

The Enchantress of Florence: A Novel. Rushdie, Salman. 2008. London: Jonathan Cape. ISBN 978 0224 06163 6

Jodhaa Akbar. Ashutosh Gowariker Productions. 2008. Mumbai: India. UTV Motion Pictures.

Enchanting tales of Jodha-Akbar

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Jodhaa Akbar is a lavish period drama on celluloid; *The Enchantress of Florence* is an 'East meets West' novel, highlighting not so much a clash of civilisations as their commonality. At the heart of both is Jalal ud-din Muhammad Akbar (1542-1605), the greatest Mughal Emperor of India, who, though illiterate, was gifted with a unique syncretic vision which he tried concretising in his own lifetime, by creating a new religion of man (*Din-i-Ilahi* or the 'Divine Faith') that sought to bring people of all faiths under the same roof.

It is this leader who thought much ahead of his times who dominates both the novel and the film – though they depict him at different stages of his life. Rushdie's Akbar muses at length on the questions of God and Man. He is a tortured, faltering, fallible man – past his prime, beset with anxieties, and disillusioned at the failure of his dreams. Gowariker's Jalal ud-din, on the other hand, is a young man of great beauty and vigour, at the peak of his powers, discovering himself and his ideals through his love, and with a life full of possibilities and greatness ahead of him. In both, his Rajput wife, Jodha Bai, plays an important role – though she plays it very differently.

Secular credentials

The questions of Muslim identity and culture have always been important to Rushdie – especially, vis-à-vis the secular credentials of the Indian polity. In his novels on the subcontinent (especially *Midnight's Children* [1981] and *The Moor's Last Sigh* [1995]), he has explored the fate of secularism in India – what came of it in the years and decades after Independence – and recorded his bitter disappointment at the souring of that great Indian dream. In *The Enchantress of Florence*, he traces that secular ideal (cherished by the founding fathers of the Indian nation and enshrined in its constitution) back to its source – in the musings of the 16th century philosopher-king.

Interestingly, though this novel is his tenth, the genesis of its idea preceded many others. As a student at Cambridge in the 1960's, Rushdie was greatly drawn to the history of Mughal India and Renaissance Italy – two uniquely great moments in both India and Europe, representing the pinnacle of both cultures. The fascination with these two periods stayed with him, and decades later, it resurfaced as an idea for a novel. Even as he was finishing work on *The Ground Beneath Her Feet* (1999), he started toying with the idea of "finding a fictional device that would... bring together the Florence of the Medicis and the India of the Mughals (two worlds which in real history had very little contact with each other in this period)".

Thus, *The Enchantress of Florence* came into being. In the novel, a Mughal princess is bartered away by her brother and,

after changing several hands, becomes the famed enchantress of Florence. She is the one who connects Mughal India and Renaissance Italy; and through her, East meets West.

The Enchantress of Florence is a sprawling novel in three parts:

The first part of the novel is taken up with the adventures of an enigmatic Florentine rogue of many names (Mogor dell'Amore, Argalia, Niccolò Vespucci) as he makes his way to the court of Akbar the Great to reveal a secret and claim kinship with the Emperor. The remainder of the novel dramatises the story that Akbar is told by this Italian – about the adventures of the enchantress of the title – Akbar's great aunt, Qara Kōz, "Lady Black Eyes", eventually re-named Angelica, as she journeyed from the Middle East to Florence, conquering the heart of one bloody conqueror after another.

Despite her title role, however, it is Akbar who is the moral centre of the book, and who provides its strongest link to the issues that have concerned Rushdie in his works and his life. He is a marvellous spokesman for his author, of which the reader is left in no doubt when told that Akbar's chief objection to God was that "his existence deprived human beings of the right to form ethical structures by themselves. If there had never been a God, it might have been easier to work out what goodness was."

The Emperor is not only uncomfortable with the idea of God, but also ill at ease with his own godliness. He broods long and deeply on his self-identity – what it really was, what it was constituted of. Being a despot, he had always referred to himself as "we", as the incarnation of all his subjects, but he was now beginning to

wonder about the "disturbing possibilities of the first person singular."

