

HUMANITIES INSTITUTE
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MR AND MRS '55 1955

Guru Dutt

(Hindi language)

OVERVIEW

This witty romantic comedy represents a departure for Guru Dutt, who had earlier made his reputation with crime-dramas and would later direct tragic masterpieces (such as *Thirsty* and *Paper Flowers*). Nevertheless, it does include some of his trademark features, such as songs embedded in the dialogue and gorgeous black-and-white cinematography. Beyond its sometimes slapstick humour, the film does provoke debate about the important social question of women's rights in general and within marriage more specifically. The butt of the jokes here is an upper-class, westernised feminist (Sita), who stands in for any group of urban elites who want to tell the rest of the country how to live their lives. Sita is suspicious of men who marry for money and warns her niece, Anita, against getting too close to Preetam (played by Guru Dutt, the director). For reasons contained in Anita's father's will, however, Sita changes tact and arranges a bogus marriage with Preetam that prevents them from living together. Preetam then 'elopes' with his wife and the couple live with his family, including his married sister. Now, Anita observes the contentment of the 'normal' Indian wife and, after a few dramatic pitfalls are avoided, they end up happily married. Although the sexual politics are cringingly outdated, there are some genuinely funny scenes. A good example is the cartoon that Preetam draws of Sita wearing a Roman toga standing in a chariot with a whip in hand as Anita struggles to draw the chariot.

CULTURAL SIGNIFICANCE

The film was released in the same year that a major change occurred in Indian divorce law. The Hindu Marriage Act of 1955 (which gave the film its title) was hugely controversial, as the film itself makes clear. The very idea of making long-standing domestic and private arrangements subject to legal processes and assessments was anathema to many traditional Indians. While the new laws covered a wide range of issues, such as marriage, succession and inheritance (to be equal between sons and daughters), the most controversial was divorce. Grounds for divorce would now include impotency, even partial impotency, lack of valid consent to marriage, desertion, illness, bigamy and rape. Not all of India was ready for such sweeping change in 1955, and the film suggests that most people opposed it. This may have a kernel of truth, since the parliament in New Delhi, which enacted the legislation, was at that time out of touch with their constituents. In any case, it is not surprising that the film and the new law garnered so much public attention. Since the late 19th century, one of the effective strategies of the Independence movement had been to depict India as a woman, often as a goddess, whose honour the people must protect from foreign defilement. To many people, therefore, the fight against the new marriage and divorce law was simply a continuation of the fight for independence.

STORY

Sita the feminist The film opens with the credits rolling over a newspaper headlines screaming about a sensational courtroom drama and then cuts to a meeting presided over by feminist firebrand Sita Devi. Speaking to a group of women friends in her own house, Sita is adamant about the need to support the newly proposed legislation that would enable women to exit a failed marriage more easily. Some of the women in the audience, though, seem more interested in talking among themselves about the relative merits of various skin creams.

Anita, the niece Next, we see Anita, Sita's young niece, at a tennis match, where she drools over one of the handsome young players. A minor accident lands her almost on top of a sleeping man, who is Preetam, an unemployed cartoonist. She is sweetly apologetic, and he falls in love with her.

Inheritance Anita turns twenty and there is a formal reading of her late father's will, which reveals that she will inherit a fortune but only if she marries within a month of her 21st birthday. The father, it seems, has anticipated Sita's scheme to keep Anita unmarried. Now, Sita must get the girl married so that she can get her father's inheritance.

Bogus marriage Anita tries to entice the dashing tennis player to marry her, but he has other ideas and departs to play at Wimbledon. Now Sita comes up with an idea that she hopes will achieve two things: enable Anita to keep her inheritance and keep her unmarried. The clever plan is that Sita will arrange a marriage that will be ended after a single month. All she needs to do is find a man who is poor enough to want the job (the bogus groom will, of course, be paid for his efforts) but also educated enough to look the part and enough of a gentleman to forswear any contact with his 'bride' during their month-long bogus marriage.

