

HUMANITIES INSTITUTE
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The Seventh Horse of the Sun / Suraj Ka Satvan Ghoda (1992)

Shyam Benegal

OVERVIEW

Auteur Shyam Benegal is an award-winning South Asian film director and scriptwriter from Hyderabad, India. He was inspired by his father, Sridhar Benegal, a famous photographer. Many of Benegal's films explore facets of the human condition, with special attention to contradictions. *The Seventh Horse of the Sun* is no different. In his early films, such as *Night's End (Nishant)*, *Ankur*, and *The Role (Bhumika)*, Shyam Benegal laid the groundwork for parallel cinema, an alternative to mainstream commercial Indian cinema. Accordingly, directors angled towards realistic plots, often critiquing the sociopolitical climate. The genre applies filmographic techniques to social realism.

Film The film's plot builds on the seven horses of the sun god from Hindu mythology, mentioned in the film's title. Accordingly, it weaves in and out of the present and the past, gathering multiple character perspectives. Thus, the plot deconstructs conventional narrative styles. Moreover, the zigzagging narrative demonstrates the circularity of time that the film's protagonist and storyteller, Manek Mulla, attempts to convey to his friends, the listeners. The film won the Best Feature Film in Hindi at the 40th National Film Awards.

Background The film's script is based on the novel, *The Sun's Seventh Horse (Suraj Ka Satvan Ghoda)* by Dharmavir Bharati. Both the novel and the film adaptation delve into complex love triangles called "Devdas complex," taken from the famous novel of the same name written by the Bengali novelist Sarat Chandra Chattopadhyay. Manek Mulla's method of telling a long story over a period of many days also mirrors the storytelling strategy employed in historical epics and fables, such as the *Panchatantra* and the *Arabian Nights*.

MAIN CHARACTERS

Manek Mulla	The protagonist
Shyam, Omkar, Prakash	Manek's three friends who listen to his stories. Shyam is the writer
Jamuna	Manek's neighbor, who falls in love with Tanna and Manek
Roma	Jamuna's aunt, who arranges her marriage to the wealthy landowner
Ramdhan	The chief manservant at Jamuna's husband's estate
Tanna	Jamuna's lover, who gets married to Lalitha
Mahesar Dalal	Tanna's father
Mausi	Tanna's stepmother
Sethji	The owner of the neighborhood corner shop
Lalitha/Lily	Tanna's wife, who was in love with Manek before her marriage
Kammo	Lalitha's friend
Sati	Chaman Thakur's niece, who falls in love with Manek
Chaman Thakur	An army veteran, who adopts Sati as his niece

SYNOPSIS

In the film's opening scene, Shyam, the film's narrator, addresses the viewers in a voiceover. He reflects on storyteller Manek Mulla's eerie stories he had heard as a young man. Then, the scene cuts to the past as Manek Mulla tells stories from his life to three ardent listeners, Shyam, Omkar, and Prakash. Manek attempts to show that love depends on socioeconomic factors. In the stories, three women from three different socioeconomic classes fall in and out of love with Manek. First, Jamuna is an upper caste girl who falls in love with Tanna, a lower caste neighbor. When the lovers' parents reject the match, she finds comfort in Manek. Ultimately, her parents arrange her marriage to a wealthy but older landowner from the

same caste. In the second story, Lalitha, from an intellectual and affluent upper caste family, falls in love with Manek because of his wit and intellect. Unfortunately, Lalitha's arranged marriage to Tanna forces the lovers to separate. Finally, in the third story, Manek meets Sati, a low class orphaned woman raised by an ex-soldier. She falls in love with Manek because of his nobility and hopes that he will save her from her tragic life. Ultimately, Manek loses the love of all three women and narrates the stories to his friends as a single man. Suddenly, Sati appears out of the dark. A shocked Manek follows her and disappears into the mist. His friends are befuddled by his eerie departure and the stories he left behind. Ultimately, it is revealed that the film's narrator was Shyam, one of Manek's three friends.

