

ALAIN DÉSOULIÈRES

A Study of Kamal Ahmad Rizvi's Urdu TV Drama *Alif Nun*

Introduction: Urdu Theater, a Minor Genre or a Dead One?

DUE to its extremely late appearance on the literary scene in a society that developed a taste for theater as a mode imported from Europe, Urdu theater has always had a variable ranking in the hierarchy of literary genres. It receives, at best, a chapter at the end of an anthology, at worst an annotation dismissing its literary qualities and lamenting its disappearance. Radio and television drama obviously enjoy lower prestige.

Our intent is to situate televised Urdu drama within the general framework of Urdu literature, while conscious that the genre spills over any framework of traditional literature; we will trace the genesis of the series *Alif Nūn* as best as possible with the meager documentation available. We will then analyze two episodes from the series, and finally attempt to outline their chief formal and thematic characteristics.

At the end of his *History of Urdu Literature* (1927), Ram Babu Saksena dedicates an exhaustive chapter to the Urdu theater of the times and its Indian and European origins, but offers a very critical view of its literary value. He first notes that Urdu inherited no literary model for drama from Persian (the language of a Muslim society that repressed, in India, the representation of human beings, despite the Shi'ite tradition of sacred theater), whereas Persian had furnished the models for its other forms of literature. Moreover, as an Indian literary language, Urdu came to maturity too late to inherit the rich history of Sanskrit theater: “[By then] the Sanskrit drama was a sealed book.” Lastly, he notes that “There are very few literary dramas in Urdu, for there is no encouragement for

them.”¹

However, in the last lines of his work, Saksena, now in the rôle of literary critic, takes the trouble to defend drama as a genre, deeming it essential to the vigor of the language even while noting that Urdu theater may still be faulted with the many shortcomings of youth (in particular the extravagance of its language and thought); the author suggests the conditions conducive to its health:

The salvation of Urdu drama lies in the widening of its fields and the enriching of its coffers. Translations of the best European dramas and English masterpieces should be made. They may be made either for stage or for literature. The Sanskrit masterpieces should be unearthed and translated in their proper spirit. Urdu play-wrights must know the nature and ideals of true drama. Let them see what advance has been made by the dramatic literature of the leading countries of the world. Let them adopt what is suited to the genius of Urdu literature and Indian society. Let not the translations swamp original compositions. Comedies of manners may be written. Society should furnish subjects for artistic treatment. The scholar must not despise drama nor dramatic literature. The general tone of the drama must improve. Actors should not be looked down upon. A greater enterprising spirit is required. A wider patronage is solicited. Unfortunately the institution of the purdah impedes the progress of Urdu novels and drama. No healthy and romantic love is wholly possible where there is no freedom of intercourse between maid and man. A man should not be deemed to have lost caste if he has taken to the stage as a profession. The present plays are inordinately long. They should be kept well within bounds. The dramatists must have a very high sense of their avocation.

Achievements of Urdu Drama

Drama is an important branch of literature which cannot be ignored. Urdu drama thus supplied a long-felt want and removed a defect found so long in Urdu literature. It is the training ground of language where it is exercised and strengthened. Urdu drama also served to popularise Urdu throughout the length and breadth of India and helped to make Urdu the lingua franca of India.

Future of Urdu Drama

The Urdu dramatic literature has a value of its own and with the passage of time it will develop and become more rich and important.

¹(Allahabad, 1927), p. 360.

Prophets are never popular and their prophecies are laughed at. Nevertheless Urdu drama has a bright future before it. It has made wonderfully good progress considering its age. Already Urdu drama has shown signs of vigorous growth and development. Men of light and leading will surely recognise in it a powerful instrument for the uplift of the people and the next wave of dramatic composition is likely to be historico-political even as it has been in Persia, one of the most backward countries from the dramatic standpoint. Historical dramas like those of Shakespeare are yet to be written in India. Through and after these perhaps will in the course of time arise the true romantic drama. Then and only then will Urdu drama take its rightful place by the side of the best productions of the world. (pp. 366–7)

It would be easy to be ironic, seventy years or so later, given the near disappearance of Urdu theater as a true literary genre with the advent of cinema, and say that Saksena was completely wrong. But we shall see that if we take dramatic literature in its largest sense, things look quite different. Indeed, it could be said that the program put forth by Saksena has been widely adopted by cinema, and later television.

No less a novelist than the renowned Premchand also had a pessimistic view of the Urdu theater of his times, while regretting that he had not written it himself on a serious level and admitting that he had not mastered the techniques involved. At least, this is what we learn in a letter he wrote to Indra Nath Madan, dated 26 December 1934 (two years before his death):

I never made a serious attempt at theater. I thought of two or three plots that could have been used dramatically; if plays are not produced on stage, they lose all significance. There are no appropriate facilities in India. Especially when it comes to plays in Hindi or Urdu, the stage of the Parsis, which scarcely deserves the name, is impotent and lifeless. I hate it particularly. Actually, I have never been gifted for dramatic technique or staging. My plays were [written] solely to be read. Why limit myself to the novel? I can depict my characters much better in a novel than in theater. This is why I have given preference to the novel to express my ideas. And yet I hold the hope of writing one or two stage plays. As for the financial aspect, it is more a matter of [popular] success. Theater in Hindi or Urdu can be a great success, you can make a name at it, but it is impossible to gain a living income from it. People here are not in the habit of buying books. To do so is seen as a mark of laziness, frivolity, and lack of good

sense.²

The public's lack of interest in literary theater was thus denounced by Premchand, eight years after Ram Babu Saksena. It is also interesting to note that Premchand, in the very same letter, expressed his disappointment in the commercial film industry, which inspired in him comments hardly more complimentary than the Parsis' theater of Bombay. The basic idea he expresses is the same: that he did not find in film, as in theater, the professional outlet he was seeking for his literary and social ideas. He writes as follows:

The cinema is not an appropriate setting for a man of letters. I came to this sector in the hope that it would bring me sufficient income, but now I have come to the conclusion that this was vain illusion on my part. That is why I have returned to literature. In fact I never stopped writing literature.³

In another letter, this one addressed to Ḥisāmu 'd-Dīn Ghairī and dated 13 November 1934 (Bombay), Premchand clearly expressed the distaste he had for commercial film, an industry "that has nothing to do with the comic or with reform [of society], and knows only exploitation," and does nothing but "exploit the noblest human passions ..." Note that Premchand's remarks echo an article by Ḥisāmu 'd-Dīn Ghairī that spoke of progressive social reform and Indian films, an article with which he agreed completely. Premchand did not have time to adapt to the new forms of dramatic writing required by radio and cinema, unlike the generation of writers following him, who went from dramatic writing for radio to screenwriting for film. Premchand did not make the transition between literature and the new media of the era.⁴

The Rôle of Radio in the Survival of Urdu Theater

Premchand died in 1936, the year All India Radio was founded in Delhi

²*Prēmčand kē Khuṭūṭ*, comp. Madan Gōpāl (Calcutta: published by Madan Gōpāl, 1967), pp. 196–7.

³*Ibid.*, p. 197.

