

Thirst and Mourning

by Urbain Bizot



— In memoriam Guru Dutt —

Now that in its whole, cinema has so obviously ceased to be an art, and has taken its place, with a sort of silly pride, among various kinds of industry, time has come to evoke a masterpiece of rare beauty, and to pay a well deserved homage to one of its most important names, to somebody who remained unknown or almost unknown by the mass audience, if not, quite often, by the “specialised” clubs of those who call themselves cinema-lovers.

Indian filmmaker Guru Dutt Shiv Shankar Padukone (born on July 9th 1925 at Bangalore, committed suicide on October 9th at Bombay), was not in the usual sense a filmmaker, but an immense poet, expressing himself through the camera. One may assume that this is truly the only way to be a “film-maker”, but then, there have been very few of them. Through the few films he was free to produce according to his own taste, Guru Dutt deserves without hesitation to be compared to such great filmmakers as Charles Chaplin or Orson Welles; his masterpiece would have put André Breton in rapture as much as did Henry Hathaway’s *Peter Ibbetson*. In India, i. e. in the midst of what was and still is the worst film production in the world (from which the western audience just homoeopathically extracted Satyajit Ray as a moviemaker

acting at his best for the western audience), Guru Dutt was an exception, trying to speak to the Indian audience with respect to its taste, while also trying to load the traditional stylistic forms with a radical content, profound and unexpected, without compromising with mere Entertainment.

His works' list is quite short: he shot some negligible films, much too adapted to his time's taste, on behalf of the Navket Productions company of Dev Anand, *Baazi* (The Gamble) in 1951, *Jaal* (The Net) in 1952, *Baaz* (The Falcon) in 1953, then, on behalf of his own production company, Guru Dutt Productions, later on becoming the Guru Dutt Films Private Limited, he already used a more personal tone in 1954 with *Aar Paar* (This side or the other), then with *Mr and Mrs 55* in 1955. Thanks to the financial success of this comedy and to thus earned independence, he achieved in 1958 his masterpiece, totally alien to what came before : *Pyasa* (Thirsting), the script having been written as early as in 1948, and being constantly improved by Dutt since then. The next film, in 1959, was *Kaagaz ke phool* (Fake flowers), a sincere and much appropriate critic of cinema's deceiving and dead bringing world, and, therefore, a commercial flop. Due to this, Guru Dutt ceased any activity in his own name ; in 1962 he had *Sahib bibi aur ghulam* (The master, the mistress and the slave) directed by his talented dialogue-writer Abrar Alvi, but was nevertheless participating himself to the shooting, and not only as an actor. This was a second flop, and also his last: Dutt became even more alcohol-addicted than before, played some second roles in various films, and committed suicide in the middle of a shooting.

Pyasa appears as the story of a pariah. The main theme is linked to modern time's constantly strengthening paradox that refined and sincere culture (for example the culture of Vijay, the poet played by Guru Dutt with utmost tact and distinction) is of no help for gaining a place in society, but rather forms a major handicap for achieving it. Like in all Third World countries, India was torn apart between an old traditional culture, dominated by religious morality (and, among others, by the cult of the dead), and modern obsession for business, greedy and cynical. A civilised and sensitive individual has no place in a world that is no longer anything else than a boxing ring for such adversaries, whose party he can by no means consider as his own. Too modern and too clear-sighted to adopt the religious consolation's servile rites, Dutt was at the same time too conscious of a classical humanism to get unreluctantly corrupted by commerce's needs : he saw on the contrary that commerce does not spare anything in life, and spreads itself like this very prostitution that Dutt shows as the main force dominating the world (scenes he devotes to this question are the realistic portrait of what now the Third World's daily life has become ; besides, if it is true that the most miserable most deserve that the world should be changed for their sake, Guru Dutt is right giving the most respectable and clear-sighted role to Gulabo the prostitute, played by the very beautiful and moving actress Waheeda Rehman). Crushed between the teeth of this impossible alternative (religious tradition versus

mercantile corruption), Vijay will have another danger to escape from, more attractive than all others: the individual way out – literary glory, spectacular passion for the exceptional dropout, the “accursed poet”. Thus, he will reach the end of the film with totally empty hands, and dive into a shapeless emptiness.

