Afroz Taj examines the text of Saghar Nizami’s play *Anarkali* and compares it to the earlier play of the same name by Imtiyaz Ali Taj. He describes how Saghar’s play engages Imtiyaz Ali Taj’s text while reworking the Anarkali legend in light of the utopian project of the young Indian republic. A close reading of Saghar’s text reveals several linguistic devices metaphorizing Indian linguistic and cultural diversity.

After Independence and Partition in 1947, there was a new blossoming of Urdu dramatic literature in both Pakistan and India. The divergent development of these two national literatures is beyond the scope of this article, but in each country Urdu dramatists encountered different opportunities. In Pakistan, Syed Imtiyaz Ali Taj (1900–70), whose 1922 drama *Anarkali* was the epitome of the late Parsi theater, became a leading figure as a radio scriptwriter as well as a writer of children’s books and editor of women’s magazines. In India, a new generation of poets and writers was emerging, flush with the exhilaration of newfound artistic and political freedoms and armed with a progressive utopian vision. Among these was Saghar Nizami (1905–84).

In this period we see for the first time a marked bifurcation in the Urdu-language performing arts. One branch, the mainstream cinema industry, was driven by economic forces and dependent on box office success. As a general rule, it had no pretensions to literary quality or stylistic innovation; it was based rather on the continual reworking of the standard formulas, albeit with a distinct infusion of Nehruvian socialism.

The other branch, championed by a new generation of intellectuals, strove to find a new voice through formal experimentation and a rejection of the old. It was only a matter of time before this new generation of writers would try its hand at drama; the fashion of the times dictated that they would gravitate toward socialist realism, which invested every drama with a social conscience and a political agenda. Many such dramas were written originally for radio broadcast.
Some of these writers discovered that poetic drama, with its emphasis on beautiful language and aesthetic delight, could function as a sugar-coated pill for the moral, political, and educational messages they wanted to convey. In the days of colonial censorship, poetry had been the medium of choice when one’s message was potentially provocative, but in the mid-twentieth century, the ornateness and indirectness of poetry had fallen out of fashion. After Independence, playwrights could express their concerns openly, in blunt and homely prose. The era of the *ghazal* غزل (thematically unrelated couplets sharing a single rhyme scheme and meter) and the *masnavi* منتوی (a long poem in rhyming couplets on a unified theme) seemed to be receding.

The power of poetry is so great, however, and its place so firmly established in India’s cultural matrix that even the most avant-garde writers could not reject it entirely. From the earliest days of South Asian drama, verse had been the mode of choice for the expression of emotion, as it allowed characters to compress vast meanings in a few words. Poetry allowed the dramatist to use allegory, metaphor, allusion, and simile to build a web of correspondences that infinitely enriched the dramatic text. Since the dramatist must efficiently capture a character’s whole emotional life, poetry was seen as a more effective vehicle than prose.

Poetry has other advantages for drama as well. It is uniquely descriptive and evocative, and it is meant to be spoken and to be recited on stage. In the South Asian context, for full effect, poetry must be heard aloud, as for example in a *musha’ira* مشاعر (a poetry recital in which multiple poets participate). When characters on stage speak in verse, the rhythms and rhymes quickly draw the listener into the action and convey the feelings of the dramatist.

Poetry was not without pitfalls, however. It was easy to get caught up in verse spinning. This was the chief fault of the Parsi theater dramatists who packed their dramas with poetry and song at the expense of plot. Likewise, the dramatist might be seduced by ostentatious language and lose sight of the need to further the plot. In drama, poetry must be the means to an end rather than the end itself. The most effective poetic dramas were those that struck a balance between form and content: they neither obscured their message with overwrought poetic language nor allowed their moral agenda to compromise their quality as works of literature. In the mid-twentieth century, South Asian Urdu dramatists were searching for just such a balance.