⁴For a chronicle of Premchand's involvement with film, see Madan Gopal, *Munshi Prem Chand, A Literary Biography* (Bombay, 1964), pp. 386–92.

after getting off the ground as a short-lived branch of Post and Telecommunications. From the start, the radio station offered theatrical programs both in English and in Indian languages. As nearly as can be determined (although it cannot be stated with certainty), the first radio play in Urdu was broadcast in October 1937; it was a piece by Krishan Chandar entitled *Bēkārī*.⁵ It would appear that Krishan Chandar officially worked for All India Radio from 1939 to 1943, after which he went to Bombay to write film scripts for Shalimar Pictures.

Saadat Hassan Manto (who was, like Krishan Chandar, much younger than Premchand; they were born in 1915 and 1917 respectively) also managed to adapt to the dramatic forms of radio and film; he was no doubt attracted by the substantial revenue this brought him, but also strove to preserve the integrity of his literary ideas. He was able to work in cinema while continuing to publish short stories in Urdu and without forfeiting his right to engage in criticism.⁶

Manto was thus able to take advantage of the extraordinary career path offered by All India Radio to authors of drama starting in 1941, when, according to Ahmad Dehlavi, Ahmad Shah Bukhari and N.M. Rashid tried to make radio a more effective medium for the spread of literature by hiring well-known writers.⁷ The era of the Second World War was also, as noted by Akhlāq Aṣar, the time when Urdu radio drama was becoming more patriotic and less influenced by its English counterpart;⁸ it was a period when authors saw a shortage of live stage theaters, which had fallen victim to cinema, and writers could not count on public taste to ensure sales of theatrical works published in Urdu. In 1931 sound movies came to Bombay, 1936 brought color films, radio was in its golden age: it is not surprising that the young generation of writers would be fascinated by these new means of reaching an audience.

It is interesting that these two writers of Urdu fiction, who were able to work in dramatic art and adapt it to radio, also managed to earn a

⁵Akhlāq Aṣar, *Urdū Ḍrāmē kā Muṭāli‘a* (Bhopal, 1977), p. 91.

⁶Indeed, this did not prevent him from expressing his own very critical views on the Indian cinema of his time; cf. his Urdu articles in *Manṭō kē Maḡāmīn* (Delhi, 1942).

⁷Cited in Leslie A. Flemming, *Another Lonely Voice: The Life and Works of Saadat Hassan Manto* (Berkeley, Center for South and Southeast Asia Studies, University of California, 1979), p. 11.

⁸P. 95.

living writing film scripts without giving up writing modern literary prose, particularly the short story. Manto died in Lahore in 1955, nine years before the arrival of television in 1964. As we shall see, dramatic work for radio did not die out with him, for radio became, for many, the training ground for television.

On the other hand, there was the pessimistic view of Muhammad Sadiq, who, in the second edition of his *A History of Urdu Literature* devotes a separate chapter to Urdu theater and addresses the causes of its weakness as a literary genre: in sum, Sadiq sees Urdu theater as a commercial product fulfilling the demands of an uneducated and uncultured public, generated by playwrights incapable of rising above popular taste. He compares it with English theater of Elizabethan times, noting:

Why Urdu drama did not keep pace with other literary activities and was not cultivated by literary men is not difficult to explain. The drama was of the people, popular, and had to suit the taste of those it was written for. It would not, however, explain the essential mediocrity of the drama to say that it was mainly commercial. The Elizabethan drama was no less commercial. Nor would it do to put the whole blame on audiences and their poor taste. Dramatic fare must suit the palate of those who order it. And yet, in spite of all limitations, Elizabethan dramatists produced a drama of high literary merit. There is much that is popular in it—mystery, murder, sensationalism. But the popular element does not exhaust the plays, and over and above the popular element there is always a great deal for the serious reader and playgoer. The Elizabethan playwrights transcend their limitations, our playwrights either succumb to them, or have no capacity for rising above them. Before we make a scapegoat of audiences, let us remember that Urdu drama is the work of needy adventurers who did not do better because they could not. Last though not least, it should not be forgotten that the drama was suspect with a large section of the sober, matter-of-fact middle class that looked upon the theatre as a limb of the devil. And they were not far wrong. The actors were mainly bohemians, recruited from the lower ranks of society; and they lived up to their dubious reputation. The owners of companies were often gay and licentious young men, who strove to combine business with the pleasure of an undisturbed intimacy with the demi-monde employed in the company. And who were their patrons? Dissolute young men, prostitutes, rakish members of the aristocracy, old roués, hooligans, and city riff-raff. Rowdyism, lawlessness, and free fights, in which anybody and everybody might join, were the order of the day. The ordinary decent-minded people

gave a wide berth to the theatre.⁹

This judgment is quite harsh and bespeaks a rather aristocratic concept of Urdu literature, but that Sadiq would judge it thus is not surprising considering that the vocation of classical literary genres is to address the élite.

For Sadiq, a literary genre that could not be cultivated by litterateurs and was unable to rally to its cause a serious readership was on its way to destruction. But he was not alone in denouncing the sheerly commercial, ephemeral aspect of Urdu theater: Saksena does the same, especially in regard to theatrical enterprises in late-nineteenth-century Bombay, and we have seen that Premchand himself, a Progressive writer, also condemned certain commercial theater. Sadiq is simply taking note of the disappearance of “Urdu theater,” which has lost its public and its creative talent to the all-powerful medium of popular (sound) film, and adds that in addition, Urdu theater has not managed to fulfill its own artistic function:

If there was a renaissance in drama in Europe and America with the establishment of motion-pictures, why did Urdu drama suffer a slow eclipse and ultimately die with the advent of motion-pictures? This is best explained by a study of the essential function of these two art forms. The capacity of motion-pictures for portraying the external world is unlimited. The drama, on the other hand, is confined to the narrow limits of the stage; and in this respect it is no match for motion-pictures. They can portray all scenes and sights and actions ... In the face of such potential, how has the drama not only survived, and flourished?

The fact is that all the arts have their natural or self-imposed limits. Instead of being thwarted by them the artists make them into stepping stones to success. Motion-pictures are by their very nature extended in space; they have the monopoly of the external world. The characteristic quality of the drama is its inwardness. Unable to range at large in the external world by the exigencies of the stage; it has made the heart of man its special province, studying its conflicts, passions, desires, aspirations, doubts, fears and complexities in the face of fate, customs, and traditions—a world infinite in range, variety, interest, mystery, and intensity. Motion-pictures are like the telescope; they bring the outer world within our reach. The drama is like the microscope; it dissects and analyses the drama eternally being played inside the heart of man. It tries to probe into

⁹(1964; rpt. Karachi: Oxford University Press, 1995), p. 611. All further references to this work appear in the text.

the mystery of life, and tries to interpret and explain it while giving us a vivid picture of it.

Motion-pictures and drama are not mutually self-exclusive; their boundaries often overlap; but all the same, they have their own distinct provinces, as a comparison of the great plays of the world with the masterpieces of motion-pictures will show.

