

## From Political Obligation to Social Emancipation: A Reading of Imtiaz Ali's *Anarkali*

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### Abstract

The paper aims to examine the issues related to the obligation that can lead to conflicts. All of us are duty-bound to follow social norms, adhere to promises and obey laws, which are also the prerequisites to justice. However, people also have grounds to not believe in the 'rightness' of the rules. The famous Urdu historical drama *Anarkali* (1922) by Syed Imtiaz Ali Taj, later translated in English by Zulfiqar Ali, contradicts the popular notion of justice. Voices imbued within the play defy the political 'laws' and plead for reordering the normative social structure. The play also interrogates repressive colonial ideology engaging with fear and amnesia of people who surrender their agency in the name of Order and Laws. The play deals with authority, power, anarchy, and universalizing notion of justice. The key questions that the paper seeks to address are: a) On what grounds does this justice rest? b) Why is political obligation necessitated, and how does it clash with individuals' notion of liberty? c) How can we navigate the individual will with the power of authority? Further, the paper also attempts to explore and explain some of the peculiarities of how social democracy was conceived.

**Keywords:** *Anarkali*, Love, Justice, Liberty, Right



*Anarkali*, a classical Urdu play in three acts, is based on the love story of Moghul prince Saleem and a slave-girl Nadera, nicknamed Anarkali. The title was awarded to her for her beauty by the Moghul King Akbar. The opening scene of the play reveals that Prince Saleem has fallen in love with Nadera, a courtesan in Emperor Akbar's court. Another slave-girl, Dilaram, is also in love with the Prince, Saleem. When Dilaram gets to know that Saleem is in love with Anarkali, she feels jealous and begins to target her. During the festival of Nauroz, Dilaram is appointed to make an arrangement in Shiesh Mahal. On the festive occasion, Anarkali has to perform a dance for the royal audience. Dilaram conspires against Anarkali and uses this opportunity to destroy her love and life. At the event, Dilaram mixes vine in Anarkali's glass of water and requests her to sing Faizi's ghazal, which is about a lover's open proposal of love to a beloved. Anarkali, being intoxicated, becomes oblivious to her surroundings. She keeps looking at Saleem as if there is no one in the court except him. Despite Saleem's gestures of caution, she remains heedless. The exchange of gesture infuriates Emperor Akbar, and he orders for Anarkali's imprisonment. Saleem's mother tries to intervene and begs the King to ignore her mistake because this will upset Saleem. King Akbar regards it absolutely undeserving for a prince to marry a slave-girl. By loving a courtesan, prince Saleem has frustrated the great expectations of his father. However, for the sake of his love, Saleem is ready to sacrifice his future as a crown prince. With the help of Bukhtyar, Saleem meets Anarkali in the prison cell and plans to run away with her from this world of pain and torments. Dilaram reports to the King that Saleem and Anarkali are planning a conspiracy against the King, which leads to Saleem's confinement later. Meanwhile, Bukhtyar breaks the news of Anarkali's death to Saleem that shatters him. Out of anger, he tries to strangle Dilaram and refuses to accept his father's decision and fatherly love. The play was written in 1922, representing the rise of historical and literary drama in Urdu, combining history, tragedy, and romance; the era defined the emergence of a new genre.

The motive behind giving a brief outline of the play is to give a sense to the reader of what the play is about and how it was generally read. On a superficial level, the play *Anarkali* is interpreted as a love story. However, there are conflicts and contradictions embedded within the play. The play is the epitome of social hierarchy that exemplifies the determination of boundaries according to age, gender and rank. As revealed through the character and actions of Akbar in the play, any attempt to transgress the social hierarchy invites revulsion of an extreme nature. Taj, who had deeply studied western drama, is a thorough Aristotelian in the treatment of his plays as he does not advocate for the suppression of emotions. In fact, he finds emotions as a portal to human insight. Reason tames emotions humanely without ferreting them out. Up to a certain point in the play, Anarkali remains prudently hesitant. She does not endanger her life as neither she is rash in her emotions nor docile. She does not rebuff Saleem's overtures and tokens. Being reticent and utterly conversant with her station in life, she remains genuinely interested in Saleem without being pompously inflated like her sister, Surayya. She does not even flare up when confronting Dilaram's hostile attitude. The fortune's wheel overturns irretrievably once when she loses her virtuous self-restraint right in the presence of the royal household and courtiers. Her ecstatic delirium brings about her fall just like Hamlet's mad obsession, or Juliet's somnambulism does in Shakespearean plays. Inevitably, though her wavering common sense induces pity in the reader, the way she behaves under the nose of a monarch is dreadful even to imagine. The play is about emotions of love, envy, disgust and jealousy, but more about how these emotions are used as guiding principles in



