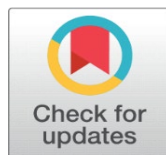
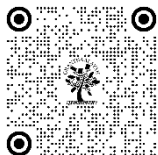


# FEMINIST MESSAGES IN GURU DUTT'S PYAASA (1957): A DISTINCTIVE CASE STUDY

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## ABSTRACT

Guru Dutt's masterpiece *Pyaasa* (1957) is not just a movie. It is in fact much more than that. It is an experiment with humanity. It is also a journey along the brighter and darker alleys of the normal human mind. While dissecting everything that cripples the Indian society then and even now, it's partly haunting and partly reassuring narrative makes us ask some fundamental questions vis-à-vis our social existence. One of the resultant questions that crops up in the process tries to uncover the true essence of womanhood. From the narcissistic and decidedly selfish character of Meena, played by the inimitable Mala Sinha, to the selfless and deeply loving character of Gulabo, enacted flawlessly by the mesmerizing Waheeda Rehman, the movie refuses to take sides and declare loyalties. While one might argue that the protagonist Vijay, played by Guru Dutt himself, sides towards Gulabo at the end of the movie, the inclination is far from being decisive. If one takes a clear look at the diegesis of the movie, she/ he would be able to appreciate that the decision is influenced more by convenience than by ideology. While ideology does play a part in what the movie theorizes, it is more of a reflection on the true nature of the society that we live in. This research paper makes an honest attempt at deciphering the obvious and subtle feminist messages that are ingrained in the movie. While doing so, the researcher looks not just at the narrative of the movie but at the filmmaking style as well for style often determines the ideological stance of any audiovisual material. While studying the given subject, the researcher uses the Auteur Theory, the Apparatus Theory, and the Feminist Film Theory.

**Keywords:** Guru Dutt, *Pyaasa*, Feminist, Womanhood, Humanity

## 1. INTRODUCTION

Decidedly revelatory, deeply unnerving, characteristically melancholy, purposefully sardonic – Guru Dutt's timeless classic *Pyaasa* (1957) could be decorated with one or some or all the above-mentioned adjectives [Misra \(2017\)](#). It is a remorseless commentary on post-independence India and its social dichotomies. The movie takes an unapologetic stance vis-à-vis its diegesis and makes the audience contemplate. Narrated from the perspective of a failed yet talented poet, the movie can be compared with an expository social trip – something

that removes the pleasant myths about the society that we live in. Disloyalty, deceit, corruption, lust, apathy, and the likes – the movie bares it all. What is particularly striking about *Pyasa* is the fact that it seems even more relevant even after 64 years of its release [Mahaan \(2017\)](#). In a way, the movie is a representation of the perpetuity of the fundamental human tenacities [Kabir \(2015\)](#). Extremely robust dialogues and powerful visuals complement the movie's moving narrative structure. While many movies suffer from the obvious folly of style over substance, *Pyasa* is a movie that keeps its audience hooked on through the sheer power of its story.

In fact, *Pyasa* could be considered to be a narrative that captures the very enigma of the Indian existence [Gupta \(2017\)](#). At a time when the country was passing through a sustained period of economic insecurity and multiple societal upheavals, the movie chronicles the story of an upright young man, who faces continuous rejections subject to his refusal to compromise [Khilnani \(2007\)](#). The educated and principled Vijay not only fails as an aspiring poet but is rejected by his own family and love interest. An obvious social pariah, Vijay finds solace from the presence of Gulabo, who is a sex worker and hence another social pariah. Here, it needs to be remembered that the movie was made at a time when Bollywood, as an industry, has not yet devised its unique character. As a matter of fact, the name Bollywood was not there. Deeply inspired by Italian Neorealism, a concurrent cinematic movement in Italy, the movie, though, experiments with the conveyance of specific messages through haunting songs as well [Corliss \(2010\)](#). While realism constitutes the base of the movie, melodrama permeates it at multiple levels thus essentially lending its quintessential Indian character. In a way, the movie could be considered to be an autobiographical tale with Guru Dutt's real life also having taken a similar trajectory [Rebanal \(2019\)](#).