When Mogor dell'Amore visits the Mughal court, we see Akbar, for all his greatness and glory, as a dissatisfied soul, questioning all the givens of his life. He is drawn to the charming Florentine raconteur and his tales, but his mind is always heavy with philosophical thoughts. Though they weigh him down, they prove fascinating for the reader. In fact, no adventure or excitement in the tale(s) we are told, can match the mind of Akbar. It is one of the many ironies of the novel. Another is Jodha.

Enchantresses and seductresses

This novel is a hymn to the erotic power of women. It abounds in enchantresses

and seductresses of all kinds, but the most interesting of them all is the imaginary Jodha – a being created by Akbar's all-powerful fancy, *khayal*. Making her character imaginary serves two purposes in the novel. In *The Enchantress of Florence*, Rushdie celebrates, among other things, a time when "the real and the unreal were [not] segregated forever and doomed to live apart under different monarchs and separate legal systems" – and the best attestation of that fact in the novel is the character of Jodha Bai, Akbar's fantasy come alive. The other purpose she serves is technical. There has always been a lot of controversy surrounding the historical character of Jodha Bai – who she actually was and whether she existed at all. By making her imaginary, in one brilliant stroke, Rushdie solves the problem of the controversy over her identity.

Akbar has numerous wives and mistresses, but none can satisfy him. So he creates his fantasy woman and gives her a name. He dreams her up, we are told, "in the way that lonely children dream up imaginary friends", to the obvious chagrin of his other consorts. They are full of malice and envy as they can never hope to compete with Jodha: "No real woman was ever like that, so perfectly attentive, so undemanding, so endlessly available. She was an impossibility, a fantasy of perfection. They feared her, knowing that, being impossible, she was irresistible, and that was why the king loved her best."

Most of the women in this novel – whether they be queens, whores or wives – are females perceived solely in relation to the male. Jodha is no different. But even within this parameter, she is unique – for, while the other women in the novel are full of envy and intrigue, preoccupied with how best to get on in life using their sexual powers, Jodha is given existential anxieties. She thinks of her identity and self in

relation to Akbar, in the same way as he thinks of his in relation to God. And in a way, they echo each other's thoughts: "The question of her independent existence, of whether she had one, insisted on being asked, over and over, whether she willed it or not. If God turned his face away from his creation, Man, would Man simply cease to be? That was the large-scale version of the question, but it was the selfish, small-scale versions that bothered her. Was her will free of the man who had willed her into being? Did she exist only because of his suspension of disbelief in the possibility of her existence? If he died, could she go on living?"

She is confident of her beauty and power over the king, but knows instinctively that her time has come when Kara Qoz, the enchantress reclaimed from the past by Vespucci's tale, casts a spell over the whole of Sikri. She loses out to the Mughal princess – but even the enchanted Emperor admits that the hidden Mughal princess' power over him was at best regressive, as it drew him "backwards in every way, in his ideas, his beliefs, his hopes."

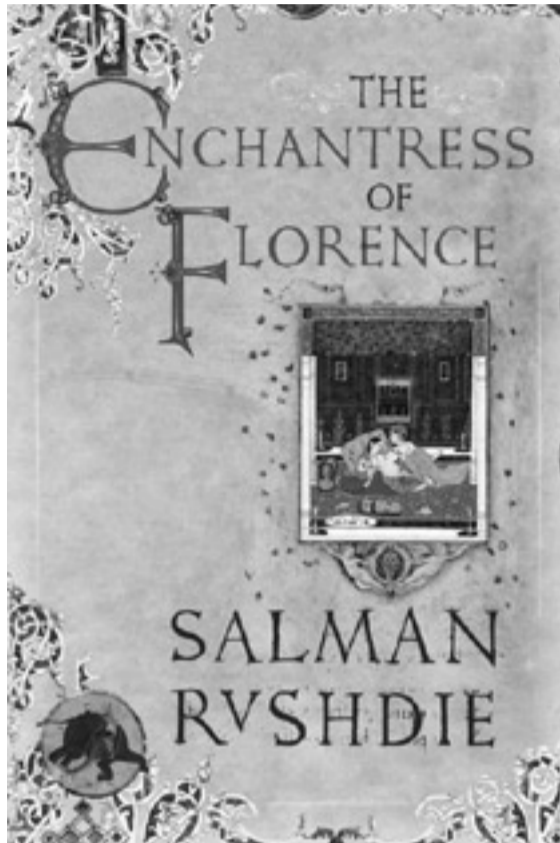
Jodha, on the other hand, for as long as she remains Akbar's favourite queen, does prove to be an ideal partner. It is she he returns to after the wars; she who informs him about the condition of his subjects; she who satisfies him physically; and she again, with whom he has mental communion – who is a part of his most profound thoughts, and with whom he can share his impossibly beautiful visions: "Imagine, Jodha... if we could awake in other men's dreams and change them, and if we had the courage to invite them into ours. What if the whole world became a single waking dream?"