The question remains: Why has the Urdu drama lost ground and disappeared? This is because Urdu drama aimed at spectacle. It fed the eye instead of feeding or stimulating the imagination and, as a spectacle, it was no match for motion-pictures. Not that in the drama there are no violent actions, catastrophes and battles, but very often they are somewhere in the background: they are usually reported and not shown, the emphasis being on what the people involved think, feel or suffer in the mind. (p. 613)

So we see that for Sadiq modern Urdu scriptwriting, whether in radio or television, is not classified as a literary genre, despite its growing success over nearly thirty years in India and Pakistan, with the publications that have followed in its wake. He does not even mention it; the most he says is that theater and cinema have shown a tendency to grow more alike or to blend into one, which does not acknowledge the literary aspect of media scripts. Similarly, in his chapter on the short story, when he speaks of the literary careers of Krishan Chandar and Manto, he makes no mention of the two authors' works for radio or film, probably because theater written for these media does not seem serious literature to him and thus does not deserve to be treated in a history of literature. It is true that the distribution of these works in written form is not very great compared to that of more classical literature, that its distribution in electronic form (principally videocassette) often leaves a great deal to be desired in terms of quality, that radio and television archives are still hard to consult, and that the study of these media and their productions, even literary, belongs to a different domain.

For a Literary Analysis of Urdu TV Drama

Three observations regarding the foregoing:

Must Urdu theater be limited strictly to its classical form as produced on a stage?

Certainly, the failure of classical Urdu dramatic literature as defined by Ram Babu Saksena, whether it is inspired by Persian, Arab or Indian mythology or borrows from romantic drama or the broader range of

European classics, is unquestionable: it has not survived.¹⁰ Urdu poetry, on the other hand, is more vigorous than that of numerous European languages, and the Urdu short story is in the midst of a period of extraordinary excellence. A literary historian such as Sadiq restricts his interests to the literary form of theater meant to be performed on stage. Thus he cannot take into account televised theater production in Urdu (and in Hindi), which has nonetheless been going strong in India and Pakistan for at least two decades. And this when one important condition for the success of this theater is the quality of the writing in Urdu combined with its own themes (qualities that have been responsible for the success of TV dramas such as *Alif Nūn*); this dramatic writing and these themes are not the same as those found in film. It is obvious that if dramatic art exists in Urdu now, it is thanks to television, and one must take a close look at the techniques and themes used in television series to account for this phenomenon.

The importance of the interaction between audiovisual media and the theater:

Sadiq does, however, bring up an authentic question that probes deeply into the modernity of works of drama in Urdu; the question of the relationship between literature and cinema. However, he sees only a relationship of artistic domination and economic oppression: cinema has killed off Urdu theater and stolen its writers. Yet there exists a true interplay between literature and cinema, for one stimulates the success of the other, and these days, not necessarily in any given order. This interplay began very early; the filmed stage play is an obvious example. A parallel question that deserves precise study is the relationship between written theater (as a literary genre) and television (as a medium). It will be interesting to see historians of literature take into serious consideration the extraordinary success of televised dramas and the publications they have engendered, if this can be done without any sociological prejudice, without insisting on classifying TV drama as non-theater. In effect, a too subjective notion of what is literature and what is not (relative to the prevailing dramatic tradition in other languages) results in exclusion from the field of analysis of anything new and popular.

But Sadiq holds up theater as internal drama, the art of the human heart's introspection. He rejects this intimist rôle for cinema, relegating it

¹⁰Cf., Saksena, p. 350.

to its principal function in South Asia: the adventure film. It is understood that by “cinema” he does not mean the genre of the filmed stage play, which was the glory of early talking films, although one might analyze this phenomenon as a natural extension of theater, and consequently he does not take into account televised dramatic productions, despite their enormous popularity, using themes drawn from dramatic literature. Yet this new treasure trove could well be seen as a sort of renaissance in Urdu theater.

To be fair, it must be said that the survival of Urdu theater was due first to radio, and that TV drama comes only in an indirect line of succession to the genre of filmed stage plays.¹¹ Historically, television was first created, in both India and Pakistan, by artists proceeding from radio, not surprisingly given the British precedent in which the success of radio broadcasting directly inspired television. It was not a form designed to broadcast cinema but a superior form of radio, image transmitting having been invented quite early by telegraphy, and the two media share the same basic structure linking a broadcaster with multiple receivers. As with radio, and not cinema, the receiver/consumer is at home and not in a large public building. From the outset television presented itself as an “intimist” medium, like radio.

That is why in Pakistan, a country then practically devoid of structures for popular theater, Urdu theater took to television very quickly, as it had to radio, from the moment of its birth in the sixties. Many social taboos were thus circumvented that had hindered the development of Urdu theater, which Saksena so rightly noted in 1927 (cited above).

Televised productions became a very important outlet for Urdu drama (even with radio still very much alive). Indeed, the producer solicits the author/scriptwriter (and even author/scriptwriter/actor, as in the case of Kamāl Aḥmad Rizvī, who plays the rôle of Allan in the series *Alif Nūn*¹²), and the writer in turn imposes a style on the producer, soon becoming indispensable to the series. We should note that the

¹¹This relationship between TV drama and radio is mentioned by Āghā Nāṣir in his preface to *Alif aur Nun* (Lahore, c. 1984), and a concise history of Urdu radio theater appears in Aṣar, *op. cit.*

¹²The series *Alif Nūn*, written and directed by Kamāl Aḥmad Rizvī, produced by Āghā Nāṣir, was published by the Shalimar Recording Company, Islamabad, Pakistan, in two volumes beginning with 1986–7, and Rizvī published five comedies in 1986 (Islamabad: Idāra-e Ṣāqāft-e Pākistān).

phenomenon of interaction between theater and television (as between the novel and the adventure film) is not unique to Urdu, that these are universal phenomena in the literatures of the world. But in the case of TV drama, the screenplay is indistinguishable from the dramatic work.

The outlook of Agha Nasir:

A theoretical text which may be interesting to cite here is the preface which Agha Nāṣir wrote for his second volume of plays for television. Here is a synopsis of the preface and a few quotations:

After reminding the reader that his first collection of theater pieces consisted mainly of plays written for radio (published in 1975), the author takes care to establish that these five plays were written for television and presented in this medium.

He states unequivocally that “theater, whether written for stage, radio, or television, has one goal: to communicate its message to the listener or spectator in a way that is enjoyable and effective.” He then specifies the nature of the message for which the author has chosen the medium of theater to convey: “For my part, I do not favor abstract or imaginary subjects. The subject of a play should relate to events or experiences of our era and our society, within a framework of the problems of everyday life.” Nāṣir adds:

I am convinced that whatever the literary genre, and especially in theater, the description of modern consciousness [the spirit of the times] is obligatory... [Theater] is the mirror of [social] realities, but it delivers them to the critic’s scalpel as well, and its goal is to guide and improve the lot of humanity.

After which he alludes to the different theatrical traditions and most famous playwrights of the world, and asserts that

all are in agreement on this definition and this nature of theater. For the Indian subcontinent, from Kalidas to the best-known Pakistani playwrights, from the ideological point of view, all recognize this inherent advantage of theater, that is, that it is rooted in the “spirit of the times.”

He then offers a cursory look at the history of theater in the Indian subcontinent, alluding successively to Portuguese missionary theater (nineteenth century), the theater of Victorian England with the vogue for amateur theater among the British colonialists, then to the theater of the “Seth Parsi” in Marathi and Urdu, a commercial theater founded on a

foreign tradition lacking national values and traditions but having, he points out, the merit of keeping a theatrical tradition alive.

He adds:

The invention of cinema was the fatal blow to theatrical enterprises and commercial theater; however, the [new] means of distribution opened new pathways for the creative experiments of playwrights.

