HUMANITIES INSTITUTE
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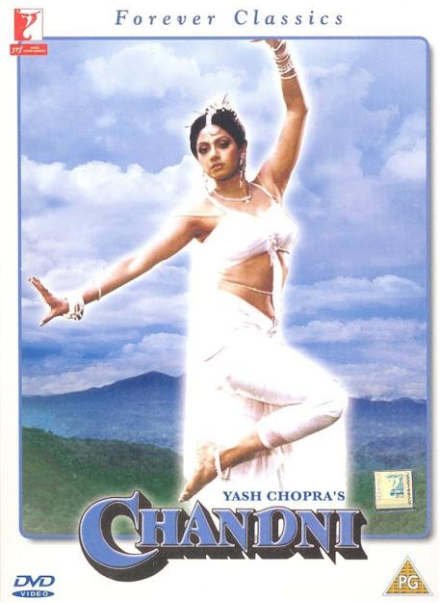
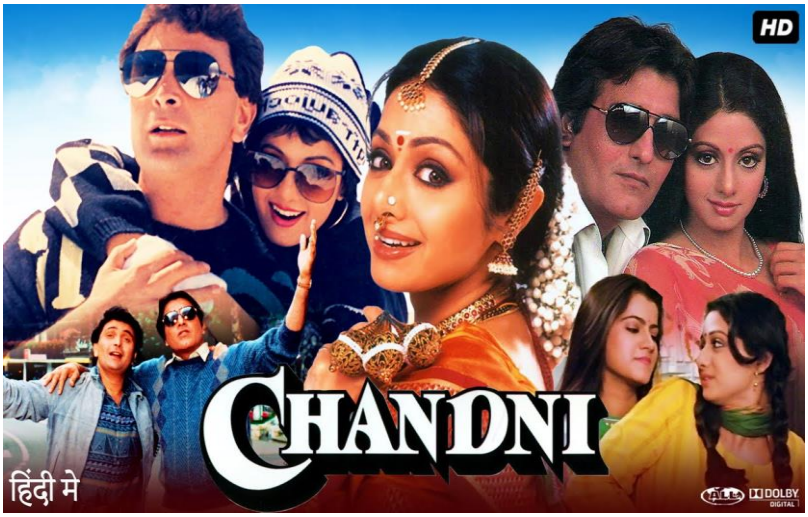
MOONLIGHT / CHANDNI (1989)

Yash Chopra (1932-2012)

Hindi language

film link*:* https://www.febspot.com/video/339321





OVERVIEW

Director Yash Chopra was one of the most iconic and influential Indian film-makers who worked in the Bollywood film industry based in Mumbai. Chopra initially worked with his elder brother, B.R. Chopra, making hits such as *Dhool Ka Phool* (*Flowers of the Dust*, 1959) and *Waqt* (*Time,* 1965). In 1973, he launched his own production company, Yash Raj Films, which went on to become one of Bollywood's most powerful production houses, with over 80 films to date. Chopra is considered a "King-maker" of Bollywood cinema, having introduced and nurtured the two biggest stars of the industry, Amitabh Bacchhan and Shah Rukh Khan. His most impactful films include romances such as *Kabhi Kabhie* (*Sometimes,* 1976), *Silsila* (*The Affair,* 1981), *Chandni* (*Moonlight,* 1989) and *Veer Zaara* (2004) and action-packed thrillers such as *Deewaar* (*Wall*, 1975) and *Darr* (*Fear*, 1993). Chopra's work is also memorable for featuring visually stunning imagery shot in diverse and exotic locales, such as Switzerland and Kashmir. He is the only filmmaker to have won the Indian National Film Award for best popular film five times— four times as director and once as producer. He also received a number of Filmfare Awards (given by *Filmfare* magazine), including 12 nominations and 4 wins for best director and 15 nominations and 4 wins for best film. The government of India honoured him with the Dadasaheb Phalke Award for lifetime achievement in cinema in 2001, and in 2005 he received one of India's highest civilian honours, the Padma Bhushan.

Film The 1980's marked a professional setback in Chopra's career. After a series of failed films (*Silsila*, *Sawaal*, *Mashaal*, *Faasle*, *Vijay*) his break with Amitabh Bachchan and the Salim-Javed screenwriting team, Chopra decided to return to his roots and make a romantic musical. Chopra says: "I wanted a romantic film with beautiful music. I was sick of violence." The film stars Sridevi in the title role of Chandni Mathur, a young, effervescent woman. It was the first collaboration between Chopra and Sridevi; they would collaborate soon again for the path-breaking *Lamhe* (1991). Chandni is torn between two suitors played by Rishi Kapoor (Rohit) and action hero Vinod Khanna (Lalit). Waheeda Rehman, Anupam Kher and Juhi Chawla feature in supporting roles.
At the 35th Filmfare Awards, the film received 10 nominations, including Best Film, Best Director (Yash Chopra), Best Actress (Sridevi), Best Actor (Rishi Kapoor), Best Supporting Actor (Vinod

Khanna) and Best Supporting Actress (Waheeda Rehman), but only won Best Cinematography (Manmohan Singh). At the 37th National Film Awards, *Chandni* won Best Popular Film Providing Wholesome Entertainment.

Background The film emerged as a widespread critical and commercial success, ranking as the third highest-grossing Hindi film of the year, with its soundtrack emerging as the best-selling album of the year as well as the decade, with more than 10 million copies sold. The massive success of the film and its soundtrack was instrumental in ending the era of violent action films in Indian Cinema and rejuvenating the romantic musical genre. At the age of 56, Chopra was clearly much older than the new generation of directors, despite his much-touted youthfulness of spirit, but his resurgence was perhaps also influenced by the contribution of his new assistant, his teenage son, Aditya. *Chandni* has all the hallmarks of what has come to be known as the “Yash Chopra style” – heroine-oriented, romantic, emotional, depicting the lifestyle of the super-elite, with melodic music used in songs picturized in foreign locations. The success of the film further reinforced Sridevi's position as the top female star of the era, even though she was a relative newcomer to Bollywood and did not know Hindi well. Chopra says, “[She] never knew what she was doing [i.e., did not have a script]. She didn't know the language, assistants told her dialogues. But she contributes so much to each dance, scene, emotion.” On her costumes, which became a pan-Indian “Chandni craze” that Chopra tried and failed to replicate in his later films, he says, “We had a lot of white, very simple clothes. We designed her saris and colours, middle-class salivars and churidars which changed when she was working but she could wear different clothes in the dream sequences, such as modern dresses.” The story was written by Kamini Chandra (Vikram Chandra’s mother), but due to creative differences she quit the project. There were last-minute plot changes, too, including making Rohit paralysed, inspired by *Whose Life Is It Anyway?* (J. Badham, 1981). Chopra had also initially planned a scene where true to his action hero roots, Vinod Khanna’s Lalit would rescue Chandni from a fire; but he later removed it. Over the years, *Chandni* has been hailed as one of Chopra's finest films.

