shelter and education to orphaned children, expanding the orphanage and a school in a tall new building planned for this purpose. Shamim agrees to taking care of the two children while Najma and Anwar plan to visit other towns and villages, driving there in a large convertible automobile, to bring deserving children to the new school. The ending of the film proposes a happy resolution and offers a didactic social message of the importance of education among the poor and the disadvantaged. However, these are all schemas for the future. The new school building is mentioned as being ready but never shown on screen, and the plans for the orphanage and the school are not depicted at any stage of realization.

The closing shot frames the large convertible at the entrance of the orphanage. The car is framed on the wall and the bottom with banners with Urdu text, foregrounding the importance of writing in this film. Recall that

the opening credits of the film begin with loose papers from an office file that become animated in space and provide the *mise-en-scène* of the credits sequence. The large bundles of files containing office papers that Anwar works on for interminable hours are now replaced by another kind of writing that emphasizes education. The struggle of Anwar's children to continue to go to school, their attachment to their homework and on learning while at home, and the profound dismay they feel when selling their textbooks serve to reinforce the shift from bureaucratic and soulless writing to one that cultivates human potential. Nevertheless, the happy ending scenes are almost an appendage, in a film whose overall thrust is on the crushing force of the iron cage of exploitative low-end office employment on the lives of its workers and their kin.

SUSRAAL (1962)

Susraal is a remarkable film on many levels, and yet there is virtually no mention of it in the popular press or summary briefs prepared by veteran observers of the film industry. *Susraal* is listed in neither in Yasin Gorija's compendium of the one hundred best films from Pakistan nor in the larger compendium by Zakhmi Kanpuri, which has over two hundred films listed in it.⁵⁵ Aijaz Gul, in an overview essay on Pakistani cinema, mentions its title, along with *Jago Hua Savera*, the Masood Pervaiz-directed *Sukh Ka Sapna* (1962), and *Dhoop Aur Saay* (1968), directed by Ashfaq Ahmad, as "alternate cinema" and notes that these were all commercial failures. Contemporary playwright Faseeh Bari Khan, who has written well-received plays for television, lists *Susraal* among films he finds to be important.⁵⁶ Apart from these fleeting references, one searches in vain to find even a brief descriptive account of the film. However, for the country's twenty-fifth anniversary program in 1972 by Pakistan Television Corporation, six landmark films were shown, one every weekend. These films were selected by the Pakistan Film Producers Association—*Qismat*, *Susraal*, *Ishq Par Zor Nahin* (Love cannot be coerced, 1963, dir. Sharif Nayyar), *Riwaaj* (Custom, 1965, dir. Diljeet Mirza), *Badnam*, and *Hamraz* (The confidant, 1967, dir. Khurshid Anwar). A small jury was appointed to select the leading films among these. *Susraal*, written and directed by Riaz Shahid, was awarded the best film, while *Badnam*, whose screenplay and dialogue were also written by Riaz Shahid, was accorded the second place. Faiz Ahmed Faiz, who was a member of the jury, recalled that the jury was unanimous in agreeing on these as the two best films. The main debate that ensued was

about the relative merits of the two and which one should be accorded the first place.⁵⁷

As we have seen in *Clerk*, many of Khalil Qaiser and Riaz Shahid's films bear a didactic message, frequently delivered toward the end of the film with a rhetorical flourish.⁵⁸ *Susraal* also falls prey to this subsumption of the film's narrative—with its multiple significations and discrepant affects—into a moralistic envelope at the end of the film. But if one disregards this, the rest of the film is a remarkably fluid and subtle work that has several qualities—including sophisticated editing by use of cut-on-action and match cuts, well-chosen arenas for location shooting in the Walled City in Lahore combined with spare and haunting dream sequences, and the refusal of typeage by casting its characters with specific personality traits, which make them neither heroic nor villainous but quirky, subtle, and flawed. Riaz Shahid's dialogue in the film is agile, humorous, and playful, and the relationships especially between its male characters are laced throughout with everyday levity. Briefly, the plot revolves around the desire of Jeeda, a simpleton who plays the horn in a brass band in the Walled City, to marry, and the complications that ensue in its wake.

The film's opening shots offer establishing views of the Walled City from a high vantage point. The camera rapidly pans 360 degrees, offering a panorama of the setting, and zooms in and out on specific buildings, such as the monumental and iconic Badshahi Mosque, built during the reign of the Mughal emperor Aurangzeb in the seventeenth century. The film is entirely set in the Walled City, and the interior shots provide a *mise-en-scène* for the film that consists mostly of small spaces, each of which possess distinctive character in their architecture and furnishings that help establish the specificity of the location. The opening credits are beautifully calligraphed in Urdu and proclaim the popular nature of the film. For example, Allauddin, the lead actor, is "the people's actor" (*avāmī adākār*), and the film title, *Susraal*, is appended with the phrase "your own story" (*āp kī apnī kahānī*). The opening credits segue into a street scene in which a brass band playing wedding music is marching and then stands arrayed by the side of the street. The camera pans across the members of the brass band playing music and comes to rest on the last player, Jeeda, who is playing the horn while eyeing his friend Bhola, a barber by profession, engaged here in stirring *biryani* in an enormous metal cooking vessel as part of the wedding feast. Seeing Jeeda's hunger and his lack of attention to his music, Bhola covers the circular aperture of the vessel.

