HUMANITIES INSTITUTE
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DAAG: A POEM OF LOVE (THE STIGMA) (1973)

Yash Chopra (1932-2012)

Hindi language

film link:
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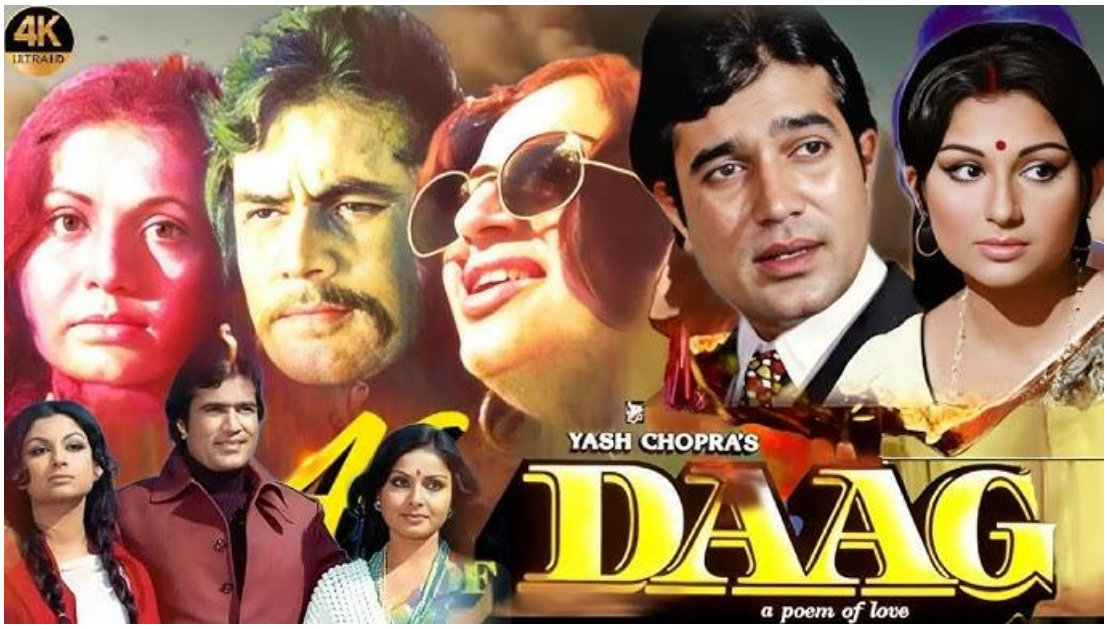

OVERVIEW

Director Yash Chopra (1932-2012) 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 *Dilwale Dulhania Le Jayenge* (*The Brave-Hearted Wins the Bride*, 1995) 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 Yash Chopra's *Daag: A Poem of Love* is a tale of star-crossed lovers Sunil (Rajesh Khanna) and Sonia (Sharmila Tagore), who encounter all kinds of trials, obstacles and separations on their way to happily ever-after. Over the years, the film has acquired cult status as a classic triangle of a man caught between two women. The story is adapted from *Maili Chandni (The Stained Moon)* an Urdu novel by Gulshan Nanda, who himself drew inspiration from Thomas Hardy's *The Mayor of*

Casterbridge. Nanda was the go-to novelist for Hindi film screenwriters in the 1960s and 1970s, giving us more than a dozen big hits of the period. Chopra was to direct *Daag* for his brother B.R Chopra and had been working on it with Akhtar-ul-Iman (famous Urdu poet and screenwriter) and others in the story department and the script was almost complete. When Chopra was in London on his honeymoon, he saw *Sunflower* (1970), starring Sophia Loren, where a married soldier meets another girl when posted overseas and marries her during the war. Chopra started rewriting his film script on his return and eventually made this the first production of his own company, Yash Raj Films. At the 21st Filmfare Awards, *Daag: A Poem of Love* received seven nominations, including Best Film, Best Actor (Khanna) and Best Actress (Tagore), Best Music Director (Laxmikant Pyarelal duo) and Best Male Playback Singer (Kishore Kumar). It won 2 awards – Best Director (Chopra) and Best Supporting Actress (Raakhee). The music dominated the charts for the year and at least three songs are still well-remembered today. The film was later remade in Telugu as *Vichitra Jeevitham* (*Strange Life*, 1978).