CHARACTERS

Chandni Mathur	The film’s heroine (Sridevi)
Rohit Gupta	Chandni’s first fiancé, estranged and reunited (Rishi Kapoor)
Armani Gupta	Rohit’s mother (Sushma Seth)
Reshmi Gupta	Rohit’s sister (Beena Banerjee)
Ramesh Mehra	Rohit’s brother-in-law (Anupam Kher)
Lalit Khanna	Chandni’s boss and second fiancé (Vinod Khanna)
Lata Khanna	Lalit’s mother (Waheeda Rehman)
Kiran Chawla	Chandni’s friend in Mumbai (Mita Vashisht)
Brijbhan Chawla	Kiran’s husband (Anant Mahadevan)
Devika Shastri	Lalit’s girlfriend, deceased (Juhi Chawla)

SYNOPSIS

Chandni meets Rohit at her cousin’s wedding in Delhi and they fall in love instantly. They romance during her stay in Delhi and write love letters to each other after her return to her small-town home in the mountains. Rohit's family disapproves of Chandni as she is not from a wealthy background, but Rohit is adamant he loves her, covering the walls of his room with her photographs. One day, after Rohit uses a helicopter to shower roses onto Chandni's roof terrace, he falls from the helicopter and is paralysed. Although Chandni is keen to continue her relationship with him, he tells her he no longer loves her and his family also abuses her. Chandni relocates to Mumbai where she stays with her friend Kiran and finds work at a travel agency as a secretary to Lalit. On one fateful night when Chandni and her friend are temporarily evicted from their housing, Lalit coincidentally sees them roaming the streets and offers them shelter. Lalit lives with his mother, Lata, who takes an instant liking to Chandni. Lalit tells Chandni of his loss, since his girlfriend, Devika, died of a terminal illness some time ago. Lalit goes on a business trip to Switzerland. Rohit, too, goes to Switzerland for rehabilitation therapy, where he is miraculously cured and able to walk normally. Rohit meets Lalit and they strike up an easy friendship swapping love stories; they do not realise they are talking about the same woman. With Lata's encouragement, Lalit proposes marriage to Chandni and she agrees. Later, Rohit tells Chandni he wants to marry her, but she refuses as she had already agreed to Lalit’s proposal. At their wedding, Rohit arrives drunk and falls down the stairs, at which Chandni reveals her true emotions. Lalit finally realises that Chandni loves Rohit, and he and Lata help them to get married and go on a honeymoon.

SCENES



Opening scene Preparations are being completed for a wedding; everyone is busy. Chandni, who is visiting for her friend Neetu's wedding, greets everyone and is constantly teased about getting married herself. Rohit, Neetu's brother's friend, makes a ruckus coming in. At a women-only event in the evening, Chandni, dressed stunningly in pretty pink *lehenga,* sings and dances to the super hit song, "*Mere haathon mein nou nou chudiyan hain*" ("I am wearing all of nine bangles [i.e., breakable things]/ Tarry a while, my love, for there are barriers in my way"). Rohit notices her but is shooed away; then he dons a shawl over his head, pretends to be a woman and sits at the back and is chased away again. Then he gets a telephoto camera to take pictures of her from afar.

Boy meets girl Chandni's blouse gets ripped at the sleeve and she rushes indoors, but the lights suddenly go out. Rohit grabs her and confesses his love at first sight. She runs away, breaking a bangle that hurt her hand, leaving it in Rohit's palm. She also feels attracted to him, thinking to herself how charming his words were. An old aunt tells the story of her wedding night, while Rohit, Chandni and many youngsters gather and listen. Rohit has smart comments about our "instant age", charming Chandni further.

Boy chases girl The next day, Rohit and Chandni serve the guests food. The girls get *mehendi* (paste of *mehendi* leaves which leaves a dark red imprint on skin) applied on their hands and Rohit takes many photos. They continue to flirt. Soon it's time for the wedding, which is performed without a hitch and the bride and groom leave. Rohit shows everyone the wedding pictures. Neetu's mother wants Chandni to stay behind for a few days and her parents agree to it. That makes Rohit ecstatic.

Rohit and Chandni's romance They chat and flirt. He takes her on a motorbike ride, which scares her and she agrees to go out with him. At the historic India Gate (there are huge, cordoned off crowds, policemen in attendance, watching the shoot!!!) and some other beautiful places, Rohit sings a catchy song. He shows Chandni his room full of pictures that he has taken of her. She is surprised and overjoyed. But soon it is time for her to return home. He asks for a friend's address to send letters to. Soon, a loving letter arrives, describing how he misses her in poetic terms. Chandni replies to him in the same vein.

Rohit's parents oppose the match Rohit brings up marrying Chandni to his parents, but they flatly refuse to let him marry "below" their status. He says he doesn't care about norms but just wanted to inform them and ask for their blessings, then leaves. Rohit's (married) sister Reshmi complains, "how will I show my face in society if Chandni becomes my sister-in-law" but her husband Ramesh says that her "society" cares more about a man's bank balance than his character or integrity. Ramesh is a *gharjamai*, that is, living with his wife's parents. Rohit's father asks Ramesh to speak to Chandni's parents. At least the wedding ceremony should be matched in status, he says.

Trouble at home Chandni performs a (coincidentally) pointed, comedic song towards her in-laws at a pre-wedding event, "*Main sasuraal nahin jaungi*" ("I won't go to my in-laws") ending with how much she loves Rohit. Rohit's parents are furious, as her singing and dancing was undignified in their eyes. Ramesh defends Chandni and reiterates that they will lose Rohit if they continue to vilify Chandni.

Rohit and Chandni get engaged At the engagement, Chandni only gets a lukewarm welcome and Rohit's parents sneer at the gifts from her side. Rohit's sister presents her a set of ornate silver *payal* (anklets with bells), insulting her and Rohit. Chandni's parents and relatives are also angry with the insults, but Chandni's father reassures them that it will be fine.