law-making and social formations. These emotions have boundaries that correspond to the social and political boundaries. The sad and sudden end of Anarkali's life suggests that unregulated emotions may yield a threat to life. By the end of the play, Anarkali's love for Saleem trespasses every social boundary as her emotions drive her conduct. This brings forth Rousseau's dictatorial ideas that have been guiding principles for organizing social and political laws. Much as Rousseau suggests that the state should note those nonconforming conducts, Anarkali and Saleem were punished in the play for their nonconformist behaviour. The state still has not found the space to negotiate with autonomy and conduct that invites coercion.

Most of the time the society understands emotions as impulses. However, it is embedded with evaluative contents and norms. Certain emotions are presented as public emotions, expecting people to imbibe the circulated emotions and endorse their belief in them. The world is inhabited by a diverse group of people belonging to different religions and regions. A state can ask its citizens, who have different meanings and purposes in life, to agree in a shared political space, with fundamental principles and ideals. To make those principles effective, the state must also take steps to promote love and devotion to those principles and ideals. However, to make those devotions compatible with autonomy and freedom, it is important to build a critical political culture that can defend freedom of speech and expression. There should also be a space for dissenting voices that play a valuable role in keeping the conceptions liberal. In the play, the King does not keep the room for subversion and humour open. The voices of Anarkali and Saleem try to make room for subversion of the dictatorial order. Her unregulated emotions make an attempt to challenge the widely accepted public emotion regarding love which does not allow a prince to woo a slave-girl. Together, they pose a challenge to social class differences and power hierarchy.

There exists a robust literature in philosophy that questions the nature of the moral and political obligation, liberty and law. The debate between the two has been numerously addressed and remains the subject of even Socratic dialogues. Judith N Shklar's question remains pertinent to understanding the conflict between King Akbar and Anarkali. She writes, "Why should we obey or disobey the government? Most people ask these questions when they are faced with incompatible loyalties, but some raise them when law and private conscience are in conflict." (Shklar 10) Once Anarkali gets intoxicated, her actions beg questions like: Should she obey the directive of King Akbar? Here her liberty clashes with the political obligation. The very question to obey or not to obey is in tune with power, authority and collective decisions. The play poses specific questions to the audience, like what constitutes collective decisions? Is a collective decision the mere display of whims and fancies of a king? On what grounds does political obligation rest? Saleem and Anarkali assert their inner voice through their love for each other. In prison, she speaks of her daemon, an inner spirit that commands her assent on that occasion. This gets displayed through her individuality and freedom to love. For the condition of justice, it is a duty to obey laws and follow the social rules because society is based on them. But do we have grounds to accept that the given rules are always right/just? We all possess loyalties that may also go against the rules: loyalties to families, loyalties to beloved etc. Many of these elements/debates are interwoven within the seemingly simple love story of a prince and a slave girl in the play *Anarkali*.

Undoubtedly, according to the parameters of Aristotle, the play is a tragedy because the entire play is about kings, queens, nobles and aristocrats. These are the people who rule, and their problems overshadow the problems of other individuals within the play. Their problem is that they suffer from excessive honour and pride. Anarkali's mother keeps requesting her daughters to live with honour and respect. In a conversation with Kafoor, she says, "may we wish instead that we leave this world with honour and respect" (1.1.117) A tragedy usually has a hero(s), also called the protagonist of the play, who manifests certain characteristics that make him a tragic figure. The protagonists exhibit tragic flaw that leads to their downfall. They are unyielding and intransigent as they do not listen to reason. They refuse to alter themselves, are full of passion and are intellectually unbalanced. Even if the world mocks them, they remain the same because they think of themselves as equal to the King or authority. As such, they are utterly alone, and their despair at the end is terrible. They are autonomous as they are a law unto themselves. All of these help to define the two central figures of play—Anarkali and Saleem.

