University of Arizona Library
Interlibrary Loan
1510 E. University Blvd
Tucson, AZ 85721
(520) 621-6438 / (520) 621-4619 (fax)
OCLC: AZU
U of A Ariel: 150.135.45.156
askill@u.library.arizona.edu

ILL #: 106703284

Reference #:

Journal Title: Guru Dutt; a life in cinema /
Article Author: Nasreen Munni Kabir
Article Title: “Pyaasa”

Volume: 
Issue: 
Month/Year: 1997
Pages: 75-88 (scan notes and title/copyright pages for chapter requests)

Email Address:

7/15/05

Shipping Address:
Northern Arizona University
RECP- SHIP IN GREEN COURIER BAG
RECP- RETURN IN GREEN COURIER BAG

Fax: 928-523-6860
Notice: This material may be protected by Copyright Law (Title 17 U.S.C.).

Paged by (Initials)

Reason Not Filled (check one):
☐ NOS ☐ NFAC (GIVE REASON)
☐ LACK VOLUME/ISSUE
☐ PAGES MISSING FROM VOLUME

ARIEL INFORMATION:
Ariel Address:

Enter Ariel Address Manually if unable to scan.
If Ariel address blank, send via email.
Guru Dutt never forgot to acknowledge the people whom he admired, and so *Pyaasa* is dedicated to 'the fond memory of Shri Gyan Mukherjee', with whom he had felt a great affinity. The original story 'Kashmakash' (Conflict) written sometime in 1947/48 was revised with Abrar Alvi's help and given its new title, *Pyaasa* (The Thirsting one). The central character, Vijay, was originally conceived as a painter but in the final script he is a poet. *Pyaasa* was released on February 22, 1957 at the Minerva cinema in Bombay. The premiere was attended by many leading film personalities, some of whom mistakenly believed that the film would not do well because of its serious and sombre mood.

*Pyaasa* begins with a narrative prelude, a scene showing a young man lying on the grass in a city park observing the splendour of nature. The young man is a poet and composes a verse which we hear in voice-over:

*Ye hanste hue phool, ye meheka hua gulshan*  
*Ye rang men aur noor men doobi hui raahen*  
*Ye phoolon ka ras pi ke machalte hue bhanware*

(These smiling flowers, this fragrant garden  
These paths bathed in light, bathed in colour  
The wayward bees drunk with the nectar of the flowers)

The next lines follow the image of a man's foot crushing the bee:

*Main doon bhi to kya doon tumhen ai shaukh nazaaron*  
*Le de ke mere paas kuchh ansoon hain kuchh aahein*

(What do I have to give you? O glorious nature!  
All I have to offer is a few tears, a few sighs)
Vijay's poems are rejected by an established Urdu publisher, who advises him to compose verse on love and not on human suffering. His two brothers (played by Mehmood and Mayadas) sell his poems as waste-paper and happily throw their brother out of the house despite the tearful protests of their mother (Leela Misra). Vijay tries to retrieve his file of poems but is told that a woman has bought it. One night, as the homeless Vijay rests on a park bench, he hears a young woman recite his verse. The prostitute, Gulab (Waheeda Rehman), assumes that he is a client and lures him back to her house. When Gulab discovers that Vijay has no money and is only after his file of poems, she throws him out. As Vijay leaves, a piece of paper falls from his pocket. Gulab matches the hand-written page to the poems that she has bought. She tells her friend Juhi (Kum Kum) that he is the poet whose verse she has found.