However, as relevant as the movie is, it catches attention subject to the presence of two diametrically opposite yet powerful female characters – Meena and Gulabo [Chettiar \(2019\)](#). Without getting into any value judgment, it would suffice to say that the movie moves ahead subject to the presence of Meena and Gulabo. Any qualitative analysis of *Pyasa* cannot be complete without a qualitative evaluation of the two women characters. This research paper tries to uncover the feminist inclinations of *Pyasa* through the narrative and diegetic deconstructions of the two female characters. While doing so, this study keeps a close tab on the concurrent social motifs and links those with the larger theme of the movie.

## 2. METHODOLOGY

The researcher does a narrative and diegetic analysis of the movie using the three dominant film theories – the Auteur Theory, the Apparatus Theory, and the Feminist Film Theory – to decipher the feminist messages ingrained in *Pyasa*. As a part of the study, the researcher looks at the different narrative elements used in the movie and pinpoints the presence of specific feminist constituents to understand the larger audio-visual superstructure that projects both feminism and the absence of it in the movie. The researcher also looks at the movie's diegesis and stylistic depictions to decipher the storyline using the three mentioned film theories as the theoretical frameworks for the study. While there were attempts to keep the study as objective as the case could have been, the researcher does not discount the absence of subjectivity in the analysis. However, there is a concerted effort to justify the resultant subjectivities to the maximum possible extent.

## **2.1. OPERATIONAL DEFINITIONS**

### **2.1.1. THE AUTEUR THEORY**

One of the first film theories, the Auteur Theory considers the filmmaker or the director as the 'auteur' (the French term for 'author') of a movie. In very simple terms, the theory says that any movie is the result of the 'artistic vision' of its director. From the audience's perspective, it could be said that any movie would bear clear imprints of the director [Renée \(2015\)](#).

### **2.1.2. THE APPARATUS THEORY**

A complex film theory, the Apparatus Theory basically deconstructs the relationship between the audience and the moviemaking devices. The theory clearly says that the medium of cinema is ideological by its very nature and the audience occupies the central position vis-à-vis the perspective of the cinematic composition [Young \(2015\)](#). In literary terms, the theory could be likened to the concept of *Suspension of Disbelief*.

### **2.1.3. THE FEMINIST FILM THEORY**

A direct byproduct of the different feminist movements across the world, the Feminist Film Theory, a relatively new entrant to the world of film studies, says that men and women are positioned differently in movies. This difference in positioning is largely dictated by the unequal positioning men and women have in the society. Largely benefitted by Laura Mulvey's seminal essay *Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema*, the theory bases itself on the concept of male gaze [Singh \(2021\)](#).

## **3. DECODING THE FEMINIST MESSAGES IN PYAASA USING THE AUTEUR THEORY**

Anybody who has watched *Pyaasa* at some point in time in her/ his life would agree that the movie exhibits a deep empathy for women. Though the film, the filmmaker, Guru Dutt takes a definite ideological stance. While Meena and Gulabo are shown as two contrasting characters, both are revealed as victims of a patriarchal system. While Meena is shown to be selfish and narcissistic, it becomes clear from the movie's diegesis that the values that drive the actions of Meena are essentially fueled by patriarchy as the overarching social reality. While Meena marries the financially successful Mr. Ghosh, played by the masterful Rehman, the action is clearly dictated by a societal rejection of male unemployment. An Indian woman is hardly ever given the right to choose an unemployed man as her life partner. More importantly, a deeply conservative Indian society seldom lets a woman have her way in terms of selecting her life partner. Even though Meena is shown to be rather conceited, the diegesis of the movie makes it clear that her position as the wife of the aristocratic yet cunning Mr. Ghosh makes her be so. Even though she continues to harbour feelings for her erstwhile love interest Vijay, she is forced to conceal it subject to a rather decapitating concept of social propriety.