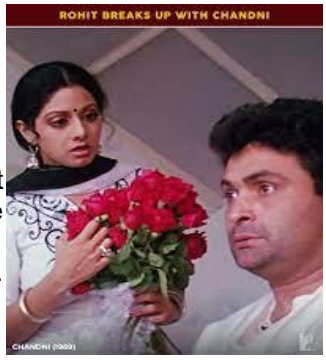
(Fantasy) Switzerland trip On a date by a serene spring, Chandni makes Rohit close his eyes and plays a “guess the food” game, ending with a spicy chilli pepper! Rohit wants to take her far away from their families and honeymoon in Switzerland. They (apparently) go to Switzerland, frolic in the snow, eat ice cream without her sharing with him and go shopping. They have a very light-hearted relationship and she even calls him “fatso” and makes him chase her. He tells her that cognac isn’t alcohol and both of them get drunk! But she passes out. The next day, out on another date, nestled in a beautiful green valley and a snowy hilltop, they sing the super hit duet, “*Tere mere honthon pe, meethe meethe geet mitwa*” (“Sweet songs on your lips and mine”). Chandni prances around in some thin sarees in that snowy, freezing place, while Rohit dons a series of truly ugly sweaters.



A promise of a date But the Switzerland trip was just Chandni's dream! Rohit calls her and teases her. She says that she is loving herself because she loves him. Rohit wants to meet her on the rooftop terrace, but she should be dressed in pure white, just like her name. He comes by riding on a helicopter and showers red rose petals on her!

Rohit becomes paralysed in an accident The phone rings. Ramesh calls to say that Rohit fell out of the helicopter and in a serious condition. Chandni rushes to the hospital. Rohit’s mother and sister blame Chandni for Rohit’s accident. Rohit finally regains consciousness but has become paralysed on the right side! The doctor tells him to stay strong and Chandni reassures him that she will always support him.

Chandni is harassed by Rohit’s family He comes home in a wheelchair and asks Chandni to take him to his room, ignoring his family. Looking at all her pictures on his walls, Rohit falls silent. Chandni tells him to move on from the past and the good days will surely return. They promise to be together. She comes to take care of Rohit every morning, running around with the new anklets jingling. She makes his breakfast but his mother and sister constantly needle her with harsh words and even throw away the food she has lovingly cooked. Chandni runs away, crying. Ramesh tells her that her tears mean nothing here and this was a war she had to win. He tells her to tolerate it, because Rohit will be broken to see her tormented.



Chandni’s harassment continues She pretends to regain her usual cheerfulness and sings a chirpy song to make him feel better, but it only dredges up memories for Rohit, which have now become painful. He accidentally falls from the wheelchair and his mother and sister again hurl abusive words towards Chandni, calling her a witch, a circus performer etc. and telling her to get lost. Rohit tries to defend her but is made to leave. Rohit’s father also threatens Chandni. Only Ramesh has a few kind words.

Tensions fester The next day, Chandni tries to play the same game of “guess the food” but Rohit says that things have changed too much. He isn't the man she fell in love with. She tries to reassure him that she will become his support, his literal “*ardhangini*” (other half), but he pushes her away. They spend a tormented night away from each other. He imagines her dancing in a pristine white classical dance dress in a beautiful field (only instrumental music here). Rohit starts hitting his right hand in a vain effort to regain feeling and takes off the engagement ring.

Separation The next day, Chandni comes with fresh roses, but all her pictures have been whitewashed. Rohit says that he didn’t need those reminders and didn’t want to live with her pity- “You want me to be dependent in you? No! It’s better to die than live like this!” Chandni, shocked and hurt, tries to reason with him, but he says that he would have left her much sooner if she were paralysed. She says he pities his pettiness. He keeps adding on insults, telling her that she made him a cripple and successfully drives her away. He can live in hatred, she says, but she will live in love. And then she leaves, crying angrily.



Rohit justifies his decision She breaks off the engagement and returns the ring. Ramesh scolds Rohit about it and he replies that as an *apahij* (invalid) he couldn’t even shield Chandni from his family’s abuse, let alone support her. Unless he broke her heart and insulted her, she would never have left him for a better life. He has already lost everything, so it doesn’t matter.

Chandni relocates to Mumbai for work Chandni rides on a train to Mumbai, dreaming of the ionic and well-remembered title song "*Chandni*" (duet with Rohit; Sridevi sang parts of the song herself). She stays with her friend Kiran and her husband and wins over the landlady quickly. On the day of an interview, she can't find a bus or autorickshaw, so makes a car stop and hops on. The nice gentleman (Lalit) drives her to her interview. Of course, Lalit turns out to be the travel agency owner whom she's interviewing with! He is impressed by her words and hires her on the spot, obviously, even though she has no work experience. Everyone is overjoyed! She is free and alive now, she says.



Lalit asks Chandni to "entertain" clients and she refuses At work, Lalit asks her to entertain his old business associates for dinner. She tells him she doesn't think it's appropriate. Lalit yells at her for being stuck-up and that they should do everything to please the customer. She says she cannot do it and he tells her to "get lost". But later Lalit sends an apology note with a rose.



A homeless overnight picnic She returns to the government housing colony (where she rents illegally) which is being raided by police for illegal tenants and Kiaran and her friend have to stay away for the night. They decide to see Mumbai at night but it starts raining heavily. They enjoy some ice cream and Chandni steps out to get wet in the rain. Lalit, driving by, sees her and chastises her for her hypocrisy in being alone and unseemly late at night. But Chandni, unfazed, calls her friends over and tells him that they are "homeless, helpless, powerless" that night. Lalit offers to take them home.

Chandni meets Lata Lalit's mother, Lata, is pleasantly surprised with the company and tells Lalit that he's being nice to assuage her loneliness. Chandni offers to make coffee and they settle down quickly. Lata immediately shows her fondness for Chandni. Chandni is amazed at Lalit's different personality at home. It keeps raining heavily; Chandni, who loves getting wet in the rain, dances on the lawn.

Chandni finds Lalit being morose Suddenly she hears Lalit signing another super hit song from the film, "*Lagi aak saawan ki phir wo jhari hain*" ("The rains have retuned/ my heart is on fire again"). It's a song of sadness and separation, pictured on a beautiful woman in white dancing in the rain. Chandni comes to find Lalit. He is a little taken aback. She tells him that he likes nurturing his pain and asks him to share. He says it's too difficult, but tells her his story regardless.