One day, as Vijay wanders the streets of Calcutta, he sees a young prosperous looking woman, Meena (Mala Sinha). Seeing her evokes memories of when they were at college together and in love. Another old college friend, Pushpalata (Tun Tun) happens to see Vijay in a park and insists that he attend the college annual reunion. At the reunion, when Vijay sees Meena again, he recites a poem telling of sorrow and resignation. Meena's husband, the publisher Mr Ghosh (Rehman), is present at the gathering. His curiosity is aroused and he asks Vijay to visit him. Vijay discovers that Mr Ghosh is not after all interested in publishing his poems, but accepts the menial job he offers. Vijay is also asked to help serve drinks at a party to be held at Ghosh's residence in honour of the city's leading poets. At the party, Vijay discovers that Meena is Mr Ghosh's wife. A few days later, Meena tries to explain to Vijay why she left him, and admits that she married for security. Mr Ghosh overhears their conversation and angrily dismisses Vijay. Vijay learns from his uncaring brothers that their mother has died. Overwhelmed by sorrow, Vijay takes to drink. Gulab tries to console him but he is suicidal. One night, he heads towards the railway tracks to kill himself. Vijay sees a poor beggar shivering with cold, and gives him his jacket. The beggar follows him and gets caught in the tracks. As the train nears, Vijay tries to save the beggar but it is too late. Vijay's suicide note is found on the beggar's mutilated body, and all assume that Vijay has committed suicide. Grief-stricken, Gulab goes to Mr Ghosh and offers him all her worldly possessions to pay for the publication of Vijay's poetry. The book of poems, Parchhaiyan (Shadows), is printed and becomes an instant success.
In the meantime, Vijay is in hospital suffering from shock. When he sees the book of poems, he tells the doctors that he is the book’s author. The doctors do not believe him, they assume that he has lost his mind, and lock him into a mental asylum. Mr Ghosh and his friend Shyam (Shyam Kapoor) are called, and they deny Vijay’s identity. One day, the head masseur, Abdul Sattar (Johnny Walker), happens to pass by the asylum, and helps his friend Vijay to escape.

The first death anniversary of the poet is commemorated at a grand hall in full attendance. Mr Ghosh, and the others present, shower praise on the dead poet, declaring that if he were alive today, he would be lauded and acclaimed. Vijay sings a moving song decrying the hypocrisy of the world. A riot breaks out in the auditorium and Gulab is injured. Mr Ghosh tries his best to bribe Vijay’s brothers and Shyam to have Vijay committed once again. But they refuse, having struck a better deal with the Urdu publisher. Another grand event is organized to celebrate the return of the dead poet. Disgusted by the hypocrisy of his friends and family, Vijay announces that he is not the poet they have come to acclaim. Another riot breaks out, and Abdul Sattar manages to save Vijay again. Meena tries to persuade him to grab the wealth and celebrity on offer, but Vijay refuses. He asks Gulab to go away with him to a place from where he shall not need to go any further.

The first of Guru Dutt’s masterpieces, Pyaasa is a romantic melodrama set in Calcutta that tells of the thirst for love, the thirst for recognition, and the thirst for spiritual fulfilment. Vijay is an outsider trying to make a place for himself in the society in which he lives. His only possessions are the old pair of trousers he wears and a worn jacket that serves all occasions and has seen better days. He sleeps at nights on park benches and for a much needed meal even offers his services as a coolie. The man who gives him a rupee coin for lifting his parcels comments, ‘What have we come to? Now the educated work as coolies.’ The irony of this situation is that the rich and portly Babu — a brief cameo appearance by the brilliant Bengali actor Tulsi Chakravorty — has given Vijay a counterfeit coin. Without a home and without a job, despite his social background Vijay shares the predicament of the many thousands who live on the pavements of Calcutta. When he has the chance to claim the place of honour that his poetry has finally awarded him, he renounces the world. Because Vijay has high morals in a world where immorality reigns, he will always remain an outsider. And the prostitute Gulab, who is another kind of outsider, is the only one who can share his life. Unlike the example of many Hindi films in which
the hero is a transparent character, Vijay has many facets to his personality that are gradually revealed. His past, seen in a series of flashbacks, evokes a time when he was filled with youthful dreams of love. He cannot nourish these dreams and reality shatters them.

It now seems difficult to believe that Pyaasa went through many changes during its making. After having shot and edited three or four reels of the film, Guru Dutt decided that it was not to his satisfaction. He scrapped the edited material and started all over again.

