

HUMANITIES INSTITUTE

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## PYAASA (THIRSTY) 1957

Guru Dutt

(Hindi language)

### OVERVIEW

*Pyasa* is a melodramatic yet subtle film about desire for love, for poetry and for fame. It also manages, in the 1950s, to highlight the social and economic problems of newly-independent India. It is one of the earliest classics of Hindi cinema, with its effective use of popular song/poetry alongside stunning black-and-white photography. The story concerns Vijay, played by Guru Dutt, who also directed. Vijay is a young poet, whose efforts are appreciated by women but not by his brothers, who sell his poems as scrap paper. Thrown out by his brothers, Vijay has a number of encounters with arrogant bosses, prostitutes and beggars. Unable to publish his poems while alive, they become a best-seller after he is (mistakenly) thought to have died. In the end, the agonised poet has the last laugh over crude materialism.

### CULTURAL SIGNIFICANCE

*Pyasa* set a new standard for Indian cinema in its use of song and poems embedded in the story as a vehicle not only for romance but for social protest. Poetry as art may be at the centre of the film, but the lyrics, which condemn India and Indians for moral complacency, are what makes the film so memorable. Appearing at a time when the traditional Gandhian values of spirituality and selflessness were being replaced by the new materialism of an independent India, the film acted as a meditation on modernity. Even today, when other styles of film-making are more popular, it remains a classic because it allows Indians to examine themselves and reassess their goals in life. When they watch this film, made by then 32-year-old Dutt, they may wonder if they, too, live in a society capable of discarding poems as scrap paper.

### STORY

*Unloved poet* In the opening scene, Vijay has his aesthetic appreciation of nature crushed by human cruelty, which sets the tone for the film. He then goes to his publisher, asking if his poems will be published. In a comic scene of chaos and insults, Vijay is told to study the classical poets and not to write about poverty and unemployment. He angrily snatches back his manuscript and leaves. Back home, his brothers also abuse him, saying that if he had any pride, he would not eat in a house to which he contributes no money. Stung by their comments, Vijay rises to leave but first hunts for his poems. 'Sold them for ten pennies as scrap paper,' a brother says with a sneer and throws him out of the house.

*Gulab* Vijay searches for and finds the scrap paper seller, who tells him that his folder of papers was bought by a woman, but he doesn't know her address. Then, by accident, Vijay overhears a woman reciting his poems and follows her. She is Gulab, a prostitute, who thinks he is a customer and lures him to her house. When he insists that he only wants his poems back, she angrily turns him away as a penniless pest. Then she sees a paper he dropped and realises that he is the poet whose papers she bought and whose poems she likes. Full of remorse for treating him so badly, she runs after him, but he has disappeared. When she finds him, she says she knows him through his poems. A deep understanding has begun.

*Meena* Vijay attends a college reunion where he recites his poetry to a receptive audience but also finds himself face to face with Meena, his old college sweetheart. Through flashbacks, we see the innocence of their young love and also learn that she rejected Vijay to marry a wealthy man, Ghosh, who is a big publisher. Ghosh, who has escorted Meena to the function, realises that Vijay is his wife's old flame and invites him to his office the next morning to discuss his poems. Flattered and optimistic, Vijay shows up only to find that Ghosh offers him a job as his 'office boy' in order to humiliate him. At a drinks party, Vijay, who is acting as a waiter, is asked to recite one of his poems. It is a tragic song of lost love, which moves Meena to tears and confirms Ghosh's fears that she is still in love with Vijay. Meena later arranges a meeting with him, at which he tells her to remain faithful to her husband. Ghosh bursts in on the meeting and fires Vijay.

*Gulab again* Vijay and Gulab meet again in a chance encounter on a dark street. Gulab is chased by a policeman, who wants to arrest her for prostitution, but Vijay saves her by saying that she is his wife. The flame of love is lit within her. Vijay, out of work, now wanders the streets himself, hungry and homeless. This time, Gulab plays saviour to Vijay, finding him in a drunken state and takes him back to her grimy apartment. When he awakes, Gulab is asleep. He writes a suicide note and leaves.