The next sequence begins with the match cut of a round plate of *biryani*, the camera moving back to show two seated figures speaking to each other. Jeeda notes, "After today's wedding procession, I am convinced that I can never get married. The groom today was very ugly, but he was rich. . . . If I were a *bābū* [bourgeois], I would have compelled a girl to love me, but I am illiterate and now somewhat past my prime [*javānī kī ḥadd se zarā āge nikal chukā hūn*]." Ahmad replies that if Jeeda gave up drinking and gambling, he would save enough money to get married within a year. Jeeda retorts that Ahmad should give up pigeon keeping.⁵⁹ Jeeda laments that it is impossible for him to find a young woman to marry because they are either being driven in cars or stay behind the veil. In other words, either eligible women are far above his social class, or they are conservative and are not seen publicly.

In the next sequence, Jeeda enters a hammam, or a public bath. Here he finds his band members stoned, merrily singing together a humorous song with makeshift instruments: "Do not smoke hashish, it will burn up your liver." They see an ad in the newspaper for a firm that offers marriage services, but the business looks somewhat shady, as there is no clear address listed. Meanwhile, Ahmad has gone to the rooftop to attend to his pigeons but also to signal across the rooftops to his beloved Zarina, leading the two of them to sing the first full song of the film, which they sing alternatively from their own roofs across the space that separates them. The song's placement in the rooftop setting is evocative of the importance of this distinctive social space in the dense Walled City (figure 3.2).

Jeeda finds his way to a marriage services business, the Rahnuma Marriage Office. As he is walking down the street and asking for directions, the office's sole assistant spies him coming and quickly tells the manager to spiff up and prepare the office. Jeeda enters the office as the manager and the assistant pretend to be the manager and a client, the manager insisting to the client that he needs to bring with adequate funds before his case will be taken up by Rahnuma Marriage Office. This charade is intended to impress on the new client, Jeeda, the effort and the expense involved in arranging good liaisons. The manager is among the most endearing characters in the film. A fraud through and through, he is endowed with a silver tongue, whose blandishments render even the most ugly and unpalatable realities and the most unattractive marriage prospect into a beautiful fiction. Riaz Shahid's dialogue for the manager's character is among the many pleasures of this film. For example, when the manager asks Jeeda what the source and



FIG. 3.2. Ahmad sings across the rooftops of the Walled City in Lahore to his beloved Zarina. *Susraal* (1962).

amount of his income is, Jeeda replies that while his legal income is close to being nonexistent, he earns extra money through his drinking and gambling pastimes. Upon hearing this, the manager exclaims, “You can never get married, because you are unable to tell a lie! God is my witness, I have arranged hundreds of marriages; every single one of them was based only on deception! . . . Men who had failed their Matric [tenth grade] in school have now become ‘BA pass’ and ‘MA pass.’” And as soon as he hears Jeeda’s colloquial name, without missing a beat, he portentously renames him as Abdul Majeed or, even better, Chaudhary Abdul Majeed, baptizing Jeeda with an honorific name worthy of a dignified person.

Right after Jeeda departs, the father of a young woman comes in and asks the manager for help. The manager exaggerates the profile of Jeeda as a wealthy and pious individual when the two make an introductory visit to the prospective bride’s house. Jeeda briefly sees the beautiful young woman, Zarina, who is supposed to be his intended bride. He cannot believe his good fortune, even more so as the woman’s father appears most eager and anxious to conclude the wedding.

Susraal is almost entirely based on location, shooting in the Walled City, but also includes a fantasy song-and-dance sequence. After Jeeda has seen his promised bride and the wedding date has been fixed, he dozes off and finds himself transposed into a dream world. In a cavernous space that is



FIG. 3.3. Fantasy song sequence in Jeeda's dream, "Ā'e gā ṣanam jab naẓareṇ mileṇ gī tab nah jāne kyā ho gā" (When my lover arrives and our eyes meet, who knows what will happen next?). *Susraal* (1962).

otherwise very dark, he is dressed in a fine wedding *sherwani* and seated on a bed whose canopy is lit up with lights. The camera approaches him from a high angle, evoking the sense of looking down on a miniature scenario. As the camera descends and comes closer, Jeeda is distracted by a singing voice from the left. The camera pans left in the dark space, and he sees Zarina dressed in her bridal dress as she comes forth and dances and sings the seductive song on a floating undulating path, "Ā'e gā ṣanam jab naẓareṇ mileṇ gī tab nah jāne kyā ho gā" (When my lover arrives and our eyes meet, who knows what will happen next?), the lyrics and her bodily movement exciting and enthralling him. As he watches her in rapture in a medium close-up, an elliptical balloon floats up vertically across his chest, an innuendo of his sexual arousal that somehow escaped the scissors of the Censor Board (figure 3.3).

Zarina is shown from various angles, including canted shots of her dancing and close-ups of her face and feet adorned with ankle bells (*ghungroo*). Despite the close-up shots, the theatricality of the sequence, with its shiny and reflective surfaces in darkened space, creates a chiaroscuro effect that is unreal and doll-like.

After the wedding ceremony, Jeeda enters the bridal chamber, and the veil is finally lifted from his bride's face. To Jeeda's horror, it is not the beautiful, young, and physically able Zarina he had seen upon his first visit, and whom he had been fantasizing about, but someone else, who is older, less attractive, and above all physically disabled, unable to walk without crutches. It turns out that the biggest fraud of the film has been perpetuated by someone no less than the dignified-looking and righteous-acting father of the bride, who secretly substituted his elder daughter, Safia, as the bride in a brazen bait and switch maneuver.