During the making of Pyaasa, Guru Dutt’s younger brother Devi Dutt was trained under sound recordist Raman before being sent to Calcutta to learn about film distribution at the Rank Organisation. Devi worked briefly in Guru Dutt’s own film distribution concern in Calcutta before returning to Bombay to join the production arm of Guru Dutt Films. In the 1960s, Devi Dutt made documentaries and advertising films before producing highly successful features such as Aakrosh and Masoom. Devi Dutt, who began his career as his brother’s assistant, remembers some of the changes Guru Dutt made in Pyaasa:

The end of Pyaasa was changed. In the original version, the film ends at the scene [high-angle crane shot with papers flying about the room] where Vijay finishes talking to Meena and leaves. And no one knows where he goes. Later on, we added the last scene that you now see in the film in which Vijay comes to Gulab and asks her to go away with him. He changed the ending because of the way the distributors reacted. They felt the ending was too heavy. The financiers requested, ‘Why don’t you have a happy ending?’ It now has a sort of happier ending.

The original casting had Madhubala as Meena, and Johnny Walker in the role of Shyam, Vijay’s opportunist friend. Shyam proudly states that he goes where the wind blows, implying that he has no principles. Pyaasa’s characters always remain true to their nature. In the first scene when we see Shyam, he has just returned from the court where he has been paid to give false testimony. He will do the same when it comes to Vijay’s turn: for money, he will deny Vijay’s identity. But having shot some scenes with Johnny Walker in this role, Guru Dutt felt that audiences would never accept their favourite comedian in a negative role and so he substituted Shyam Kapoor. When Guru Dutt discovered Waheeda Rehman, he cast her as the compassionate Gulab and Mala Sinha in the role of Meena.

Guru Dutt himself is the very soul of Pyaasa and any other actor in his place seems inconceivable, though Guru Dutt himself had wanted to
cast Dilip Kumar in the role of the poet. S. Guruswamy remembers
that when Dilip Kumar failed to turn up on the first day of the shoot,
Guru Dutt decided to take the role himself. Dilip Kumar explained in
an interview many years later that he had declined to work in Pyaasa
because he saw Vijay as another Devdas, a role that Dilip Kumar had
played in Bimal Roy’s 1955 version of the film Devdas (1955). Guru
Dutt wisely gave the role of the cold and calculating publisher, Mr
Ghosh, to Rehman, his old friend from Prabhat days. Rehman had
previously acted in a number of films in the fifties, but had soon found
himself cast in secondary parts rather than in lead roles. Rehman’s
performance in both Pyaasa and Sahib Bibi aur Ghulam is remarkable.
Johnny Walker as Abdul Sattar, a man of the people, is so perfect that
Sattar and Johnny seem to be two names of the same person.

In the darker role of Vijay’s devious friend, Shyam, Guru Dutt
finally cast Shyam Kapoor, his assistant on four films: Mr & Mrs 55,
Pyaasa, Kaagaz ke Phool and Baharen Phir Bhi Aayenge. In Hindi
cinema the name of an actor often inspires the name of the screen
character that he or she will play. The most famous example is Raj
Kapoor, who in his own films often played a character called Raj or
Raju; and in Guru Dutt’s films we have already seen Johnny Walker as
Johnny in Mr & Mrs 55. The distinction between on-screen and off-
screen personae is deliberately blurred. In the case of Shyam Kapoor,
however, this congruity of the names of role and actor is probably
coincidental. In the role of Vijay’s greedy brother, his unusual choice
was the young Mehmood, who later became a leading comedian of
Hindi cinema. Mehmood also acted in Guru Dutt Productions’ C.I.D.
in the role of the villain.

MEHMOOD: My father, Mumtaz Ali, was working in Bombay Talkies
as a dance director. I played the role of Madan [Ashok Kumar] as a
young child in the film Kismet which was directed by Gyan
Mukherjee. When I was older, I worked as Gyan Mukherjee’s driver
while Guru Dutt was working as his chief assistant. Guru Dutt
always had a camera hung around his neck. He used to keep on
taking photographs. After that time, I did not see him. One day,
Guru Dutt happened to see some rushes in which I appeared. He
then asked me to play his elder brother in Pyaasa. I told him, ‘But
I’m younger than you!’ When Guru Dutt was working, he used to
throw everyone off the set. When he himself was acting, he would
shoot take after take. He should be in the Guinness Book of
Records for giving retakes.
Guru Dutt had also wanted me to act in a film called ‘Chilman’ (Curtain), the story of a qawal. But he dropped that idea. He was a moody man, a very good-hearted man. Work was God for him. He was a romantic. When he made Kaagaz ke Phool, he thought that it was going to be a better film than Pyaasa; but it bombed. I have noticed that whenever a film is made on an artist, it does not run. I personally feel that the public do not want to see an artist portrayed in a negative way. Raj Kapoor’s Mera Naam Joker [1970] also bombed.