Aware of the reputation of current Urdu theater in the form of TV dramas as a “minor genre,” Nāṣir offers his point of view:

I shall not take a stand as to whether TV dramas [televised theater or *nashariyātī drāma*] have their place in the history of literature or not, but it may be stated with certainty that in the history of theater, these two institutions [radio and television] cannot be ignored. Radio has played a very important rôle in this history in the past. But here and now, this is not the case. In our day, television is a practical, effective and prestigious medium for the theater. That is why a play is shown in one language or another every day. Generally, TV drama is constructed as a description of our problems and of the mindset of our times. With the reservation that drama is produced by means of resources and institutions controlled by the government, and thus the consciousness of our times and the reflection of our realities are only possible to the degree that the politics of the government in power permit.¹³

We must note in passing that Āghā Nāṣir has no qualms about speaking of a single “literary genre” (the Urdu word he uses is “*ṣinf*”) to refer to theater broadcast on television or radio, and that for him, no matter what the technical means of production, it does not cease to exist as a literary genre.

Saksena’s Prophecy and Urdu Drama

One might also note that televised drama in its own way fulfills the standards Saksena established for the survival of authentic theater in Urdu:

– Social themes adapted to the country: The plays of Āghā Nāṣir or the televised series *Alif Nūn*, by Kamāl Aḥmad Riḏvī, which we examine here, draw their inspiration from the observation of social realities

¹³ Āghā Nāṣir *kē Ṭēliviḏān Drāmē* (Islamabad, 1988), pp. 6–9.

(emigration, the problems of the middle class in a consumer society, the consequences of rural exodus, urban poverty, etc.) that are specific to Pakistan (although in no way foreign to India).

– Shortness of subject and uniqueness of genre: The episodes are brief (around a half hour for *Alif Nūn*), and the author establishes a precise social theme, symbolized by one or two key characters.

– Urdu television (and radio) drama in Pakistan, which has produced works for all segments of the public, has certainly contributed to popularizing a modern, conversational Urdu language, playing a not inconsiderable pedagogical rôle in a country in which Urdu is not the native language of a great majority of the population. Televised drama fulfills well the rôle as linguistic training ground that Saksena foresaw.

– Television has also accorded actors in Urdu theater not only glory but the dignity and social recognition previously lacking (Rizvī, the playwright and director, thus returned to acting as well, winning success in the rôle of Allan, just as Rafī‘ Khāvar was a success in the rôle of Nannhā in the series under discussion).

– In the end, television has served as mentor to Urdu theater and given it the stronger spirit of enterprise that it lacked, all the more important in that it arose under the censorship of state television, which itself is now losing ground to private enterprise.

In conclusion, there now exists a televised dramatic literature in Urdu that has filled what was seen as a “gap” in Urdu literature, and it is appropriate to acknowledge its rôle in the spread of ideas and of the language. Of course, this is not to say that televised dramatic literature takes all the honors because of its great popularity, but it is in order to analyze this literary form which, in fact, embraces great categories of drama such as comedy, social drama and even historical drama.

Genesis of the Series *Alif Nun*

The preface to the edited and published texts of the *Alif Nūn* series,¹⁴ written by playwright Āghā Nāṣir, who is also a specialist in television production, attempts to give the reader an idea of the genesis of the television series.

The first interesting note in the preface concerns the relationship

¹⁴(Lahore: Ferozsons, 1984), pp. 6–10.

between the producer and the writer. It is a complex interrelationship that emphasizes the producer's rôle in the genesis of the series:

In television, my work was as a producer and Kamāl Aḥmad Rizvī was among the authors who wrote the screenplays. The relationship between producer and writer is extremely delicate, complicated and even a bit dangerous. If a good writer and a good producer do not maintain a faithfulness [to each other's ideas], things will of necessity be difficult.

Nāṣir also confides, as producer of the series, privileged information that shows a sort of genetic descent of the series:

Now I can't really remember how many of Aḥmad Rizvī's plays I've presented on television, but I remember quite well that we felt a "mutual compatibility" [he is speaking here as a producer] based on the drama series he had written for television, inspired by the radio works of Saadat Hasan Manto, *Ā'ō* [come].¹⁵ The title of the program was *Ā'ō Naukrī Karēñ* [come take a job]. After citing the elegance, literary power and acting skills of Kamāl Aḥmad Rizvī, I must mention one more thing: the rôle of the high-level functionary, for which Kamāl Aḥmad Rizvī had called in from somewhere a bank employee whose name was Rafī' Khāvar, and who soon became one of the most famous actors in the country. I was the one who presented [produced] this television series written by Kamāl Aḥmad Rizvī, and in an instant all of us, producer, writer and actors, thanks to television, rose to the summit of fame and glory.

This passage is important because it underlines the importance of its radio heritage in the birth of the TV drama (not to mention the rôle of radio as a significant link in the history of Urdu literature). Āghā Nāṣir himself had come out of radio, he tells us in the beginning of the preface. As to the origin of the series' theme, he adds:

Alif aur Nūn was not one of my original ideas: I had previously presented for two or three years running on Radio Karachi a serial written by Intiṣār Ḥusain, *Dambāz Damsāz* [braggart trickster], a program created,

¹⁵This series of radio plays is mentioned by Flemming (p. 13) as among those he wrote for radio in 1941 and 1942, which he published almost simultaneously; strangely, the date on the published version of this series, *Ā'ō*, is 1940. See *Ā'ō* (Lahore: Nayā Idāra), p. 114. The first play Manto wrote for radio is undoubtedly "*Ā'ō Rēḍyō Sunēñ*" (come hear the radio); the resemblance between the titles is striking.

as is well known, by Z. A. Bukhari. But if we take a close look, *Dambāz Damsāz* was not an original idea either. Mr. Bukhari himself said that in view of the performances of two famous theater actors, Mughal Bashīr and ‘Abdu ’l-Raḥmān Kābulī, he had suggested to Intiṣār Ḥusain that he write a series in the style of the world-famous movie series of Laurel and Hardy.

The moment I mentioned this to Kamāl Aḥmad Rizvī, he set to work on a wonderful script with a quick pace and plenty of sarcastic humor, and we began preparing to distribute the new series right away. It was the very beginning of television [in Pakistan], a situation of astounding destitution; we had nothing like the sort of time and resources we have today. We had no recording device and could only mount one set at a time in the tiny studio. Every play followed the same schedule: dialogue memorized in two or three days, then two days of rehearsal outdoors or in another locale, one last day of rehearsal in the studio with the camera, and then the live broadcast.

Āghā Nāṣir also reveals in an anecdote the origin of the title of the series, which always stars two main comic characters, Allan and Nann^{hā}: The first two letters of the name of producer Āghā Nāṣir (in Urdu *alif* and *nūn*) were suggested by someone on the team, and these became the first names given to the two characters (one skinny and one fat) by the author, due to the shapes of the letters *alif* and *nūn*. Nāṣir adds that he and Rizvī later agreed to give them the symbolic names Allan and Nann^{hā}.

This information about the distant origins of the television series *Alif Nūn* is of note because it demonstrates both the continuity of the comic tradition and the influence of film comedy (Laurel and Hardy being at the same time a couple of comic actors and two mythic characters, one fat and one thin,¹⁶ just like Allan and Nann^{hā}). It is well known in stage and cinema tradition that earlier works have always been a source of inspiration, for producers as well as authors. Tradition also shows clearly the rôle of the producer who makes specific demands of the writer (like the mentor in classical comedy), relativizing the inspiration of the writer without diminishing its worth. The anecdote regarding the invention of the series’ name also illustrates a relationship of collaboration between producer and author.