The scenario evolves in more precise terms as follows (I am using the description of P. Parrain, only occasionally modified by footnote):

A young poet without money has his works rejected by a slightly foolish publisher, and is also thrown out of his home by his greedy brothers. He strays along the streets, homeless, and, in the night, suddenly listens to a song he wrote himself before loosing its text : a few steps away from him, a woman sings to catch his attention, a prostitute, leading him softly to her door. While he tries to speak about his lost song, she refuses to listen and pushes him away when hearing he's short of money. A paper fallen from the young man's pocket shows her that he is indeed the author of the song she was singing just before, and now she tries desperately to find him again. Meanwhile, Vijay (the young poet) happens to meet a former classmate who suggests going to the reunion of past classmates. There, Vijay meets Meena, the girl he had fallen in love with as a teen¹. As he sings one of his poems the audience has been asking for, melody and text overwhelm the girl's heart, bringing old memories into life, and recreating a bond that had vanished. In the meantime, she had married a publisher, who now proposes Vijay to come to his office; but as the poems do not please him, and moved by pity, he offers Vijay a position as a servant in his household². This lasts until a qawali³ occurs, and until it is the servant who starts singing a song of his own in front of a charmed audience.

But admiration is not what he is looking for. The tear on Meena's cheek did not escape his view, and when his song ends, Meena's chair is empty, rocking all alone. Vijay looks for her and asks her for an explanation. He reproaches treachery, but she answers necessity: she had to survive, and, unlike him, she was not able to sacrifice her material desires, waiting for Vijay to become well known and rich. Her husband listens to the conversation. Vijay has to leave. Unable to reach his ideal, the young poet drinks heavily, and is rescued by a girl who happens to be the prostitute's friend. The prostitute is still searching for him, having fallen in love with

¹ Parrain is wrong : Vijay meets Meena, his former love, in front of publisher Gosh's building, where Vijay goes to offer his poems to the man, Gosh, who has become Meena's husband.

² Parrain is wrong: it is quite obvious that Gosh hires Vijay as a servant in order to test his wife, thus confronted with her lover.

³ Poetical competition, poems being sung in public. In India, like in all the ancient world, poems were always sung.

him⁴. When dawn breaks, Vijay escapes from the prostitute's home and, trying to commit suicide, causes the death of a poor bloke⁵ to whom he gave his last property: his coat. By mistake, the media announces Vijay's death. The book publisher agrees to publish the manuscript, called *Shadows*, as long as the prostitute pays for it, while Vijay is locked up in an asylum. There, everybody refuses to recognise him as the new literary celebrity he became overnight, including his brothers and the publisher. One day, he manages to escape from the asylum, and comes to a giant meeting in his own honour. He starts singing one of his poems and is acclaimed by the audience, but he pretends not to be the Vijay all are looking for, causing the crowd's anger⁶. Once again, he has to escape, leaving mass admiration and commerce vultures behind him, running away for a country where he probably will again be misunderstood, or maybe loved for himself. Meena refuses to join him for this quest: to her, this is meaningless. Only the prostitute listens to his call, and both disappear in the void landscape, as a stormy wind takes away in the same swirl mankind and papers.

First of all, it is important to refuse the traditional praise of this film, saying that it is a great "romantic" masterpiece. People speak of "romanticism" only to speak of reactions that are foreign to their own behaviour. It is sufficient that someone refuses compromise or corruption to be considered as a "romantic". This common place says more about the people using it than it does about whom they are speaking of, and it reduces any authentic expression of life to an artistic fashion among others, occurred at the beginning of the XIXth Century. Saying that a work is "romantic" is merely reducing it to something irrational, which we tolerate only because we secretly despise it, refusing that it might have any real content, or any effective impact. Although *Pyaasa* possesses a dreamlike beauty, the story can by no means be reduced to a simple dream.