*Mistaken identity* Vijay meets a beggar, to whom he gives his coat. And when the beggar dies in an accident on a railway track, everyone thinks that it is Vijay who is dead. Gulab is grief-stricken but manages to find a little money with which to get Vijay's poems published by Ghosh. The book is an instant success, selling out immediately and requiring a new edition.

*Resurrection of a dead poet* Vijay has been shocked senseless by watching the beggar die and is taken to a hospital to rest. He knows nothing about the mistaken identity but then hears a nurse reading his poem from a book. When he claims that the poems are his, the doctors only think that he is insane and send him to a mental asylum. Vijay's greedy brothers and best friend all come to Ghosh with further unpublished poems and strike deals to have them printed.

*Escape* Finally, Vijay escapes from the asylum and attends an event to commemorate him, the dead poet. Standing in the shadows of a large hall filled with people, he hears the hypocritical Ghosh extol him as 'a great poet, the greatest of our era.' Then a voice is heard at the back of the hall. Vijay sings, 'Bodies wounded, souls thirsty. Confusion in the eyes, despair in the hearts.'

*Disillusioned* When doubts are raised about his identity, his brothers and best friend—who plan to make money from his fame—stand up to confirm that it is really Vijay. But then a disillusioned Vijay denies that he is the man 'for whom you shout adulation.' He tells Meena, who wants him to accept his new fame, that 'they who say I am Vijay are not my friends; they are the friends of money.'

*Hope?* In the final scene, he embraces Gulab and they walk away into an uncertain future.

## THEMES

*Desire* The overriding theme of the film, as announced in the title, is desire. The Hindi word *pyaasa* is usually (and correctly) translated as 'thirsty', which conveys the desperate nature of the search for love and for recognition. The love triangle at the heart of the film is complex: Meena (though married to Ghosh) and Gulab both love Vijay, who used to love Meena but is now in love with poetry, which brings him in contact with Gulab. Many of Vijay's poems, in the Urdu literary tradition, speak of the pain of love and the anguish of unfulfilled desire. The pain in Vijay's life, on the other hand, is the agony of not being recognised as a poet. These thwarted desires build throughout the film, growing stronger and stronger, propelling the characters toward a dramatic conclusion, when false fame is rejected in favour of true love. The 'thirst' has finally been quenched for Vijay and Gulab, but the pain remains for Meena.

*Hypocrisy* *Pyaasa* would not be such a classic film if it were only a romance, however skilfully shot and acted. It is a classic because it is also a social film, which presents a powerful indictment of hypocrisy and greed. The most heinous offenders are those closest to the poet, his brothers, who sell his poems as scrap paper and later want to cash in on his sudden fame as a dead poet. Vijay's best friend also displays a similar falsity when, he too, approaches Ghosh with a proposition to publish some of Vijay's verses. Ghosh is only marginally less venal because, although he is supremely insincere, he does not betray an earlier connection with Vijay. Neither brother nor friend, he is Vijay's rival for his own wife's heart. Still, in the final section, at the anniversary of the poet's supposed death, he displays a phenomenal degree of hypocrisy when he declares: 'If he [Vijay] were here today, he would see that you killed him. You made him starve by not appreciating his art when he was alive.' This is rich coming from a man who refused to publish Vijay's poems and hired him as little better than an office boy.

*Social critique* The social critique of the film extends beyond these instances of individual falsity and accuses the entire society of being dishonest. India as a nation, less than a decade after Independence, is shown to have failed its less fortunate people. Poverty, prostitution and begging are everywhere on the streets. In one scene, Vijay watches hopelessly as a dancing girl has to decide whether to accept small change and abuse from drunken men or go away and care for her sick child. In another memorable scene, Vijay is shown wandering in the red-light district among drunks and pimps while he sings: 'Oh, these spittle stains, these crude remarks, these shameless glances, where

are those who claim to be proud of India?' The song has several similar verses, all of which indict the country as a whole for allowing such poverty and widespread degradation (prostitution and begging) to exist in the new India. Special attention is given to the problem of prostitution, which the film presents as a last-ditch effort by decent women (such as Gulab) to make money in a dog-eat-dog world. It is not a pretty picture.