Coming to Gulabo, she is a sex worker and hence is an obvious social outcast. A victim of the social order, she still has managed to keep her humanity intact – something that becomes obvious along the course of the movie. As the filmmaker, Guru Dutt demonstrates his deep anguish over the exploitative system of flesh trade through the iconic song *Jinhe Naaz Hai Hind Par Woh Kahan Hain*. His anguish and

resultant empathy for the sex workers become clearly visible as he increasingly associates himself with Gulabo. Gulabo, despite being a sex worker, is otherwise the archetypal Indian woman – soft, caring, and loving. However, what sets her apart is a certain sense of purpose that is demonstrated through her actions throughout the movie. A look at how she publishes the poetry of Vijay into a book is a testimony to that.

Throughout the movie, there is a clear attempt to emancipate women. While the tragic fate of Meena as the trophy wife of Mr. Ghosh constitutes a clear statement from the auteur about the obvious lacunae of the institution of marriage, Vijay's acceptance of Gulabo as his clear companion elicits questions vis-à-vis the societal concept of sexual and feminine purity. Throughout the movie, the director unapologetically questions the society's stand on multiple issues including the concept of womanhood. In a way, it could be argued that the movie was way ahead of its time in terms of the reconstruction of the popular concept of femininity.

It is very important to point out that the general constructions of femininity and womanhood remain the same even today in 2022. Women from across the socio-cultural and socio-economic spectrum are associated with fulfilling certain expectations. The society makes it difficult for women to discount those expectations. The same is visible through the character designs of Meena and Gulabo.

While the taboo associated with Gulabo's social positioning is challenged throughout the movie, the not-so-obvious taboo associated with Meena's social positioning is not challenged thereby projecting a certain bias on the part of the filmmaker. The movie makes a distinct commentary about the unacceptability of a woman, who prefers a secured lifestyle and rejects love. There is an element of value judgement on the part of the filmmaker here. Most importantly, the movie projects an obvious disdain for rich and high-society women. Meena is shown to be the erring person more than her husband, who decidedly is the antagonist of the movie.

The filmmaker also takes a lot of liberties in terms of the construction of shots and shot sequences in the movie. Patriarchy as an overarching social construct is evident from the way different elements of the concurrent society are projected through the shot compositions and shot sequencing. It starts right after Vijay visits his home to meet his mother. His mother clearly lacks enterprise and is not powerful enough to neutralize Vijay's elder brothers, who throw him out of the house. All the shots that showcase the agony of Vijay's mother are constructed in a way such that the women seem dwarfed in front of the men. All the shots that portray Gulabo's love for Vijay project her as a helpless young woman, who is burdened by a male-dominated and patriarchal society. The same goes for Meena as well. Despite being married into an affluent family, Meena seems rather morose in all the shots with her husband Mr. Ghosh. Even for shots that show her with Vijay, Vijay clearly takes the visual cake. One of the biggest representations of patriarchy is the comic depiction of Tun Tun as Pushplata. This clearly pushes the dominant male narrative of how a woman should look and behave. Any departure is mocked and scoffed at. Visibly, Pushplata does not conform to the standards that are set for an ideal woman. In a way, the filmmaker vindicates this societal stand.

The music by the legendary composer Sachin Dev Burman and the lyrics by the extremely talented Sahir Ludhianvi were used intelligently by the filmmaker to not just take the story forward but also make a point vis-à-vis the positioning of women in the Indian society. All the songs only point towards the supremacy of men in the society. One of the most important points to be noted here is the amplification of Vijay's sorrow through music while underplaying the mistreatment of women.

However, it is impossible to say if the final misogynist message in this case is intentional on the part of the filmmaker.

Cinematography was also effectively used by the filmmaker to convey messages on womanhood and feminism. The thematic placements of light and shadow put a distinct focus on the facial appearances of the primary female characters in the movie. In a way, this phenomenon is representative of the unjust social focus on female appearances thus specifying the widespread sexism that was prevalent in the Indian society right after the country became independent. While for the male characters, the camera focused on their activities, for the women, the camera largely focused on how they looked.

On the other hand, there is another aspect that cannot be ignored. While equality might not have been in the mind of the director, the concept of gender neutrality was definitely there. Most importantly, the movie does not overtly villainize the role of Meena and lets her deal with the tragedies in her life in her own way at the end.

