

Article

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## The Aesthetics of Dissonance: Audio-Visual Irony and the Subaltern Lament in the Cinema of Meena Kumari



*Sahib Bibi Aur Ghulam* (1962)

### Abstract

The cinematic legacy of Meena Kumari, commonly identified by the reductive label of the "Tragedy Queen," represents one of the most sophisticated sites of "audio-visual counterpoint" in Indian cinema. This paper argues that Kumari's performances utilize "soundtrack dissonance"—a structural tension between celebratory, "upbeat" musicality and tragic narrative/lyrical content—to articulate the systematic violation and dispossession of the marginalized female subject. By analyzing the non-traditional application of Hindustani ragas, specifically the manipulation of traditional *rasas* and the violation of "Time Theory" (Samay Siddhant), this study demonstrates how the "forced cheer" of the cinematic *mujra* and the domestic performance serves as a performative "mask." Through close readings of *Pakeezah* (1972), *Sahib Bibi Aur Ghulam* (1962), *Dil Apna Aur Preet Parai* (1960), and *Baiju Bawra* (1952), the paper explores how Meena Kumari's work functions as a "celebration of gloominess," where the structures of entertainment are repurposed to voice a subterranean subaltern lament.

## **I. Introduction: The Research Argument**

The term "Tragedy Queen" has often functioned as a double-edged sword for Meena Kumari, elevating her as a master of pathos while simultaneously confining her to a static image of the "weepy" heroine. However, a closer semiotic and musicological examination of her filmography reveals a much more dynamic use of her persona. This paper posits that Kumari's most significant contribution to film aesthetics lies in **audio-visual counterpoint**, or soundtrack dissonance—a technique where the auditory valence (joyful or uplifting music) is placed in direct conflict with the narrative arousal (tragic or exploitative subtext).

The central research argument is that the "ironic song" in Meena Kumari's repertoire is not merely a stylistic quirk of Bollywood melodrama but a deliberate semiotic strategy. The upbeat musical structures function as a performative "mask". Due to the fact that subaltern women (regardless of their public or private status) bear the burden of meeting a professional/social obligation in relation to the production of pleasure and/or entertainment, they must find some way of articulating their own sense of psychological and/or systemic dispossession while still fulfilling their obligation to others. They do this by using specific ragas as musical accompaniment to scenes depicting violence or despair, which provides the viewer/audience with a "rhetorical distance" to confront the disparity between the woman's performance and her internal suffering.

## **II. Theoretical Framework: Soundtrack Dissonance and the Subaltern**

In film theory, soundtrack dissonance occurs when film producers choose music that is "completely contrary to the dominant emotion in the scene". While laboratory research often suggests that viewers average sensory inputs, in an artistic context, the "meaning" of the percept is only grasped if the two streams (audio and visual) are kept separate. The Opposite of a Gloria Song by Hisham Matar and Ayesha creates the sound of an ecstatic reception for the viewer, bringing them into an ecstatic state of mind.

Through the use of dissonance, we are able to create an ecstatic state in the viewer. Because we are not responsible for just ascribed roles within society while displaying our emotions with others; we are also responsible for the treatment received by the people within the society in which we live, and how we will treat an individual in all future interactions after extracting them responsibly from society. Dissonance has been used extensively throughout history to control the behavior of people.

Meena Kumari's performances in these songs become dissonant to what is normally seen on screen because of how she is portrayed in both her acting and music, as well as her treatment of men through the use of creative techniques that are not part of traditional storytelling; these forms of creative expression will be described in detail throughout this paper but will be summarized by stating that there are two main categories of creative expression used by Meena Kumari that create dissonance which include concepts of objectification and subjectivization. These concepts are discussed further below in relation to the examples provided by Meena Kumari.

### III. The Semiotics of Violation: *Inhi Logon Ne Le Liya*

The most seminal example of this audio-visual counterpoint is the sequence "Inhi Logon Ne Le Liya Dupatta Mera" from *Pakeezah* (1972). Though it is one of the most popular dance numbers in Indian cinema, its structural irony is profound.

#### 1. The Metaphor of the Dupatta

A duppatta, or scarf worn by a woman, represents modesty and honor in the cultural semiotics of South Asia. Thus, the lyrics written by Majrooh Sultanpuri express a communal narrative around the violation of honor by using the character Sahiba to emphasize how her honor was taken from her through referring to three witnesses who can attest to the stealing of her honor.

Character (The Witness)	Lyrical Reference	Societal Symbolism
Bajajva (Cloth Merchant)	"Jisne asharfi gaj deena"	Represents the economic commodification of the female body; her honor is "bought" with a gold coin.
Rangrajva (Cloth Dyer)	"Jisne gulaabi rang deena"	Represents the aestheticization of a life destined for tragedy; he colors the life into a mimicry of a bride.
Sipaiya (Constable)	"Jisne bajariya mein chheena"	Represents the state's active role in the violation of the subaltern woman.

