

PAPER FLOWERS (KAAGAZ KE PHOOL) 1959

Guru Dutt

(Hindi language)

Contents (Overview – Plot – Themes – Characters)

OVERVIEW

Although *Paper Flowers* flopped badly at the box office, it is generally ranked among the finest of all Indian films. It has become famous not only for its tragic (and semi-autobiographical) story of a film-director's life, but also for its display of Guru Dutt's ground-breaking cinematic techniques, such as in-depth long shots (this was India's first film in cinemascope) and songs embedded in the narrative. The story, told entirely in flashbacks, traces the life of a director, who rises high in the film business but then crashes precipitously after a love affair with a married woman whom he recklessly casts as a matinee star in his films. The director's daughter persuades the actress to leave her father, after which the director loses a legal battle for paternity rights over his daughter. He then slides into alcoholism but is nearly redeemed when his former lover tries to get him hired on one of her films. His pride won't let him and, in the final scene, he dies an old man in a director's chair.

CULTURAL SIGNIFICANCE

On its release, *Paper Flowers* was an unmitigated financial disaster, probably because of its downbeat tone and unhappy ending. Over the years, however, the film has achieved a special place in Indian cinema for its complex structure of a film within a film and the theme of tragic love, which closely mirrors the story of the director's own life. On the innermost level of this film is *Devdas* (1935), which is the film being shot in *Paper Flowers*. Here, the barrier to true love is caste, and the protagonist descends into self-destructive drink after he realises he will never marry his love. Second, in the middle level, is *Paper Flowers* itself, which, as we will see, also features a story of impossible love, although the problems are more personal than social. And, then, on the third level, outside the film, is the life-story of Dutt himself, who, like his fictional director (Suresh), suffers from a marital separation because of his affair with an actress. In further parallels with Suresh, Dutt's film was a financial failure that effectively ended his successful career and led to his alcoholism. Five years after this film, in 1964, Dutt died at the age of 39. These three layers of intertwined storylines make this film unique.

STORY

The present The story starts when an old man, Suresh Sinha (played by Guru Dutt, the director) make an out-of-hours visit to a Bombay film studio. Sitting down in his old director's chair, he recollects his life, which unfolds in a series of dramatic scenes, punctuated by seven songs.

Prime time The first section of the flashbacks shows Suresh as a young and famous director. He is swamped by adoring fans who want his autograph. Commanding a film set with hundreds of assistants, he is preparing to shoot an ambitious film, *Devdas*, which is an actual film made in 1935 about a man whose lack of self-belief leads to his self-destruction. Suresh is trying to find a leading lady to play the part of *Devdas'* lover, Paro, who must combine innocence with beauty.

Family troubles Suresh later travels to Delhi to visit his young daughter, Pammi. We then learn that he is separated from his wife, Veena, and that he is battling to gain the right to visit his daughter. The couple have separated because Veena, and her pretentious parents, consider film-making as a disreputable and vulgar profession. Veena's whole family come across as mindless Anglophiles.

Meeting a stranger After heated arguments with Veena and her family, including an eccentric brother, Suresh takes a rainy walk in a park in Delhi. Seeing a young woman without a coat, Suresh gives her his coat. She is Shanti, a shy but pretty girl.

A star is born Suresh returns to Bombay and is shooting on the set when Shanti comes to return his coat. Looking for him in the studio, she accidentally walks on to the set during shooting. When Suresh reviews the rushes, he thinks that Shanti would be perfect for the part of Paro, in his movie. Suresh and Shanti get to know each other on and off the set. In one central scene, she goes to a fancy party for the production team, where Suresh censures her for wearing too much make-up and hiding her natural beauty.

Love blossoms It becomes slowly apparent that the director and his star are falling in love. When Suresh is injured in a car accident, Shanti looks after him with devotion and warmth. Suresh warns her that he is a married man, but it's too late to halt her love for him. A key scene occurs early in the morning, in an empty studio, where the two lovers gaze adoringly at each other, while a song (sung by Dutt's real-life wife, Geeta Dutt) plays in the background:

What a sweet pleasure of pain has life brought us.
You are no longer yourself.
I am no longer myself.