Lalit tells Chandni his story We see a flashback of Lalit with the same beautiful woman, Devika, whom he runs into at an art gallery. Devika asks to play a guessing game with Lalit. She makes some accurate observations about him and they soon get into an intimate relationship. They promise to be together forever, but she gets sick with a (undisclosed) terminal illness. She makes him promise that he will find a good woman to marry. She soon passes away but Rohit hasn't been able to move on; his life now is just for the sake of living. Chandni is touched by his story.



Lata wants Lalit to marry Chandni The next day, Lata tells Lalit that she really likes Chandni and that he should move on from Devika, implying that he should marry Chandni. At the office, Lalit gives Chandni the task of booking a trip for him. She says that everyone is a stranger and alone, but being at his home made her feel welcome. He tries to ask more about her life, but she doesn't answer clearly. Instead, she gives him an apology rose and he laughingly says, "get lost"!

Rohit's sad days Rohit wallows in his depression in the rainy weather. Parts of Chandni's pictures that he had painted over peek out, so he cleans them all up again, remembering Chandni in all her many moods. Rohit imagines another dream song with both of them dancing in the rain, Chandni wearing her signature white outfits. Ramesh comes in and scolds him that he's living just for the love of Chandni. He tells Rohit to call Chandni back but he wants to be able to walk first. Rohit starts rehabilitation therapy in Switzerland.





Chandni and Lalit grow closer Lata tells Lalit to hurry up and propose to Chandni right away, before he leaves for a business trip. Lalit says he will ask her at the party. At the party, they lie to each other that they cannot dance. They chat and he tells her to go and meet Lata often. Then he tells her to be happy and have a long life, as she lights up everyone around her. She says she's afraid of her own happiness as it's ephemeral. He says he will change that fate. They go to the airport together, where Lalit tells her to come with him, as there is no next time. He also asks her to call him by his name, not "Sir". They joke about what gifts to bring for her, like the Big Ben from London. He asks if she will miss him, and she hesitates to reply. Lalit leaves. Lata takes Chandni shopping and drops clear hints that she wants Chandni to marry Lalit.



Rohit and Lalit become best buds In the meantime, Rohit gets better and is able to walk after therapy. Rohit and Lalit meet coincidentally and both are overjoyed to find a fellow countryman. They end up sharing their life stories over drinks. Rohit explains that his paralysis made him break off his relationship. Lalit says he can't forget his first love who passed away and had been living in shambles, but a new woman has come into his life, like a ray of sunshine. They share a duet song, "*Tu mujhe suna, Main tujhe sunaun apni prem kahani*", ("Let's swap our love stories") with clips of Chandni in all her moods. They quickly become best buddies, spending the days together shopping and enjoying Switzerland.

Lalit confesses his feeling to Chandni Rohit calls up Ramesh to give him the good news of his recovery and asks to meet in Mumbai. Rohit and Lalit go shopping at Geneva Airport where they buy many expensive perfumes for Chandni. Lalit calls Chandni from the pay phone when Rohit goads him to confess his feelings. Lalit tells her, "I love you". She is shocked and not too happy. He asks her to come to the airport and she agrees. The men decide to go on a double date later.

Chandni's hesitation Chandni calls Rohit's landline phone but his mother picks up and says unkind words. Kiran gives Chandni a talking-to about clinging on to the past with a person who doesn't care and his abusive parents. She should move on. Chandni doesn't go to the airport to receive Lalit. Lalit and Rohit both keep calling her from the airport phone booth but she doesn't pick up the phone at all. Ramesh, overjoyed to see Rohit walking again, gets all teary-eyed. Lata also comes to pick up Lalit and they all get acquainted. The two pairs (Lata-Lalit; Rohit-Ramesh) have an exited, almost identical conversation about their hopes for their future with Chandni. Rohit has not informed Chandni that he has recovered and is in Mumbai.

Lalit proposes to Chandni Lalit asks Chandni why she didn't come to the airport and she offers to tell him about her past. He says he's not interested in knowing her story. He wants to marry her but is afraid of her reaction. She hesitatingly agrees. He is overjoyed, as is Lata when he tells her. Lata excitedly tells Chandni that she trusts Chandni to make Lalit happy.

Reunion Rohit gets all dressed up and goes to meet Chandni. She is pleasantly surprised to see him. He pretends to be in a wheelchair and surprises her when he stands up. He does some dance moves for her and she lights up! He again professes his love and tells her that lovers never lose or die. His love for her was the impetus he needed to get better. He wants to get married immediately before his family arrives. She is finally smiling!

Rohit and Chandni argue Suddenly the phone rings. It's Lalit calling, telling Chandni he misses her and that Lata is overexcited about the upcoming wedding. Chandni says nothing. Rohit correctly guesses, from her expression, that someone else has come into her life and she is supposed to marry him. Rohit can't believe it and yells at her for betraying their love. She lashes back about how he ignored her and abandoned her; what would he have done in her place? He acknowledges his fault and leaves. Chandni breaks down crying.



An awkward meeting The next day, Rohit meets Lalit and tells him about the complication in his love life. He has decided to leave Mumbai. Lalit convinces him to stay behind until his wedding in a couple days. Chandni arrives. They are stunned to see each other and it's very awkward, but they don't acknowledge their acquaintance. Chandni requests Rohit to stay and he agrees.

Rohit has an accident At the wedding, Rohit gets very drunk even before anything starts. Lalit guesses something is amiss, but has no time to pursue it. Chandni, dressed beautifully, comes to the place where the ritual will take place; but she is visibly mournful. Rohit comes down stairs to the ceremony, and drunk, falls down the stairs. Chandni, screaming his name, scatters the wedding ritual items with her feet as she runs over to him, crying loudly. Lata and Lalit realize the truth. Later, the doctor says it's a mild concussion and there is no need to worry. Chandni, Lalit and Lata all fret, remembering their past interactions with each other.



Climactic twist Chandni applies *sindoor* [vermillion powder applied by Hindu women on their hair parting as a sign of marriage] and Lata compliments her. Lalit calls about a super deluxe honeymoon suite and business class flights. They get ready to leave. Rohit is also there. A car bedecked with flowers for the wedding is waiting. Chandni thanks Lata for all her love, as does Rohit. It looks like Lalit will get into the car. But the men hug and surprise! Rohit gets in! Lata and Lalit cry. Lalit tells Lata that it would have been compromise, not love and he couldn't live like that.

The film ends with a short clip of Lalit singing the sad rain song, followed by the title song, with Rohit driving a red convertible and Chandni standing up, waving her saree: "Love never ends".