#### 2. The Visual-Auditory Counterpoint

The irony is visually reinforced by Kumari's vibrant red outfit—the color of a bride—while she performs this *mujra* for the very men in the *kotha* who have marginalized her. The tune, based on Raga Yaman Kalyan, is described as "light" and "playful," yet the lyrics are a "heart-rending plea". This "forced cheer" is a professional requirement of the courtesan; the character must dance with verve and a smile, effectively performing her own defilement for the entertainment of her patrons.

### IV. Musicological Scaffolding: Raga Theory and Emotional Masking

The "tone" of these ironic songs is meticulously crafted through the application of specific Hindustani ragas. These musical frameworks are not merely aesthetic choices; they provide the emotional scaffolding that allows for the coexistence of "fun" musicality and "sad" lyrical themes.

## 1. Raga Yaman: The Prayer of the Profane

"Inhi Logon Ne" features the raga Yaman, a core raga of the Hindustani system that falls under the Kalyan thaat system of ragas. Yaman is usually played in evening hours (from 6am-9pm) and is associated with Shanta and Shringara rasas.

The scale of Raga Yaman is commonly represented as:

**Ascending (Aaroha):** .Ni Re Ga Ma# Dha Ni Sa'

**Descending (Avaroha):** Sa' Ni Dha Pa Ma# Ga Re Sa

(Where .Ni denotes the Mandra Saptak or lower octave, Sa' denotes the Taar Saptak or higher octave, and Ma# denotes the sharp fourth).

The sharp Ma (Ma#) gives Yaman a "luminous," "uplifting," and "spiritual" quality—it feels like "a prayer floating in the air". The non-traditional subversion here lies in setting a song about sexual violation and the "impure atmosphere" (*napaak mahaul*) of a brothel to a raga that expresses "ultimate humility" and "submission to the divine". The "bright and open" character of Yaman masks the "morbid" and "suffocating" reality of the *tawaif*, creating a profound spiritual dissonance.



## 2. Raga Maand and the Playfulness of Dejection

In the song "Thade Rahiyo O Banke Yaar" (*Pakeezah*), the music utilizes **Raga Maand**, which originates from the desert folk music of Rajasthan. Maand is known for expressing a "sweet-sadness".

The sequence of a "forlorn alap" which provides an auditory "painful dejection," then suddenly accelerates in tempo over a period of 5 beats (Dadra Taal of 6 beats) and creates a "dancy" feel by doubling the tempo. While Meena Kumari uses the playful "nakhras" (affectations) to express her character as seductive by using performative means hiding an internal form of "misery."

## V. Temporal Irony: Violating the Raga Samay Chakra

A significant method for intensifying irony in Kumari's work is the deliberate violation of the **Prahar** (prescribed time of day) for specific ragas. Performing ragas outside their prescribed time is traditionally believed to compromise their *rasa*, yet Hindi cinema uses this misalignment to signal psychological displacement.

## 1. Raga Asawari: The Morning Raga for a Night Lament

In the song "Ruk Ja Raat Thahar Ja Re Chanda" from the film *Dil Ek Mandir*, the central



character is imploring the night to last and not come to an end, as her husband will undergo life-threatening surgery at dawn. The raga used for this song, Asawari, is a morning raga (2nd or 3rd Prahara) generally associated with "seriousness" or "somberness."

Ironically, by using a raga that belongs to the dawn to call for "Chanda" (moon) and ask for the night to continue, the music creates a temporal dissonance.

The serious, stable nature of Asawari underlines the "aching for love" that is about to be severed by the coming day.

## 2. Raga Bhairav: Dawn as Heartbreak

In *Baiju Bawra* (1952), "Mohe Bhool Gaye Saanwariya" is composed in **Raga Bhairav**, a masculine morning raga associated with Lord Shiva and "stern" devotional prayer. Naushad infuses this "primordial sound" of stability with elements of Raga Kalingda to create an "unmistakable tinge of sadness". By using a raga that symbolizes the "dawn of the soul" to score a woman's "heartbreak and dejection," the music emphasizes that for the subaltern woman, the morning brings not renewal, but the realization of abandonment.

## VI. Spatial Irony: The Public Kotha vs. The Private Haveli

The irony of the "fun" song manifests differently depending on the space occupied by the woman. This section compares the irony in the public *kotha* of *Pakeezah* with the "gilded cage" of the aristocratic *haveli* in *Sahib Bibi Aur Ghulam* (1962).

### 1. Piya Aiso Jiya Mein: The Irony of Restless Hope

Chhoti Bahu (played by Meena Kumari) in *Sahib Bibi Aur Ghulam* employs the tools of a tawaif namely singing, drinking and tantalizing to retrieve her husband from the brothels. The song "Piya Aiso Jiya Mein Samaye Gayo Re" employs aspects of Raga Brindabani Sarang (also referred to as Raga Sarang) which has been described as "full of exhilarating boisterousness" and has that characteristic "excitement". From the perspective of irony... dressing up with jewels and using Mohini's sindoor (the magical vermilion of India) on oneself in order to create a "miracle" with the use of the song.

The "carefree singing" and "romantic voice" create a "delightful scene" that masks her "desperate gullibility". The audience, aware of the husband's debauchery, knows her hope is a precursor to "longing and despair".