Jeeda descends into deep depression and self-pity—he drowns himself in drink and avoids going back to his house so as not to encounter Safia. When he finally confronts his father-in-law, the latter justifies his actions as being forced by circumstances. He explains that he is old and cannot continue to support Safia indefinitely. He wanted his elder daughter to be married before the younger and able Zarina; otherwise, he would have no leverage in getting Safia married off later. Zarina has long been in love with Ahmad, Jeeda's best friend. Initially Ahmad is distraught when he realizes that Zarina is to be married to Jeeda but does not reveal his distress to his friends. But when it dawns on him that Zarina is still available, as his best friend has been duped into a terrible situation, this causes a crisis between him and Jeeda and in the larger diegetic world of the film. To complicate matters further, the father has imposed a precondition on Ahmad that he cannot marry Zarina unless Ahmad convinces Jeeda to be reconciled with Safia. Although Ahmad proposes to elope with Zarina to get out of this bind, she firmly refuses this because she does not want to cause family dishonor.

Safia returns to her father's home in despair, which is expressed in a song that has become among the most popular films songs of Pakistani cinema, "Jā apnī ḥasraton par ānsū bahā ke so jā" (Shed tears for your thwarted desires and fall sleep), whose playback singer is Noor Jehan. The song is a lament picturized on Safia when she is back in her father's home after being repudiated by Jeeda, and its lyrics and camerawork embody her physical and psychological predicaments. While Zarina and her father lie in their respective beds at night, Safia sits upright as the camera frames her from various angles and through and against screens and apertures among the furniture, suggesting her imprisoned state of consciousness. These are interspersed with shots of caged birds, her hennaed hands, her wedding jewelry lying on a table, and the father covering his head with his blanket to block out

her lament. As the song progresses, a window closes by itself, and her crutches begin to sway by themselves—the song evidently possesses the pathos to move even inanimate objects but is powerless to transform Safia's circumstances.

Eventually the major male characters offer to make extraordinary sacrifices to resolve the situation—the women in the film have no say in these proposals. The father releases Ahmad from the promise that he can marry Zarina only after Jeeda is reconciled with Safia. Ahmad in turn proposes to Jeeda that he should divorce Safia—instead, Jeeda can then wed Zarina, who was shown to him as his intended bride. In exchange, Ahmad will marry Safia and thus provide her with a home and security. This is a sacrifice Ahmad is willing to make in order to preserve his friendship with Jeeda. Jeeda now also has a change of heart. A canted long shot of the exterior of the building, where Jeeda and Ahmad are conversing on the balcony, mirrors the new circumstances. Jeeda begs forgiveness from Ahmad for trespassing and desiring Zarina, who after all was Ahmad's beloved from well before: "If a friend does not forgive the lapse of another friend, the world will never trust any relationship" (*Agar dost ne dost kā quṣūr muā'f nah kiyā to dunyā se har rishte kā i'tibār uṭh ja'e gā*), he explains to Ahmad.

Ahmad is finally married to Zarina, shown in a long shot sitting with others in the street and wearing a *sehra* (floral headdress and veil). The brass band plays, with Jeeda, dressed in his uniform, enthusiastically playing his large horn. The camera moves in for a medium close-up of him playing the instrument, very similar to the opening shot, when we first encountered Jeeda. His horn becomes increasingly quieter and more introspective. The camera then pans 180 degrees, lingers for a moment to show Safia's dejected face between the large doors of the front entrance of her father's house, and then pans further for a medium close-up of her father's figure, leaning crest-fallen against the wall. A three-way shot–reverse shot sequence follows, with close-ups of Safia, who covers her visage, and the father and Jeeda's conflicted faces, accompanied by dramatic music.

Jeeda arrives at the realization that he needs to accept the disabled Safia as his wife, because hierarchical and unjust expectations of society deny humanity and value to those perceived to be less able. In the next close-up shots, framed from a low angle, Jeeda walks toward the father, first as a small figure in relative darkness, then as an equal in scale to the father's profile, and they stand there facing each other. His visually dramatic approach in



FIG. 3.4. Safia's father and Jeeda reconcile after Zarina's wedding. *Susraal* (1962).

this shot is another indication of the change in consciousness in him but about which the father is still unaware. "Don't avert your eyes from me; let's share our grief," Jeeda exhorts, and they embrace (figure 3.4).

As Jeeda turns after the embrace, the camera moves back for a long shot that shows the veiled Safia through the doorway on the left, Jeeda in the middle, and the father at right. Jeeda continues speaking, first addressing the father: "If you concealed your burden and passed it on to me, you are not to be blamed." Then, turning toward Safia: "If Safia is disabled, it's also not her fault." And next, facing the camera frontally: "And had I refused, I would also be blameless." Approaching the camera frontally, he declares angrily, "The fault lies entirely with society [*samāj*]." Turning now and framed against a dark cloth and festive flags that decorated Ahmad's wedding, he grandly proclaims to the camera, "I became afraid of my circumstances. I am still scared; nevertheless, I have decided to embrace Safia as a companion." Now moving toward the camera to an extreme close-up as his face becomes darkened by a shadow, he continues, "If I lose my resolve now, helpless daughters of poor households will remain confined in darkness forever" (Agar main himmat hār gayā to gharibon kī majbūr betiyān

qiyāmat tak andheron men baithī rahen gī). The final sequence sees him walking down the alley holding his large horn, and with his hand on Safia's back as she walks alongside him on crutches.