Guru Dutt returned to S.D. Burman knowing that only Burman could create the right musical mood for Pyaasa. Burman gave the score a flavour of Bengal, and all his song compositions are brilliantly varied and are always appropriate to the characters who perform them. The Latin American mood of Abdul Sattar’s song, Sar jo tera chakaraaye (If your head reels with pain) has all the necessary beats to accompany, in perfect comic rhythm the head-massage of an unsuspecting client. On the other hand, the songs that are meant to be appreciated for their poetic weight such as Ye kooche ye neelaam ghar dilkashi ke (These lanes, the auction-houses of pleasure) or Ye mehalon, ye takhton, ye taajon ki duniya (This world of palaces, thrones, and diadems) have almost no orchestration and suggest the mood of a mushaira (poetry symposium) in which verse is recited to a gently lilting tune. Another important contribution by S.D. Burman is in the use of an effective background score of the film which helps to create the subtle atmosphere for a number of individual scenes. Meena, for example, like most of the main characters, has her own ‘signature tune’ — in her case a simple haunting melody played on a harmonica. Whenever Vijay sees Meena, the same tune is repeated, representing the stirring in Vijay for the love he has lost.

S.D. Burman was born in 1900 into a royal family of Comilla, a province on the East Bengal and Tripura border. He started his career as a singer for New Theatres in Calcutta when S. Mukherjee (who had by then joined Filmistan) asked Burman to compose music for them in Bombay. Burman’s first Hindi film was Filmistan’s Shikari in 1946. When Dev Anand created his film company Navketan, Burman was a natural choice as music director. Throughout his career until he died in 1974, S.D. Burman wrote some of the finest film music of almost three decades, and Pyaasa always features in a list of films with his greatest compositions. His son Rahul Dev Burman, familiarly known
as Pancham, became an important music director in his own right, having trained under Ustad Brijen Biswas and Ali Akbar Khan.

R.D. BURMAN: Even when Guru Dutt did not use my father’s music, he used to frequently visit our home. Geeta Dutt was my father’s favourite and there was a family feeling between us. Geeta’s first hit song, Mera sundar sapna beet gaya (My beautiful dream is over) was composed by my father whom she called chacha (uncle). Geeta was very famous in her time; she could sing any type of song: soft songs, cabaret songs, aggressive and romantic songs. She had a real female quality to her voice. Anyway, Guru Dutt fell in love with her. I remember their courting. I used to go with them to Khandala and Lonavla on picnics. We had a lot of fun.

My father’s music was not recognized immediately. He made a few films; Shabnam (1949) was a success. Then came Baazi, a big hit. Sahir Ludhianvi wrote the song Tadbeer se bigdi hui [in Baazi] in the metre of a ghazal [a lyrical poem]; it had the weight of a ghazal. It was difficult to compose a ghazal to fit in a cabaret style. So my father gave the song a western rhythm composed on guitar. He used to love to experiment. Even in Jaal, when he wrote the song Ye raat ye chaandni he transformed its ghazal mood giving it a regular stressed beat. When he sang the tune to Sahir Ludhianvi, Sahir laughed. My father also insisted that Hemant Kumar should sing that song even though everyone had wanted Talat Mahmood to sing it. When the song was recorded by Hemant Kumar, Guru Dutt wanted to re-dub the song in Rafi Sahib’s voice. My father said, ‘Nothing doing.’ During the production of Jaal, the song Ye raat ye chaandni started growing on everyone, so it stuck.