One can also see here, besides the pioneering rôle of radio, the interaction of two different traditions in the creation of televised comedy: that

¹⁶See for example the films of Stan Laurel and Oliver Hardy, from 1930 to 1941, directed by J. G. Blystone and also by Hal Roach.

of “cinema” (particularly the form of filmed stage plays) and that of the stage.

Āghā Nāṣir also furnishes specific dates for the production of the serial *Alif Nūn*, which came into being at Lahore in 1964, nearly at the same moment that television reached Pakistan:

The series *Alif Nūn* was presented for the first time in 1965 and was rebroadcast in 1969 and 1971. After the advent of color and the national television network, at the end of 1981, *Alif Nūn* appeared on television screens a fourth time so that new viewers from every corner of the country could see this famous and delightful series.

Synopsis and Commentary on Two Episodes from the Series:

A brief synopsis and analysis of two episodes will give a concrete idea of the technical and thematic structure of these TV screenplays.

1. Chicken Corner Men.¹⁷ Our two heroes, Allan and Nannhā, are employed by the manager of a streetside restaurant to prepare and sell *tikkās* (kebabs) to passersby. Let us quote from the initial script directions in the printed text:

A kebab stand [on the sidewalk]. On one side, a metal brazier with glowing coals. To the side, an electric fan. A bowl filled with chopped meat which Nannhā is kneading with his hands while tears run down his cheeks.

As usual, all the material tasks fall to Nannhā, who is at once the cook and the tout to passing customers. Allan limits himself to advising and supervising the work while pocketing the profits. The art of the “profession” (blatant chicanery) consists of selling food made of meat that is unfit for consumption but cheap (dog, cat, and the like) in the form of unrecognizable chopped meat whose taste is altered by the very strong spices in the sauce (*masāla*). This is sold at a high price to customers in a hurry, who eat it on the street. Allan is a sort of trustee of the owner,

¹⁷In the script published by Ferozsons (Lahore), the title of this episode is different, and closer to written tradition in Urdu: “Tikkā Kabāb Shāp Mēñ.” It is given the number 21, cf. Rizvī; pp. 178–84.

Chaudhri Sahib, who shows up from time to time to make sure all is going well.

The play has several scenes in which Nann^{hā}, a very bad tout, tried to force a passerby to eat when the man has no desire to, or makes mistakes about the quality of the merchandise he is supposed to provide.

The humor in the situation stems from the fact that while Chaudhri Sahib provides the stand with bad meat (chickens dead of disease rather than healthy animals slaughtered according to religious and hygienic rules), in the end he finds himself in the position of the duped customer. He has bought a healthy chicken and had it killed and prepared before his eyes to be eaten by himself and his guests, but Nann^{hā}, having sold the good meat to a customer who was in a hurry, serves his boss the restaurant's usual fare; Nann^{hā} cannot then resist remarking that it is only justice that he taste for once the meat he has them serve his customers. It is the fable of the robber robbed, wherein the author's moral once again triumphs, but first we have been shown a sympathetic portrait of common people trying to get by however they can.

Indeed, if Allan and Nann^{hā} are presented as complicit in the restaurateur's dishonesty, they are also victims of a system that makes them outcasts. They end up as they were before, jobless, in the streets, with Allan furious at losing everything due to Nann^{hā}'s simpleton nature; when Nann^{hā} insists that they go and eat in a real restaurant with the little they have managed to earn, Allan, with a gesture like that of an adult punishing a child, pulls off his shoe and gives his clumsy partner a beating. End of episode.

The play under discussion evokes the moral problem of the pure and the impure, in food and in everyday behavior, beyond the restaurateur's dishonesty. The author holds up to shame the managers of sidewalk food stands that serve adulterated meat in the form of *tikkās* or kebabs, in defiance of all standards of hygiene, of the taboos on meat not prepared under conditions established by Muslim practice, and of common morality (even the spices are spoiled). But he also makes a comparison between bad meat and money acquired by means of corruption, thus impure and unsuitable for consumption.

2. "Film Sazi Men"—a satire on commercial film in the Alif Nun series. One of the most remarkable episodes in the series, when it comes to satire, is entitled "Film Sāzī Mēñ" [making movies]; this episode merits a detailed analysis, for here we witness a denunciation of commercial cinema by a dramatic author and TV

scriptwriter (Rizvī) who takes a view verging on the classical standpoint of Premchand cited above. Note that this is not the only instance in which the series criticizes commercial film; the episodes of the “hair salon” and “Ghunḍā Tēks” [the racket] also include several references to bad movies.

Unfortunately, this episode is not included among the published screenplays. The synopsis given here is based on the Urdu dialogue of the filmed version.¹⁸

In the first scene (exposition) we see our two heroes in a comfortable office (leather-covered chairs, an impressive work table overflowing with papers and telephones, in one corner a couch and two armchairs, shelves full of files, a metal cabinet containing the sort of round tins that hold reels of film, etc.). Allan is making an imaginary frame with his hands as though he had a camera and were panning past the photographs of actresses on the wall: “*Film kā shāṭ sōḥ rahā t̄hā,*” he says [“I just thought of an idea for a film”]. He bumps into Nann^{hā}, who has been backing up without watching where he is going, in terror that the tea seller, to whom they owe money, will disfigure him with a broken teacup.

Allan explains to Nann^{hā} that he is getting ready to make a film. The latter is surprised that he could make a film seeing that he does not have enough money to pay for his tea. Allan explains that producers like them do not need money to produce a film: the way to do it is to promise a share in the film’s future receipts to the shooting team (scriptwriter, leading actor and actress, musicians, etc.) via contracts payable after the film is made. Then they will borrow money from a distributor, to whom one also sells a share of the film’s profits, all the while posing as rich and discerning producers who have a good film to sell, of which some of the rights have already been sold to another distributor. The names of the cast members serve as bait to convince the distributor to advance the money.

The stratagem or crux of the action is thus laid out: to get a lot of money by exploiting the talent of others and pretending one has the financial means to back the production.

The ensuing scenes of the episode unfold as foreseen, despite the bumbblings of Nann^{hā}, who has not grasped the game and tries to take

¹⁸“*Film Sāzī Mēñ,*” written and directed by Kamāl Aḥmad Rizvī, with Rafī‘ Khāvar in the rôle of Nann^{hā} and Kamāl Aḥmad Rizvī in the rôle of Allan, produced in the studios of Lahore, distributed on videocassette by the Shalimar Recording Company (1986), vol. I.

himself seriously. The first character of the shooting team to appear is the story writer. He does not write the sort of standard commercial scripts Allan and Nann^{hā} desire (a mix of comedy and drama, with fights, etc.) and complains that the texts he produces don't sell because public taste has been corrupted. He ends up proposing to Allan, who takes naturally to the rôle of a knowledgeable producer (while Nann^{hā} cannot do business at all), not a story but a "subject" drawn from a successful foreign film, whose screenplay he has faithfully reconstructed, scene by scene. Plagiarism of successful foreign films (a project with no risk) is thus denounced, while it is shown that originality and new literary inspiration are rejected by this conformist cinema.