#### **4. DECODING THE FEMINIST MESSAGES IN *PYAASA* USING THE APPARATUS THEORY**

*Pyasa* was released at a time when cinema was pretty much at its nascent stage at least in India if not across the world. Also, it would not be wrong to say that the movie was years ahead of its time. Thus, the larger audience did not have the capacity to comprehend the dominant narrative in the movie – be it in terms of its feminist messages or in terms of any other parameter. However, since the movie was entrenched in realism and melodrama permeated it in terms of the creation of its bigger plotline, a significant section of the audience could relate to its ingrained diegesis. From a feminist perspective, the movie was made in such a way so that the audience felt empathetic towards the leading women characters in the movie. While Indian cinema until that point in time was dictated by remorseless populism, *Pyasa* was a welcome break. While a certain section of the audience found it outrageous in terms of the depiction of the women characters, the other section did find it revolting and cathartic at the same time. The fact that Gulabo, a sex worker, was preferred by the protagonist over a ‘socially respected’ Meena sets the feminist tone of the movie. Contemporary feminist scholars might scoff at how the characters were constructed and how the same reeked of traditionalism. However, it is important to understand that we are talking about a time right after independence. At that time, the concept of feminism was not very clear and more so in India. Thus, it was enough for a filmmaker to make something as close to modern feminism as *Pyasa*. Throughout the movie, the protagonist keeps on asking some very tough questions to the predominant social order almost to the extent of doubting its relevance. In fact, India was going through a transition phase at that time and multiple social issues were largely unattended. *Through Pyasa*, the filmmaker makes a concerted effort at pointing those out to those in power. The degrading condition of women in a newly independent country is one of those issues. Thus, it could be argued that the movie tries to address feminism politically and economically. While the constitution of India was crafted with equality of sexes being one of the fundamental conditions, the social and economic condition of women remained as bad in post-independence India as it was in pre-independence India. In a way, *Pyasa* was representative of this grim reality. The question remains though! Does the movie offer a solution? If one takes a close glance at the movie, she/ he would be able to understand that it does not. However, the movie does provide an alternative lens to look at womanhood – a lens that does not suffer from

the obvious lacunae of an ultra-conservative upbringing that has a straightjacketed notion of morality and propriety. It is only poetic that the movie is set in Kolkata, the primary centre of the Indian renaissance. Finally, one can say that the movie forwards the concept of idealistic feminism.

## 5. DECODING THE FEMINIST MESSAGES IN *PYAASA* USING THE FEMINIST FILM THEORY

*Pyasa*, albeit being a little different from other films released during the same period, does have its moments of populism. The concept of male gaze is as much a reality in *Pyasa* as it is in any other commercial film. If we look at the character of Meena, she is luminously beautiful and gorgeous. The filmmaker could have chosen someone much less glamorous to play the role of Meena, but he did not and for reasons that are not too difficult to fathom. While the diegetic reason could be the fact that a successful man like Mr. Ghosh would obviously choose someone extremely gorgeous, the subtle reason is the general audience's preference for beautiful women in movies. Indian movies allowed deglamourized male protagonists at the time but not their female protagonists.

**Figure 1**



**Figure 1** Meena Looks at the Camera for the First Time  
**Source** Ultra Movies

**Figure 2**



**Figure 2** Vijay Looks at Meena through a Badminton Net  
**Source** Ultra Movies

Even if we look at the character of Gulabo, she is a little too beautiful for someone in her social position. Gulabo is way more gorgeous than a normal sex worker in Kolkata would be. While one appreciates the subtle feminist messages in *Pyasa*, the fact remains that it also uses the concept of male gaze to its advantage.

**Figure 3**



**Figure 3** The 'Seemingly Beautiful' Gulabo Appears for the First Time and Vijay Looks at Her with Clear Intent

**Source** Ultra Movies

**Figure 4**



**Figure 4** Gulabo Smiles at the Camera after Her First Appearance

**Source** Ultra Movies

Now, before proceeding any further, it is important to understand as to what male gaze is. Male gaze essentially means the way a man looks at a woman. In terms of cinema, male gaze can be classified in the form of three different perspectives – the perspective of the man behind the camera, the perspective of the male characters inside the diegesis of the movie and the perspective of the male section of the audience [Mulvey \(1975\)](#).