CHARACTER ANALYSIS

Chandni

The titular character, played by "India's first female superstar" Sridevi, is fondly remembered even today and remains one of her best-known roles. Chandni is a charming and energetic young woman, who likes to flirt with being "improper" vis-a-vis social norms, but is actually a nurturing and compassionate "girl-next-door". Being jilted by the love of her life helps her become more independent, though she isn't ambitious or career-oriented.

Charming What lingers in the audience's mind long after the film has ended is Sridevi's characteristic *joie de vivre* that makes her performance unforgettable. The camera captures her impish, playful, tender, grave, sorrowful, and loving glances in close-ups, played and replayed. With her half-smiles and the full gaze from her large, enigmatic eyes, Chandni captures the heroes' hearts (as well as the audience's) with an effortless charm. She can be hilarious (the "cognac is not alcohol" scene) or sarcastic (the pointed song about the in-laws) or even insulting (body-shaming Rohit as a "fatso", which to be honest is accurate) but her sweet demeanour makes it impossible not to love her- for everyone except Rohit's family, of course, though that likely has more to do with status expectations and less with her as a person.

Girl-next-door The Bollywood filmgoer would be hard-pressed to find any other actress who could have given a comparable performance in that role, least of all the "dignified", "mysterious" Rekha, who was Chopra's first choice. Sridevi herself said, "I liked the role of Chandni. It was a different role, where any other girl, every ordinary girl can identify with that character, she can imagine herself as a Chandni, a very simple and very down-to earth character. I liked it, because always I played larger than life, snakes (and) this and that (referring to *Nagina*, 1986)…. even today, people call me *Chandni.* They really see me in that character. It's very difficult to get that kind of popularity. Credit goes to Yashji for portraying that kind of a character".

Nurturing We see this side of Chandni only briefly after Rohit's accident when she teaks on the responsibility of taking care of him, both physically and emotionally. She relocates to a rental apartment (?) to be near Rohit and goes to his house every morning to make his meals and take care of his daily needs in the absence of a paid nurse/ caretaker. Though we are shown only one day when she makes his breakfast etc., she tries hard to cheer Rohit up by bringing roses and singing just for him.

Resilient Rohit's mother's words make it clear that Chandni has been "buzzing around" their house shamelessly, even though they aren't married, for some time. But she swallows their insults on Ramesh's advice. Her tears mean nothing to Rohit's abusive family, Ramesh tells her; she must be strong for Rohit's sake. This trope of the woman/ new wife/ fiancée swallowing the abuse of her to-be husband's family was common enough in Bollywood films of the 1980's and 1990's (a stellar example is Shekhar Kapoor's *Mr. India,* 1987, which starred Sridevi and Anil Kapoor, 3 years

before Chopra's *Lamhe* with the same superhit pair) and remains in contemporary films, too, though recently it's more geared towards the "tradition" vs. "modernity" imaginarium (see for instance, Karan Johar's *Rocky aur Rani ki Prem Kahani*, 2023).

Independent Chandni becomes independent forced by her circumstances; she was content simply to be Rohit's wife and fulfil that role to the best of her ability. There is nothing in her life prior to being jilted by Rohit that indicates she had any career aspirations. After her broken engagement, however, her choices were socially limited: either try and find another person to marry, which was impossible as she was still in love with Rohit, or make a new life for herself as a career woman in a big city and spare her small-town parents of the ignominy of having their daughter jilted. Chandni chooses the second option, and luckily for her, quite literally falls into the lap of a kind and supportive man like Lalit.

Rohit

Played to a T by Rishi Kapoor, Rohit is the pudgy, childlike love of Chandni's life. She (and the audience) is easily taken in by his fun-loving nature and this complements Chandni's own sense of humour well. He is somewhat lacking in sound judgement and easily devolves into self-pity, but makes up for that by being broad-minded to an astonishing degree insofar as social norms are concerned.

Fun-loving We see Rohit's comedic side right from his first appearance when he knocks down a tent. On first sight, he grows so enamored of Chandni that he disguises himself as a woman to sneakily attend the women-only parts of the wedding festivities. Their relationship is light-hearted and full of pranks up until the accident.

Broad-minded Unlike many other heroes of 1980's-90's Bollywood film, including his romantic rival Lalit, Rohit is surprisingly not a "mama's boy". In fact, his relationship with his parents and sister appears to be strained even before meeting Chandni; when announcing his intent to marry Chandni, he goes in with a guns blazing, "I'll marry her with or without your blessings" spiel, because he correctly anticipates what their reaction would be given her social status. Ramesh even warns his parents-in-law repeatedly that they would lose Rohit if they were abusive towards Chandni, but to no avail. In other ways, too, he is remarkably liberal about Chandni- not once does he tell her to stop singing and dancing and discard her "undignified" ways after marriage (a common trope), nor does he restrict her fashion choices and even encourages her to drink alcohol.

Petulant Rohit, at least compared to Lalit, is a man-child at best; at the first whiff of adversity, he takes practically no time to devolve into a self-pitying mess. Granted, being paralysed on one side was a blow to his independence, and he was of course burdened by the social challenges of being an invalid. But only a petulant man-child would be convinced, with no indication from his partner, that he would be a burden on her and have to live with her pity: "You want me to be dependent in you? No! It's better to die than live like this!" He thinks it is his "supreme sacrifice" to drive her away to a better life, regardless of what she wants and his own power/ agency to make that happen for her.

Lacking Judgement Rohit loves to surprise Chandni, but his spontaneity comes at the cost of good judgement. Why he thought it would be a good idea to go on a helicopter ride, and then fall from it just as it was landing, is inexplicable. As his execrable taste in ugly sweaters, four-or-five in a row in the song sequences, clashing visually against Chandni's understated and elegant attire. Jilting Chandni, the best thing to happen to him, would obviously take the cake in this department. Then after months of no contact, he suddenly arrives at her doorstep out of the blue, all cured now and confident that she's just waiting for him to take her back. He is heartbroken by her commitment to Lalit, but does that deter him from making another bad choice? Not at all! In the climactic scene, where instead of slinking away with his dignity and secret intact, he manages to down a bottle of whisky and drunkenly stumble and roll down a frighteningly tall staircase, traumatizing her (again) and breaking up his so-called best friend's wedding.

Lalit

Lalit, played by the action hero Vinod Khanna, shines as a strong, dark-and-handsome, supportive lover in *Chandni* and is in every way a foil to Rohit. While being an energetic boss at his travel agency, he has a mysterious world-weary air about him that hints of a deep sorrow. He is very close to his mother and that perhaps gives him some emotional support to be resilient in the face of repeated loss.