The simple and happy-go-lucky Jeeda certainly cuts an odd figure in his new avatar as a social reformer, a didacticism at the end of a film that otherwise possesses much subtlety, at least in the characterization of its male characters. The film focuses centrally on the social relations between men and ultimately the adjustments and sacrifices they make to accommodate each other. The relations between the men are dynamic and animated. Friendships between Ahmad, Bhola, and Jeeda; the tortured gravitas of Safia's father; and the unctuous loquaciousness of the manager of the Rahnuma Marriage Office constitute the center of the film. The relation between Ahmad and Zarina is fleshed out somewhat and imbued with some nuance. On the other hand, Safia is shown as largely suffering her condition as an unwanted and disabled person living a thwarted and unhappy life due to society's normative ableism. A female side character, the washerwoman Chanda, is given incidental treatment. Chanda offers advice to many people as she delivers their laundry. She is herself interested in Ahmad, but he does not reciprocate. Bhola eventually courts her, and they suddenly elope—together disappearing from the Walled City one night. The only female character accorded some depth is Zarina, but even she eventually becomes a token of exchange among the male characters who are attempting to resolve the dilemmas of their friendship when these bonds run up against an impasse.

In his detailed analysis of the film *Saheli* (Female friend, 1960, dir. S. M. Yusuf), Kamran Asdar Ali has cited Claude Lévi-Strauss on marriage, which Ali summarizes as “constitut[ing] the exchange of women between two male groups. Women in this process figure as objects of exchange, and not as active partners.”⁶⁰ And while Ali notes that this view has been “severely criticized by feminists,” it nonetheless offers a framework for thinking through *Susraal*'s conception of gender dynamics in society.⁶¹ Ali, however, suggests yet another methodological route, that of the figure of the *raqīb* (male friend and rival) in classical and modern Urdu poetry: “In most cases, the two *raqīb* seek the attention of the same (female) beloved, but what remains under-theorized in Urdu literary criticism is the intensity of male bonding that permeates this relationship.”⁶² This is most evocative in characterizing the dynamic between Jeeda and Ahmad. Overall, however, the handling of gender dynamics in the film does compromise its otherwise sympathetic

portrayal of nonelite everyday life. And as Ali's analysis of *Saheli* has demonstrated, imaginative scenarios focusing more centrally on the relationships among women were also emerging at that time, within the very matrix of Lahore's commercial cinema, but this is not the case for *Susraal*. Nevertheless, with its focus on subaltern lives beyond typage and stock characters, the film could have charted a new trajectory for Lahore cinema, and there is no reason why subsequent works in this vein would not have addressed women's lives with subtlety and nuance.

Susraal evokes lifeworlds with characters whose daily habits are wasteful, such as gambling and drinking, pigeon fancying, and consuming marijuana and opium; consequently, they have no savings. They are employed as musicians and barbers and in other petty professions. Most of the male characters are involved to some degree in presenting a fraudulent sense of themselves to others. Indeed, the film suggests that authentic lives are possible only because they are based on a contrived and fraudulent presentation of the self, and a filiation and loyalty toward fellow travelers in one's social world, partly because embracing the quality of duplicity is a recognition of human finitude and thus forms the most enduring basis for kinship. There are therefore no heroes or villains in this film and no stock characters such as the vamp; the corrupt, wealthy, and lecherous industrialist; the saintly mother figure; the girl's bourgeois father dressed in a dressing gown and smoking a pipe; the joker sidekick to the hero; and so on. The complete lack of reliance on typage in *Susraal* is a refreshing change from the wearying homogeneity of such characterization in an endless number of social films from Lahore and Bombay. It also promised to make available for Lahore cinema the possibility that minor lives might become visible in their complexity and yet remain buoyant—rather than their portrayal only as oppressed figures in alternative cinema that takes itself seriously as proffering a diagnostic aesthetic. The possibilities missed by *Susraal*'s commercial failure and its neglect in public memory subsequently were thus enormous for Pakistani cinema, as they were for Riaz Shahid himself. He continued to write original and meaningful stories and scintillating dialogue and directed many important films later in his career, but the subtlety of *Susraal* was subsequently eclipsed by evident anticolonial and anti-imperial messaging and calls for social reform. The film *Zinda Bhaag* (Run for life, 2013, dir. Meenu Gaur and Farjad Nabi), analyzed in chapter 4, also focuses on the lives of young men in a nonelite neighborhood of Lahore and can thus be compared with the ambitions of *Susraal*, from five decades earlier.

BADNAM (1966)

Badnam is a landmark accomplishment in Pakistani cinema, for which it was accorded second place (after *Susraal*) by the Pakistan Television Corporation's jury convened for the country's twenty-fifth anniversary.⁶³ The film is adapted from a short story by Saadat Hasan Manto, "Jhumke." Manto had been associated with Bombay cinema during the forties and, after the Partition, had moved to Lahore. Many of his stories have been adapted to film in both India and Pakistan.⁶⁴ A film titled *Jhumke*, based on the same story, was released in 1946.⁶⁵ While this film is now unavailable, Pervez Anjum, author of the book *Manto aur cinema* (Manto and cinema), notes that *Badnam* (1966) is a superior adaption of the short story, as well as having achieved far greater success commercially. *Badnam* was directed by Iqbal Shehzad, who was earlier associated with Eastern Film Studios in Karachi as its chief sound technician.⁶⁶ The film was his directorial debut, for which he recruited Riaz Shahid to adapt the short story to full feature length, as well as write the screenplay and the dialogue (figure 3.5).