Our longing hearts met in such a way
As though we were never apart.
You became lost,
I became lost, too,
As we walked a few footsteps along the same path

The daughter intervenes The production of the film (*Devdas*) continues apace, with gossip in the fan magazines about a sexual affair between director and leading lady. We know that they are in love but not lovers. Suresh's daughter, Pammi, however, is embarrassed by these rumours. She goes to Bombay and asks Shanti to break off any relationship with her father.

Empty success Meanwhile, the film is released to a great wave of popular and critical acclaim. Shanti is moved by Pammi's request and is unable to take part in the joyous celebrations by the production team. When she tells the production manager that she is resigning from her contract, Suresh goes to Pammi and then to Shanti in order to bring her back. All his efforts fail and Shanti leaves him and returns to her previous job as a school teacher in her home town. Suresh's despair is compounded when he also loses a court case against his wife's family over custody of Pammi.

Downward spiral Disconsolate, Suresh begins to drink heavily and loses his once-sure grip on production. When his films fail at the box office, the producers call him in for harsh words, but he is too proud to listen. Suresh quits the studio and falls into debt.

Last chance The actions skips forward two years and we see that Suresh is auctioning off all his personal possessions. Meanwhile, Shanti has been forced back to the studio by the producers who find a clause in her contract requiring her to act again. She quickly returns to stardom. Hoping to return the favour he once did for her, she seeks out the penniless Suresh and tells him that he can direct her next film. But the proud Suresh is too far gone and too humiliated to accept her charity.

Speechless Shanti continues to star in film after film, while Suresh sinks deeper in poverty and drink. Years pass and Pammi is about to get married. As a last resort to get a little money with which to buy her a wedding gift, Suresh gets a job as a movie extra. It turns out that he is scheduled to speak one line in a scene with Shanti on set. She doesn't recognise the man the scruffy extra with the makeup and beard, but he is struck speechless by the sight of her and is unable to speak his single line of dialogue.

Pursuit When Suresh is fired and told to leave the set, he takes off his costume and is recognised by Shanti. She runs after him, out onto the street and pursues him, but cannot reach him. These final shots are accompanied by a haunting song, which explains the film's title:

Fly, thirsty bee,
there is no nectar here where paper flowers blossom,
not in this garden where innocence is lost.

Back to present The flashbacks end and we see the aged Suresh slumped in his director's chair, where he dies.

THEMES

Thwarted love The main theme of this classic Hindi film is impossible love, a passion that tears apart the lives of both main characters. There are two strands to this theme, one minor and the other dominant. The minor strand is the relationship between Suresh and his daughter, to whom he is denied access. There is a moving scene when she is practically ripped from his arms by the principal of her school, who explains that he is not her guardian. By far the greater tragedy, however, is the impossible love between Suresh and Shanti. This is a tale of doomed passion as tragic as that between Romeo and Juliet or Scarlet O'Hara and Ashley Wilkes (in *Gone with the Wind*). Guru Dutt's film, however, differs from those two examples in that the reason for the tragedy lies not in social factors but in the personal flaws that prevent the fulfilment of love. We have to remember that Suresh is separated from his wife and Shanti is unmarried. In the Bombay world of 1950s, they could have had an open, loving relationship, but Suresh's pride and Shanti's scruples prevent that.

