

“Chaudhvin Ka Chand” captures the heartbreaking choice of love or friendship
By Ray Luo

When a man looks upon his new bride under the moonlight, he is tempted to admit that her beautiful face is “like the lotus that is blooming in the lake” or “like an ode that has been plucked on the instrument of life.” Guru Dutt and Mohammed Sadiq’s classic Hindi film about the then-Muslim city of Lucknow, “Chaudhvin Ka Chand,” is full of poetic depictions of that ultimate love in a man’s life, but more poignantly, it teaches us how to give up that great love when following one’s own convictions.

The story begins with Nawab Sahib of Lucknow, Pyare Mohan (Rehman Khan) falling in love with a woman he sees glancing at him through a window in his own house.



His servants mistakenly inform him that she is a different person, because the women had exchanged scarves. That woman, Jameela (Waheeda Rehman), is the daughter of a doctor who agrees to go on the Hadj for the Nawab’s mother if his daughter can be married off. Thus, Sahib marries her off to his best friend Aslam (Guru Dutt), whose life he had once saved. Hidden behind a veil during the wedding, Jameela never actually meets the Nawab, though he is constantly looking for that mysterious woman he met at the party.

When Aslam finally figures out that his best friend is in love with the woman who happens to be his wife, he realizes that he must give up his “full moon”. He had sung to his new bride in the best known song from the movie, calling Jameela “the prime of life amongst the love and beauties of the world”, but he knows too well of his obligation to his best friend, and even Jameela tells him unknowingly that being a friend means making sacrifices. Much of the film shows how Guru Dutt’s character destroys himself by visiting brothels (though not actually using them) and drinking in order to get his wife to stop loving him. He does not succeed, for his wife still loves him

no matter what he does.

Much of what makes today’s Bollywood films so enjoyable was pioneered or given widespread acclaim by “Chaudhvin Ka Chand”. Among those elements is the comic stock-character of the third of the best friends, Mirza Shaiza, played by Johnny Walker, who bumbles his way into every brothel and bar he could find. In one scene, he tries to get up at home, but can’t, and we soon find out about how he’s living at home with mother. In another scene, he dresses up as a pauper to secretly take pictures for his friend the Nawab. In the process, he hilariously catches a corrupt policeman! Johnny Walker would go on to bring his squeaky voice and pointed moustache to other Dutt films like “Baazi” and “Pyasa”.

Dutt’s masterful understanding of the cinema as a mode of expression is captured in the song he sings to Rehman in the moon song “Chaudhvin Ka Chand Ho”. Aslam slowly approaches his new bride. Just as Dutt sings of her eyes like “the containers of liquor are full”, we get the first close up of Rehman and sense her dashing beauty. Like many sections of the film, especially during the singing, the audience looks at the protagonist through camouflage like shadows, bamboos, or opened tiles, as if we are merely glimpsing into the form of beauty without actually experiencing it. Dutt’s skillful manipulation of this scene is pure poetry.

Other than the ending, the climax of the film occurs when Aslam finds out that the woman his best friend has been obsessing over is his wife Jameela. He runs down a flight of steps at the port to enter a surreal desolated landscape where he sings another Mohammad Rafi song, “Mili Khak Main Mohabbat”. This is where Indian dramatic cinema is at its best. Dutt, who had just looked longingly at his friend, now realizes he must choose one of two loves. Dutt sings his disappointment. The freshly created chaos is magnified by Dutt’s lyrics and expression—a mix of contemplation and sadness at the inevitability of life. Here, we feel that he must give up that great love of “Chaudhvin Ka Chand Ho” by following his convictions and give it up to his best friend.

“Chaudhvin Ka Chand” is a potpourri of beautiful music, festive episodes, and a whole lot of heartache and poetry. It is the representative Guru Dutt feature of the Bollywood Golden age not to be missed.

The full review is available at pacificties.org.

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