The result was a new kind of poetic drama, one which simultaneously pursued formal experimentation and explored new themes and messages. Eventually the poetic dramatists came full circle; Saghar Nizami and others would return to the old tales and the old characters, and breathe new life into them. They could survey the rich and gaudy tradition of the Parsi
Saghar Nizami

Saghar Nizami was one of the main Urdu writers responsible for the revival of the Urdu poetic drama. Born on December 21, 1905, in Aligarh, his full name was Sardar Muhammad Samad Yaar Khan. He used the pen-name Saghar. He was educated in Arabic, Persian, and Sanskrit, in addition to Urdu and Hindi. He began publishing collections of poetry in the late 1920s; his early collections and books include Tehzeeb-e Sarguzisht (The Refinement of History, 1927), Suboohi (Morning Draught of Wine, 1932), Kehkashan (Galaxy, 1934), and Badah-e Mashriq (Eastern Wine, 1935). His first drama, published in 1960, was a 356-page reworking in modern Urdu of Kalidas’s Shakuntala (ca. fifth century). This work was an enormous critical success, and the quality of Saghar’s poetry was praised throughout the Urdu-reading world. In 1969, on the eve of the Ghalib centenary, Saghar was awarded the Padma Bhushan Award, one of India’s highest civilian honors.

Saghar’s great poetic drama Anarkali first appeared in the form of a radio script that was broadcast in 1958 on All India Radio. It was subsequently rewritten and published in 1963. At some point Saghar had been invited to help write the screenplay for K. Asif’s 1960 film Mughal-e Azam (The Great Mughal) based on Imtiyaz Ali Taj’s play Anarkali. Although his name does not appear in the credits of the film, we can hypothesize that Saghar was inspired to write his own drama while associated with this project.

After Anarkali, Saghar wrote Nehru Namah (Sea Goddess, 1972), at the request of Indira Gandhi; and Mash’al-e Azadi (Torch of Freedom, 1980), a long poem on the Indian Mutiny and the subsequent freedom struggle, for which he received the Urdu Academy Award in 1981. While often drawing upon well-known stories from history or legend, Saghar’s poetry and dramas are generally political and often evoke a utopian vision of a reformed society.

Throughout his life, Saghar was involved in the film industry, working as a poet, lyricist, and screenwriter. In addition to Mughal-e Azam, he was associated with Mirza Ghalib (dir. Sohrab Modi, 1954), Jhansi ki Rani (Queen of Jhansi, dir. Sohrab Modi, 1952), and Shalimar Pictures’ Man ki Jeet (Victory of the Heart, dir. W. Z. Ahmed, 1944). He was also affiliated with All India Radio and wrote many radio features. Saghar died on February 27, 1984.

Saghar’s dramas speak to both the past and the future of Urdu poetic drama. On the one hand, his reworkings of texts like Shakuntala and Anar-
kali link him to the Parsi theater tradition. On the other hand, his approach is novel, and his voice is fresh and unfettered by the overused formulas of the past. He was one of the first post-1947 Urdu writers to pursue literary experiments in dramatic form, and he set for himself the enormous challenge of investing the old stories with new themes, forms, and messages.

**Anarkali**

Saghar’s *Anarkali* is an entirely new breed of poetic drama. Where Taj wrote *Anarkali* in prose as a revolt against the Parsi theater song-sequence paradigm, Saghar’s play is an attempt to create a new dramatic texture based on a varied combination of traditional, blank, and free-verse forms. Using Taj’s drama as a subtext, Saghar creates an innovative and thoroughly modern poetic drama.

Saghar’s *Anarkali* is essentially a free-form dream sequence that assumes an intimate knowledge of Taj’s play and its source legend. In one sense the play depicts the aftermath of the events with which Taj’s play concludes: the execution of Anarkali and Salim’s psychological breakdown. But Saghar’s play is not a sequel. It is rather a reinterpretation or a reevaluation of the story told by Taj. This is not the same approach as that used by the older Parsi theater dramatists who in drawing upon earlier romances and masnavis freely omitted plot details that would be tedious or ineffective on stage and that were already familiar to their audiences. Saghar, by contrast, actively engages Taj in a kind of intertextual debate; Saghar relies on Taj to provide the backstory, but at the same time challenges the fundamental moral assumptions on which Taj’s play is based.

The action of Saghar’s play begins where Taj’s ends with prince Salim crying and mourning Anarkali in front of his mother, Jodhabai. Eventually he falls unconscious and begins to dream. He sees himself walking hand in hand in a garden with Anarkali, and the two reaffirm their love. Salim’s father, the Emperor Akbar, appears and exhorts Salim to renounce her. Anarkali’s rival and nemesis Gulandam (Taj’s Dilaram) then arrives and attempts to divide them. Gulandam fights with Anarkali and curses her. Salim cannot tolerate this; he draws his sword to strike Gulandam, but instead strikes a tree. The earth splits open and an ocean appears in the breach. Anarkali is on one side and Salim is on the other. He immediately jumps into the ocean — only to wake up on the other side of his life with Akbar and Jodhabai watching him scream for Anarkali. He says,

Alas! It was such a beautiful dream,
Make me sleep again, make me sleep again. (Saghar 1963, 200)
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Jodhabai weeps in sympathy, while Akbar remains impassive. Excepting the first and last acts, all of the action takes place in the bright fog of Salim’s dream.