The film's first content appears in my opinion to be this: Vijay, a young poet educated in a bourgeois manner, is hardly thoughtful of people's reactions around him. Nothing surprising, therefore, that he doesn't understand others, and is fooled by a

⁴ Again, Parrain is wrong: drunk, Vijay meets the prostitute, Gulabo, who in turn recognizes him immediately, and who leads him to her home with a gentleness and with a consideration that an audience sensitive to the beauty of gestures will never forget.

⁵ Now, Mr Parrain clearly talks blunder: unlike what Parrain writes, Vijay tries to rescue the beggar from an imminent death, despite the danger there is for himself, and the beggar, thankful for this attempt, throws Vijay back, away from the train, to save the poet's life. This reciprocal care explains mainly that after it, Vijay loses the memory of his identity.

⁶ Quite a nutshell: Vijay's enemies tell him in public that he is not Vijay. Disgusted by such dishonesty, Vijay renounces to his identity, because he does not wish an identity subject to recognition by such scoundrels.

stuck-up go-getter like Meena. Hermetically concentrated on his “œuvre”, he behaves like the traditional egotist called “artist”, fully absorbed in narcissistic contemplation of his own production. Only thanks to his social breakdown and to his becoming a down-and-out, Vijay will learn the essential: poetry is not so much an “œuvre” than a mean of communication. Also that his poems do not have to be recognised by a literary audience, something that does not really matter, but that they have to be active in people’s life. Examples, though, are abundant: Gulabo, is charming her clients with Vijay’s poems; Abdul Sattar, the masseur, is entertaining likewise his customers, and, later on, distracts the attention of the asylum’s guards to free Vijay; Gosh uses the poems to pretend, publicly and falsely, to have some humanity; Vijay’s singing his poem in front of his audience allows him to turn the situation around and make people angry with his supposed official “friends”; etc. All this (real use of art, effective social impact of art) occurs more or less without Vijay’s being conscious of it – until he understands that Gulabo loves him because initially she had loved and understood his poems. Then, his mental yoke bursts, and the work’s fetishism is broken: separate art has to be refused, because of the necessity of overcoming an art that would stay in the margin of a missing life, and would comply with this state of things. Life itself has to become art. At the same time arises the question of the power of speech, and of the reality of thoughts. Instead of being satisfied with the standard opinions that, for some, speech is real, and, for others, speech is unreal, Guru Dutt develops a subtle dialectic showing that words take their impact only in certain, quite determined conditions. Some day, Vijay’s poems are a big commercial success, but only at the cost of being misunderstood, and merely consumed by “literary amateurs”. The sole person able to understand them has nothing to do with a literary status: Gulabo had known the poems’ despair in her own flesh, and the poems came to her as the conscience comes to reality. Literature has to be destroyed in order to free what’s inside. The separate status of art is nothing but a malediction; words mean something only amidst struggle for life. Gulabo didn’t love any man because love was her commerce. She just loved these words she found by chance, she, the illiterate, but also the only “cultivated”. In these words she had found the feeling for life that life did not offer her, so how could she abstain from loving Vijay instantly, the man who took these words out of his own heart? As long as imprisoned by official means of distribution, words are sentenced to radical powerlessness, but they transform into an extraordinary power when they play in direct communication between two living beings.

The second theme revealing itself in the film is systematic contest against a society based on money. As wrote Henri Micciollo, “his hatred for the rich and his passionate love for the humble” are constant and essential features of Guru Dutt. There is hardly any element of Guru Dutt’s style and taste that do not express his plebeian sensitiveness (or, even more than plebeian, on the fringe, outcast). His

disgust for money could belong to a character of Prévert, and Dutt never ceases to express his refusal of this kind of jail (poor, or golden, no matter). No sphere escapes the picture of corruption: neither family feelings, nor sexual attraction, nor intellectual respect. Vijay staggers from his greedy brothers, his greedy publisher, his corrupted beloved to a city disrupted by prostitution, from one misery to another, and the film looks like a never ending series of plunges made by somebody more and more drunk, this of course being in line with the movie's title and also with Guru Dutt's real life. Refusal of money and of society's breakdown because of money, we hardly can emphasize it enough, is never compensated, with Guru Dutt, by some kind of nostalgia for an ancient order, or, even less, by any sympathy for religion. No doubt that this man was especially moving because of his simultaneous and indissociable accusations against the ancient social order and the new one : a radicalism for which he paid a tremendous price.