When Guru Dutt was making Pyaasa, I played the harmonica for Meena’s tune. I also composed the masseur’s song, Sar jo tera chakaraaye. Guru Dutt liked that song very much and said he would use me as music director in his next film. The film was called ‘Raaz’ and it was to be directed by Guru Dutt’s assistant, Niranjan. But the film was shelved and the songs that I composed for it ended up instead in Mehmoord’s first film, Chhote Nawab [1961].

For the film’s lyrics, which are the essence of Pyaasa, Guru Dutt chose the Urdu poet, Sahir Ludhianvi. Sahir’s father, Fazal Mohammed, a feudal lord, though married several times, had only one son. Sahir was born in Ludhiana, in the Punjab, on March 8, 1921, and named Abdul Hai. His parents separated after a long court battle; and the young Sahir stood by his mother, Sardar Begum. In the early 1940s, his interest in nationalist politics and poetry began while he was studying Urdu, Persian and philosophy. Sahir took an active part in the freedom
struggle and, because of his personal popularity, he held important positions in various student organizations both in Ludhiana and later in Lahore, where he joined the Dayal Singh College. Sahir did not complete his B.A. examinations, instead devoting his time to editing a prestigious literary journal, *Adab-e-Latif*, in Lahore. In 1944, while still a student, Sahir (his pen name means 'magician'), published his first collection of poems titled *Talkhiyan* (Bitterness), which included his famous 'Taj Mahal'. In the poem, Sahir writes of the suffering endured by the humble folk who built this majestic monument. *Talkhiyan* was reprinted with additional poems by Sahir several times over the years. He was also an active member of the Marxist-oriented Progressive Writers Association, an important literary group which had particular influence in Urdu literature circles in the thirties and forties. Sahir was soon accepted among the great poets of the time.

After Partition, in 1948, he lived and worked in Delhi editing the magazines *Shahrah* and *Preetlari*. He moved to Bombay with his friend, the poet Majaz, to look for work as a song writer in films. Majaz gave up within six months but Sahir decided to keep on trying. One of Sahir’s poems, *Mohabbat tark ki maine*, from *Talkhiyan* was included in the film *Do Raha* (released in 1952), but it made little difference in advancing Sahir’s career as a lyricist. Finally through a friend from Ludhiana, Mohan Sehgal, who shared Guru Dutt’s Almora background, Sahir met S.D. Burman in the late forties. It was evident to Burman that Sahir was very skilled in song-writing and Burman asked him to work on A.R. Kardar’s film *Naujawan* (1951). Though *Naujawan* is the first of the many films credited to Sahir, *Baazi* was released before *Naujawan*. The songs in *Naujawan* were as popular as those in *Baazi*, with *Kaise bhulaayen thandi hawaen lehra ke aayen* (How can one forget the cool breeze flowing in waves), sung by Lata Mangeshkar, proving a particular favourite. Burman and Sahir formed a team working on a number of films, including Guru Dutt’s *Jaal* and *Pyasa*.

**RAJ KHOSLA:** Actually, I was an admirer of Sahir Sahib right from my college days. I had noted one of the poems that he had written during his college days called *Chakle*, and I sang it at college functions. The poem was *Sana khwane taqdis-e-mashriq kahan hain* (Where are the eulogists of Oriental piety?). This was the poem that Guru Dutt later picturized as *Ye kooche ye neelaam ghar dikashi ke* (These lanes, the auction-houses of pleasure), with its refrain *Jinhen naaz hai Hind par vo kahaan hain*. The language of the refrain was simplified for the film because no one would understand the difficult Urdu of the original. When I sang that song
to Guru Dutt, he said, 'Raj, this is it! This is Pyaasa.' In the form of art, Sahir and Guru Dutt were very close, but they were not close personally.