Let us look at the dramatic text in a little more detail. The play consists of eight short acts. Act I begins with Salim and Jodhabai reacting to Anarkali’s death. Akbar enters and Jodhabai reproaches him fiercely for his hypocrisy and lack of compassion. This immediately demonstrates the difference between Taj and Saghar: Taj’s Jodhabai is not nearly this bold and assertive.

In Act II, Saghar gives Anarkali stanzas that describe Salim’s dreamland. She describes the transfigured beauty of the world, the fragrances and colors, and the glorious light that steeps the valleys and mountains. This is an example of the device called *husn-e taleel* which invests the whole world with the lovers’ happiness. Her poem ends with the radiant lines:

> At every step there is ecstasy and dance.
> Into which world has my desire brought me?
> Into which atmosphere is my life soaring? (Saghar 1963, 125)

Saghar paints the whole scene in the colors of wonder and ecstasy.

Saghar’s play is replete with similar images of transcendence and escape. Two passages in Taj’s drama particularly seem to prefigure this mood in Saghar’s drama and probably played a part in its conception. The first occurs in Taj’s Act I, Scene 3, in which Anarkali speaks to her sister: “I wish I was free, sitting in a boat, set adrift on the quiet waves of the Raavi, accompanied by fragrances and by the sound of flutes in the moonlit night. . . . Otherwise I would ride in a chariot drawn by two horses, restless like tongues of flame” (Taj 1987, 73). Saghar borrows the latter image when a supernatural chariot appears from the sky to carry the two lovers. Anarkali remarks: “Did you call down this chariot of Indra from the sky” (Saghar 1963, 126)? Both passages contain allusions to the episode in the Hindu epic *Mahabharata* महाभारत in which the king-god Indra sends a chariot drawn by ten thousand golden horses to carry Arjun up into the heavens.

In another passage from Taj that may have inspired Saghar, Salim imagines himself and Anarkali in a state of perfect bliss: “We would embrace, there would be no fear. The sky would draw us and we would be raised up into new lights, the earth would slip from beneath our feet . . . .” (Taj 1987, 80). This passage anticipates the characteristic mood of Saghar’s drama; it captures the same transcendent emotion, the same feeling of wandering the heavens beyond the reach of death.

Act III is dedicated to the love of Salim and Anarkali. In this verse sequence they are essentially giving themselves to one other; the whole act is full of the *raddīf* رديف “mere liye hai” (for me) and “tere liye hai” (for you).
The act concludes with a divine blessing in the shape of a chorus sung by the hoor and ghalman حور و غلامان, female and male attendants of the faithful in Paradise.

In Act IV, the lovers have passed beyond their initial ecstasy and are now confident and secure in each other's love. The poetry is more relaxed as it describes the essential unity of the lovers' souls. Anarkali realizes that without Salim, everything is useless. She says that all the stars, the galaxies, and the moon are meaningless in the absence of Salim:

If I do not receive the alms of light from Salim’s face,
There will be no revelry and light left in the moon’s beauty.
(Saghar 1963, 134)

Anarkali, bordering on idolatry, begins to refer to Salim as “devta” دیوتا (deity) and “ma’bood” معبد (god). Incidentally, this one of the play’s first examples of the technique I call “cross-etymology”: the juxtaposition of Sanskrit words with synonymous Arabic or Persian words. Salim is likewise idolatrous when he says:

The right to prostrate himself at your feet is Salim’s and only Salim’s.
(Saghar 1963, 135)

This line interestingly contrasts with other passages in which Salim highlights Anarkali’s sensual attributes, such as her body, her fragrance, and her dancing and singing.

Act V introduces the first signs of trouble: the disembodied voice of Akbar and the appearance of the Jailor. Akbar cannot part the couple but Anarkali becomes disturbed. In Act VI, Akbar appears on stage to confront Salim directly. This is an example of the poetic debate, found in a less refined form in other Urdu plays like those of Agha Hashr Kashmiri آغا ہشز کشمری (1879–1935). Akbar and Salim argue with equal confidence and conviction. Salim wins when Akbar flies into a rage and insults Anarkali, calling her “naachti titli” ناچتی ٹلی (“dancing butterfly”). Salim stands his ground and Akbar disappears. Taj’s Akbar never loses control or dignity, and his Salim is relatively ineffectual; Saghar has reversed their relations. In Saghar’s dramatic scheme, Anarkali’s death has simultaneously shaken Akbar’s confidence and given Salim a kind of tragic strength.