Public success and personal loss A second major theme in the film is the elusive nature of success. Throughout the story, public success is juxtaposed with personal loss. At the beginning, Suresh is the epitome of success—adored, famous and wealthy. He has everything, on the outside, but we then see that his marriage is a failure; his in-laws do not respect him and his wife won't allow him to see their daughter. At this point, having lost his daughter and his wife, he meets Shanti. She becomes a (second) public success, which augments his fame as a director. But then he loses her because his daughter is upset by the insults she endures from her school mates about the scandalous nature of her father's life. Wife, daughter and now (platonic) lover—all gone. Next, he loses his career when his despair renders him unable to perform well on the movie-set. What else can he lose? His dignity. The man who used to glide into the studio in a chauffeur-driven car now stumbles along the street half-drunk. At the end, Suresh claims that he still has his pride, but he has sunken so low that he cannot even succeed in holding onto to this scrap of dignity. His personal failures have ruined his public life.

CHARACTERS

Suresh Suresh is a successful film director. Suresh is a brooding presence throughout the film. He is outwardly thoughtful (always shown sucking on his pipe), calm and polite, but inside he is a maelstrom of emotions. Despite his great fame, he is thwarted in his attempts to gain access to his daughter and he is torn apart by his love for Shanti. Unable to cope with loss, he is a weak man who falls prey to self-pity and ends up destroying himself with drink and despair.

Confident In the beginning, Suresh is confident about everything. This self-assurance is illustrated in an early scene when he visits his wife's parents' house. He has just come from his daughter's school, where he has been denied access to her. That setback, however, has not dented his self-assurance. Standing in front of his seated in-laws, Suresh proclaims that he will take back his daughter. 'From now on,' he says, 'she will live with me.' When the in-laws threaten to take the case to court, Suresh turns on his heel and says, 'I'll discuss this with Veena [his estranged wife].' Veena refuses to see him, but Suresh leaves confident that he will regain access to their daughter. And why not? He is a famous film-director, he is the girl's father and he has done nothing to besmirch his character. This is the scaffolding of his high self-esteem, which will slowly come tumbling down.

Sentimental There are several instances of Suresh's sentimentality, especially in the first half of the film. Offering Shanti his overcoat is one that most people cite, but, to my mind, a more significant example occurs later, when he is in the film studio in Bombay. One of the extras, a woman with two small children, is scolded by the stage manager for not being ready to go on the set. She explains that she had to feed her baby and forgot the time. The man continues to shout at her until Suresh, who has been listening in the background, sends him away. He approaches the woman and says softly, 'There's no hurry. You can come to the set when you've put your baby to sleep.' Then he looks at her other child and asks her name. 'Shammi', the little girl says, which is close to his own daughter's name (Pammi). She is also about the same age as his daughter. He gives her a sweet and gently pats her head. The busy man, directing a complex film production, is overcome with sadness at losing touch with his daughter.

Controlling Suresh slowly falls in love with Shanti, but once a director always a director. Despite his growing passion, he continues to 'direct' her and control her image, even off stage. One of the finest moments in the film illustrates this flaw in his character. A grand party is held to celebrate the success of the film. Shanti is dressed up, by others, in expensive sari and jewellery. When Suresh

first sees her, he doesn't recognise the sweet, innocent girl he gave his coat to in the rain. Then he inspects her, as he would an actress on set. 'These curls are all wrong,' he says. 'Turn around. Show me your nails.' When she protests that she was told to dress appropriately, he sneers at her, 'Hmff. I never expected you to take to tinsel town so quickly. All that make-up has wiped the innocence from your face.' He may be falling in love with Shanti, but he also wants to control how she looks.

Proud The fatal flaw in the character of this kind and sentimental man is his pride. It is what elevated him in his profession in the first place, but it is also what prevents him from accepting help when he has fallen into poverty. The key example of this masculine characteristic is illustrated toward the end of the film. Suresh is destitute, living on his own in a slum. Shanti seeks him out to offer him a job as director on her next film. She tries to convince him that she is making this offer purely for her own selfish, professional reasons ('because you can direct me better than anyone'). But he sees through her and knows she has come to him out of pity. After a long conversation, he gallantly refuses her offer, saying, 'After losing so much, I have only one thing left in me. My pride.'