PLOT

Friends, storyteller, and writer Three young men, Shyam, Omkar, and Prakash, arrive at Manek Mulla's apartment for tea and conversation. Naturally, the conversation turns to Chattopadhyay *Devdas*, a famous novel. Manek dismisses it as "sentimental junk," claiming that love is never pure emotion. He tells three stories of three women from three different social classes to demonstrate his hypothesis.

Jamuna

Jamuna's romances Jamuna's and Tanna's families are neighbors. They fall in love despite caste differences. When their families reject the match, Jamuna and Tanna sneak private moments. Unfortunately, the situation does not improve, and Tanna's family strictly forbids him from seeing Jamuna. Since Jamuna's family cannot afford her education, she reads on her own. After reading Chattopadhyay's *Devdas*, she pities Paro's and Devdas's doomed love, connecting their love to hers and Tanna's love. Tanna's obedience to his family's wishes frustrates Jamuna. She finds a trusty confidante in her neighbor, a younger Manek. She prepares Manek's favorite foods and forces him to hear her sorrow and pain. Over weeks of close interactions, Jamuna falls in love with Manek, Tanna's replacement. However, it ends in tragedy.



Jamuna's marriage

Soon, Jamuna's aunt, Roma, introduces her nephew, a wealthy, twice-widowed childless older landowner seeking a young bride. Impressed by his wealth, her parents consent to the match. Jamuna settles into her new life and forsakes her former lovers. Commenting as Jamuna's forsaken lover, Manek notes, "There's only one end to love stories. The heroine gets married to someone else and the Manek Mullas of the world are left standing like fools." Soon after the birth of their son, Jamuna's husband passes away. She is abandoned once more. When her parents express concern over Jamuna staying alone at her husband's mansion, Ramdhan volunteers his services to stay on as a groundskeeper and ensure Jamuna's and the baby's safety.



Tanna

Tanna's marriage Manek's second story branches out from his first story on Jamuna. He revisits Jamuna's declaration that she will only marry Tanna before her eventual marriage to the wealthy landowner. Although they accept Jamuna's and Tanna's love match, their approach is condescending, designed to demean Tanna's family based on caste differences. Inevitably, Tanna's family rejects the proposal and seeks a better proposal to upstage Jamuna's groom. The local shopkeeper introduces Lalitha to Tanna's family and plays up the family's wealth. He mentions that since Lalitha's father is no more, she stands to inherit everything. Out of greed, Mahesar immediately agrees to the match between Lalitha and his son, Tanna.



Jamuna and Lalitha become friends

After Tanna's marriage, Lalitha and Jamuna became friends. Lalitha expresses her dissatisfaction with her in-laws because of their narrow-mindedness. She confides in Jamuna about her pregnancy and plans to leave Tanna.

**Jamuna's first love resurges**

Although Jamuna and Tanna are married to different people, Jamuna cannot forget Tanna, her first love. When Lalitha is away, she hugs Tanna and asks him if he still thinks about her. He tells her to forget him and runs away. When Tanna and Jamuna meet again after many years, age and misfortune have mellowed them. Therefore, he readily accepts her invitation to visit her for friendship's sake. As Tanna distractedly waves goodbye and walks away, a train runs into him and injures him. He passes away soon after, and Lalitha comforts Jamuna.



Lalitha

Lalitha loves Manek Storyteller Manek explains to his three listeners that the story's events unfold over a single day. Lalitha and Manek are lovers forced to separate because of Lalitha's marriage to Tanna. On their last evening together, they draw on their love of literature to find solace.