There are many interpretations available to the play *Anarkali*. Most of the interpretations view the play as a love story where a ruthless king sacrifices his son's happiness at the altar of societal norms and authority. Even the iconic adaptation of the play, *Mughal-e-Azam* by K Asif, is a celebration of love where Akbar emerges as an overbearing ruler. This popular representation and evaluation of the King as wrong and Anarkali and Saleem as right is problematic and debatable. Bukhtyar, a friend of Saleem, refuses to help Saleem and suggests him not to move forward with Anarkali. In one of his conversations with Saleem, he says, "...but prince! The ultimate result of such a hidden romance can be dangerous. It can't remain a secret in the palace. You can't make Anarkali your Begum". (2.1.113) Against Bukhtyar, one can say that he is cowardly principled but one may also consider him to be right. Surayya, Anarkali's sister, is a strong character who has a public voice. She did what she could do for her sister and represents the voice of an angered woman. Bukhtyar also did what he could do for his friend Saleem. These acts and motives raise some fundamental questions: How valid is the loyalty that instigates us to reject the sovereign? Is Saleem too devoted to Anarkali?

On the one hand, the play nowhere shows Akbar as an outright tyrant; in fact, few of his acts within the play show him to be a benevolent ruler. On the other hand, Anarkali and Saleem are shown to be deeply in love. Love for them is one of the most virtuous things created by God, and they are ready to leave this man who created the world for it. It seems that they are obeying the higher law and are not scared of mere men and the laws created by them. The voice of Anarkali and Saleem express the notion of a higher and more universal law than the laws made by men. They constantly call on God, and Saleem's life is so troubled that he longs for death. Ashis Nandy in *Secret Politics of Our Desires*, commenting on the two central characters of the play, writes,

In their unconditional love of God, the mystics seek total annihilation of their Self in the Divine. Since both Islam and Hinduism see the physical and spiritual as an integrated whole, it is natural for the Indian culture to postulate that true love, love worthy of serious consideration, must move from physical to spiritual realms: the lovers must unconditionally surrender themselves to each other without concern for worldly consequences. (30)

The darker side of the King's character comes out strongly when Queen and also Anarkali's mother begs for Anarkali's life, while the King remains resolute in his decision. Sitting on her knees, Anarkali's mother says:

Mother: People can appear before God without permission. And you're God's shadow, a merciful emperor, and she is my daughter, my only hope for life. She is at fault, but you're kind. She is a sinner, but you're merciful. Forgive her, for God's sake, forgive her.

Akbar: Go and wait for the judgement.

Mother: Where can I go. I can't have peace anywhere. Queen, you're a woman (holding Queen's feet) You're the mother of a child. You know those pains. I kiss your feet. Ask them to kill me. I've seen enough of this world. Let them tear me into pieces. But that wretched has seen nothing. Forgive her. (3.3.954)

In the situation, he emerges out to be cruel and brutal. For him, love is irrelevant. From Akbar's perspective, it is not that Saleem is not good as a king or Anarkali is not lovable but their romantic alliance signifies a challenge to the King's status. Anarkali dares to love a prince, and for the King it implies an attempt to show that Anarkali is equal in status with the King. Obviously, the aspects of gender and class are intertwined here. Queen and Anarkali's mother try to dissuade the King from carrying out the pronounced death sentence for Anarkali as it will lead to Saleem's destruction. The King rejects it, for he believes that if Saleem fails to maintain order in his family, he cannot preserve the order of the state. Anarkali and Saleem rebelled and must suffer the decreed punishment. For King, it is obedience that saves the authority. He cannot come to terms with the fact that his son is a slave to a slave girl. King says, "I don't want to be under the obligation of a slave-girl to own him. (pause) Let him do whatever he wants. And let me do whatever I want" (3.3.2404). Saleem, both hopeless and angered by the events, does not allow the King to embrace him. "Shiekho is fatherless. He is dead. You are only an emperor of Hindustan. A Patriarch interested too much in wealth and worldly things. You're a murderer who got Anarkali killed. Your forehead is stamped with the seals of a blood-shedder. The flames of hell glow in your eyes. Your breath stinks like the smell of corpses" (3.5.2338). Anarkali's sister remains devoted to saving her family, but the King appears to have rejected the claims of reason and of love simultaneously. He believes that a ruler must not respect personal feelings while enforcing the law. The King, unmoved, orders Anarkali to be entombed alive in the wall.