The part played by an artist in contemporary society is characterised – and this will be the third theme – as oscillating between a domesticated monkey performing in literary salons, and a simple servant, like Vijay hired by Gosh. In the artist's status, nothing is acceptable, and glory most surely least of all. One has tried hard to forget the considerable reluctance with which this new status was received in the 19th and at the beginning of the 20th Century : nowadays, no debate on this matter is tolerated any longer, because the artist modelled his behaviour on the part of a public entertainer rewarded by a lucrative industry, and wishes by no means that any light might be thrown on the slavish reality thanks to which he earns his amazing privileges. This debate, that some people consider as obsolete as far as they do not wish to take it out of the dustbin where they concealed it, obviously runs right through Guru Dutt's film : therefore, some feel this is supposedly a fairly outdated film-maker. But, at the same time he shows this altogether privileged and slavish status of the artist, Guru Dutt creates an increasing distance of Vijay to this role of his, despite the fact that formerly he was claiming it. The evolution of this complex is quite right and consistent. As long as he was an artist, Vijay was altogether victim and onlooker of this misery: his passive role as a spectator made a victim out of him. On two occasions he realizes what's up with it: at the time of the public meeting in his honour, while he is believed to be dead, he reappears and tries to take the crowd along with him towards revolt and violent destruction of all that opposes to the will for life (tradition, money, greed, urban poverty) ; and, at the end of the film, when Vijay leaves this country sentenced to founder, and could not find any other ally than lovely Gulabo. Then, he has ceased to be an artist, because he has become a man.

Fourth theme, and not the least important: quite often, Vijay denounces the kind feelings people are supposed to have for the dead, but not for the living. Vijay, no doubt, is in a proper position to be fed up with this absurd attitude, for as long as he was alive, nobody took any interest in him, whereas, since he is supposed to be dead,

his friends and fans are countless. At first sight, this looks like a critic of some religious tradition in India, and of course, this is true. But it would be short-sighted to stick to this sole explanation. Guru Dutt does not express himself in the India of the Kushâna-Gupta era, but in a country already largely dominated by modern capitalist economy, and where the spectacle made massively his appearance – Bombay’s movie industry is quite a good example for it. So we have to understand the cult of the dead exactly as it exists in the Western world: not as religious fact (at least in the traditional sense of religion), but as the logical result of a preference for fiction. What is the basic form of an unreal person? A dead. In their lifetime, celebrities are already quite unreal, but when they die, their unreality leaps forward. How many groupies prostrate with grief on Jim Morrison’s tomb, burst out crying in Elvis Presley’s bedroom, or, climbing up the molehill of Solutr , holding some bottle of beer in their hand, to honour the memory of a dead President whom his butler announced as “ socialist ” ? The carrion cult, though now supposedly profane, takes considerable proportions. Processions are endless. TV programs could not survive without commemorations. For sure, Guru Dutt was particularly right in giving this question a central position. Light is shed on tums only, while the living sink into oblivion.

Fifth theme, perhaps the most concealed, but not the least important : the subject’s identity. The poet Vijay’s advance is an evolution like in the German *Bildungsroman*, the story of a man in search of himself. Vijay walks out of this story deeply changed, but not as American scenarios would see it (that is by discovering himself as he always was, as if he had had a “ nature ” just ready to be discovered, an idiosyncratic private nature like preferring Pepsi to Coca or Pall Mall to Peter Stuyvesant). No, Vijay does not “ discover ” himself, he makes himself. The best evidence for this is that he tries to avoid such a necessity until the end, being stuck with regrettable stubbornness to some artistic recognition. His choice is precisely to stay faithful to his initial shape as a poet, thus renouncing to the living feeling that he is dwelling in, or to renounce to this status, in order to save his feelings. Finally, that’s what he does, but only when pushed to the breaking point, when missing any other alternative. But it’s also greatly to his credit, let’s not forget it, that he stuck to his line without any compromise, until, for such reasons, his position became irreconcilable. Guru Dutt offers permanent variations on the identity’s quest: Vijay’s brothers deny his identity; he renounces to recognition by his mother so that she would not take charge of him ; awakening from coma at the lunatics’ asylum, he does not remember his identity ; in front of the audience acclaiming him, he pretends not to be himself ; the beggar dies with Vijay’s identity in his pocket ; and, last but not least, the whole story started because Vijay wanted to be recognized for himself. All kinds of identity vanish, such as social, family, professional identity, there only remains the kind of identity to which the path of life leads on. But this ultimate kind of identity is closely linked with a sixth theme: Death.