Lalitha marries Tanna Although Lalitha loves Tanna, she leaves him because of the marital arrangement with Tanna. On her wedding day, Lalitha and her childhood friend Kamma indulge in their favorite girlhood mischief of stealing guavas from their neighbor's tree. Although Lalitha's groom is Manek's neighbor, there is no room for Lalitha and Manek to continue their relationship after Lalitha's marriage. Wearing profound sadness, Manek looks at Lalitha in bridal attire. There is an unspoken finality in their wordless goodbye.



Sati

Sati loves Manek Manek meets Chaman Thakur and his adopted niece, Sati, on the way back from running errands. He gets roped into helping them with their accounts from soap trading. Sati and Manek develop a friendship aided by exchanging poems and songs. Sati's boldness in wielding a knife to warn away salacious men impresses Manek. When Manek passes his exams, Sati congratulates him and takes him to the temple for prayer and blessings.



A Trap Mahesar lusts after Sati and offers Chaman money to acquire Sati as a mistress. Although Sati scornfully rejects the offer, she cannot escape the trap. When Sati shares her distress with Manek, he seems preoccupied with his difficulties. When she offers to help finance his college education, he refuses her help.

Abandonment Manek's brother and sister-in-law forbid his friendship with Sati. Consequently, he panics when Sati runs to him for help after escaping Mahesar. However, Manek's family hands her back to her abusers.



Manek's conclusion Referring to the circularity in his stories involving Jamuna, Lalitha, Sati, Tanna, and himself, Manek points out that time is cyclical. He equates the cyclical quality to light chasing darkness, like the seven horses driving the Sun's chariot in the *Upanishads*, an ancient Indian text.



Storyteller Manek leaves As Manek Mulla delivers concluding remarks on the stories and life experiences, Sati suddenly appears in front of Manek and the three friends. Although Manek is shocked to see Sati alive again, he does not hesitate to follow her into the mist. After that, no one hears from Manek again.



The Writer Ultimately, it is revealed that the film's narrator is an older Shyam, one of the three original youngsters who listened to Manek Mulla's stories and watched him disappear into the mist. Shyam is now a writer and the author of the film's plot.



CHARACTER ANALYSIS

Manek Mulla Manek Mulla is the storyteller in the film. The film's narrator describes him as a slightly older man with worldly experience, willing to indulge three curious youngsters. As a studious young man, he had hoped to acquire a collegiate education. However, his older brother and sister-in-law reject his request and force him to work as a station master at the local railway station. After three failed romances, he becomes a deep thinker. He discusses the socioeconomic factors influencing feelings of love with his three friends.

Passive In Manek's own words, he describes himself as someone who became the object of three women's affection. In all his interactions with Jamuna, Lalitha, and Sati, it is abundantly evident that Manek passively enjoys their passionate admiration. Jamuna values his sympathetic ear to her woes at being deserted by Tanna. As an intellectual conversationalist, Manek easily won Lalitha's affection. Manek's untainted youthfulness drew Sati to seek his love and protection. Ultimately, he insists he neither initiated nor encouraged the three young women's romantic feelings.

Coward Manek's relationships with Jamuna, Lalitha, and Sati reveal different shades of his cowardice. When Jamuna needs a friend and a backer, Manek refuses to step up. Although he enjoys Lalitha's company and conversation, he refuses to fight for her when her marriage to Tanna is arranged. Despite being fully aware of Mahesar and Chaman's danger to Sati, Manek refuses to intervene to protect her. When she finally manages to escape and begs him to take her away to a distant place, he panics and informs his elder brother. Wanting to avoid associating with Sati, Manek's older brother informs Mahesar and Chaman about Sati's whereabouts and indirectly causes her disappearance. Therefore, Manek's guilt in Sati's damnation is indisputable. When he finishes the story, all three friends vociferously express their disapproval of Manek's actions.

Jamuna Jamuna is Manek's and Tanna's neighbor. Initially, she pities Tanna because of the mistreatment he suffers from his family. Soon after, her pity grows into romantic love. She is the only daughter in her upper caste family. Although her father is a bank manager, they are not an affluent family. She loves books and reading but cannot attend school because of her family's financial situation. Manek brings her novels so that she can continue reading on her own. Her favorite among them is Chattopadhyay's *Devdas*.