The scene raises issues that are the crux of the whole drama, and Saghar responds to them with elegant and powerful poetry. Akbar considers his son’s love a foolish sentiment that threatens to destroy Akbar’s carefully constructed civilization and empire. For Salim, Anarkali is the harbinger of a new world order, in which the two build an entirely new tradition
founded on love. Akbar repeatedly tries to ensnare Salim in the coils of fatherly concern and affection, but Salim knows that this is not love but bondage to the old tradition. Salim’s desire undermines Akbar’s will.

Act VI concerns the emperor’s fear for the future of India’s traditions and its throne. Several quotations indicate the thrust of his argument:

What were my dreams?
On this [Salim’s] shoulder, I wish! on this shoulder,
That the banner of Babur would shine more brightly.
(Saghar 1963, 156)

May you be the custodian of the glory of the race of Timur.
(Saghar 1963, 157)

You are playing with the word “religion.”
Do you know what religion is?
(Saghar 1963, 167)

Why does Akbar mention religion and his hopes for the empire? Does he have any reason to believe that Anarkali threatens these?

Saghar nicely brings out the inherent contradiction in Akbar’s attitude. The emperor refuses to let his son marry Anarkali because he does not want Salim’s love to interfere with his future career as ruler. Indeed, Akbar himself selected his own wife, Jodhabai, a Rajput princess, for primarily political reasons, not the least of which was to promote his policy of Hindu-Muslim coexistence. The pious Akbar, the founder of his own religion, Din-e Ilahi, rejects Salim and Anarkali’s love on the grounds of social inequality, Anarkali being a court dancer and unworthy of the throne. If both Islam and Akbar’s derivative Din-e Ilahi are founded on the concept of inherent human equality (masaavat مساوات), how can Akbar simultaneously promote social equality and veto the marriage of Anarkali and Salim? For all his pretended piety, Akbar is a creature of political expediency and a hypocrite. What religion tolerates murdering the innocent? Jodhabai herself has accused Akbar of this crime in Act 1:

Where the message of the messenger of God gave the dignity of queens to maids,
Where he gave the highest dignity and respect to slaves, making world rulers ashamed,
There you have caused to be immured an innocent, naive girl.
Is this religion? Is this morality? Is this compassion for mankind? Is this the fear of God?
(Saghar 1963, 118)
The Hindu queen clearly understands the precepts of Islam better than Akbar. The struggle between humanism and bigotry disguised as religion was much in the forefront in the young Indian republic. It is ironic that Akbar, one of the most earnestly humanist rulers in Indian history, is immortalized in drama and film as an intolerant and jealous father, while Salim, the future Emperor Jahangir, is accorded the moral high ground.

The centerpiece of Saghar’s play, beautiful in both conception and execution, is the Act VI poem in which Akbar compares ishq عشق (love) and aqal عقل (wisdom). This opposition between Salim’s passion and Akbar’s prudence is the driving conflict of the play, and Saghar sets up a marvelous series of comparisons between the two.

In Acts V and VI, Saghar avenges Akbar’s triumph at the end of Taj’s play. The audience can only watch Taj’s play in despair as Akbar has Anarkali executed. In Saghar’s play – at least for a while – Salim thwarts Akbar and all wrongs are righted. Even the Jailor does not escape; he appears dying of thirst.

By Act VII, which takes place in Salim’s bedroom, doubts have arisen in Anarkali’s mind. She has been affected by Akbar’s arguments and accepts that she might endanger India’s future. She reminds Salim of the importance of his father’s love and urges him to consider the empire’s future. She blames herself for everything and tries to convince Salim to leave her. She releases Salim from responsibility, saying: “Do not take my tears as someone’s complaint” (Saghar 1963, 170). And later: “Remove me from your heart, forget me” (Saghar 1963, 187).