Sahir's poem *Chakle* (Brothels) is a fine example of political comment combined with humanitarian compassion. Guru Dutt's understanding and identification with Sahir's poetry blend at such a deep level that Sahir's words seem to articulate Guru Dutt's own view of the world and experience of tragedy. Sahir's unhappy romances, frequent as they were, set a tragic pattern that recurred throughout his life. Though his name was linked to Amrita Pritam, among others, Sahir never married and lived most of his life with his mother and his sister Anwar. Sahir himself acknowledged the importance of working for Guru Dutt in the development of his song-writing career. In an interview published in *Filmfare* (January 26, 1962), Sahir noted that the problem with Indian films was their preoccupation with form and neglect of content. Commenting on song-writing itself, he said that the writer of film songs must keep in mind the fact that cinema is a mass medium and so must use simple language, and express complex emotions and feelings in an accessible manner. He added that it was Guru Dutt who gave adequate scope to Sahir's poetic talent: 'The success of *Pyaasa* led producers to show willingness to accept literary songs.'

Guru Dutt is remembered for his indecisiveness, his fickle-mindedness, his habit of shooting and re-shooting. Yet the fluency of many scenes in *Pyaasa* show little of such hesitation. Many individual shots in the film transcend their narrative function and become impressionistic images telling of Guru Dutt's lyricism. One such example (intended originally as the last shot of the film) occurs in the penultimate scene: a high-angle shot of Meena standing very still as she watches Vijay leave the room. He has told her that he will never find peace in this world and is going far away. A gust of wind invades the room and papers fly about them like falling leaves. A similar moment occurs when Gulab, having heard that Vijay is dead, sits on her bed staring into space. The window opens and with it a gust of wind causes the pages filled with Vijay's poems to fly all about her. She knows she must do something to preserve his memory. The next scene has Gulab visiting Mr Ghosh's office to ask him to publish Vijay's poems. Such atmospheric scenes suggest a similarity between Guru Dutt's work and that of Orson Welles. V.K. Murthy smiles when asked if they planned in advance each sequence or each shot:
Those scenes were very well conceived, but they were mostly on-the-spot decisions. It’s the Indian method of working. We constructed the sets all right, but we conceived the shot on the set. We would both discuss where to place the camera. Guru Dutt had a tendency to do things extempore; because whatever he had planned earlier would be changed. Many things were changed. We worked with a general outline of scenes, no details. We’d go on the set, and if he didn’t find it to his liking, he’d say, ‘Okay, cancel it.’ Or suppose we shot a scene, and he didn’t find the effect he wanted, he’d say, ‘Scrap it. We’ll do it again.’ Actually he has redone many scenes, shooting and re-shooting; this is particularly true of the way he worked in Pyaasa. Before Pyaasa, he would scrap only one or two shots of a film, rather than whole sequences. People appreciate his films today, but they were not the result of quick decisions, or confidence.

In the beginning, the style of shot-taking in Indian cinema was similar to Hollywood action films, most directors believed in mid-shots and long shots. Guru Dutt was the first to use the establishing shot, followed by close-ups. Thereby the expression of the actors is highlighted and the story becomes immediately intimate, more like cinema, less like theatre. He was also the first person to use the long focal-length lenses, such as 75mm and 100mm. This lens is useful for close-ups, it has the effect of creating movement. He was willing to take risks, to introduce new styles.

Guru Dutt was never very confident about his acting and would ask his assistants to comment on his performance after each take. Atmaram recalls how difficult it was for Guru Dutt to be satisfied with himself, because of his perfectionism. Guru Dutt would turn to Abrar Alvi at the end of a take and ask, ‘Is it all right?’ and when Abrar Alvi nodded slowly in reply, Guru Dutt would shout in an irritated and impatient tone, ‘Bolo na, kya galat hua?’ (Tell me, what’s gone wrong?).

ABRAR ALVI: I remember how stubborn he became about one particular shot. It is the scene in which Meena (Mala Sinha) comes to see Vijay at her husband’s office and tells him that there are other considerations in life beside love and poetry. Vijay answers: ‘When did you give me the chance? When a man has responsibilities, he learns to shoulder them.’ The dialogue went something like that. It was a dialogue-exchange in one extended take. We started at 9.30 in the morning. Guru Dutt wasn’t used to delivering long bits of dialogue, but he became stubborn and said, ‘We’ll do it.’ He was at it until midnight, still trying the same
shot. Once he got it right then Mala Sinha, who was fed up by then, started forgetting her lines. Guru Dutt had finished all the raw stock, he even borrowed some and that finished too. That was his determination and doggedness in work.