Badnam adheres fairly closely to the original short story, with some key differences, however. While the original story does not have a morally redemptive ending, in *Badnam*, the film ends with the errant character having achieved moral closure.⁶⁷ Alamgir Kabir notes that *Badnam*, along with *Lakhon Mein Aik* (One in a million, 1967, dir. Raza Mir and written by Zia Sarhadi) and *Neela Parbat* (The blue mountain, 1969, dir. Ahmad Bashir), "made unusual twists at points where the spectators anticipated the conventional. In other words, they tried to make the audiences think, even if momentarily, something that is dreaded by other directors as suicidal."⁶⁸ Kabir also observes that *Badnam*'s "theme has an unusual boldness for a Pakistani film although a great deal of its power is lost in the 'commercialized' portrayal."⁶⁹ Despite these departures from the original story, the film raises the disturbing question of whether sexual transactions permitted by marriage are not in fact a form of legalized prostitution.

Dino is a poor man who owns a tonga (horse carriage) and works long hours to provide for his young wife, Hameeda, and daughter, Saeeda, who is not yet of school-going age. Their home is quite spare, but next to a small mirror on the wall hangs a page from a magazine for an advertisement for Pond's cream, which shows a woman adorned in jewelry with *jhumke*, or bell-shaped pendant earrings. Hameeda desperately craves *jhumke* of her own and is constantly imploring Dino to provide these for her. Dino visits a jeweler, who shows him a design that will cost 150 rupees. Dino plans to



FIG. 3.5. Publicity poster of *Badnam* (1966).

save 5 rupees every day, so that in thirty days he will be able to purchase the jewelry. On the twentieth day, he has a stroke of good fortune: after coming home that night, he scrupulously returns a bag full of cash to a customer who had forgotten it on the back of the tonga, and he receives a reward of 50 rupees, the precise remaining sum he needs. He decides that he will

wait no longer and will present the *jhumke* to Hameeda that very night. Fortunately, the jeweler is awake and at his shop late that evening. Dino arrives at the jeweler in a framing shot against shallow background space consisting of a poster from the film *Shaheed*. On that poster is the oversize portrait of the actor Allauddin (who plays the role of Dino in *Badnam* and Sardar in *Shaheed*), and on the poster the text *Riaz Shahed* (sic) is visible, creating a mirrored interfilmic reference to Dino himself and also to the anticolonial films of Khalil Qaiser and Riaz Shahid. Later in the film, a lampooning *qawwali* sung by college boys in their hostel will also reference global anticolonial movements (see figure 3.10).

Above the home of Dino and Hameeda lives their landlord, who has been making overtures to Hameeda, offering his assistance in resolving disputes between Dino and her, and taking care of the young daughter. He seemingly acts in a respectable, albeit nosy, fashion but is a character with an unknown background and dubious motivations, as he seeks to learn about private matters between Dino and Hameeda by enticing their little girl with treats. One day, Saeeda returns from playing at his house with a single earring, or *jhumka*. When Hameeda goes upstairs to return it, the landlord asks her to place it on a fabric that is strewn with jewelry, dazzling Hameeda and tempting her to try on the earrings while he is apparently not paying attention.

On the same night when Dino leaves home with the bag of cash to return it to the passenger who had left it behind in the tonga, Saeeda develops a fever. Hameeda goes upstairs to ask the landlord to fetch her medicine, but he seems to be asleep. The lavish spread of jewelry tempts her again, this time decisively, to finally possess the earrings she has coveted all along. She picks up the earrings and models them on her ears in a close-up shot that has the landlord sleeping in the background. She moves to leave with them from the apartment quietly, accompanied by an ominous percussion score. But to her horror, the landlord has awoken and now jubilantly blocks her path. He pushes her roughly on the bed and audaciously offers her a poisoned choice—either he reports the attempted theft, which would ruin her reputation and Dino's, or she makes herself available to him right then, in which case she can keep the *jhumke*, and what transpires between them that night will remain a secret. Hameeda, in shock, is now like an automaton who gives in to the landlord's coercive actions as he pushes her back on the bed with his arm. Afterward, as she is leaving his home in stupor, the landlord puts the *jhumke* on her ears as payment for the sexual transaction that just took place.



FIG. 3.6. Dino extends his arms to put his newly purchased *jhumke* (bell-shaped pendant earrings) on Hameeda. *Badnam* (1966).

Meanwhile, Dino is back home with his newly purchased *jhumke* and is wondering aloud where Hameeda has gone but assumes that she may have stepped out to purchase medicine for Saeeda. He is preparing to gift her the *jhumke* right away. Hameeda stumbles down the outside stairs and enters the house, disheveled and in a state of shock. In an excited monologue, Dino asks her to stand where she is, so that “the *jhumke* will themselves walk toward you!” His outstretched hands, holding the ornaments, approach her in order to place the earrings on her ears, but as his hands lift her hair to reach her ears, he is shocked to see that she is already wearing pendant earrings (figure 3.6).

The dialogue that follows has become something of a cult classic in Pakistani cinema, or *paisa vaṣūl* (ticket money well spent), according to Zakhmi Kanpuri.⁷⁰ Reportedly, audiences would repeatedly return to see *Badnam* just to see and hear this dialogue on screen. Dino walks backward, accompanied with a dissonant score, the camera focusing on his outstretched hands in jerky articulations. He moves back from where he had started, extremely perturbed. Crying out her name, he begins a new monologue of impassioned rage and sorrow, now turning to face the camera, with Hameeda out of focus in the distance in the background in a close-up shot



FIG. 3.7. Dino is shocked to discover the landlord's *jhumke* already on Hameeda. *Badnam* (1966).

of Dino. As the shot progresses, Dino appears to float back toward Hameeda as she slowly comes into focus and he comes nearer to her, both facing the camera (figure 3.7).