*Resurrection* There is also the interesting semi-Christian theme of resurrection. Vijay is a dead poet risen from the (supposed) dead. And he appears in a famous shot as if nailed to a cross. Vijay also cares for the poor and downtrodden, and his suffering can be said to have purified others. In addition, he echoes a famous biblical verse when he says, 'What will it profit a man if he gain the world?' Taken together as a whole, it is not unreasonable to say that the film was influenced by Christian thinking and imagery, although Dutt's biography provides no confirmation of this.

## MAIN CHARACTERS

Vijay	Vijay is the protagonist, a struggling poet who searches for love and fame.
Meena	Meena is Vijay's college sweetheart, who has married Ghosh, a wealthy publisher.
Ghosh	Ghosh is Meena's husband and Vijay's enemy.
Gulab	Gulab is a prostitute, who falls in love with Vijay and his poems.

## CHARACTER ANALYSIS

### *Vijay*

Character Vijay (whose name ironically means 'victory') is a man out of sync with the world around him. He is a poet whose poems are sold as scrap paper by his own brothers, whose girlfriend rejects him for a wealthy man and whose aesthetic nature is ground down by the crass materialism he encounters in nearly every scene. He is sensitive, proud and understanding. Capable of love and kindness to strangers, he nevertheless lives in difficult circumstances, goes hungry and is reduced to a beggar's status. His desire to be recognised as a poet is matched by his hatred of the corruption around him. Artist and moralist, he is a figure of deep emotions.

### Illustrative moments

*Sensitive* Vijay's sensitivity and, equally important, the world's indifference to it, are illustrated in the opening scene. He is lying on the grass, composing a poem while he observes clouds floating in the sky and a bee sucking nectar from a flower. Suddenly, a shoe appears out of nowhere and crushes the bee on the ground. It is the first of many such examples of beauty, personified by Vijay's poetry, being trodden underfoot. Reacting to the crushing of the bee, Vijay bursts out in another song: 'What can I give you, nature? All I have is a few tears and sighs.' Here, within the first two minutes of the film, we have the gist of the story: Vijay the unappreciated and sorrowful poet.

*Perceptive* Vijay the poet is sometimes played as Vijay the philosopher or psychologist. A good illustration of his perceptiveness is displayed in a moving scene in the middle of the film. He has accidentally revived Meena's love for him by singing a romantic song at a party. She is now married to Ghosh, an apparent choice of money over love (Vijay). Her passion stirred, she sets up a meeting with Vijay, her former boyfriend. 'Why did you return to my life?' she asks. 'Return? When did I ever leave? You left me,' he says. 'Do not try to correct your first mistake with a second one [that is, by betraying your husband with me].' Meena is disturbed by this suggestion and Vijay continues, 'You were always selfish, Meena. That's why you chose wealth over love. You left without caring how unhappy I'd be. And now you want to make your husband unhappy.' Meena shakes her head, about to cry, when Vijay delivers the punch line: 'Real joy is found in making others happy. You've never understood that, that's why you're unhappy.' It is the moral message of the film, spoken by its protagonist whose suffering has provided him with deep insight into the lives of others.

### *Gulab*

Character Gulab is the female equivalent of Vijay. She suffers, she is outcast by polite society and she has little money. But she loves poetry. And she is steadfast in love. As a streetwalker, she also has a tough side and doesn't suffer fools gladly. Again, like Vijay, she has dignity and will not let others trample over her. Her tough carapace hides a sensitive and compassionate person, someone who will remain loyal to her boyfriend even after he is dead.