S.GURUSWAMY: Guru Dutt used to film many retakes. We had put up a set in Kardar Studios [Pyaasa was filmed mostly on location in Calcutta and at Kardar Studios, Bombay] for a scene where Meena comes to meet Vijay. Guru Dutt wanted to do the entire scene in a long take. It was quite difficult. So we had finished take number 78 and I went onto the set. He said, 'Pack up. What can I do? It isn’t working.' I said, 'So what, nothing wrong, pack up!' So we packed up. Next morning we went back. First take was okay. That’s an artist — until he did the whole scene in a single shot, he wasn’t happy.

Though Guru Dutt was hard on himself, Waheeda Rehman remembers how helpful he was in directing her in the role of Gulab. One of the most moving scenes in Pyaasa is the dialogue between Gulab and Meena. Gulab has come to have Vijay’s poems published, and because the poems reveal Vijay’s feelings for Meena she wants to buy them for herself alone. The subtext of the scene throws into relief the values of the middle class and of the poor. Meena offers Gulab any price for the poems, reminding Gulab that she sells ‘many things’ for a price. The high point of the conversation occurs when Meena demands to know how a gentleman such as Vijay could come to know a woman like Gulab, a prostitute and Gulab answers quietly, 'Saubhaagya se' (through good fortune).

WAHEEDA REHMAN: I didn’t know much about acting before Pyaasa. I knew about expression because I had learnt dance. All the credit goes to Guru Dutt in the way he built the character of Gulab. He had everything in his mind. I was a newcomer so it was difficult for me to follow the evolution of the character. He used to shoot and re-shoot so many times, the chronological order of the scenes kept changing. Beside being an actor himself, he was very keen on getting good performances out of all of us. He would not okay a shot if just one actor got it right, he’d make sure we all performed to his satisfaction. If we didn’t understand something, he would enact the whole scene. Because he understood rhythm and music and he understood the film medium very well, he knew how to get us to act in the right way. If an actor would say they were tired, he’d let them stop for the day and continue the next day. Sometimes, if an actor was in the mood to complete the scene the
same day, then Guru Dutt would keep shooting until the scene was over regardless of how long it took. No matter how many mistakes an actor made, he’d say, ‘There’s nothing to worry about. Do it again. Let’s retake.’ He was never impatient with actors.

I remember the shooting of the song, Aaj sajan mohe ang laga lo (Hold me in your embrace today, my beloved). The song was filmed in a studio. The hero, Vijay, is standing on the roof terrace. Gulabo wants to go to him, but she’s scared, hesitant. She is in love with him. The song is playing in the background. She isn’t an ordinary woman, she’s a prostitute. Even if she doesn’t want to go to him, love pulls her. Sometimes people are drawn to each other despite themselves because the attraction is so great. I couldn’t get the right expression for the scene. Guru Dutt tried very hard to explain it to me. He’d say, ‘You love this man very much and you’re scared. This man is a different sort. Because of your background. Because of who you are you do not dare express your love for him.’ I had to express what the song implied, there were no dialogues in the scene and I couldn’t get it right. Guru Dutt said, ‘Murthy, put the lights off. We’ll talk in peace.’

He then said, ‘Who do you love the most in your life?’ I said, ‘My mother and father.’ ‘Who do you love the very most?’ I said, ‘My father, because he spoilt me the most.’ Then he said, ‘He’s dead, isn’t he?’ I said, ‘Yes.’ ‘Imagine if your father were alive. Imagine your father is standing on the terrace. You don’t know why you’re afraid to go to him, but you are. There is a force pulling you to him. You’re dying to go up to him and hug him.’ At that point, I really started missing my father. Guru Dutt noticed that my expression had changed. He said, ‘Murthy, lights on, roll the camera.’