Stirb, und werde / Die and become! This idea, as old as ancient initiatory practice, perfectly summarizes the film's scansion, and is the sixth theme. But such an injunction, of religious origin, has been profoundly transformed. The tyranny of interest and the expropriation of meaning and sense caused everywhere by this tyranny, force us "to die, in order to live", insofar as a direct, immediate access to life is denied. But if it is true that life is blocked, barred by a previous death of subjectivity, which Freud rather unduly called "principle of reality", by an initiation to oneself's corpse, disalienation has no other way to take than the one alienation took itself, and the subject, if wanting to arise, has to die as self-image, as it is reflected by the ruling system of illusion. Conversely, if one dies, insofar, once or twice per life just to be born again and to really become oneself, it is clear that there is no life whatsoever after physical death. Guru Dutt achieved an astonishing combination of these two dimensions of life, to some extent a synthesis of ancient mystical sensitivity and atheistic, radical lucidity. Of course, things being as they are, such lucidity leads to a despair of irremediable darkness. Vijay has to pass through the death corridor, and this leads to nothing, if not to the intuition of a life that does not yet exist. In front of this disarmed intuition without return, there is nothing but global mediocrity, a death taking itself for life, numskulls' limbo. Some could be tempted to put this darkness on the account of "Indian fatalism", but who could be satisfied with such an "explanation", while situations of the same kind multiply and spread everywhere, most of today's humanity coming to life without a tiny hope to live, some day, somewhere? Who, amidst contemporary globalizing misery, would dare to speak of choice? The simple fact to be born in one or other of the numerous regions despised and rejected by the corporate market and division of labour secures to each newcomer (and there are plenty of newcomers in such areas!) the existence of a worm; or of a mayfly; or of a torch burning with AIDS; or of a sperm-bin, exhausted at the age of 14; or of an ambulant corpse, whose photo is taken just before dying by representatives of a "humanitarian" organisation. Vijay's initial preoccupation (like all artists: to "express" oneself, to be heard) has faded away, leaving its place to the fact that it is completely pathetic in a world where all men or nearly are deprived of it. Concerning the will to express himself, Vijay had to gain knowledge of its real status: for most, what seeks for expression is hunger, thirst, and the weariness of having to sell oneself. After all, only this thirst remains. Vijay's story is one of a thirsting man, learning about the tremendous size of all preconditions to his own thirst: the thirst for life includes the need to survive, and the dissatisfaction of the second forbids to speak of the first, because life as it is produces and reproduces the lack of any reasonable solution for survival. Material poverty reduces man to the level of animals, deprives him not only of the humanity he is thirsting for, but of the thirst itself.

Now, how could we avoid speaking of Vijay's psychological state, which Guru Dutt achieved to transform with technical perfection into the film's atmosphere? A pure