Then come the main actors. First there is the male lead, or "hero," who sells his physical appearance while he hides his real fees from the tax collector. The scene with the heroine is briefer but the denunciation of the "star system" is the same: Allan assures them that the film was inspired by their personalities and written for them. The content of the script is not even mentioned; all talk is of the actors' fees. It is noteworthy that the lead actress is not treated with the same regard, nor given the same amount of money (she will only have rights to "overseas" royalties, meaning the foreign market, where one can imagine there will not be much of a demand for a film plagiarized from a foreign film). Thus having denounced plagiarism practiced by "the best screenwriter in the country," Riḡvī denounces the cult of the "hero" and "heroine," one of commercial cinema's chief drawing cards.

Then comes the crucial scene with the distributor, who is ready to hand over to the producer a generous advance against the film's profits, provided he is awarded the best distribution areas. This will allow our two "producers" to get money with no financial risk or demonstrable imagination. The transaction is going quite well, and the distributor, who has been won over by the subject of the film (plagiarized version of a famous work) and the actors' names, is on the point of lending the producers a considerable sum, when Allan, forgetting about the tea seller's threats, orders some tea.

Catastrophe arrives with the tea seller, who first demands his two rupees, which Allan and Nann^{hā} cannot pay despite their luxurious office. At this point the distributor realizes he is dealing not with producers but with crooks, and Allan's carefully worked out strategy crumbles. The final scene shows Nann^{hā} reversing the rôles (as he has already tried to do several times by cutting in on Allan's words or sitting in Allan's chair) by beating Allan, who was foolish enough to order tea. But the classic

comedy rôles are reestablished in the end: Allan regains the upper hand over Nann^hā, who realizes he has overstepped his bounds, and the episode ends as usual with a “thrashing” administered to the innocent, generous, but low-ranking, uncultured character, Nann^hā.

The theme of this episode is of considerable interest in that it parodies, in a TV drama, the system that produces bad commercial films based on plagiarism and the star system. It is a defense of authentic cinema (and theater). Screenwriter Rizvī denounces dishonest screenwriters who stifle originality and literary creativity. It is true that this reading of the play is on a different level than popular perception, which registers only the humorous farce of the crook unmasked by his own bumbling.

Characteristics of TV Drama

This analysis is limited to light satiric comedy as represented by the *Alif Nūn* series. In this particular case it is difficult to separate film analysis and literary analysis. But since we believe that the dramatic and theatrical aspect dominates the filmic aspect (the cinematographic techniques are minimalized, and the result has more in common with the filmed stage play than with cinema), our analysis will be primarily literary, though we will take into account certain aspects of the staging. The published texts (or scripts) of a portion of the episodes (twenty-two dialogues in the cited edition alone) provide an additional base for literary analysis.

1. Relationship to the original text. Of course, film and television work always has a certain autonomy and its own aesthetic relative to the initial script or the literary model on which it is based. Merely listening to an episode of the televised series suffices to show the liberties taken by the actors with the initial text (published later), on which they leave their creative mark. In the case of *Alif Nūn*, where one of the actors is also the author of the dialogue, one notes a high degree of fidelity to the text, but the other actor enjoys a greater liberty with regard to the text, all the while remaining strictly within the spirit of the play. He is in fact the star of the show and marks the production with his own style, in the purest theatrical tradition.

In the case of TV drama, an outside mandate (transmitted through the producer) has been known to give rise to the creation of a given script and the writing of a certain series of dialogues. Thus there is a quite extensive range of play between the literary text and the televised work. In

this sense TV drama may be seen as a new genre.

In the case of films inspired by a novel or short story, there is even greater freedom: filmmakers retain the essential theme of the plot, of course, but write their own script or have it written; they interpret the literary work as they see fit, transform it according to a completely different ethic, and construct a narrative in language that bears little resemblance to literary narration. The directing, on the other hand, is more strict, and the filmmaker takes pains to subordinate the actors and their lines to the director's vision of the film as a whole.

From the opening credits on, television drama proclaims its autonomy by displaying its own aesthetic and sense of the comic, borrowing a few techniques from film. Thus the credits are not a simple raising of the curtain on a filmed stage play. The credits of the first *Alif Nūn* series were a direct attempt to establish in the viewer's mind that this was indeed a television serial: they had their own set, slightly clownish; two large letters of the Urdu alphabet, *alif* and *nūn*, around which the two heroes of the series make a few moves; the title of the play, written out, followed by the brief written note "Scriptwriter and Director, Kamāl Rizvi." The opening credits, like the final scene, run over a brief, lively piece of music.

In addition, while respecting the stage directions given in the script, the director chooses the shots and framing by filming for the most part frontally to give the television viewer the illusion of being at the theater. One often has the impression (especially in the case of the *Alif Nūn* series) of very conscious use of the stationary camera, with frequent shot sequences that gather the characters together as on a stage set. One also notes in the series a limited use of the wide shot; and the mid-range frontal shots are used for the viewer's ease in following the actors rather than to transmit a message from the director. It might be thought that the lack of technical resources in the early stages of Pakistani television (1965–70 at studios in Lahore)¹⁹ explains the poverty of cinematographic methods used in the *Alif Nūn* series, but the fact is that partly due to its success, more technical resources were made available, yet the style remained the same; the sobriety and discreetness of the editing (no fades from one sequence to the next, no flashbacks) indicate the intention to

¹⁹Āghā Nāṣir alludes to this era and to the rudimentary resources at his disposal as producer of the series in the preface to the printed edition of *Alif Nūn* (see the following note).

present a live show, or give the illusion of doing so.²⁰

The sets are also designed to give the illusion of a stage play; there are no sweeping landscapes, but rather a household interior, a street scene—in short, small, intimate spaces. In the case of *Alif Nūn* it may be said that the film editing has been reduced to its simplest level: a very brief credit sequence accompanied by a short musical signature, much like the raising of a curtain, and a final sequence with the same characteristics. In a word, the relationship to the dramatic text is essential.

2. Realistic dialogue writing. Naturally, since the essence of this sort of writing is to present a narrative of daily life in the form of realistic dialogues, the linguistic register varies according to the character's social origin.

A single case suffices to illustrate this stylistic resource, the final scene of the *Alif Nūn* episode “Zakhīra Andōzī Mēn” (in the black market).²¹ Looking closely at the rôle of the inspector of foodstuffs, who has disguised himself as an illiterate rich man to unmask the black market in sugar, in which Allan and Nann^{hā} participate, we note that the character's abrupt change of linguistic register at the moment he removes his typical turban and shows his inspector's card is very meaningful. Suddenly the supposedly unlettered rural client, who has been expressing himself in an Urdu very close to Punjabi (with Nann^{hā} serving as interpreter), starts speaking standard Urdu at the moment he reveals his true identity and proceeds to arrest the trafficker. We see a caricatured instance of a change in linguistic code accompanying the classic “sudden twist.”

Generally speaking, the character Allan (a wily, dishonest sort, but educated and middle class) expresses himself in very good Urdu and has no difficulty using good English, while the character Nann^{hā}, belonging to a lower social class, hesitates at learned speech in Urdu and stumbles over English words, or even becomes a parody of those who do not know how to use English judiciously. The writing of these dialogues is also characterized by frequent plays on words; Riḏvī manages to make puns on

²⁰On the other hand, Āghā Nāṣir did not hesitate to employ the rather cinematographic technique of the flashback when writing TV dramas; see for example the play “Safar Sharīk” (travel companions), cf. Āghā Nāṣir, pp. 157–201.