In short, she is his succour – that is the role she plays in his desolate, middle-aged life. In Ashutosh Gowariker's film, Jodha plays an even more crucial role in the young Akbar's life – she shows him the way.

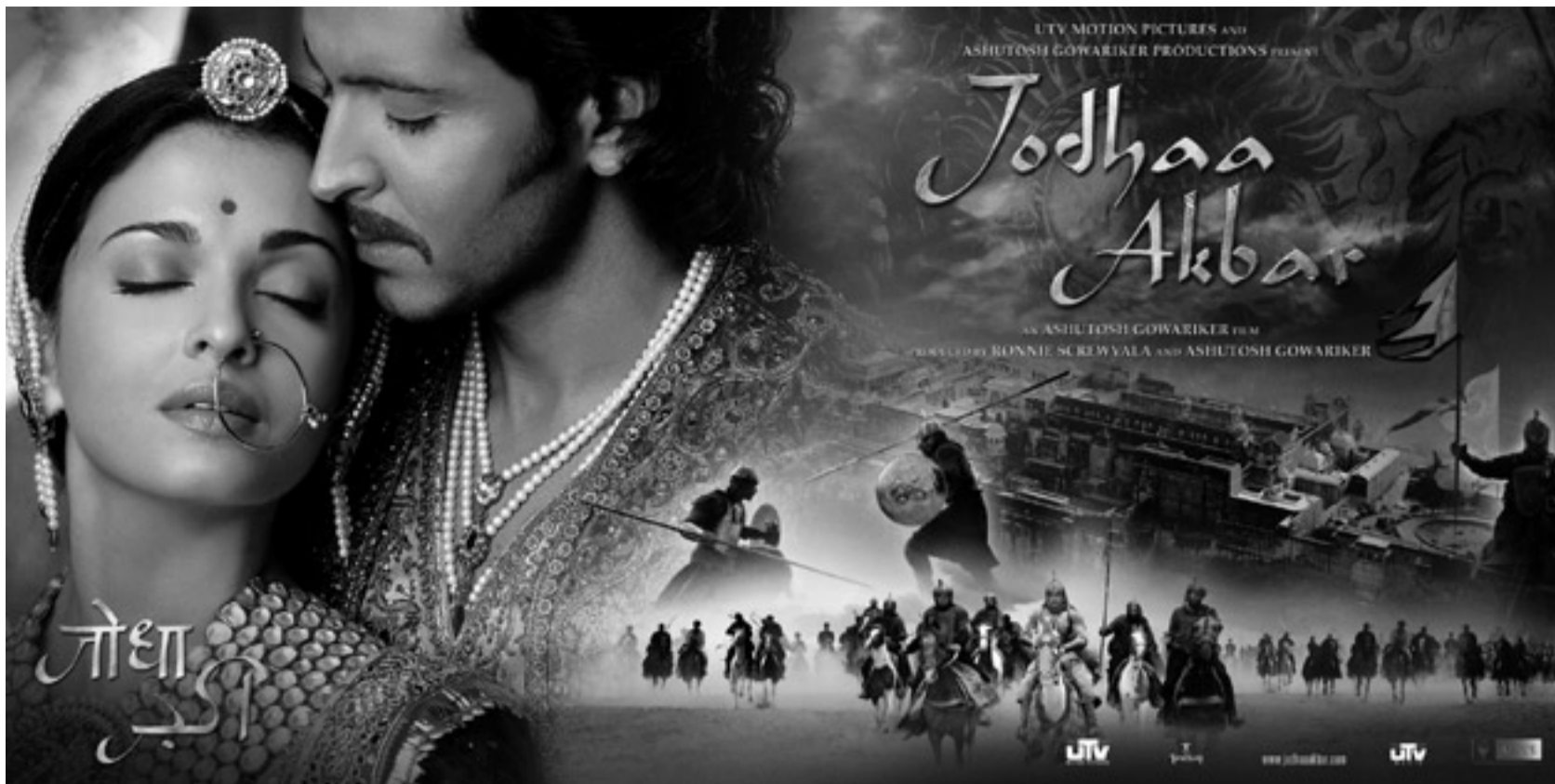
Jodhaa-Akbar

Jodhaa-Akbar is Gowariker's fifth film, but most know it as his third, as his first two films (*Pehla Nasha*, *Baazi*), sank into oblivion without a trace. The turning point in his directing career (before which he spent almost a decade as a film and television actor) came with *Lagaan* (2001) – the first Indian classic of the 21st century, which received an Oscar nomination in the 'Best Foreign Film Category'.

In Hindi film parlance, he is considered 'hatke' – different – for the unusual themes that he has chosen time and again, while working in an industry that still primarily provides popcorn entertainment. First came *Lagaan*, which depicts how, in the year 1893, a group of villagers in the heart of British India protests against unfair taxation and, led by a spirited farmer, eventually gets it waived by, incredibly, beating the British in a game of cricket. His next film, *Swades* (2004), revolves round Mohan



Salman Rushdie



Jalal ud-din Muhammad Akbar (1542-1605).

Bhargava, an Indian scientist at NASA, who gives up his lucrative career to 'to light a bulb' in one of the poorest villages of India, following a visit to his country and realising that she needs his services more.

Though his subject-matter, admittedly, has been refreshingly new every time, a careful perusal of his films reveals that he has actually kept well within the set formats and traditions of Bollywood. Following the Bollywood norm, Gowariker ropes in big names for the lead roles in his films. Like most mainstream Hindi films, music is a very important part of his films. Unlike most of them, however, the song-and-dance routines are integrated into the body of the narrative and carry the story forward; and his films are also unique in their effective use of a background score (a relatively new concept in Bollywood) that adds to their overall atmosphere.