Kis ne pehnā'e haiṇ yeh jhumke
 Kahāṇ se ā'e haiṇ yeh jhumke
 tumhāre khule bāloṇ meṇ kyūṇ aṭke hū'e haiṇ yeh jhumke
 tumhārī āṅkhoṇ se kyūṇ baiḥ rahe haiṇ yeh jhumke

Who put these *jhumke* on you?
 Where did these *jhumke* come from!
 Why are these *jhumke* entangled in your open tresses?
 Why are these *jhumke* flowing from your eyes?

And turning again toward her, he continues accusingly:

kyā kaiḥ rahe haiṇ jhumke
 kyā batā rahe haiṇ jhumke

What are these *jhumke* saying?

What is the story of these *jhumke*!

He turns around and strikes the stupefied Hameeda so that she collapses against the charpoy (rope bed) propped against the wall, still in a dazed and silent state. Dino continues his impassioned monologue, berating her for having sold her chastity for the sake of the *jhumke* and saying that she has become a living corpse that he can neither bury nor mourn.⁷¹ And before she realizes what is happening, he picks up Saeeda and leaves the house forever. The popularity of this dialogue is a manifest index to anxieties surrounding conjugal relations and the status of women at a time of accelerating social change in Pakistan. Popular forms manage or repress the repercussions of societal anxieties, “gratifying intolerable, unrealizable, properly imperishable desires only to the degree to which they can again be laid to rest,” according to Fredric Jameson.⁷² *Badnam* in general, and this dialogue in particular, raises disturbing questions about the all too proximate relation between legal marriage and prostitution, if both relations are ultimately based on a transactional foundation exemplified here by the *jhumke*.

“The film should have ended here but proceeds further in the second half by dealing with their lives after separation,” Gazdar has suggested, but in fact, Manto’s story also continues on, and the second part of the film is largely faithful to it.⁷³ It begins with Hameeda going back to the landlord to ask for shelter, but he harshly berates her, telling her that she is not trustworthy even as a domestic servant. He dramatically offers her a lipstick, a premonition of her life to come as a fallen woman and a courtesan. Meanwhile, Dino and Saeeda move to another small home, and he begins working very long hours to provide for her education. Years pass, and Saeeda (played by Neelo; see figure I.2) comes of age as a graceful and accomplished young woman who joins an elite college where mostly sons and daughters of the rich study. Here, she meets Saeed, a young man from a poor rural family, who is initially a social misfit and has been roundly heckled and hazed by his classmates. Saeed and Saeeda begin to fall in love, and Saeed gifts her a pair of *jhumke* one day as a token of his love for her.

When Dino sees Saeeda with the *jhumke*, he imagines that his worst fears are coming to realization and that Saeeda is falling prey to the same overpowering desire for gold and jewelry that had led Hameeda astray. Hari Narayan notes, “Having developed an aversion to jewels, he considers his daughter’s *taleem* (education) the best ornament he can give her.”⁷⁴ Saeeda is unable to explain to him the honorable intentions of Saeed’s gift. In

desperation, Dino reluctantly sells the horse carriage and his faithful horse and uses the money to immediately buy a handful of jewelry that he brings to Saeeda, as he imagines that this might satisfy her desires and prevent her from straying. Eventually, however, Saeeda is able to convince Dino that the gift that she received was intended not for a sexual transaction but as an expression of true love. A relieved Dino reacquires his tonga.

Dino brings Saeeda to the college every day in his tonga. He has made her promise not to reveal that he is her father, as he does not want her classmates to find out about their poverty and lowly social status. However, one of the heckling students audaciously asks Dino to make Saeeda available to him, as he suspects, without any evidence, that Dino is working as a pimp for a sexually promiscuous Saeeda. In anger, Dino brings him to a lonely spot and gives him a thrashing. Saeed also comes under the mistaken impression now that Dino, the tonga driver, is an unscrupulous man who is leading Saeeda astray. He confronts Dino verbally and physically. Only then does Saeeda confess to her college mates that Dino is indeed her father. Dino also realizes that Saeed is a young man of character, blesses their love, and suggests that they marry right away.

The simple wedding ceremony of Saeeda and Saeed is held at Dino's small home, with Saeed's mother also present from the village. Some guests insist on a dance performance in the courtyard as festive entertainment. In keeping with the conventions of melodrama that abound with improbable chance encounters precisely timed to advance the narrative, the dancer who arrives to perform is none other than Hameeda herself. Upon seeing her after all these years, Dino refuses to let her stay or meet Saeeda. Hameeda now pleads to Dino that she is innocent and offers to bring evidence immediately from the landlord to prove this. When she arrives at the landlord's house, she finds him engaged in forcibly seducing yet another gullible woman who appears to be no older than an adolescent. Hameeda confronts him and shoots him dead but is also injured in the process. Returning back to Dino's house as she is dying, she confesses to Dino that she was tempted toward theft, was then trapped, and was forced to yield to the landlord completely against her wishes. The reason why she never revealed this to Dino was because she was fearful that Dino would have killed the landlord in rage—he would then go to jail, and Saeeda would be left without anyone to look after her. The film ends as the groom and bride depart from Dino's house in his tonga, as Hameeda lies dying in Dino's arms.