The telling of such anecdotes underline the difference between the reality involved in the making of a film, and the experience of watching it: Waheeda Rehman’s story sadly breaks the illusion of the scene being the most erotic moment of the film, as it is commonly regarded. Geeta Dutt’s sensual voice introduces another ambiguity into the song: that between earthly and divine love. The kirtan (devotional song) tells of longing and desire, and though we see Baul singers perform the song, its dramatic interest lies in the fact that it voices Gulab’s passion. The earthly love that she feels is given a spiritual dimension through the words: for Gulab’s love is one of complete devotion. Filled with desire, she goes up the stairs to the terrace where Vijay stands with his back to her, unaware of her presence. Gulab goes near him to lay her head on his shoulder; but she cannot bring herself to touch him. She rushes
away. In the last scene of the film, an instrumental version of the same kirtan is played as Gulab — overcome with joy and emotion to see Vijay at her doorway — runs down the stairs of her house to embrace him. Gulab and Vijay are at last united. In Pyaasa, Guru Dutt shows how well he understood the subtlety of emotions.

Though many have linked Vijay to Devdas, the similarities are limited. Unlike Devdas, who is lost in a world of his own, Vijay is concerned with the world about him. Unlike Devdas, Vijay does not turn to alcohol as a means to escape. Though Vijay is drawn to ending his life, something within him saves him; but Devdas could not be saved. Gulab, on the other hand, has an obvious role model in the golden-hearted prostitute Chandramukhi. Like Chandramukhi, she sacrifices everything she owns in the world for the man she loves. Neither woman dares to assume that her love will ever be returned; both renounce the material world and adopt a near-ascetic lifestyle. Gulab shares with Vijay a greater attraction for the spiritual world than the material one. As the kirtan expresses the devotional nature of Gulab's love, Guru Dutt uses the imagery of Christ as an allegory for Vijay's suffering. When Mr Ghosh reads the newspaper item of Vijay’s suicide at the breakfast table, Meena is reading an issue of Life magazine whose cover illustration shows Christ on the cross. When Vijay appears resurrected, at a ceremony held in commemoration of his life, he is silhouetted by a haloed light in a manner suggestive of the figure of Christ. Though Vijay longs for recognition, it is improbable that his deepest aspirations could ever be met in the material world. His thirst is hardly the sort to be satisfied by publishers and poetry enthusiasts. Like Vijay, Guru Dutt, never found an inner place of healing.

ABRAR ALVI: I believed that Vijay should not leave and go away in the last scene of the film, but that he should stay and fight the system. I told Guru Dutt, 'Wherever Vijay goes he will find the same society, the same values, the same system.' We discussed the scene at length, but I was overruled by Guru Dutt. So I wrote the ending in which Vijay comes to Gulab and tells her to go away with him to a place from where he will not need to go any further. I asked Guru Dutt, 'Where does such a place exist in this world?'. But Guru Dutt put his foot down saying, 'I like it. It's sunset, they walk away into the distance, hand in hand. It will be emotionally satisfying to the audience.'

That was how he thought. As far as Vijay's beliefs and philosophy were concerned, I never believed in such a defeatist attitude. But Guru Dutt liked it. The kind of introverted character of Vijay in
Pyasa and Suresh in Kaagaz ke Phool, that was Guru Dutt. He had shades of Vijay and shades of Suresh. If he hadn’t been such an introvert, he’d still be alive today.

Har ek jism ghaayal, har ek rooh pyaasi
Nigaahon men ulfat, dilon men udaasi
Ye duniya hai ya alaam-e bad hawaasi
Ye duniya agar mil bhi jaaye to kya hai
Ye duniya agar mil bhi jaaye to kya hai

(Each body is wounded, each soul filled with thirsting
These glances of longing, these hearts bearing sadness
Is this the world or a realm without sense?
For what shall it profit a man if he gain the world?)

LALITHA LAJMI: I feel that working in films does change a personality, especially the kinds of films that Guru Dutt made. I remember when Guru Dutt was engaged to Geeta we used to go on picnics, fishing. We had a lot of fun together. Then all those picnics and fun that we had came to an end. I always felt that he had very many disturbances within him. Somewhere in Pyasa and Kaagaz ke Phool you find these disturbances in flashes. But I think they were tremendous. Even though we were brother and sister, in those days it was not easy to confide in another person. Quite often he used to ring up and tell me, ‘Come over, I want to talk to you.’ When we went to his home, he never said a word.