Romantic Jamuna is a lively young woman who is unafraid to express love and affection. She falls in love with Tanna because she wants to protect him from the mistreatment he suffers at his father's house. In the face of her mother's outright rejection of the love match between herself and Tanna, Jamuna loudly declares that she will marry only Tanna. However, when Tanna fails to keep his promise to marry her, she turns her attention to Manek. While sobbing her sad story and receiving Manek's sympathy, she fell in love with Manek. When Manek refuses to reciprocate, Jamuna agrees to marry the man her parents choose. When her husband does not appreciate her spritely enthusiasm for life, she finds a new friend and companion in the young servant, Ramdhan.

Impulsive As Jamuna's romances indicate, she is an impulsive person. After Tanna and Manek refuse to fight for her hand in marriage, she avenges their betrayal by accepting the wealthy older man chosen by her parents. After marriage, she takes every opportunity to flaunt her wealth in front of her former lovers. After Jamuna and Tanna are married to different spouses, Jamuna still cannot forget Tanna. Despite his pleas to let him go and forget about him, she hugs him hard and begs him to give them a second chance.

Lalitha/Lily In Manek's stories, Lalitha symbolizes a young woman from the intellectual and affluent upper class. Her father was a wealthy man and had no sons [or daughters? That is more important in calculating a family's wealth]. Therefore, she brings a sizeable dowry to her marriage. Although Lalitha is not interested in marriage, her widowed mother's anxiety over Lalitha's future results in her marriage to Tanna.

Rational Lalitha deeply values her intellect and her advanced education. She relies on reason to deal with the pain of losing Manek and marrying an unknown man. After weeks of living with her petty and narrow-minded in-laws and witnessing her husband Tanna's incompetence, she makes a rational choice to secure her child's future well-being. Deciding against bringing up her child within an ill-mannered family, she moves back to her natal home and raises the child independently. When she discovers her father-in-law's tricks to fool her naïve mother, she authoritatively insists on his immediate departure under the threat of involving the authorities.

Passionate Manek is the only person privy to Lalitha's passionate side. They are lovers connected by their love for master writers, classics, and high literature. On the eve of Lalitha's marriage to Tanna, they discuss the fate of Devdas and Paro from Chattopadhyay's *Devdas* and the historic king Skanda Gupta to rationalize the end of their love affair and the uncertain future ahead. On the morning of her wedding, Lalitha shares her fears with her best friend and cries miserably at being unable to marry her true love, Manek.

Sati Sati symbolizes the lower-class woman among the three women in Manek Mulla's stories. Chaman Thakur, a soldier who served in quelling the Baluchistan uprising, rescued an orphaned Sati. Although he rescued and raised her, it is evident that he does not sincerely care about her well-being. Consequently, she becomes the target of other men's lustful intentions and often brandishes a knife to dissuade bold suitors. She is a working woman who makes a living by making and selling soaps.

Hard-working Among the three women who fall in love with Manek, Sati is the only woman who makes her living. The film shows Sati working hard at marking soaps while her benefactor, Chaman, smokes a hookah and relaxes. She runs Chaman's household in addition to running her soap business. She is strong enough to carry heavy baskets filled with soap and transport her merchandise to the buyers.

Smart As a businesswoman in a patriarchal society, Sati is street-smart and wary of men's intentions. When the corner shopkeeper, who stocks her soaps, attempts to flirt with her, she threatens him with her wicked-looking knife to dissuade him of evil intentions. Similarly, when Mahesar tempts Chaman Thakur with money and jewels to steal Sati away, she exercises caution to protect herself. She runs away to the only person she trusts in the neighborhood, Manek.