The above account of the play appears simple; however, it has its own complexities that are enormous. What do we make of it? Anarkali, Surayya and Saleem are pure and courageous rebels for the eternal rules of justice. Saleem and Anarkali fight defending the good and right, and they set an example for all those who are confronted by evil rulers. Their character depicts that one should resist and struggle against tyranny. There is no obligation as such that can limit pure goodness nor is any owed to pure evil. King is like a dictator and Saleem is one of the rare examples of courageous defiance. We are time-servers like other courtiers and while Queen means well she is futile in her efforts at persuasion. Only defiance and sacrifice work in the play. Indomitable courage is what political evil calls for. Above all, Anarkali and Saleem have followed their conscience, and that is what matters the most. A critical analysis of the play also reveals that it is a confrontation between two equally right claims. Anarkali and Saleem stand for the values



of love and Surayya stands for familial relationship. Surayya preserves a bond that ties family instinct, feeling, sisterhood, where she acts as a soldier breaking the gendered culture and domesticity. King is equally right as he defends the powers of human political conduct. "Here we act on our own, and the upper gods only symbolize the values of conscious law making and purposeful human projects, social and intellectual." (Shklar 33) While Anarkali's purity and courage are to be adored and admired, historically Akbar was also right. He stood for the recognition that we create our laws and act on premeditated plans. As we know true tragedy is not the conflict between right and wrong since that is not a deadly conflict, but one between two rights. Given the case, Akbar has a slight edge because he represents the manmade world of conscious rationality. As a king he does not fall for familial piety. As the Queen points out, "You [Saleem] can't blame him [king] for this if he wants to see you fit into a special frame of mind" (1.2.595). Saleem and Anarkali had to resist and King had to enforce the law. Nevertheless, in the contest between two obligations, one is sentimental and personal and the other is rational and considered to be progressive. Out of the two, the second obligation sounds greater and one feels that Saleem should have obeyed. According to the context of time and place, Anarkali and Saleem could not have possibly done so. That is his tragedy, but from the voice of philosophy looking back his obligation is clear; he was wrong.

Again, it is not as plain as it appears as the stance taken above may be based on wrong standards. How far is it relevant that historical hindsight reveals what could not have been known then, and deliver judgement on the past? Has there been progress? Do we really find the state voice public rationality against the individual? Do emotions, inner feelings because they are not rational have no claim on us? These are some of the points which have been overlooked and which call for serious enquiry. We need to look more closely at the conduct of the protagonists, Saleem and Anarkali. What we notice are two forms of heroism confronting one another, neither of which is purely political or individual, but each has both politics and individuality in mind. The significant point is that the primacy of the blood ties has been replaced under the political order. King expresses himself as the symbol of political order and justice. He does not listen to the virtue of love. Enraged Akbar says to queen:

you say this to me? To Akbar? On whose shoulders rested the responsibility of an empire when he was the same tender age as he. The one whose awe and power humbled the bold and daring tempers. The one who at his age was wrestling with the difficult task of the consolidation of his own conquests. Yes, the one who at his age, would dream as well..... You are a mother.... a mother only." (2.3.1429)

However, Saleem is reckless and Anarkali is trapped by the trick of Dilaram. Each does have an ideal but there is a difference. King is deflected by egotistic vengefulness, Anarkali and Saleem by an excess of love. King's affirmation of life is not simple and loving but it is bloated with power, honour and pride. He fails to express a more general human claim. Anarkali may love death and her loyalty towards love may be misdirected, but she does not harm anyone but herself. In the end, the pronouncement of the death sentence to Anarkali and prisoning of Saleem were unjust, not only as a father but also as a king.

This does not settle the matter of Saleem's rebellion and Anarkali's concern towards Saleem. They are more admirable heroic figures, but were they right to march to their punishments out of loyalty towards their love? It was not their disrespect towards King or



public order but love that moved them. Dilaram's jealousy towards Anarkali is one crucial factor that causes Anarkali's death but it is a mixture of loyalty, love and fatalism. It is not conscience as we understand it, but something personal and individual. Moreover, it cannot be said that Anarkali and Saleem do not exhibit the qualities of good citizens. The Prince used to follow the dictates of the King and despite her ill health, Anarkali agrees to perform in Sheish Mahal. They were law-abiding citizens who had respect for public and political order, but the mistake that they committed was that they followed the law of humanity as well. Politics rests on disciplined family and obedience. Surayya and Bukhtyar do defy the King but not like Saleem for public reasons. It seems that neither there is no clear answer to the conflict between the obligation to the law and personal loyalty, nor is it easy to judge between the two political and individual principles. Saleem was a passionate hater of tyranny and loved individual liberty. Most of the important characters of the play, except Dilaram and King, cry out for justice and for freedom against the tyrant. The conflict between love and political duty is much sharper for King and Saleem. This is a different world from that of Shakespeare or Greek heroes. Here the struggle between love and politics is clear and the question it poses is how far government can compromise the demands of personal love, loyalty, and family ties.