Preetam The man she hires is Preetam, who is still in love with Anita. He has no interest in the fee offered by Sita, but he hopes that Anita might learn to love him after their civil wedding ceremony. Before that event, he happens to meet Anita, who has no idea that he is the intended groom, and they strike up a friendship. There is also a complicated sub-plot involving Johnny, one of Preetam's rakish, off-beat friends, who is trying to woo a secretary in his office.

Married life Anita and Preetam are married, although she is not happy that her husband turns out to be a man she has met before. He, however, is delighted and takes her away from her aunt by impersonating the family chauffeur and driving her to the house of his married sister. Now, the film exploits the comedic opportunities presented by this situation of a marriage that is not a marriage (similar to the screwball comedy *It Happened One Night*). This is when their real courtship begins, inside marriage, with petulance and trickery, witty dialogue and suggestive songs. Anita also makes friends with her sister-in-law, who is a traditional Hindu wife and begins to change her ideas about men and marriage.

Bogus divorce Meanwhile, Sita has been looking for her missing niece. She eventually tracks her down and berates Preetam for his affrontery in stealing her. After a heated argument, Sita shows him a telegram sent by Anita (when she was first kidnapped) asking for her aunt to take her back. When Anita leaves, Preetam thinks that he has misbehaved and that Anita does not love him. In order to give her grounds for easy divorce, he arranges for a photograph to be taken of him drinking with a 'loose' young woman. He gives the photo to Sita and tells her to use it in court to get the divorce.

Court case When their divorce case is heard in court, Sita's lawyer misleads the jury alleging that Preetam used the marriage to get money and to satisfy his depraved sexual desires. The truth is also twisted in testimonies by witnesses, some of whom have been bribed by Sita to make Preetam appear to be a greedy chancer.

Transformation Sita's plan fails, however, when Anita is told that Preetam deliberately debased himself by arranging for the photo in order for her to get divorced. Now Anita undergoes a transformation. She calls her aunt a liar and disowns her. Not knowing this, Preetam has already made plans to leave Bombay by an airplane. Anita rushes to the airport but can only watch the plane depart through her tears. But, no, it's not the end. Preetam has missed his flight and the two lovers are united, forever.

THEMES

Marriage There is really only one important theme in this romantic comedy, and that is the value of a traditional marriage. Viewers today, in the 21st century, will find the gender stereotyping extreme (almost ludicrous) and the characterisation of the fanatical feminist a little overdone. But we should approach the film in its historical context, in the mid-1950s, when major changes to marriage and divorce customs were instituted by new legislation (Hindu Marriage Act of 1955). In fact, Sita articulates the very argument that persuaded the government to pass new laws, namely that a traditional wife is subservient to her husband. In opposition to this 'radical' idea is Preetam's sister, who is happily married with three children. Caught between is Anita, lectured to by Sita and then given a chance to see a marriage at work when she lives with Preetam's sister and her family. In those short weeks, the sister-in-law gives Anita a mini-course in traditional wifely values, which

counter the feminist instructions given by her aunt. At one point, Anita sits with her sister-in-law in the kitchen and says, 'Three children in four years? I mean, it isn't good to have children so young. A woman loses her freedom.' To which, her sister-in-law replies, 'What freedom? How can a woman who considers her children a burden be called a mother?' Slowly, Anita changes her views on marriage and, in the end, turns against her aunt in an angry exchange. When her aunt warns her not to go back to Preetam, Anita cries out, 'Instead of lecturing on stages and ignoring ordinary people, you should go to their homes and see how happy women are as wives.' To which, the aunt replies, 'That is slavery. They're illiterate women. I'm surprised that an educated woman like you would accept such slavery.' Anita's response, one of the defining statements of film is this: 'If slavery is loving your husband and looking after a home, then I'll sing the praises of slavery.'