Even when it comes to the most indispensable element of Bollywood's signature style - romance - Gowariker has not hesitated to follow tradition. The love story is absolutely central to *Jodhaa-Akbar*. But here again, his treatment has been different. Until now, all the Hindi films that dealt with Mughal history from a romantic angle (*Mughal-e-Azam*, *Anarkali*, *Taj Mahal*, to name but a few) either chose to depict the doomed love of Akbar's eldest son, Salim (later the Emperor Jehangir) for the dancing-girl Anarkali (who was buried alive

by Akbar); or else, Shah Jahan's undying passion for Mumtaz Mahal (the wife who died too young, and in whose memory, the mourning emperor built the mausoleum Taj Mahal).

A broadening of vision

Gowariker does not follow this well-trodden track, but his film is a paean to love, nevertheless. At the time of its release, the film was promoted as 'a journey of love' of a Mughal emperor for a Rajput princess. That it undoubtedly is, but after seeing the film, one realises that the whole of it moves towards a certain ideal. It is not only a journey of love that the director shows us here, but also an individual's broadening of vision.

What starts out as just a political strategy for the young Mughal emperor, goes on to become an ideal. A matrimonial alliance, to expand his kingdom and maintain peace with the martial Rajputs, becomes the means through which - because of which - Akbar is driven to think more deeply about religion and the moral duty of the ruler. And every time, it is Jodha who points the way.

In perhaps the most crucial scene in the film, Jodha puts two conditions on her nuptials. It is a marriage of convenience, forced upon her by her father, but she makes it very clear that she will accept it only on her own terms. *Meri do shaarte*

hain ("I have two conditions"), she tells a stunned Akbar: That she is not forced to convert to Islam; and that she be allowed to continue with her own religious worship in her private chambers after marriage.