Act VIII begins as Salim searches for Anarkali. She appears suddenly. Then she dances while Akbar’s voice echoes in Salim’s mind. Again the whole scene of her arrest flashes before him to remind the audience of Taj’s story. After Akbar’s voice has ceased, Gulandam (Taj’s Dilaram) appears and argues with Salim and Anarkali and succeeds in separating them. This act is a masterpiece of tension and suspense. Saghar is at once reminding us of the tragedy of the “real story” even as he changes it slightly. One of the frustrating things in Taj’s drama is that we know that however strong Salim’s love for Anarkali is, he will in six short years forget her and take up the reins of empire. We are deprived of the sort of “love-death” that we find in the stories of Laila Majnoon, Romeo and Juliet, or Tristan and Isolde. But Saghar gives us something else. Salim casts himself into the ocean crying: “I am with you till the limits of eternity” (Saghar 1963, 218). With these words still on his lips, Salim awakens in the “real world,” with Anarkali dead and gone. The audience now has an alternate reality to contrast with the historical fact portrayed in Taj’s drama. We may prefer the dream world, where true love creates its own everlasting heaven even while we acknowledge the harsh victory of politics and tyranny. Saghar’s drama is truly modern in the sense that it does not assert a single reality; rather it
admits that each person creates his or her own reality and that each person’s vision of reality is valid.

**Saghar’s Poetic Language**

Saghar’s verse is remarkably varied in meter, even from couplet to couplet, and occasionally within couplets themselves. In direct rebellion against the metrical strictures of nineteenth-century Urdu poetry, Saghar changes the meter continuously in order to modulate the tone according to the mood of the characters and in order to provide variety. The poetic forms in the play range from the *azad nazm* آزاد نظم، a form of free verse, to the traditional ghazal, with its highly formalized rhyme scheme and metrical consistency. Between these two poles, Saghar chooses his forms carefully to reflect the emotional and intellectual state of the characters. He himself described his rationale in an introduction to the play: “The meters of this drama are rooted in the sentiment [of the characters]. Some of these meters are known, some are unknown [new], and there are also some *azad nazms*” (Saghar 1963, 81).

Just as the story of Anarkali is traditional but told in a completely new way, so Saghar’s poetry has roots in tradition while its branches wave in the fresh air of imagination. One of his own couplets captures the essence of his approach: “To stitch a shroud in the style of a wedding gown” (Saghar 1963, 155). It should be noted that the term *azad nazm* was coined in the twentieth century and that this form of poetry, which has no regular rhyme or meter but which is nevertheless poetic, is in some ways an outgrowth of the medieval *dastan*-style (dastans داستان were long prose romances) and nineteenth century Parsi theater-style rhyming prose. The two idioms share the same features: internal rhymes, metrical regularity (but no strict meter), a preference for poetic vocabulary, and the use of poetic devices such as metaphor and simile. In his use of language, Saghar is thus not so far from the Parsi theater after all.

Saghar is truly at his best when describing the transfiguring power of love. An example of Saghar’s most singable poetry is found in Act VI when Salim describes how he imagines Anarkali breaking the chains of her prison, breaking out of the wall, emerging into light, starting to smile, and her appearance causes even the “stone faces to smile.” Salim’s song is full of Saghar’s utopian vision, and ends with the line: “The cup of happiness began to well from the earth” (Saghar 1963, 151–2).

Let’s look more closely at Saghar’s use of language. In general he writes in a highly refined Urdu, but his style is never pretentious or obscure. Occasionally he enriches his vocabulary with words from Sanskrit. This is especially apparent in the lines given to Jodhabai, who of course remained a Hindu even after her marriage to Akbar. In these passages Saghar creates a linguistic metaphor for the intermingling of the two cultures: the Hindi
words are set like jewels in the Urdu matrix, each complementing the other. He often conjoins Sanskritic and Perso-Arabic words in the same couplet, creating a parallelism of meaning and metaphorizing the intermingling of the cultures.

Jodhabai’s lines to Salim in Act I exemplify Saghar’s use of Sanskritic words. Note the parallelism between the Sanskritic (S) and Perso-Arabic (PA) vocabulary.

Meri shakti hai tu, meri himmat hai tu
Mera sammaan hai, meri izzat hai tu.

You are my power (S), you are my strength (PA)
You are my prestige (S), you are my respect (PA).
(Saghar 1963, 111)

Although this hybrid vocabulary is particularly appropriate for Jodhabai, the Hindu Rajput queen married to the Muslim emperor Akbar, she is by no means the only one endowed with this kind of language. Another example of the mixture of Hindi and Urdu occurs in the opening of Act VIII, when Anarkali has temporarily vanished and Salim is calling to her, bewailing her absence. Describing Anarkali, Saghar uses the same linguistic device to create a poetic counterpoint:

Sho’la-e tund (AP) kahaan, aur kahaan neel kanval (S)?