All the four movie screenshots given above perfectly encapsulate and exemplify male gaze. While [Figure 1](#) represents male gaze towards Meena from behind the

camera and from the male section of the audience, [Figure 2](#) represents male gaze from the diegetic character (Vijay) towards Meena. Similarly, while [Figure 3](#) represents male gaze from Vijay towards Gulabo, [Figure 4](#) represents male gaze towards Gulabo from behind the camera and from the male section of the audience.

From all the male perspectives, both Meena and Gulabo are attractive women. Also, it can be argued that both the women in the movie have incidental roles and their respective roles only complement the central role of the male protagonist. One can go a little farther and even say that the protagonist is given the leeway to choose one of the women at the end thereby ironically reestablishing the very same patriarchy that the filmmaker apparently fights throughout the movie.

Alternatively, at multiple points in the movie, Meena is shown repentant for the choices she makes along the course of her life. This also reeks of a patriarchal moral supremacy. While the absence of choice for a woman constitutes one side of the story, the other side of the story is that of the constant blame that the woman must endure subject to her choice.

It would suffice to say that *Pyasa* is guilty of the same feminist crimes that other movies of that time committed. The bare fact that the movie blames the choice of one woman while celebrating the choice of another is quintessentially anti-feminist. However, while dissecting these subtle aspects, it should always be kept in mind that cinema was at its development stage in India at the time when the movie was released. Hence, the filmmaker did not have the advantage of leveraging earlier works while constructing the intended and unintended messages in the movie.

## 6. ACCUMULATED FEMINIST MESSAGES FROM *PYAASA*

There are multiple points that tumble out through the diegetic analysis of the movie using the three film theories. The following are the predominant pointers though:

- 1) The movie exhibits a deep empathy for women.
- 2) Both the primary female characters are shown as victims of a patriarchal system.
- 3) A deeply conservative Indian society seldom lets a woman have her way in terms of selecting her life partner.
- 4) Throughout the movie, the director unapologetically questions the society's stand on multiple issues including the concept of womanhood.
- 5) Patriarchy as an overarching social construct is evident from the way different elements of the concurrent society are projected through the shot compositions and shot sequencing.
- 6) The music by the legendary composer Sachin Dev Burman and the lyrics by the extremely talented Sahir Ludhianvi were used intelligently by the filmmaker to not just take the story forward but also make a point vis-à-vis the positioning of women in the Indian society.
- 7) The thematic placements of light and shadow put a distinct focus on the facial appearances of the primary female characters in the movie.
- 8) From a feminist perspective, the movie was made in such a way so that the audience felt empathetic towards the leading women characters in the movie.
- 9) The fact that Gulabo, a sex worker, was preferred by the protagonist over a 'socially respected' Meena sets the feminist tone of the movie.



- 10) The movie tries to address feminism politically and economically.
- 11) The movie provides an alternative lens to look at womanhood – a lens that does not suffer from the obvious lacunae of a straightjacketed notion of morality and propriety.
- 12) The concept of male gaze is as much a reality in *Pyasa* as any other commercial film.
- 13) Both the women in the movie have incidental roles and their roles only complement the central role of the male protagonist.
- 14) While the absence of choice for a woman constitutes one side of the story, the other side of the story is that of the constant blame that the woman must endure subject to her choice.
- 15) The bare fact that the movie blames the choice of one woman while celebrating the choice of another is quintessentially anti-feminist.

## 7. CONCLUSION

*Pyasa* would continue to haunt cinephiles for many more years. Its anti-establishment tone and its rejection of the traditional societal values make it decidedly different from other movies of its time [Manwani \(2020\)](#). However, the director also tries to redraw the contours of feminism and womanhood through this movie. Notwithstanding, this movie also makes some of the obvious feminist mistakes that some of the other movies from the same time made. Thus, *Pyasa* is a tale of both hope and despair – not just in societal terms but in cinematic terms as well. In a way, the movie is representative of a decided change in filmmaking norms back during the 1950s and the 1960s [Nambiar \(2017\)](#).

## CONFLICT OF INTERESTS

None.

## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

None.

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