## 2. Na Jao Saiyaan: The Subterranean Lament

In contrast, "Na Jao Saiyaan Chhuda Ke Baiyan" uses **Raga Pilu**, a "light classical" raga associated with "devotion and longing". The instrumentation is minimal and emotionally charged, focusing the audience on Kumari's "subtle inflections of tone". The irony here is her "willingness to take up drink" and sacrifice her "purity" in the name of a fanatical devotion to a culturally assigned role—the "ideal wife"—that is already dead. Her "fall" is portrayed as a sacrifice, where the beauty of the song masks the horror of her subjection.



## VII. The Romantic Counterpoint: *Ajeeb Dastan Hai Yeh*

The phenomenon of the ironic song extends beyond the *mujra* genre into the romantic social drama. The song "Ajeeb Dastan Hai Yeh" from *Dil Apna Aur Preet Parai* (1960) is an iconic



example of "celebrating gloominess".

- **The Hawaiian Irony:** Composed by Shankar-Jaikishan and adapted from Jim Reeves' "My Lips Are Sealed," the song features a "Hawaiian-themed" melody with western backup vocalists and a "superb choir".

- **The Narrative Dissonance:** Meena Kumari sings this lilting, exuberant melody while realizing that the man she

loves is committed to someone else (Nadira's character). These "heart-breaking lyrics" ("Ajeeb dastan hai yeh, kahaan shuru kahaan khatam") ("This is a strange story, where does it begin, where does it end") are essentially a "celebration of sorrow." The buoyant sound of music covers up the unexpressed void in the music. The "Tragedy Queen" used her own personal pain to create a "frothy" public display.

## VIII. Technical Musicological Breakdown (Text Format)

The structural tension of the ironic song can be seen in the specific swara (note) arrangements that composers use to balance joy and pathos.

## 1. The Unstable Tension of Yaman

**Aaroha:** .Ni Re Ga Ma# Dha Ni Sa'

**Avaroha:** Sa' Ni Dha Pa Ma# Ga Re Sa

The *Teevra Madhyam* (Ma#) creates a sharp "sparkle" that conventionally signals an "uplifting" mood, but in the context of *Pakeezah*, it provides an unstable tension that remains unresolved, mirroring the courtesan's lack of societal closure.

## 2. The multi-octave Pathos of Darbari

"**Tora Man Darpan**" (*Kaajal*) utilizes **Raga Darbari Kanada**, which belongs to the Asavari Thaata.

**Scale:** Sa Re ga ma Pa dha ni Sa' (where lowercase denotes komal/flat notes).

Darbari Kanada is noted for its "serious, introspective" quality and deep emotional impact. The irony lies in scoring a household bhajan with a raga historically associated with "courtly grandeur" (Darbar) while depicting the character's internal domestic tragedy.

## IX. Synthesis: The Bio-Cinematic Echo

There is a deep connection between the performance of irony by Meena Kumari and the story of her life, creating a "prophetic" bond between her personal struggles and the characters she plays. She was known as "Naaz," the poet whose poems are said to be "sorrowful, lacking in joy, and pessimistic," paralleling her own descent into the throes of loneliness and self-pity.

### 1. The Alcoholism Parallel

The portrayal of Chhoti Bahu as an alcoholic in *Sahib Bibi Aur Ghulam* is frequently cited as being uncannily similar to Kumari's own "slide into alcoholism". By the time *Pakeezah* was nearing completion, her health was so compromised by liver cirrhosis that she collapsed during sequences like "Teer-E-Nazar".

- **The Triple Irony:** The "dancy" nature of sequences like "Inhi Logon Ne" gains a third layer: the actress is performing a high-energy number while her own body is physically failing, mirroring the "suffering soul looking for an utterance" that defines her on-screen personas.

### 2. The Abandoned Child and the "Cinderella" Role

Kumari's "fragility and spontaneity" are often traced back to her origins as an "unwanted child" abandoned at an orphanage at birth because her father wanted a son. She was forced into being the supportive one from four-when she became an 'analytical and serious trainee.' This 'angst' and 'pain..' promoted not only her comic or bubbly roles in films such as 'Azaad' (1955) but also forced the audiences to know about her tragic experiences.



## **X. Conclusion: The Dissonant Muse**

Meena Kumari was not merely an actress who "cried without glycerine"; she was an artist who mastered the **dissonant muse**. Through the integration of upbeat musical structures—the luminous Yaman, the folk-sadness of Maand, the restless Sarang—and subterranean subaltern laments, she articulated the "unspeakable" realities of marginalized women.

These ironic songs served several functions:

1. **A Professional Mask:** Highlighting the commodification of the courtesan's pain.
2. **A Coded Lament:** Using metaphors like the *dupatta* to bypass rigid social and moral censorship.
3. **A Spiritual Counterpoint:** Setting "impure" narratives to "devotional" ragas to create a sacralized space for the audience to experience the character's inherent purity.

Ultimately, Meena Kumari's captions of "joy" were always "tinged with melancholy," ensuring that her work remains a profound exploration of the scar left on the soul by its encounter with societal desire. She ended life, as her own poem stated, with a "broken song" and a "broken heart," but as a master of the audio-visual irony that continues to haunt the annals of cinema.

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