Khaulta neer (S) kahaan, saaghar-e billor (AP) kahaan?
Phool kaiser ka (S) kahaan, aur kahaan paarah-e sang (AP)?

How far the fierce flame from the water lily!
How far the boiling water from the goblet of crystal!
How far the marigold from the piece of stone! (Saghar 1963, 195)

Anarkali herself uses Hindi words, some of which have Hindu religious connotations. For example, she uses “akash” (sky), “Indra” (Hindu deity), and “devta” (deity) in the same section of Act II (Saghar 1963,
126). Salim likewise uses the words “megh” (clouds) and “gagan” (sky) (Saghar, 152).

One of Anarkali’s poems features a distinctly Hindi folk-song style and inscribes a Hindu theme. It contains words like “chundri” (scarf), “Jamuna” (the river by which Krishna used to play his flute), “aamon ke kunj” (mango groves), “madhur” (sweet), and “baansuri” (bamboo flute) (Saghar 1963, 178). The practice of including such folk songs in Urdu drama was of course well established by Amanat Lakhnavi’s (1815–58) opera *Indar Sabha* (The Court of Indra, 1853), but Saghar has endowed it with a new political significance, discernable in Salim’s answer:

\[
\text{Meri janambhoomi hai naghmon ki dharti} \\
\text{Meri janambhoomi kalaon ka gulshan.}
\]

Here Saghar, like his Urdu playwright predecessors, uses the diversity of India’s languages and song genres as a metaphor for the national diversity of India. Such songs are at heart a celebration of India’s variety and its differing flavors and colors.

Saghar’s eloquent use of *ista’rah* (metaphor) is exemplified in Act I. Jodhabai says to Akbar:

\[
\text{Just look at your own hands, the fresh blood of life is on them.} \\
\text{The pyre of a ray of light, the shroud of a flower bud. (Saghar, 120)}
\]

The metaphoric words “kiran” (ray) and “kali” (bud) are especially powerful because they are closely associated with Anarkali.

**The Two Anarkalis**

Saghar’s *Anarkali* is distinguished from the earlier version of the play in the following ways. First, Saghar is clearly conscious of recent Western literary trends. His play has affinities with the late nineteenth-century symbolist movement and the twentieth-century surrealist movement, set as it is in the world of Salim’s dreams. These movements shared a rejection of prosaic realism and a turn toward dreams, poetry, and imagination. This also explains Saghar’s use of poetry: he is describing a dream world, a world of
imagination, a world where prose would seem inappropriately dull and ordinary.

Second, Anarkali is very difficult to stage, with its scenes of the earth splitting and an ocean appearing. Saghar seemingly intended his play as a radio script more than a stage script; Taj of course designed his play purely with the stage in mind. Saghar himself admits in his introduction to the play that he is no expert in the mechanics of the stage (Saghar 1963, 81). Saghar is primarily a poet, but a poet who ventured into drama, and perhaps for this reason his plays are vague about staging details. He writes that Anarkali can be presented as a poetic drama, as an opera, or as a ballet.

Third, whereas Taj felt compelled to reject the formal parameters of the Parsi theater tradition, Saghar is distant enough to feel comfortable picking and choosing from the legacy of the Parsi theater. Taj, in a concession to realism, believed that poetry could not help but seem unnatural on stage since people do not actually speak that way. But Saghar’s priority is the exploration of his characters’ emotions rather than the creation of realistic dialogue.

The difference between the poetic and the prose approaches is demonstrated by a comparison between analogous scenes in Taj and Saghar. Saghar’s first act corresponds to Taj’s final scene. Indeed, Salim’s despairing request in Taj to “send me there” (i.e., to Anarkali) is the starting point of Saghar’s dramatic trajectory. In both dramas Salim’s lament before Jodhabai is moving. In Taj it is captured by the simple but poignant refrain “Amma Anarkali, Amma Anarkali” (Mother Anarkali, Mother Anarkali). In Saghar, Salim’s lament is set in elaborate poetry:

Alas that image of the moon-brow
Alas that delicate face
Alas for my white rose
Alas for my jasmine. (Saghar 1963, 113)

Salim continues:

A wave of fragrance has been sealed in the wall
The music of pleasure has been sealed in the wall
The dance and song has been sealed in the wall
The cup and the wine have been sealed in the wall. (Saghar 1963, 114)