²¹This play is not included in the published collection of TV drama texts by Kamāl Aḥmad Riḏvī (*op. cit.*). It is the second play presented in the first video-cassette released by the Shalimar Recording Company (Islamabad, 1986.)

English and Urdu words at the same time. In the same episode, for instance, Allan introduces Nann^{hā} (who understands nothing about the black market) to a trafficker (Sēṭ^h Ṣāḥib) he says is the largest sugar “dealer” in town, and Nann^{hā} hears “*dilēr*,” meaning “courageous” in Urdu.

3. Exact stage directions. To begin with, the sets are rather carefully specified in the script, and often the gestures of the actors as well, just as they have always been in the print versions of classical theater works. The television plays published by Āghā Nāṣir are richer in this respect than those of Rizvī: in addition to the dialogue, the texts include at the beginning a precise description of each character, then highly specific stage directions for each scene, with the settings and even the main camera movements. These stage directions must be seen as part of the literary creation, despite their technical jargon, just like the stage directions of Molière, for they are the indispensable complement to the dialogues, furnished by the author. They exist, in the end, to enrich the psychology of the characters, not as details of subject matter imported from fiction.

Dramatic Writing for Television

A brief cinematographic analysis of the above-mentioned episode “Film Sāzī Mēn” (making movies) will allow us to better characterize the making of this filmed (and televised) theater: From the technical point of view one is struck by the great economy of means, which fits in perfectly with the requirements of the play: a single set for a single locale, the producer’s office; few characters (Allan, Nann^{hā}, an office employee who introduces visitors, the screenwriter, the hero or male lead, the female star, the producer and the tea seller, eight characters in all); no music but that of the opening and closing credits. The framing is often frontal (the characters are seen essentially head-on and either standing up or seated) and the “stationary camera” dominates in scenes of conversation between the “producers” and their visitors. Close-ups and mid-range shots of the dialogue alternate for variety, since the action consists entirely of entrances and exits within a single limited space. Obviously, there are no special effects and no flashbacks (the narrative is linear).

The shots alternate at a rapid rhythm, following that of the conversation, the camera passing from one actor to the next in close-up to empha-

size a given line or look. Or the shot may be at middle range to show the progression of the scene, for example, the signing of the contract by the hero or the conversation with Allan and the heroine of the future film (accompanied by her mother) seated in comfortable leather armchairs in one corner of the office behind a low table, against the backdrop of movie stills mentioned earlier. A previous close-up has shown us the pretty face of the heroine, who frets about the sum she will receive. The sound is strictly synchronous and limited to the dialogue plus a few sounds, without music (except for that behind the credits, which is cut off when the filmed episode begins). Camera motion is limited to following the characters' movements and the shots are often restricted to the characters who are speaking. There is a single zoom, to a close-up of Nann^{hā}'s face, crying, as he receives the usual punishment at the end of the episode. The sequences are clipped by the entrances and exits of characters within a single locale; there are no overlapping fades from scene to scene.

The satire of commercial cinema is effected by writing that is pure theater; the television actor even parodies the sort of cinematographic technique deployed in the service of the star system: at the start of the episode, just after the credits that announce "Film Sāzī Mēñ," we see Allan acting out an imaginary traveling shot, framing it with his hands, along the photographs of film stars (close-ups in black and white of the actor and actress who will become the episode's "hero and heroine"). The satire of the star system is all the more piquant in that the real-life actor (Allan) is himself a television producer. In other words, technique is totally subordinate to the text and actors (who make few departures from the script); everything works to make the television viewer a theatergoer.

The Theme of the Two Heroes

1. **A symbolic couple.** Each little one-act comedy in the series *Alif aur Nūn* (*Alif Nūn* on television) brings us the two eponymous heroes of the series: Allan and Nann^{hā} (whose names begin with the letters *alif* and *nūn* respectively, hence the title of the series). They form a couple: the first, Allan, is as thin as Don Quixote, and the other, Nann^{hā}, as fat as Sancho Panza; we might also say that Allan is tall and slim like an *alif* and Nann^{hā} squat and round like a *nūn*, which is clearly suggested by the design of the credits, in which the two giant letters appear at a podium. Note that the educated but dishonest character, Allan, has an English given name (Anglophilia is often twitted in this series, with a few short

phrases in English interspersed within the Urdu dialogue of the television plays). Nann^{hā}, on the other hand, bears a symbolic Urdu name (the small, the child) that evokes his innocence, or at least unworldliness.²²

The comparison with the famous couple Don Quixote and Sancho Panza is not far-fetched, in that Allan is the intellectual and the boss, while Nann^{hā} is the general factotum and follows Allan's orders. In the same way, Don Quixote is the dreamer and sometimes evil anti-hero, while Sancho appears as a servant who is obedient but endowed with a wealth of common sense, and constantly attempts to reason with his master to bring him around to his nobler sentiments; in addition, Sancho is motivated by his master's endless promises of recompense. Allan, too, is a sort of evil genius, constantly in pursuit of easy money (the way Don Quixote pursues his Dulcinea and imagined knighthood) and Nann^{hā} serves as his living conscience, bonded in friendship and unflinching submissiveness, swayed by the lure of profit, but in the end giving away the game to soothe his conscience.

2. A master-servant pair. If Nann^{hā} is not clearly presented as Allan's servant, he remains his social inferior and is always the subordinate in the various professions by which the two characters undertake, clumsily and dishonestly, to earn a living. These two anti-heroes, perpetual failures, are perhaps also the inheritors of the European literary and dramatic tradition of the master-servant pair.

Typology of the Series

1. Moralizing theme: Each episode of the series concerns the same two heroes and a variety of secondary characters who are either victims (consumers, the general public) of their schemes, accomplices, or representatives of the law. In short, all the characters are social types.

In each episode the two friends are engaged in a new stratagem (the Urdu term is *dand^{hā}*) to garner some easy money at the expense of the unsuspecting. The trickery always relies on the unworldliness or greed of the ordinary citizen. In each case, morality wins the day because the two

²²The character of Allan was played by the author, Kamāl Aḥmad Rizvī, and Nann^{hā} was played by Rafī' Khāvar (who put an end to the collaboration by committing suicide around 1986).

heroes fail or are outsmarted by someone cleverer than they (or fall into the hands of the law); this gives the author an opportunity to criticize the black market, or charlatanism in all its forms. But directly or indirectly, the author is also criticizing corruption. Each episode is thus a lesson in morality, sometimes a patriotic one.

The innocent reactions of Nann^{hā}, who finds it hard to understand why society is so corrupted by money, and who bumblingly acts on Allan's directives and advice, are always a source of humor in the series. By contrast, Allan appears to be more cultivated, but is ready to make any moral compromise in order to get money; unfortunately, his faithful friend and assistant is never equal to the task. Note that the character of Allan in the television series is played by the author of the dialogues himself, Kamāl Aḥmad Rizvī. The contrast between the sly, wily character of Allan and the innocence of Nann^{hā}, whom Allan exploits and who must confront the difficulties of earning a living while a social outcast, gives rise to comic misunderstandings and mistakes.

Thus we have a television series that is essentially moralistic and thus perfectly acceptable to the censors of the time, but which takes advantage of the situation to censure Anglicized society, or corrupt officials, or dishonest merchants, but does it by means of humor and comedic satire. The two heroes often pass themselves off as the social types being satirized.