Hopeful Despite the string of misfortunes Sati encounters in her young life, she entertains a hopeful attitude, especially after meeting Manek. Moved by Manek's youthful innocence and passion for education, she reluctantly falls in love with him, hoping to join him in escaping the harsh limitations of their small town. Her hope in Manek powers her effort to escape and choose a different life.

Tanna Dalal Tanna is the only son of Mahesar Dalal and has two sisters. After the death of their birth mother, the siblings have a stepmother, Mausi, from their father's second marriage. Whenever his family members bully Tanna, he cries to Jamuna, his neighbor. Since he is not academically gifted, his father scolds him harshly, and Mausi forces him to get a job and contribute to the family's monthly income.

Timid Tanna is soft-spoken and timid after years of being heckled by his family members. He never fights back when they deride him, further encouraging their abuse. Although Tanna loves and hopes to marry Jamuna, he is unable to fight for his love. When Jamuna's parents make outrageous marriage demands, he is tongue-tied and incapable of asserting his ability to provide well for Jamuna. Therefore, he loses Jamuna. Similarly, when Tanna's parents decide to stop his education and send him to work, his timidity stops him from contradicting them and expressing his wishes.

Mahesar Dalal Mahesar Dalal is Tanna's father and Mausi's husband. His character resembles a schoolyard bully who would go after anyone smaller and weaker than himself. He deflects attention from his own inadequacies by constantly bullying his son, Tanna.

Lusty Mahesar treats all women as sexual objects, evident in his interactions with his second wife, Mausi and other women in the village, such as Sati. When they do not reciprocate his lustful attention, he gets angry and forces himself on them. After his first meeting with Sati, he attempts to make her his mistress. When she rejects his money and sweet words, he schemes with Chaman Thakur to force Sati. Mahesar demonstrates a similar tendency when he meets Lalitha's mother to arrange his son's marriage to Lalitha. He attempts to coerce Lalitha's mother by flirting with her.

Insular Mahesar is a profoundly insecure man who asserts his superiority through bullying and flattery. The patriarchal structure of society aids his cause. He uses flattery when wooing his wife and other women who catch his fancy. However, when his second wife dares to question his decisions, he uses his patriarchal power to oppress her dissenting voice and divorce her. Similarly, he is wary of his future daughter-in-law Lalitha's high academic achievements. Therefore, he demands that she stop her education immediately after marriage.

Chaman Thakur Chaman Thakur is a retired soldier who lives a purposeless life of relaxation and indulgence. He rescued Sati when he served in Baluchistan. He often reminds her that she was a starving orphan waiting to be devoured by birds of prey until his rescue. His speech is deliberately populated [use another word] with quaint phrases such as "damn fool," alluding to his years of active duty under British and anglophile Indian officers.

Complaisant Dulled by years of indulgent and lazy living, Chaman blatantly opposes exerting himself for anyone but himself. Although he bravely rescued an orphaned Sati from a war zone, he refuses to do the same when Mahesar schemes to harm Sati. Instead, he succumbs to Mahesar's money and jewels and complacently assists him in acquiring Sati as a mistress.

THEMES

Class Socioeconomic class is a predominant theme throughout the film. Manek explains that class status plays a distinct role in determining who falls in love with whom and who gets married to whom. Accordingly, he uses his romance with women from three different social classes to prove the point. Among the three, Lalitha belongs to the intellectual upper class, Jamuna belongs to the middle class, and Sati belongs to the lower class. Although Jamuna's family belongs to an upper caste, they struggle to find a suitable match because of the family's lower socioeconomic class status. Jamuna's mother worries that they cannot prepare a sizeable dowry for Jamuna, leading to poorer marriage proposals. Consequently, they readily agree to marry Jamuna to Aunt Roma's nephew despite his age because of his family's wealth.