The underlying philosophy of the two approaches is entirely different. Taj is striving for a realistic effect. He portrays a man in love who has just lost everything he held most dear, and his Salim can barely speak for grief. But grief gives Saghar’s Salim a tongue. Where Taj relies on the actor’s talent to convey this deep sorrow in few words, Saghar has endowed his character
with an elaborate song of lament. Saghar seeks to draw out, intensify, and elaborate the emotion in the traditional Sanskrit dramatic fashion, so the music and words unite in a tour de force of tragedy. In the wrong hands Taj’s scene could be flat or maudlin, while Saghar’s scene could degenerate into overacted melodrama. Both approaches have their merits.

It is interesting that Saghar’s Salim concentrates primarily on the physical attributes of Anarkali. As in the passage cited above, he consistently uses similes that emphasize her beauty, her dancing, and the solipsistic intoxication of the desire she evokes. In Taj, Salim respects Anarkali and even goes down on his knees before her. In Saghar, Salim’s love is if anything stronger, but its tone is slightly different. Saghar also changed the personalities of the main characters. Both Salim and Anarkali are more aggressive, more self-assured, and more courageous in their defiance of authority, and this is the clearest evidence that the mood of Indian dramatic literature had changed. No more passive princes or trembling beloveds. Saghar’s Salim is defiant, strong, courageous, and idealistic. He acts impulsively and decisively in pursuit of Anarkali and he is not afraid to flout his father’s will, openly showing his love for Anarkali before Akbar. Likewise, Anarkali is bold enough to hold Salim’s hand and to make eye contact with him. She is thrilled by the prospect of becoming his queen. Even Jodhabai is more assertive in her relationship with Akbar, and Gulandam is blunter than Dilaram. Perhaps Saghar wants to suggest that in dreams we may be more aggressive than in our real lives, or perhaps he is allowing the poetry to embolden his characters’ expression and display of emotion.

In Taj’s play, Anarkali lives in constant terror; she wants her mother to take her far away from the palace and its intrigues into the trackless jungle. Taj’s Anarkali speaks very little and lives in constant fear. Saghar makes her a much more courageous character. In Saghar, she speaks, sings song after song, and is completely unafraid. In Act III she even stares into her lover’s eyes and holds his hands (Saghar 1963, 130). In Taj she is terrified of even associating with the royal family, but in Saghar she is charmed when Salim places a crown on her head and says:

Are this crown and this diamond-decorated throne for me?

Whatever is available in this world of possibilities
Is for me, for me, for me. (Saghar 1963, 131)

This passage is remarkable for casting Anarkali in an opportunistic light. Despite her assertiveness, she remains generous and compassionate, a true queen. When Salim and Anarkali share the vision of the Jailor dying of thirst, Anarkali is deeply concerned and wants to alleviate his sufferings
Moreover, Saghar portrays Anarkali as wise and practical. She often speaks in aphorisms; the best examples occur in Act VIII, just before Salim’s dream ends, when Anarkali is all courage and determination (Saghar 1963, 207–8). Anarkali shows her courage and her refusal to regret the past especially in the exchange with Gulandam, saying proudly, “I have shaken the foundations of the empire” (Saghar 1963, 210).

**Utopian Vision**

One of the most interesting aspects of Saghar’s drama is the completely new political theme that is woven through the poetry. In the Urdu dramas written before Indian independence, and even in Indar Sabha, as I have shown elsewhere (see The Court of Indar and the Rebirth of North Indian Drama, Delhi: Anjuman Taraqqi Urdu, 2006), the overall national mood was reflected in the choice of stories: tales of fantasy worlds, fairy kidnappings, dethroned kings, and lovers who choose death instead of surrender. All of these plots, though they may be escapist fantasies, revolve around the conflict between love and authority or the issue of might versus right. Even dramas that were not based on such tales would often include themes of self-determination and cultural pride, hinting at a nascent nationalism. In Saghar, writing ten years after independence, an entirely new mood prevails. A utopian spirit permeates the play, growing perhaps out of the exhilaration of freedom. Dedicated to Jawaharlal Nehru, the play contains numerous references to the evils of violence and the abuses of politics. Salim and Anarkali together represent a visionary dream of peace, love, and understanding. When Salim draws his sword, all is lost; he is drawn back into the world of murder and intrigue where his beloved is no more.