Badnam is distinctive as a film on several levels. Riaz Shahid's dialogue for the film is considered to be among the best he ever wrote in their

appropriateness, affect, and symbolism. In its “mastery [*chābuk dast*]” and “comprehensiveness [*jama ‘andāz*],” it has never been surpassed in Pakistani cinema, claims Pervez Anjum.⁷⁵ The dialogue assumes special resonance and density at multiple turns. The film’s camerawork and editing break away from the deeply sedimented theatrical conventions that characterize the social film from Lahore (which was acidly criticized by Alamgir Kabir, as discussed earlier in this chapter). Industry observer Zulqarnain Shahid notes that the “making of *Badnam* had a distinct hallmark of somebody who was ready to experiment technically. It had distinctive camerawork, sterling sound, and absolutely astounding editing.”⁷⁶ For example, the opening shots depict Dino sprucing his tonga at night and riding away after the credits. As the carriage moves toward the camera, the glass lamp held by Dino comes closer to occupying the frame. The lamp moves toward the camera to an extreme close-up out-of-focus shot, then a match cut shows an analogous close-up of a kerosene lamp that Hameeda holds as she walks away from the camera in the interior of the house. This parallelism conveys the sense that the two characters are headed in different directions.

Hameeda, played by the actress Nabila, before her fall is usually dressed in unadorned dark colors. Her movements and gestures are direct and forthright and suggest that the crisis that will make her into an automaton is already latent in her as a corporeal potential. The sequences that depict her internal struggle and crisis are accompanied by dissonant music. Anna Morcom has observed that in Bombay cinema convention, a background score that accompanies disharmony, violence, and disturbance is almost never based on Hindustani ragas.⁷⁷ *Badnam* makes effective use of this convention, such as when Hameeda takes hold of both earrings on her first visit to the landlord—she sees herself in the mirror, walks toward it, and holds the ornaments up to her ears in a close-up shot of herself reflected in the mirror. The space is bereft of any other presence, as she becomes totally immersed in a state of inner excitement and turmoil at the thought of possessing her surpassing desire.

The first song in the film is a *lorī*, or a lullaby, that Hameeda sings to put Saeeda to sleep. This comes right after she has encountered the *jhūmke* in the landlord’s house upstairs, and she is conflicted and troubled inside. As she picks up the sleepy young girl and sings, a crosscut edit shows Dino’s tonga moving swiftly and smoothly on the road, accompanied by a musical score that mimics the beat of the horse’s gait. As the song proceeds, the song’s verses express the desire for a cradle (*jhūlā*) that could put the little

girl to sleep more easily, which appears swinging in an imaginary darkened space. The lyrics become stranger, as Hameeda sings to the sleeping girl that her stationary lap can substitute for the cradle. She continues to sing while walking toward the family's small mirror, next to which hangs the Pond's cream advertisement that depicts a woman adorned with earrings. The camera follows Hameeda's gaze to focus on the advertisement. Her disturbed state of mind is symbolized by her continued attraction to the ornaments, which she desires above everything else—the cradle that will bring comfort and joy to the little girl is never a demand that she makes to Dino at any time, for example. The lullaby assumes surreal connotations when Hameeda lifts Saeeda above her head with both hands, singing, "The day will come when compassionate arms will spread out for us, and the world will no longer oppress us" (Din ā'e gā jab phailē ge apne liye sukh ke bāzū, phir chal nah sake gī ham par dunyā kī sinā zorī), a bizarre lyric in a lullaby meant to comfort a child, and made even stranger by the camera movement that moves quickly to frame her from below in a medium close-up as she holds the child high and somewhat menacingly above her head. The repeated crosscut editing emphasizes the divergence between Dino and Hameeda. As Dino moves smoothly and swiftly in his carriage across Lahore, Hameeda is trapped in her house and in her mind, in a scenario that offers her no way out.

Dino traverses the length and breadth of the city, carrying various passengers across the diverse environments of Lahore's elite and impoverished neighborhoods, commercial plazas, and stately buildings. These are presented as vignettes that dissolve into each other, overlaid at times with close-ups of his face, the jeweler's face, or rotating ornaments that mimic the movement of the tonga wheel, accompanied with a jaunty background score. Gold is the *primum mobile* animating capitalist urban life.

After Hamida's fall into prostitution, at the *koṭhā* (apartment) of the courtesans who perform for an audience, another haunting song-and-dance sequence was filmed and edited with techniques uncommon in Lahore cinema, such as crane shots, canted and unconventional angles, and montage editing. The sequence evokes a sensorial experience of fragmented theatricality. Dino drives a client to the red light district one night, and the client asks him to wait until he returns. Dino rests in his carriage on the street, as the *mujrā* dance performance begins one floor upstairs at a balcony overlooking the street. The crane shots move alternately from showing Dino close-up to gliding up one floor to a long shot of the balcony from the outside. Inside, Hameeda is singing the lyrics of the *mujrā* song "Barē



FIG. 3.8. *Mujrā* (dance) song “Baṛe be-muravvat haiṅ yeh ḥusn wāle” (The exquisite beloved is uncaring). Hameeda plays the *tanpura* (stringed instrument), while actress Zamarrud dances. *Badnam* (1966).

be-muravvat haiṅ yeh ḥusn wāle” (The exquisite beloved is uncaring) and playing the *tanpura* (stringed instrument) with deep pathos, while a dance is performed by the actress Zamarrud (figure 3.8).