Similarly, when Manek's brother and sister-in-law discover his relationship with Sati, they disapprove of it, calling her "low class" and "dirty." They are concerned about Manek soiling their family's reputation. Likewise, Lalitha expresses a distaste for her husband and in-laws because of the class difference between the two families. Knowing they could never match Manek's intellectual refinement, she decides to separate from them and live alone. After hearing the stories, Manek's friends line up the symbols: Jamuna as the masses, Jamuna's husband as the landed gentry, Ramdhan as the working class, Lalitha as the intellectual upper class, Manek as the middle class, and Sati as the lower class.

Caste In South Asia, caste also plays a decisive role in marital arrangements. Although Jamuna's, Tanna's, and Manek's families share the same compound in the neighborhood, they are all sharply aware of their caste and subcaste differences, which determine interactions between the families. Jamuna's mother takes pride in belonging to a higher subcaste than Tanna's family. She frequently says that she would rather die than allow her daughter, Jamuna, to be married into a lower subcaste family. Although most families pursue marital matches into upper caste families, Tanna's family abhor Jamuna's family because they look down on others. When Jamuna's parents condescendingly accept Tanna as a groom, they make outrageous demands to humiliate Tanna and his family based on their caste differences.

Love Although marriage is a recurring event in this film, marriage and love are defined in mutually exclusive terms. Love leads to matches that are disavowed and forbidden by the lovers' families.

The film introduces many love matches, such as Jamuna and Tanna, Jamuna and Manek, Jamuna and Ramdhan, Lalitha and Manek, and Sati and Manek. In such matches, the young people demonstrate their ability to leave behind the class and caste prejudices their parents consider sacrosanct. Unfortunately, the families are backed by community and social influences. Therefore, they forbid love matches, causing disappointment in young people.

Marriage Marriage is a recurring theme in this film because many characters are young people on the brink of adulthood. However, the film highlights the joining of two families and the accompanying cultural, social, and economic transactions instead of love between the bride and the groom. Jamuna's and Tanna's marriages demonstrate this style of marriage. When Roma learns of Jamuna's situation, she introduces her relative, a wealthy widowed landowner. She makes sure to stress that he belongs to the same caste as Jamuna's family and is a man of means. His wealth cancels out the significant age difference between Jamuna and her groom. Likewise, the shopkeeper who introduces Lalitha's family to Tanna's father, Mahesar, stresses the family's wealth and large property. Although Lalitha is a highly educated and academically gifted young woman, she is forced to settle for Tanna, who has not passed his high school qualifying exams, because of gender bias in society.

Family obligations The film highlights the importance of families and familial obligations in Indian social life. The importance of the collective over the individual pressurizes individuals to sacrifice personal likes and comforts for the good of the family and community. In the film, the youngsters' family obligations force them to set family obligations over vows to lovers.

Tragedy Since familial obligations, social norms, and arranged marriages effectively derail young people's fervent wishes and dreams, the film contains many tragic and bewildering notes [notes?]. Whenever the youngsters' love matches in Manek's stories are forbidden, the listeners express sorrow and empathy. The tragic end to love matches causes the listeners to experience vivid nightmares. They cope with the tragedies by ideating multiverse realities where love has a winning chance of leading to happy endings.

Resilience Although the youngsters in Manek's stories suffer spiritual wounds, they display remarkable levels of resilience. Jamuna's passion for life never dissipates in the face of rejection. Although she loses Tanna, she still opens her heart to other opportunities for love. She gains Manek's and Ramdhan's friendships. However, she always holds a candle for her first love, Tanna. When they meet again years later, they are both unattached. She expresses a desire to rekindle the love they were denied in their youth. The storyteller, Manek, expresses a similar resilience. Although he has loved and lost three lovers, he does not succumb to the tragedy of lost chances. Instead, he feels grateful for the heartwarming experiences and regales his friends with the stories. He has gained perspective over the years and regrets his inaction in not aiding Sati. In karmic justice, the film's closing scene brings Sati to Manek. This time, he does not hesitate and immediately follows her into the mist.