Canny Unlike Rohit who doesn't appear to be gainfully employed, Lalit runs his own travel agency, which is a successful business with several employees. He is dedicated to his work (several scenes when he directs Chandni) and not beyond providing a little "extra" to his loyal clients, like telling Chandni to entertain them after hours. He often goes to various foreign and exotic places for work, further underscoring his business acumen and Chopra's favourite theme of travel.

World-weary Lalit always has a mysterious, world-weary air about him; as Chandni comments, he appears to be a completely different person at work and at home. He has experienced the pain of loss; in a flashback we see his lover Devika (Juhi Chawla, looking very Sridevi-esque) die with pretty much no build-up, in his arms. Before passing away, she makes him promise that he will find a good woman to marry. Yet Rohit hasn't been able to move on; his life now is just for the sake of living. But his loss hasn't turned him into a petulant, self-pitying mess, like Rohit. He only gradually allows himself to fall in love with Chandni.

Mama's boy Again unlike Rohit, Lalit is a perfect mama's boy; but in this case his mother Lata is a strong, positive influence on him. While Lalit is initially hesitant to explore his feelings for Chandni, Lata encourages him by telling him that life has to move on and she wouldn't be there forever for him. Lata couldn't approve more of Chandni, finding the very traits that Rohit's family had found irksome to be charming and attractive; her enthusiasm of course rubs off on Lalit given how close they are.

Supportive Lalit is perceptive, attentive and kind; best of all, he's an adult. He holds space for Chandni to become comfortable around him instead of forcing her against her will. Before leaving for the trip, he tells her to be happy and have a long life, as she lights up everyone around her. She says she's afraid of her own happiness as it's ephemeral. He promises that he will change that fate. Later, after she didn't come to the airport, Lalit asks Chandni for a reason and she offers to tell him about her past. He says he's not interested in knowing her story; the past is behind us and we have to move on. But he is perceptive enough to notice, several times, that something was amiss, both with Chandni and Rohit.

Resilient At the climax, it's Lalit's turn to be crushed by sudden unwelcome knowledge: his best friend and his new fiancée are in love with each other. But does he go on a self-pitying binge? Does he speak bitter, angry words to his fiancée and friend? And does Chandni come to her senses and realize that Lalit is much better friend, lover and husband material than Rohit has ever been or could be? No, no...and no! In true Chopra fashion, "the heart wants what the heart wants", Chandni and Rohit fly off to exotic Switzerland, the trip arranged (and presumably paid for) by Lalit, leaving him crying in the dust. But with his mother's support, it seems that he will be all right.

THEMES

Romantic love: *Love triangle* Once again, "traditional" romantic love between attractive young people is the subject matter of this film, and yet again, Chopra weaves his magic to such an extent that the film remains fondly remembered and rewatched even today. Thematically, it is a much simpler and more straightforward film than his previous outings, involving no great moral dilemma (*Silsila, Kabhi Kabhie)* or social critique (*Deewaar, Trishul*). The narrative of Chandni is a typical love triangle (or quadrangle), in which A loves B, loves C and so on. This plot device is common to many of Chopra's films; although subject to various variations and permutations, it expounds the idea that love is not always reciprocated and that human relationships have foundations other than those of romantic or sexual love. The plot of the love triangle in *Chandni*, while following this well-known device, contains unexpected twists. Chandni loves Rohit all along but is very fond of Lalit and his mother and agrees to marry him out of a sense of duty.

Rohit and Chandni's romance is reminiscent in many ways of the early parts of *Daag* and *Waqt*; but Sridevi's unmissable *joie de vivre,* well-matched with Rishi Kapoor's usual exuberant mannerisms, brings an elevated comedic and romantic dimension to their relationship. They are lovers, but they also become friends who like to prank each other and are quite unbothered about hurting egos; she even calls him a "fatso". Later, Lalit offers Chandni a much-needed escape from her traumatic past by focusing on work, and while Chandni is hesitant to cross the boss-employee line, they share some sweet moments of camaraderie and a few jokes along the way. It's almost certain that Chandni has actually never fallen in love with Lalit; she mostly admires him, understands his pain of losing the love of his life and agrees to the marriage as the "best option" amongst all the others available to her. Lalit's brief but formative relationship with Devika is also marked with Juhi Chawla's characteristic *joie*

de vivre and is mirrored in many ways to the Rohit- Chandni relationship (except that ends in her death). Maybe it was mere stroke of luck that Chopra settled on the two most vivacious and uninhibited actresses with excellent comedic timing to play Chandni (Sridevi) and Devika (Juhi Chawla), as they do the heavy work of carrying the narrative forward.

Illustrative moment One of the best-remembered songs from this film, "*Tere mere honthon pe, meethe geet mitwa*" ("Sweet sweet songs on your lips and mine, my beloved") is an interesting dream sequence and as such also encapsulates romantic ideation in this film (and for this couple). Without so much as a wedding, we suddenly see Rohit and Chandni visiting Switzerland; this something that neither of their conservative families would have allowed, tipping the audience that this was likely a "dream sequence" and everything in it was fair game. There, the happy couple frolic in the snow, eat ice cream without her sharing with him and go shopping. They have a very light-hearted relationship and she even calls him "fatso". He convinces her that cognac isn't alcohol and both of them get drunk! But she passes out without giving Rohit any chance of intimacy. Chandni prances around in some thin sarees in that snowy, freezing place during the song, and wears trendy western outfits in the other scenes.

Attraction: *Voyeurism* Again, Chopra presents a heroine who is open to multiple relationships, though the fallout from *Silsila* probably prevented him from openly depicting any physical intimacy between our main romantic couple. Instead, we see Chandni idealized, repeatedly, through the eyes of the two men who love her. Rohit photographs her from the moment they meet and decorates his room with her poster-size, larger than life pictures, which he whitewashes when he claims the relationship is over. He remembers her through her bangles, also a reference to the song she sings when they first meet: "*Mere haathon mein nau churiyaan hain*" ("I have all of nine bangles on my wrists"). Lalit has a screen at work on which he watches her. Pivotal scenes repeat still images or fragmented sequences of Chandni as she is imagined by the men; similarly, Lalit's girlfriend Devika is also shown only through his memory/ imagination. In shots through glass roofs, often through rain which acts a catalyst for intensifying romantic emotions (as per traditional Indian aesthetic schema), into bedrooms and other private spaces, we get an unobstructed view of Chandni. Chandni is unable to return the "male gaze", but remains its object to an almost obsessive degree. Voyeurism was perhaps a necessary component to underplay the woman-centric plot and ensure the film's success- so long as Chandni remained an object that could be freely viewed, she could not become a potential threat challenging patriarchal ideas of romance or family.