It is important to invoke an old distinction from the Sanskrit literature on ethics and jurisprudence. There are two different words – *niti*<sup>1</sup> and *nyaya*<sup>2</sup> -- both of which stand for justice in classical Sanskrit. *Niti* refers to the idea of organizational propriety and behavior correctness. In contrast to *niti*, the term *nyaya* stands for a comprehensive concept of realized justice. In the same context, Amartya Sen writes, "... the role of institution, rules and organization, important as they are, have to be assessed in the broader and more inclusive perspective of *nyaya*, which is inescapably linked with the world that actually emerges, not just the institution or rules we happen to have" (Sen 20). It does not matter how proper the institutionalized organization might be; the principle of 'justice of fish' violates the idea of human justice as *nyaya*. 'Justice of fish' is not allowed to invade the world of human beings. That is exactly what happens in the political order of King Akbar. King applies 'justice of fish' over Anarkali. In the sixteenth century, Ferdinand I, the Holy Roman emperor, said, "Fiat Justitia, et pereat mundus" which can be translated as 'Let justice be done, though the world perishes'. The relationship between individuals and society is one of the chief concerns of Islam, and it provides certain models to establish justice in their relationship. Justice remains a central category in Islamic thought, is the core theme of the Quran and is one of the chief attributes of God (*Al'Adl* or the Just). Within the Islamic code, it is represented in three principle forms: justice to God, justice to others (*qist*), and justice to self (*adl*) (Powell 15). The first is closely related to the notion of *tauheed* while *qist* is based on the principle of equity and equality aiming at a just society, one that is all-embracing—believer and non-believer, white and black, young and old, women and men. Justice to self is building a just character and one that is accountable to God. "O ye who believe! Stand out firmly for Allah, as witnesses to fair dealing, and let not the hatred of others to you make you swerve to wrong and depart from justice. Be just: that is next to piety; and fear Allah. For Allah is well acquainted with all ye do" (5:8). So hatred has no place in the dispensation of justice. Also, justice and equality are two essential purposes of Islamic law. Rather than doing justice with Saleem and Anarkali, King ends their lives and social world. In a paper in "Econometrica", Sen emphasizes on 'comprehensive outcome' where he speaks against arbitrary punishment. Anarkali is being punished not for any treason or sedition but because she did something which the King did



not appreciate. It is not a matter of act being just or unjust, and it is more the matter whether the King appreciates it or not.

The demands of justice must not be considered as a solitarist exercise. When we are thinking of social and political arrangement, we have reason to listen and pay attention to the views and suggestions of others. In the case of Rawlsian justice, any social and political arrangement primarily includes the priority of liberty. He defines liberty in reference to three items, “the agents who are free, the restrictions or limitations which they are free from, and what it is that they are free to do or not to do. Complete explanations of liberty provide the relevant information about these three things” (Rawls 177). He further adds and argues that liberty of conscience means that individuals have the basic liberty to pursue their moral, philosophical and religious interests. Whereas Saleem and Anarkali both are not allowed to pursue their moral interest and are forced to serve the moral interest of a king, their personal interests do not incite any violence. The question that emerges is, what if everyone behaves in the same way as Saleem and Anarkali? In the context of Anarkali and Saleem, this question widens the horizon of justice. Their action nowhere produced a threat to law and order, and their action could not lead to the collapse of the political order of the kingdom. Therefore, there is no reason to suppose that letting them pursue their interest would lead to the destruction of the law and order of the state.

Justice has many aspects to it. It also rests on the choices one makes and their wider repercussions. We all have witnessed what emanates from the actions of King, nothing but violence and terror. In the periodic setting of the play, the King’s verdict defined a totalitarian sense of justice, the voice of dissent was hushed. The play reflects upon the enormous amount of violation of equal rights and basic liberties as encountered by Saleem and Anarkali. We do see any social or political arrangements being made to tackle these social inequalities or seek reconciliation; the absence of these endeavours marks the presence of a dictatorial view of in/justice. To develop the sense of justice, a king, if there is any, must profess the morality of association and encourage to practice individuals’ conscience.

### Notes

<sup>1</sup>The term is derived from the Sanskrit word which, in English translates to ‘To Lead implying proper guidance’. *Shukranītisara* and *Niti Sastra* are two prominent ancient Indian text to understand the genesis and implementation of the term

<sup>2</sup>The term literally translates to “justice”, “rule”, “method” or “judgement”. It is one of the six astika of Indian philosophy.

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