2. Plot and narrative structure. All the episodes have more or less the same plot and thus the same structure, typically as follows:

a. Exposition: the argument of the comedy: Very brief credits (over the opening scene) give the name of the author/director (Kamāl Aḥmad Rizvī) and the title of the episode (or argument of the comedy); the titles always having the structure "in such-and-such a profession." For example, "Tajridī Ārṭ Mēñ" (in abstract art) is the title of both the written and the televised work in which the two heroes pass themselves off as an abstract painter (Nann^{hā}) and his impresario (Allan); the title delivers at the outset the social subtheme treated in the episode, then our heroes are shown in the material setting in which the episode will take place and which frames the subtheme or subject of the play (here, the painter's studio). In the written version the setting is described. In a few lines we learn what profession and what social characters are being parodied, that is, what type of fraud or corruption will be denounced.

b. Action and events of the scenes: fraud and victims: The two heroes are seen at work, sometimes under the direction of another cheat,

but Allan always directs Nann^hā, and secondary characters, “victims” of the system, appear one after the other. Mini-episodes, or short scenes involving “passersby” or characters symbolizing innocent customers, expose the working of the system or stratagem devised by Allan, in which Nann^hā becomes an innocent, bumbling, or reluctant participant. In the case of “Abstract Art,” the victims are the owner of an art gallery and an art critic who writes for a magazine; naturally, Allan’s plan goes awry. Allan, as the typical employer, confiscates the bulk of all the earnings, frustrating his companion, who is then all the more apt to give the whole thing away, since he has little to lose. These action scenes are especially comical because of the contrast between Nann^hā’s awkwardness, candor and inability to take things seriously, on the one hand, and Allan’s cunning and professionalism on the other.

c. **The dénouement, or catastrophe:** The two charlatans are usually unmasked thanks to Nann^hā’s bungling, and to his candor: he cannot stop himself from putting his foot in it and giving the game away. In effect, Nann^hā is incapable of lying and fooling the client, unlike Allan, the cajoler par excellence. The catastrophe, actually an immediate sanction for the offense, a sort of immanent justice, may also be brought on by a watchful and honest representative of the law. But so as not to fall into a simplistic moralism, and to remain within the master-servant tradition, in which the clumsy servant is trounced by his master, more for show than for effect, the classic recipe for popular comedy, there is often a short scene at the end in which Allan beats Nann^hā the way one smacks a child who has done something naughty. A variant is that the victims take vengeance and beat the heroes. This is a comedic stereotype with a final *bastinado* scene not unrelated to Italian *commedia dell’arte*. One way or another, the last scene always brings defeat to our two heroes in their enterprise, but they never leave each other.

Thus we see that we are dealing with mini-comedies whose plot structure may be analyzed in an entirely traditional manner. We also note that although television allows for a distribution and a realism impossible on the stage of a theater, these mini-comedies present main characters who are ludicrous and caricatural rather than real, like certain *commedia dell’arte* characters.

The Anti-Hero Theme

1. **The theme of failure.** All the episodes in the series have one

major thematic point in common: all efforts to play a rôle in society end in a stinging failure. Our two heroes are ridiculous because their attempts rest on the illusion of easy money which they are ill equipped to win: Allan conceives the plans but will not carry them out (he refuses to work, instead exploits his associate, and always takes the best of everything), and Nann^{hā} agrees to carry things out (moved, as is Allan, by the lure of gain), does the work of two, has inadequate intellectual forces, and is endowed with a moral sense that works counter to the dishonest enterprise; their undertakings are doomed to failure from the beginning, and the viewer knows it. Their defeat is comic, but also highlights the social types in each episode: it is the defeat of the dishonest baker, or the fake beggar. The failure of these characters also signifies the triumph of social morality thanks to the moral conscience of Nann^{hā}, while the vigilance of honest people is always ineffective. The misadventures of Allan and Nann^{hā} are filmed, but are a far cry from those of film heroes for whom everything works out well against all adversity.

2. Two basic characters negate and contradict each other. Just as the hero (lead actor) of commercial film has a “character type” or basic rôle (ingenue, villain, etc.) that is nearly invariable from one film to the next, our two heroes each have a basic (and caricatural) character that reappears in each episode: beyond their contrasting physical types mentioned above, Allan is deceitful, educated, and immoral, and Nann^{hā} is simple and ignorant but heeds his moral conscience; nonetheless they form an indissociable, contradictory comic couple and are united for life. In the same way, the star actor and actress (often married) form a complementary romantic and dramatic couple (the man usually taking the active rôle and the woman a passive one) who assume different social rôles depending on the film. Our two “heroes” act out a multitude of social types, to whom they lend their basic characters. As a rule, in the case of commercial movie heroes the lead actor may interpret (during the course of the same film) negative social types, but at last is reincarnated as a positive social type who triumphs over evil, which makes him in the end a positive hero. Allan and Nann^{hā} form a couple of heroes whose basic characters act out exclusively negative social rôles: dishonest bakers, fake beggars, fake artists, or fake film producers, and they suffer moral reproof in some ridiculous catastrophe in the end, which makes them negative heroes.

3. Characters without social moorings. While the heroes

of commercial cinema are often assigned a recognizable social slot (oppressed middle class, poor but rising in society, etc.) and a precise geographic origin, Allan and Nann^{hā} are characters with no precise geographic base or defined social context. True, the character of Allan appears generally to be more cultivated and educated than average, and often wears British-style clothing, while Nann^{hā} is rather simply dressed and has difficulty with learned Urdu or English words, but this is nearly all we know about the social position of the two characters, other than that they are perpetually seeking to get rich quick. Most of the time they are in the streets (or booted out of their lodgings), they have no known family or friends (except for each other), and although they are naturally attracted to beautiful women, they are not known to have any adventures with females either. All we know about them socially is that they are two marginal characters without regional attachments (Nann^{hā} may disguise himself perfectly as a bandit from Karachi and speak a mixture of Urdu and Punjabi, but this is only an artificial social rôle).

Caricatured personalities, a morally contradictory couple, two marginalized characters who are not accepted by society, our two anti-heroes exist to illustrate the ills of society by means of satire. Indeed, what better implement than these two “losers” to deride dishonest sorts, but also their victims, who lack the courage to stand up to petty crooks? For the satire in these television plays also applies to the victims of the two protagonists’ fraudulent maneuvers, who are also caught in the trap of their greed, gluttony, or lack of patriotism, as, for example, in the episode “Dispōzal Shāp Mēñ.”

Provisional Conclusion

A new perspective on the recent history of Urdu theater and its relationship to radio, then cinema, and finally television, is necessary in order to form a vision of the rôle and importance of television dramas in Urdu. In the absence of documentation, we are only able to sketch the briefest outline.

But it can already be said that the series *Alif Nūn* exhibits the broad characteristics of classical European comedy (or farce) and filmed stage plays, as well as universal satirical themes. The intent to moralize via social themes in mini-comedies of morals is common to classical theater and these television plays. We may conclude by saying that in spite of their ambiguous audiovisual status, their natural dialogues and their

caricatural characters, little TV dramas like those of the *Alif Nūn* series, because they involve creative and imaginative writings, should find their place in the history of Urdu literature. □

—*Translated from French by Elizabeth Bell*