Voyeurism is further intensified by Chopra's fixation with the name "Chandni" itself, creating a sort of superimposition effect of all the prior heroines-named-Chandni (*Daag*, *Silsila* and *Faasle*) which culminates in Sridevi's titular role. In *Chandni,* Sridevi is shown as a figure of idealised beauty, dressed in white outfits, occasionally in yellow, in styles which created a whole new fashion craze across India – the "Chandni-look"; interestingly, she wears western outfits (denim skirts and pants) in the dream sequences, accentuating the voyeuristic effect.

Illustrative example The most notable of these peeping-Tom moments recur with shots of Chandni getting seductively drenched in the rain, often wearing lightweight, translucent sarees and salwar-kameez that accentuate her figure and beauty. Chandni herself claims to love getting wet in the rain and apparently has no idea about how enticing that might be to anyone who sees her! For instance, when she purposely gets drenched in the rain in the middle of the night out on Mumbai's streets and Lalit chances upon her, he (quite justifiably from his perspective, given her earlier prudishness) reprimands her for her hypocrisy.

Family: Parenting This love triangle with Chandni as the centre of both heroes' affections is much complicated by direct involvement of the bigger family structure. The domestic space is the arena in which romantic love occurs, with love contained, prevented, and encouraged by the larger/ joint family unit. Rohit is a broad-minded boyfriend; always standing up to his family in Chandni's defence and quite unlike the typical "mama's boy" heroes common in Bollywood film and Indian society alike. Thus it doesn't come as too much of a surprise when Rohit jilts her, ostensibly because he doesn't want to live with her pity, but in truth, as he confesses to Ramesh, that he no longer had the strength to defend Chandni from the abuse of his family. Love and family are inseparable in Lalit's case as well. Although Devika passed away before marrying Lalit, they were physically and emotionally intimate enough, and this presumably had Lata's full support as we are not shown anything to the contrary. Lata also eggs Lalit on to fall in love with Chandni and try to marry her without delay, citing one of Chopra's touchstones- "life must go on". Thus, Chopra finds it expedient to remove both Rohit and Chandni's families entirely in the climactic scene just before their marriage/

honeymoon. In fact, only Ramesh, Rohit's brother-in-law, is privy to Rohit's recovery and marriage plans. Ramesh, incidentally, is the only kind person in Rohit's household, perhaps because of his subservient position as a *gharjamai* (a man who relocates to his wife's family after marriage) and with a history of being ignored, undermined and verbally abused himself, is another victim of the Indian joint family, just as Chandni was on the verge of becoming.

Illustrative moment Rohit's family interferes incessantly when Chandni arrives to the house to take care of Rohit, paying no heed to their romantic relationship and instead treating Chandni as a disgraced, "shameless" woman who was unwanted there. One morning, Chandni makes his breakfast, but his mother and sister constantly needle her with harsh words and even throw away the food she has lovingly cooked. Chandni runs away, crying. Ramesh tells her that her tears mean nothing here and this was a war she had to win. He tells her to tolerate it because Rohit will be broken to see her tormented.

Social norms: *marriage* *Chandni* is once again set among the super affluent, but they are somehow a bit lacklustre compared to Sunil Dutt's family in *Waqt,* likely going back to the feud between "old money" (colonial landed gentry) and "new money" (professionals with high incomes, like lawyers and doctors). This "old money" vibe is clear from the furnishings etc. in Rohit's house, which are old-fashioned; even his otherwise "modernised" room with walls of pictures has some very ornate furniture. Rohit's family is clearly obsessed with status, regarding financial "matching" as the major purpose of marriage; as his sister complains, she can't "show her face" in society if Rohit marries "below" their status. Added to it are certain expectations of what "proper" daughters-in-law should behave like, for instance, singing and dancing are considered inappropriate for women of high-status families, and this is an oft-repeated trope in Bollywood cinema even today. Thus, Rohit's family mercilessly hurls abuses at poor Chandni, especially after his accident, blaming her for making their son an invalid, insulting her dedication towards Rohit and everything she does for him while doing all they can to drive her out. In contrast, Lata seems to recognize Chandni's worth as a good person and not her bank balance or social status when she encourages Lalit to pursue her. As a widow who must have seen some harsh times (if we are to go by Chopra's track record), she well understands the futility of chasing status and money once they are financially comfortable through honest, hard work (Lalit's travel agency).

Illustrative moment At the engagement, Chandni only gets a lukewarm welcome and Rohit's parents sneer at the "cheap" engagement ring and other gifts that her family has brought. Rohit's sister presents Chandni with a set of ornate silver *payal* (anklets with bells), insulting her and Rohit; Rohit, hurt at this, even goes on to sarcastically respond that he will always remember what a great gift his sister was giving her only brother on his wedding. Traditionally, necklaces and bracelets are gifted on engagement from the groom's family; anklets are commonly associated with dancing girls/ prostitutes. As such, it must have irked them no end when Chandni actually wears these anklets all day while running around the house barefoot, taking care of Rohit after his paralysis.

Caring: *Sacrifice* Another core theme of the film is sacrifice, and interestingly, performed by the two men who love Chandni, instead of the usual feminine act. In fact, the only thing Chandni sacrifices willingly is her cloistered home life with her parents in her small town for an independent life as a working woman in the Mumbai megalopolis. Chopra had initially planned on a completely different plot where Rohit would jilt Chandni for no good reason but then go on to have a family with her. Rishi Kapoor, who boldly took on Rohit's role, suggested the turning point in another instance of Hollywood inspiring Bollywood:

> What am I in there? Am I a star, am I the darkness?... If you incorporate a film I've seen, *Whose Life Is It Anyway?* (J. Badham, 1981), which had Richard Dreyfuss in it, the character like that, paralysed for life, in love with the girl, the girl with him, he feels why should I spoil her life because I'm going to be an invalid. She should have a life of her own. So he starts making the girl hate him. Supreme sacrifice. Humiliates her and she walks out. Mission accomplished.