He is impressed with the beautiful Rajput princess' total lack of fear in confronting him and says, he has now come to realise for the first time what Rajput pride, courage and glory means "*Rajput aan, baan aur shaan kya hota hain.*" Her demands are revolutionary for her times, and both her parents are embarrassed. Her father even tries to stop her; but the emperor says, to everyone's surprise, that he accepts her demands (despite being patently unprepared for them).

This is only the beginning. Jodha next refuses consummation on their wedding night, saying candidly, that in her mind she has still not consented to this union, though she is grateful to the emperor for accepting her demands, and this was the reason why she went ahead with the marriage.

For every condition that Jodha gives, she reasons calmly. Though each one of them takes the emperor by surprise, she does not come across to him (or the audience) as defiant - simply as an individual with a strong sense of self and a woman of sterling qualities.

Jalal ud-din admires her and gradually falls in love with her. He has to accommodate, accept, and bend to make way for Jodha and her ways in his life. He stretches not

only the borders of his kingdom but, with every new demand that Jodha makes on him, also the limits of his mind. Each demand is a moment of crisis for him, the greatest being Jodha's refusal to return to Agra after a misunderstanding between them. Jodha refuses to accept his apology, saying "*Apne... humpar fateh kiya hain - par hamara dil nahin jita.*" (You have earned a victory over me, but not won my heart.) And what applies in his relations to her, extends to his subjects as well. He has merely ruled over his subjects, she tells him - never tried to win their hearts, never been sympathetic to the common man's problems. He had never considered this notion. Prompted by her admonishment, Akbar visits Agra's main market in disguise and comes to see the plight of his ordinary subjects. He listens to their many grievances and complaints in person for the first time. It opens his eyes to the inadequacies of his rule and he realises the truth of Jodha's words.

Thus, Jodha humbles him every step of the way - as a ruler, as an individual. His kind heart is honed and nurtured under her care, and gradually, over the course of the film, we see him develop from an emperor of vast territories to a true ruler of his people. And in acknowledgement of this, his subjects honour him with the title 'Akbar' (the great).

What is most interesting about Gowariker's film is the way in which the secular strand is inextricably linked with the love story. The film shows a young Akbar, who is still a long way away from the man who

started the cult of *Din-i-Ilahi*. But the filmmaker successfully shows the beginning of that journey towards a secular ideal. And it is beautifully summed up in Akbar's pronouncement at the end of the film: "For the final time, I want to make it clear to my ministers present here and to all my subjects that Rani Jodha is a Hindu Rajput, is my Begum, and is also the empress of Hindustan. Taking any step against her would mean taking a step against the Mughal Empire itself. Let this also be known to you all - only the desire to respect and tolerate every community in India can guarantee its future well-being."

If we trace the trajectory of Gowariker's films, we will see that they are inspired by Indian themes and India - its present, its past, the Indian nation and its character. With great élan, he has used his films to re-define patriotism, trace its secular ideals, and show a moment of self-assertion. In a way, Gowariker's films are essays in fashioning the idea of a nation - defining its nature and character, and prescribing what it should do to create and maintain its identity.

Re-imagining the past

In trying to re-create the past, both Gowariker and Rushdie have re-imagined it. Both have been careful in reminding the audience about the historicity of their subject-matter - the filmmaker by a disclaimer at the beginning of the film, saying he has used only 'one version' of history; and the novelist (for all his flamboyant entangling of histories), by adding a five-page Bibliography at the end of the novel.

Essentially, Gowariker tells a love-story - but tells it in a refreshingly new way. Rushdie's novel, on the other hand, is impossible to essentialise. An epitome of post-modern fiction, it can mean all kinds of things to all manner of people. Akbar is a protagonist in both the texts. Jodha, however, is not. Unlike the film, she plays a cameo in the novel - but her role in Akbar's life is just as important. If she is muse to Akbar in Gowariker's film, inspiring him to see himself and his rule in new ways, then she is balm for his disturbed soul in Rushdie's novel. Most importantly, in both the film and the book, Akbar is perceived (to a great extent) in relation to her. And in doing that, both the novelist and the filmmaker have not only re-imagined the past, but almost re-invented the greatest Mughal emperor of India.

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