Nationalism Embedded within this clash of opinions about traditional marriage is the theme of nationalism. Throughout the film, the new legislation on marriage and divorce is said to be the result of westernisation, which Indians should resist. A schizophrenic image of women was depicted on the advertising poster for the film itself: on the right, the hero buckles the shoe of the heroine who is in western attire, while on the left, she is dressed in a sari and bowing down to touch the hero's feet. Message: westernised men are subservient to their wives. Again, it is important to remember that the film was made less than a decade after Independence, when nationalism was still a powerful impulse among the population. In one scene, Sita proudly announces that she teaches women to be free, 'like western women.' The voice of the common woman is given to a servant in Sita's employment, who throws in comments such as: 'All I hear is women's freedom and men's cruelty. There's too many meetings and lectures. Everything is turning British.' There is no doubt that Indian society was undergoing rapid change in the 1950s and that protecting 'Hindu tradition' would be a challenge for decades to come.

MAIN CHARACTERS

Preetam Preetam is the male protagonist, a hapless cartoonist.
Anita Anita is his love-interest, a twenty-year old heiress.
Sita Sita is Anita's feminist aunt.
Johny Johny is a feckless friend of Preetam.

CHARACTER ANALYSIS

Sita

Character Sita is a committed campaigner for women's rights. When calling for women's liberation from the patriarchy she says she speaks from experience, but we don't know her backstory. She is suspicious, outspoken and likes to lecture people. A mature woman, she is also clever and scheming. Her role is a caricature, but that only adds to the entertainment value of the film. In the end, this crusader turns out to be the villain.

Illustrative moments

Authoritative Despite her faults (and they are many), Sita is a commanding figure. We see as much in the first scene, when she is addressing a group of ladies in her own house. 'Last week,' she says to the seated group, 'I led a deputation to Parliament in favour of the divorce bill. As you know, it is essential for us, to gain our independence and dignity.' As if inflated by her own passion, she goes on to condemn men for marrying three or four women, for enslaving their wives. 'The divorce bill is imperative to end this injustice!' she tells her audience. It is a stirring speech, a version of which will be heard for decades in India. In a later decade, someone like Sita would become an MP and possibly Prime Minister.

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Suspicious Whatever the merits of Sita's arguments against masculine domination, they are eroded by a streak of suspicion that runs beneath. No man, in her opinion, is to be trusted, no matter how genuine he might appear on the surface. This quality is displayed in a scene when Sita announces to Anita that her father's will be read on the following day. 'You will inherit millions,' she says to the young girl, 'but beware. Men will want to marry you. They are greedy and self-interested. Every one of them. Do not be deceived!' It is this unwarranted suspicion that prevents Sita from recognising Preetam as a kind-hearted man.

Anita

Character At age 20, Anita is an immature young woman. Today her maturity, in social and sexual terms, would be comparable to that of a twelve-year-old. She is idle and a little silly, ogling tennis stars and reading movie magazines. In fact, she appears more like a tomboy than the young lady that her aunt would like her to become. By the end of the film, though, she is capable of strong emotions and of confronting her controlling aunt.

Illustrative moments

Tomboyish In order to portray Anita as a young, innocent girl, the scriptwriter makes her tomboyish. A tomboy, it is assumed, would not be viewed in any sexual way. This image of her is presented in an early scene at a tennis match, where Anita drools over a handsome young player. Her rapture is then interrupted when she sees that her aunt's spy is looking for her among the spectators. Nimble as an athlete, she climbs the rows and slips down in between the wooden boards, finding a place to hide underneath the seated spectators. Squeezing her body into the tight space, she dangles her legs and jumps with as much physical skill as the tennis player she has been admiring. She happens to land on the sleeping Preetam (who falls in love with her at first sight) but later scrambles away with dexterity. Surely, the audience thinks, she is not going to be a romantic lead.