As the sound drifts outside the balcony to the street below, the awareness slowly sinks in for Dino that the song is being sung by none other than his estranged wife. In montage shots within the apartment, Zamarrud’s rhinestone-encrusted dress and her dance moves and Hameeda’s shimmering silvery brocade and jewelry are accentuated by a soft-focus lens that brings out the pathos of Hameeda’s visage. Note that a meaning of the word *jhumka* includes a chandelier hanging from a ceiling. Polished mirrors dizzyingly reflect the dancer, and an outsize rotating chandelier frames her in shot compositions that evoke a world of glittering surface effects; across these, the lyrics of the song reverberate in sonic waves, performed by the *kaifi* singer Surayia Multanikar. The song became immensely popular, with a circulation far beyond the ambit of the film itself (figure 3.9).⁷⁸

Badnam’s music director was Deebo Bhattacharya, a Bengali who reportedly came to West Pakistan during the midfifties to work with music director Timir Baran, who was also the music director of *Jago Hua Savera*,



FIG. 3.9. Zamarrud's dance accompanying the song "Bare be-muravvat haiñ yeh ḥusn wāle" (The exquisite beloved is uncaring). The word *jhumka* also refers to a chandelier. *Badnam* (1966).

as discussed in chapter 1. Bhattacharya stayed on in West Pakistan throughout the sixties and left only in the early seventies.⁷⁹ Another remarkable song sequence is "Bohat be ābrū ho kar tere kūche se ham nikle" (We departed from your street in disgrace), performed by the male students in their college hostel, who lampoon the student who was beaten up by Dino for insinuating that his daughter was a loose woman. The refrain in this *qawwali* is taken from a famous *ghazal* (lyric poem) by Mirza Ghalib (1797–1869) that is ostensibly addressed to a beloved who rejects and humiliates the lover. Symbolism in the *ghazal* form is multivalent, however, and here, its parody addresses anti-imperial geopolitics.⁸⁰ Three students—dressed as a Victorian gentleman evidently modeled after Sherlock Holmes to signify the British, a French legionnaire, and an Uncle Sam figure (performed by Saeed)—stand near a large wall map of Africa and mock the defeat of the British in Suez, the withdrawal of France from Algeria, and the retreat of US forces from Korea (figure 3.10).⁸¹

As seen on the wall poster of *Shaheed* near the jeweler's shop earlier in the film, *Badnam*'s world is punctuated with references to historical and contemporary leftist and anticolonial struggles. The private universe of the



FIG. 3.10. Saeed as Uncle Sam mocking the retreat of the American forces from Korea in the song “Bohat be ābrū ho kar tere kūche se ham nikle” (We departed from your street in disgrace). *Badnam* (1966).

social film is not sealed off from the larger world, even as this world is evoked through melodramatic conventions in Lahore cinema.

The globality of *Badnam* is evoked in the film by circular motifs, which begin at the very opening credits, which show a spinning wheel of the tonga, and in “iris” wipes as the tonga moves from one shot to the next. The circulation of the tonga all over Lahore serves as a local version of the global, which Dino offers as an analogy to Saeeda when she expresses great interest in one of her chosen subjects in college, geography, and explains its importance to him. And when Dino is alarmed at Saeeda’s acceptance of the *jhumke*, he directs his monologue to the small globe she has been using in her geography studies. The globe serves as a stand-in for society at large, which denigrates the value of labor and honesty and instead uses gold and lucre to manipulate human needs and weaknesses and takes advantage of this dependence for exploitation (and is also depicted on the film poster; see figure 3.5). This sequence is among the most resonant in the film, shot from multiple angles, including close-up shots of Dino angrily addressing the globe and then him facing the camera in a composition in which the globe is recessed in the background—similar to the shots when Dino

discovered the *jhumke* on Hameeda. He finally picks up and attacks the globe, smashing it on the ground. Circularity is also present in the rotating chandelier (also a *jhumka*) in the courtesan's apartment, and it is foregrounded in the vertical shots composed from the top of the chandelier, through which the undulating figure of the dancer on the floor is framed. And it is reiterated in the large paper decorative ornament (which can also be described in Urdu as a *jhumka*) hanging outside Dino's house at Saeeda's wedding, which Hameeda fondles during her conversation with Dino.

Finally, circularity is also generational—Dino is terrified that Saeeda is traversing the same moral arc that her mother did, in their desire for the *jhumke*. This is partly a cinematic convention in Lahore cinema that *Badnam* engages with. Alamgir Kabir has observed that in West Pakistani films, “a good number of the script-writers appear to have a strong faith in some ill-conceived theories of heredity. For them, the son of a respectable father invariably grows up to be respectable and that of a wicked man is almost inevitably condemned to be wicked.”⁸² The fact that Dino's fears are not borne out by Saeeda suggests that *Badnam* is engaged in a critical retake of this convention, in which individual transformation is not premised upon the prison of biological transmission but is malleable according to circumstances and character, not unlike the value of education for self-cultivation that *Clerk* stresses.

Socially conscious cinema in Lahore during the long sixties consequently needs to be situated within a capacious category encompassing various genres—and indeed the dominant social film itself is largely aligned in this register in the way it evokes the fantasies and nightmares of modernization and its refraction onto issues of gender and class. As exemplified in the film *Zinda Bhaag*, examined in chapter 4, commercial cinema continues to revisit these concerns in present-day Lahore, by drawing on cinematic modes and tropes of earlier films from across South Asia.