Like his predecessors in the Parsi theater, Saghar has peppered his drama with lines and couplets expressing political sentiments. In the Parsi theater, such lines were mostly nationalist in nature with the beloved symbolizing the Indian nation. In Saghar such lines tend to be more revolutionary and utopian. Two examples may be cited, both spoken by Salim in Act I: “Patience is the grave insult of the oppressed” and “The murder of the innocent — is this politics?” (Saghar 1963, 112). Another example appears in Act V, in which Saghar portrays Salim and Anarkali’s utopian vision. Salim fantasizes about the world they will build in which “there is no wall, no surrounding border” (Saghar 1963, 139). Anarkali answers, “Here there is no limitation by race, no discrimination by color” (Saghar 1963, 140). Again, in Act VII, Saghar, perhaps recalling the Partition of India, has Salim say to Anarkali, “It is not politics, to make rivers of blood flow, / It is not politics, to burn towns and villages” (Saghar 1963, 173). Perhaps the most explicit statement of Salim’s dream of world peace and social reform occurs in his beautiful ghazal in Act VII. One couplet captures the mood of
the whole: “Let us sow the iron of the spear and dagger / And grow a new rose of love” (Saghar, 177). Anarkali answers, with lines echoing the famous ghazal by Allama Muhammad Iqbal (1877–1938) and sharing the same radeef-qaaftiya:

Sitaare falak aastaan aur bhi hain . . .

ستارے فلک آستاں اور بھی بیہ

There are ever more stars, skies, thresholds . . . (Saghar 1963, 177)

Later in Act VII, Salim sings another ghazal, this time on the definition of love (ishq عشق). For Saghar, love is the basis of all human activity; there can be no politics, no nationalism, no religion, unless it is first founded on love. This ghazal also demonstrates the breadth of Saghar’s poetic vocabulary:

Ishq sayaasat ishq sayaadat isha hi vahadat ishq hi kasrat
Isha hi naghma, ishq hi sargam, ishq hi naara, ishq hi parcham.

Love is politics, love is leadership, love is abundance,
love is song, love is music, love is [our] slogan, love is [our] flag. (Saghar 1963, 181)

When asked about his Anarkali, Saghar Nizami said, “This dream, in which are visualized freedom of thoughts and speech, freedom of love and romance, social equality, joy of living and the complete freedom of the human spirit, will come true” (Saghar 1963, 145). Saghar has a definite vision to convey, and he has chosen to convey it through the powerful medium of drama. However, Saghar is first and foremost a poet. His emphasis is on poetry and language rather than on plot and action, and the play is perhaps more satisfying to read than to see performed on stage. His Anarkali is a masterpiece of poetic skill, but this very fact makes it far too difficult for the average audience. This is the modern dramatist’s dilemma: to use the full strength of his literary talents and risk losing sight of his play’s message or to convey the message clearly but compromise the integrity of his art. Saghar has chosen the former path, with the result that his message, which is directed at everyone, is beyond the reach of all but the most educated members of his audience.

Saghar Nizami is nevertheless one of the great lights of Urdu poetic drama. As a poet, he had the courage to work in a dramatic medium in a style that many critics considered obsolete. As a social visionary, he created an original forum for his ideas, even though he struck an imperfect balance
between the form and content of his plays. Both his *Shakuntala* and his *Anarkali* are radical transformations of traditional, culturally central tales, and Saghar has thus pointed the way toward a new poetic drama that retains its roots in the indigenous Indian traditions, but whose possibilities are limitless.

*Mitti yahaan ki hai mah-o-akhtar liye hue;*  
*Khushki yahaan ki baadah-o-saaghar liye hue.*

The soil of this land carries the moon and the stars;  
The drought of this land carries the wine and the goblet.

—Saghar Nizami [*Anarkali*, Act VII]

Notes

1. All India Radio was well established before Independence and its successors in both India and Pakistan broadcast radio plays regularly. The first television broadcasts from Lahore, Pakistan, did not begin until 1964. India’s national network, Doordarshan, came on the air in 1965.

2. The surname Nizami نظامی reflects an association with the lineage of the thirteenth-century Sufi saint Nizamuddin Auliya نظام الدین اولیاء.

3. Indra is the Vedic king of the Gods; his heavenly court was the original locus of dramatic and musical entertainments.

4. In Urdu prosody, the *radeef* is a word or phrase that follows the rhyming word (ُقافیہ).*

5. Examples of *ghazals* in the traditional style occur, for example, in Act VII, on pp. 174–6.

References