Shanti Shanti is a school teacher who becomes a film star. Shanti is the innocent, naïve and devoted young woman that Suresh wanted to play the lead role in the film he was directing. She also turns out to be perceptive and strong-willed. She becomes a star in the glitzy world of Bombay cinema, but she never confuses her public image with her inner self-image. That inner strength is what guides her through the film and enables her to avoid the moral pitfalls on the path. She does not become Suresh's physical lover, and she sacrifices her own happiness by agreeing to Pammi's request that she separate herself from Suresh. Suresh is the film's tragic hero, but Shanti is its equally tragic but also moral core.

Naïve Shanti's innocence and naivete are displayed during her first encounter with Suresh. They are both sheltering from a downpour in a park. He speaks to her, and she remains silent. When he speaks again, she signs with resignation and says, 'No use asking my name. I'm having dinner in my hostel tonight and I don't like the movies.' When Suresh says he's baffled, she says, 'Isn't that the way men chat up women these days?' He assures her that his intentions are not dishonourable and then gives her his coat as protection from the rain. 'What about you?' she asks. 'Oh, I won't get cold. I've had a brandy.' This comment puts Shanti back on guard. 'Alcohol?' she says, as if the word is vulgar. 'I hear that men have drink and then...misbehave.' This is the unworldly Shanti, the simple school teacher, before she becomes an actress and falls in love with a man who drinks more than brandy.

Devoted Part of Shanti's endearing character, and her tragedy, is her devotion to Suresh. She falls deeply in love with him and never changes her feelings. The birth and growth of that devotion is shown during the course of the film, but a key scene occurs after Suresh is badly injured in a car accident. It is a rainy night. He lies in bed, covered with bandages. He calls out for water, but all the nurses are asleep. Only Shanti comes to his aid, and she offers him a glass of water without him even needing to ask for it. 'How did you know I wanted water?' he asks. 'I know your habits,' she says quietly. She arranges a shawl around his shoulders, touching him affectionately. When he tells her that she should go, that it's late and they are alone, she says that she would like to stay. The implication is that her love for him is so pure that it will nullify the impropriety of her being alone with him. She kneels by his side as she speaks and humbly bows her head when he tells her she must go. It is almost a scene of religious devotion.

Pammi Pammi is Suresh's daughter.

Veena Veena is Suresh's estranged wife.

Sir B. Bhushan Sir B. Bhushan is Veena's father.



(Suresh Sinha signing autographs)



(Suresh tries to keep his daughter, but the school principal intervenes)



(Pammi asks Shanti to leave her father)



(Shanti in agony at deciding to leave Suresh)



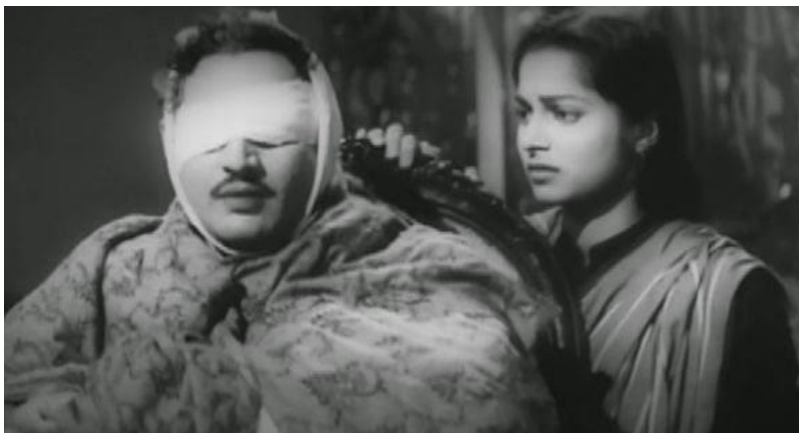
(Pammi argues with her father)



(Suresh criticises Shanti for her make-up and appearance)



(Shanti offers Suresh a job, which he turns down out of pride)



(Shanti nurses the injured Suresh)