Juvenile Anita has all the juvenile traits that we would today associate with a teenager. She is impertinent and she is bored. A vivid and humorous display of these qualities occurs during one of her aunt's lectures. "Now, listen, Anita," the aunt says, "You shouldn't make fool of yourself chasing after men." Anita, who is reading a magazine while stretched out on a sofa, gives a little grin and says, "But auntie, girls hardly ever make fools of themselves. They make fools of boys!" This shocks the aunt, but she recovers in time to inform Anita that her father's will is to be read the next day. While the aunt is lecturing Anita on how to prepare for the attention an heiress will attract, the young niece lays down her magazine, closes her eyes and falls asleep. The teenager is lost in her own fantasies and cares little about the future and finances.

Strong-willed The key drama in this romantic comedy comes at the end, when Anita, fired by her passion for Preetam and tutored in wifely duties by her sister-in-law, confronts her aunt. They have both sat through a court case hearing the petition for divorce, in which the aunt's lawyers have misled, deceived and bribed witnesses. With her eyes finally wide open, in both literal and metaphorical terms, Anita unleashes a scathing attack on her aunt. "You lied!" she cries, citing the examples of the incriminating photograph and the money she gave to witnesses. "Your liberation for women is nothing more than hatred of men!" One suspects that this line expresses the director's view rather than that of the character, but Anita has shown us enough inner strength to make us just believe that she is speaking.

Preetam

Character Preetam (whose name means 'love') is certainly charming. In his rumpled suit and fedora, his shambling gait and constant grin, he is no more threatening than Charlie Chaplin. Preetam also plays the clownish tramp in his lack of ambition, his inept business sense and his innate trust of others. And this is a defining quality. Despite his shabby appearance and happy-go-lucky outlook, he is never dishonourable and there is dignity in his disarray.

Illustrative moments

Open-hearted Preetam's endearing quality is his open-hearted trust of people, which strikes a sharp contrast with the aunt's perpetual distrust. Preetam's trust leads him to love at first sight, as illustrated when he meets Anita for the first time. He is sleeping beneath the rows of spectators at a tennis match when she accidentally lands on him to escape her aunt. She is embarrassed and tries to explain, while he gazes at her tenderly, without lust, only adoration. He can't take his eyes off her and feigns an injury to his nose so that she will lean in and look closely at him. That minor subterfuge is part of his charm, and we forgive him such an innocent lie because we know he is not in control of his senses. He is love-struck.

Proud Preetam may be hapless but he is not without pride. In fact, like many characters who live on the margins (and again like Chaplin), the scrap of self-respect they hold on to becomes a lifeline. This characteristic is illustrated in a scene where the aunt first interviews him for her scheme to arrange a bogus marriage for Anita in order to circumvent the conditions of her inheritance. He goes into the job interview without any idea what it entails, only that it brings a good monthly salary. But when he is told that all he has to do is marry someone he has never seen, he is shocked. And when the aunt has finished explaining the details of her scheme, he is irate. 'What do you take me for?' he asks. 'A puppet on a string?' He has been jerked about enough already by inconsiderate bosses and this bossy lady is the icing on the cake. He refuses to compromise himself by selling himself as a husband, which is a nice ironic twist on the usual claim that women are sold as wives. Puffing himself up with pride, he says, 'I won't do it. Marry and then divorce. Absurd.' Then he sees a photograph of Anita on the wall and realises that it is she (whom he already loves) who will be his wife.

True love Love-struck Preetam never falters in his affection for Anita. He may be otherwise unstable, unpredictable and lacking conviction, but his love for her is as solid as a rock. This constancy, which is an unintended rejoinder to the aunt's suspicion, is displayed in a scene that takes place after the bogus marriage to Anita and after Preetam has carried her away to his sister's house. The aunt offers him a cheque for 10,000 rupees in exchange for him allowing Anita to leave the marriage earlier than planned. Preetam takes the cheque, examines it and then slowly tears it into little pieces. Hidden from sight, Anita has been watching this scene and now knows the depth of Preetam's love for her. He is a man who will not forsake her, even for a minor fortune.



(Sita about to launch into another lecture)



(Anita and Preetam in a happy moment)



(Sita in full flow at a meeting)



(Preetam and Sita confront each other)



(poster for the film, showing the two sides of the argument)