Rohit jilting Chandni with the harshest words imaginable, his "supreme sacrifice", is of course not unmixed with a healthy dose of Indian male ego where he truly considers himself an object of pity just because he is disabled, and a lack of confidence that he would be able to make Chandni happy regardless, which she herself believed wholeheartedly. In comparison, Lalit's sacrifice is much more understated and gut-wrenching; not only had he already lost the love of his life to death, but just as he was recovering from the trauma and falling in love with Chandni, that too is snatched away from him

by circumstance. In the penultimate scene, when Rohit and Chandni drive away in their wedding car, he tearfully tells Lata that the marriage would have been compromise, not love- but it's pretty clear what his own feelings were and what he had sacrificed to see Chandni being happy with Rohit.

Illustrative moment A few days after his paralysis and when Rohit has hit rock bottom of his self-pity well, Chandni comes with fresh roses to cheer him up. But she is shocked to see that all her pictures, which Rohit loved, have been whitewashed. Rohit tells her that he didn't need those reminders and didn't want to live with her pity- "You want me to be dependent in you? No! It's better to die than live like this!" He keeps adding on insults, telling her that she made him a cripple just like his family was accusing her of doing. Chandni, shocked and hurt, tries to reason with him, but the final nail is when he convinces her that he would have left her much sooner if she were paralysed. That breaks her spirit and she finally dredges up some self-respect, replying that she pities his petty mindset. He can live in hatred, she says, but she will live in love. And then she leaves, crying angrily.

Disability Chopra has a track record of representing disability on screen, be it the hero's mental illness in *Ittefaq* or the food-stall owner who uses crutches in *Trishul.* Famously, we of course have Sanjeev Kumar playing a disabled main character, Thakur Baldev Singh, whose arms were cut off by the villain, Gabbar (*Sholay*, 1975) and Sridevi's own *Sadma* (1983) where she played the main role of a child-woman suffering from amnesia. But rarely do we see a romantic hero who is disabled, as Rohit is here, playing second fiddle to the heroine. In fact, Chopra's first choice, Anil Kapoor, rejected the film as he was certain it would negatively impact his career if he portrayed an invalid in a wheelchair. And Rishi Kapoor undeniably portrays the conflicting and overwhelming emotions of suddenly becoming disabled with aplomb. That said, there is very little positivity or empowerment attached to the state of being disabled in *Chandni.* Even though Chandni vows to support Rohit by "being his legs" and claims not to recognize any intrinsic change in him as a person, Rohit considers his disability negatively and wallows in self-pity for a good part of the film. He regretfully tells Ramesh that his only choice was to drive Chandni away as he could not protect her from his abusive family nor make her happy. The clear implication here is that as a disabled person, he was unable to break from his natal family functionally, since he isn't seen pursuing any income-generating occupation (photography seems to be his hobby). The possibility of them building a life together, regardless of his paralysis, does not seem valid to Rohit and he vows that he will try and win Chandni back *only* if he is cured. Thus he heads to Switzerland, which once again represents healing (a high-tech cure combined with a miracle), plus a fantasy holiday destination with romantic songs and a site of bonding/ friendship with Lalit. Upon being cured, Rohit again pursues Chandni but gives up when he learns about Lalit's proposal and Chandni's indebtedness to him. Even then, the fear of another accident-causing paralysis (or worse) compels Chandni to leave her wedding *mandap* (a small area where the rituals are completed)) without a second thought- it is considered inauspicious for bride or groom to leave that space before the rituals are completed- leading to the climactic twist.

Illustrative moment Two pivotal moments illustrate Rohit's experience of disability perfectly, and bookend the pivotal separation scene. After Chandni fails to convince Rohit of her intentions, they spend a tormented night away from each other. He imagines her dancing in a pristine white classical dance dress in a beautiful field (only instrumental music here; this sequence if often compared to a Tandav dance). Frustrated, he starts hitting his right hand in a vain effort to regain feeling and takes off the engagement ring. Later, after he has successfully driven her away, Rohit wallows in his depression in the rainy weather. He imagines another dream song with both of them dancing in the rain, Chandni again wearing her signature white outfits. That renewed dream of being able-bodied once again perhaps inspires him to seek rehabilitation therapy in Switzerland.

A woman-centric film *Chandni* was all about Sridevi; proof that a woman could carry a romance just as well as a man. Interestingly, however, it didn't do this by radically changing the rules of romance or the traditional hero-heroine dynamic. Chandni is still the sweet, submissive, nurturing "girl-next-door", the one who is pursued and reacts to pursuit. All she wants is to fall in love and be with her lover. She is not ambitious; she has no career goals or big dreams beyond having a "happily ever after" with Rohit. But she is the character we follow for the whole film, she is the one who carries our sympathies with her, and she is the one who ultimately gets to decide what she wants in the end. By structuring it this way, and yet not significantly changing the master narrative, Chopra encourages us to reconsider all the other "traditional" romances we have watched, in which we follow the hero while the heroine is forgotten for long stretches, and to think about what the heroine must have been doing and feeling and thinking during those times. For instance, in *Silsila*, we strictly follow Amit's (Amitabh's) perspective; Chandni (Rekha) is forgotten until she re-appears in his life and Shobha

(Jaya) is only relevant in the ways her actions and knowledge affect Amit. In the broader context, *Qayamat Se Qayamat Tak* (1988, a reworking of the Romeo and Juliet trope) and *Maine Pyar Kiya* (1989, another story of love complicated by family differences) were groundbreaking because they gave equal weight to the hero and heroine's stories, but Chandni was in some ways even more radical by making us forget about the hero entirely and just focusing on our heroine. In fact, Chopra's first choice of hero, Anil Kapoor, actually rejected the film as, "(it) Felt too weak, too women-oriented at this stage of my career."

Illustrative moments Two instances underscore Chandni's quiet self-confidence and ability to carry the narrative forward, even though she is the very picture of a nurturing, sweet "girl-next-door". The first is when, after realizing that she is actually in love, she admires herself in the mirror and tells Rohit over the phone that she is loving herself because she loves him. Being jilted by Rohit thus pushes her to regain a sense of self/ identity beyond her romance, and she does this, in typical (Indian) fashion, by achieving financial independence. When Lalit gives her the job, she is elated, saying that she is free and alive now, finally.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1) In your eyes, what is the single most attractive trait that Chandni has? And how do her two suitors match that energy?

2) Discuss the disparity between Rohit and Lalit's families' reaction to Chandni, with examples. What do you think could be reasons behind this?

3) Is *Chandni* truly a woman-focused film? Is it a feminist film? In which ways does it *not* challenge patriarchy or "traditional" family values? Discuss.

4) Discuss the bromance between Rohit and Lalit. Do you think their instant friendship is contrived or natural?