question of cinematographic style? Why not, but in the sense that this style is included in the film's very meaning. Vijay is a poet, by two kinds of sensitiveness: he is often led to introspection, and the film reveals all that moves him. But all that moves other people is also moving Vijay as if it were himself. As far as this sensitivity is concerned, the strongest scene is probably Vijay's distress when facing street prostitution. At no moment Vijay rejects prostitution from the viewpoint of morality, rather Vijay looks at the prostitutes as if he were belonging to them – something made easier by the fact that being heavily drunk erases the borders of his ego. And we watch a strange face-to-face between the reality of prostitution and its separate conscience (Vijay). Cinema has few examples of this kind⁷. Guru Dutt is able to create something like poetry of critical conscience, presence of critical conscience as poetry. This state of mind (something like uninterrupted, and therefore painful open-mindedness) gives the film its global tonality (at the beginning, the poet watches how a bee is smashed by a foot; and in the end, he understands how humanity in its entirety is smashed). Therefore, too, the film will keep wavering between reality and dream, dream being of course a refuge to escape real misery, but dream also imposing itself to reality as the truest way of living (“in this film, everything happens as in an enchanted castle; encounters, episodes, everything floats in semi-unconscience. At any moment, reality might slip into the dream” writes P. Parrain). Vijay looks at reality without turning off the inner machine. Insofar, *Pyaasa* is strictly speaking a great surrealist film. And what Parrain calls a semi-unconscience is rather a higher degree of conscience. *Pyaasa* is a fully integrated stylistic composition, far more even than what Henri Micciollo said about it⁸. There is a complete fusion, made consistent through style, between Vijay's point of view, the reality he is watching, and the film-audience's perspective. Quite symptomatic are the pictures where the camera watches Vijay from behind while Vijay himself watches something (very similar to the technique often used by the great painter Caspar David Friedrich, for whom mourning was also a predominant feeling). Vijay's sadness characterizes a powerless spectator: but this is not a kind of more or less pathological personal feature of Dutt, it is rather the *sine qua non* condition for having the film-audience itself confronted with the misery watched by Vijay, without softening, soothing or transforming its own feelings through an active reaction of the hero, which of course would be fictitious. Vijay is not an anti-hero in the stupid sense of a ridiculous hero,

⁷ At this moment, the picture becomes troubled, like wet: seen through Vijay's eyes, filled with tears. There is no longer any distance between Vijay and the film-audience.

⁸ “*These films give abundant evidence for the visual sense of Guru Dutt, who, in a way much original for Indian cinema at that time, conceived film direction not as the recording of a meaning given by dialogues, but as the means to create a global sense of which dialogues are only a part*” (translated).

but in the sense of someone who does not master the catastrophe's progress, not more than we do in the theatre or at home.

The unity of style does not consist only in the visual part. The least one could say is that Guru Dutt did not neglect dialogues, all of them being brilliant (dialogues written by Abrar Alvi, and lyrics by Sahir Ludhviani), nor the music, of an bewitching sweetness (S. D. Burman). Songs, traditionally imposed to the Hindi scenarios to "entertain" and "relax" the audience, are totally integrated into the story, and, as Henri Micciollo remarked, generally represent the expressive summit, the acme, the superior stage made necessary by the previous pictures, rather like the sound of human voice, singers and choirs, in Beethoven's Ninth Symphony or in Mahler's Second. The extreme fluidity between spoken and sung parts is of great mastery, and can be compared to some extent with the same ease we find in Mozart's operas, when arias and recitatives follow on from each other. Thus, *Pyaasa's* songs engrave themselves indestructibly in our memory, like the entrancing reminders of the film's unique, peerless atmosphere, but, even so, they achieve to merge with the deepest real-life of each of us.

Guru Dutt's view on the world is like an endless mourning, mourning of the living, not of the dead. A desperate sadness that reminds us of Omar Kháyyám, or of Li tai pe, or, even much more, of Schubert's *Winterreise*. The conscience that is guiding Vijay tells him that nothing seems possible, but that the conscience of what could be possible remains strong and alive, and is our only respectable guide. Guru Dutt's film is therefore tinged with a twofold light: the thirst for living and the knowledge of failure are tightly mingled, but not as strangers for one another: rather as indissociable parts. The film reaches a unique quality of tone: for Guru Dutt, the most important in a world where nothing succeeds is to remain witness of what could be. This is the least one could do, but also what costs the highest price: the poor's luxury, the humble's pride. Guru Dutt's poetry confronts itself with the lowest depths of life in a way that places his poetry on the highest level of critical intelligence.

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(Translation by Samuel Fever)

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