### Illustrative moments

*Compassionate* An important quality of Gulab's character is her compassion. Like Vijay, she cares for the down-and-out because she herself is one. The best illustration of her compassion comes in an early scene. She has just spoken rudely to Vijay, believing him to be penniless pauper who wants sex with her. Realising that he is the author of the poems she loves, she wants to make amends and tracks him down. He is eating a meal in a dingy restaurant, which he tries to pay for with a coin that turns out to be counterfeit. When the owner snatches his plate away, Gulab enters, pays for the meal and tells the owner to put the plate back. Vijay, however, doesn't eat because his pride is hurt. 'I'm not hungry,' he says unconvincingly. 'Yes, you are,' Gulab says with a sweet smile and puts a spoon in his hand. 'You've no right to pity me,' says Vijay. Then Vijay apologises for his harsh tone, and Gulab says that he is right to be angry with her, for her unkind dismissal of him earlier. 'I've nothing against you,' Vijay says, still not touching the food. 'Then, eat,' Gulab says, 'for my sake.' Gulab's beautiful smile melts his pride and he begins to eat. It is a wonderful scene, with a man's pride won over by a woman's compassion.

*Loyal* Gulab is distinguished from her rival, Meena, by her steadfast love for Vijay. Whereas Meena rejects the penniless poet for a comfortable but loveless marriage, Gulab sticks by Vijay even after his (supposed) death. When she thinks that Vijay has died, she takes her life savings (some jewellery) and carries Vijay's poems to Meena's husband's publishing house to get them printed. There she meets Meena for the first time and is rebuffed by the haughty wife of the publisher. Meena scoffs at the idea of publishing stuff brought to her by a prostitute? Then she snatches away the manuscript and realises that it is Vijay's work. 'Name your price?' Meena says, and the demure Gulab is shocked. 'Price?' she says, 'I did not come to sell them. Only to have them published.' 'Why do you refuse to sell, when you sell a lot else?' Meena asks, referring to her prostitution. Meena offers thousands of rupees, but Gulab refuses to demean the poems by making them a commodity. It is in this scene that the contrast between Meena and Gulab is made sharp. Gulab is loyal to Vijay not only in love but also in their mutual love of poetry as art.

### *Ghosh*

*Character* Mr Ghosh is a wealthy man, owner of Modern Publishing House. He wears western clothes, speaks with confidence and has the money to arrange a marriage with the beautiful Meena. He is also a jealous man, who cannot bear to think that Meena once loved, let alone still loves, the lowly Vijay. Ghosh likes to control situations, to give orders and to win any contest. Greedy and cruelty, he is also capable of hypocrisy.

### Illustrative moments

*Cruel* Not least among Ghosh's many unsavoury qualities is his cruelty toward Vijay. This is shown in a sequence that begins at the college reunion. Ghosh realises that Vijay is the old boyfriend of his wife, Meena. After hearing Vijay sing at the event, he introduces himself, says that he likes his poems and invites him to his office the next day. Vijay shows up with a bright smile and hands over his manuscript. 'Shall I recite them for you?' Vijay asks, but Ghosh subjects him to an interrogation about his college days, eventually forcing him to admit that he didn't finish his degree. Having humiliated him, Ghosh then dismisses any idea of publishing the poems and says, 'Will you work for me?' The unemployed Vijay has no choice but to accept a low-status job as an errand boy to the husband of his former girlfriend. Throughout this scene, Ghosh maintains a superior sneer on his face, supremely confident of his power over Vijay.

*Greedy* Ghosh's greed (or selfishness) is displayed in almost every scene in which he appears, but none is more telling than the hospital scene. Ghosh has taken Vijay's poems from Gulab and accepted her life savings of a necklace to print them. The resulting book has sold enough to make him rich, but he (and Vijay's equally greedy brothers) are summoned to the asylum to verify the identity of a man calling himself Vijay, the now-famous-but-dead poet. It is a sordid scene, with madmen running around and up the walls in a caged space. Ghosh is taken in and sees a crumpled figure, who rises. It is Vijay. But when Vijay calls out, 'Ghosh, it's me,' the publisher calmly tells the doctors, 'No. That's not Vijay.' With that madman's claim dismissed, Ghosh can keep all the profits from the book.



(Vijay singing one of his poems)



(Gulab)



(Gulab persuades Vijay to eat)



(Vijay works for Ghosh, seated, as an office boy)