Background Rajesh Khanna was at the height of his stardom when *Daag* was made and it is to his credit that he signed a remarkably woman-oriented film, one where his character was written so ambiguously— it is not easy to play murderer and bigamist and gain audience sympathy. The film was censored on the day of Khanna's surprise wedding to Dimple Kapadia just a month before the film's release, while Raakhee married Gulzar at the beginning of April. Gulshan Rai and the distributors praised the film, but thought it very risky. Their last sentence in a review worried Chopra: "Although the film is very beautiful, it may not do well." *Daag* was released nationally in April 1973, and was an instant hit. Not only did it go on to be one of the highest-grossing films of the year, Yash Chopra passed his first litmus test as a producer and made a film with a controversial plot on his own terms. It was also the first film to be praised in terms which have become standard in discussions of Chopra's films today: its gloss, its drama and its depiction of complicated emotional relationships, without excessive melodrama or gratuitous deployment of villains and comedians.

LIST OF CHARACTERS

Sunil Kohli / Sudhir	The hero of our story
Sonia	Sunil's separated wife
KC and Malati	Sonia's uncle and aunt who raised her
Chandni	Sunil's second "wife"
Dheeraj Kapoor	Son of Sunil's boss
DSP Singh	A police officer
Deewan	Chandni's father
Pinky and Rinku	Chandni's and Sonia's children, respectively

SYNOPSIS

College sweethearts Sunil and Sonia want to marry but face obstacles from Sonia's aunt due to Sunil being of unknown parentage. They have a discreet ceremony attended only by Sonia's uncle, who is a lawyer, and then move to Sunil's new workplace at a hill station (Shimla). They are welcomed by Dheeraj Kapoor, Sunil's boss's son, who takes an unholy interest in Sonia. He gets a chance to rape her the very next day, but Sunil returns from work unexpectedly and fights him, leading to Dheeraj's accidental death. Sunil is found guilty (involuntary manslaughter) and sentenced to 5 years in prison, but his prison van gets in an accident with, apparently, no survivors. Sonia finds that she is pregnant and decides to leave home rather than put up with her aunt's abuse. She finds work at a hill station school and raises the child, Rinku, single-handedly for 5 years as a widow. But somehow, her past catches up with her and she is fired. Chandni, daughter of a local wealthy businessman Deewan, comes to Sonia's rescue and takes her home to help care for her own daughter, Pinky. There's a shocking revelation— Sunil, now calling himself Sudhir, is Chandni's husband! Sonia feels betrayed and rues her faithfulness, but Sunil explains that he had to take on a new identity and married Chandni to save her honour as she was going to be an unwed mother. They reach an uneasy equilibrium as Sonia doesn't want Sudhir to blemish the good name of her benefactor, Chandni. Sudhir is tapped for city mayor and coincidentally is recognized by the same police officer (DSP Singh) who had earlier arrested him for Dheeraj's murder. Singh confronts Sudhir, who finally reveals all in front of his electorate. The murder trial is re-opened. In court, Chandni confesses that their marriage was only in name and Dheeraj baited her with false promises and got her pregnant. Sonia's uncle argues on Sudhir's behalf as the defence attorney that no man would have done anything different when faced with a rape attempt on his wife, sister, mother or daughter and that Dheeraj's

character was nefarious to begin with. Sudhir is acquitted and continues to play father to both children, living together with Sonia and Chandni.

SCENES



Sunil and Sonia are in love While title credits roll, a group of young friends arrive at a hill station bungalow for a vacation. Sweethearts Sunil and Sonia enjoy playing carrom, a bonfire, horse riding, frolicking in the snow, followed by a romantic song, *"Hum aur Tum/Khush hain youn aaj milke*" ("You and I/ Are happy meeting like this today") on a snowy mountainside. Sunil and Sonia chat about leaving the next day. He jokes about them dying together, with headlines in the newspaper, when she says she doesn't want to be separated: people will build them a grand tomb and celebrate their romance for aeons.



Sonia's uncle approves of their match Sunil gets a job at Kapoor Enterprises and comes to meet Sonia. He whistles from outside, which confuses Sonia's uncle and aunt. Sonia's uncle (K. C. Khanna) suspects it's for his still pretty wife (Malti Khanna) but she suspects something else, as she disapproves of Sonia's romance with Sunil. Sunil has to relocate for the job, so he says he will marry Sonia and take her. Sunil goes to meet K. C. Khanna, who is a lawyer, with a pretend problem of wanting to marry a girl with no parents and charms him with his sweet words, then asks for his blessings. K. C. asks about Sunil's family but he has none. K. C. says the "judge", Sonia's aunt Malti, is out of town, but all other parties agree. Sunil bumps into Malti and says some charming words before running away.



Malti disapproves of Sonia's marriage Malti has fixed Sonia's marriage with someone else. Malti doesn't care about Sonia's love for Sunil and insists Sonia will marry where Malti wishes and that she's a bad influence on her own daughters. KC says Malti shouldn't interfere. They argue. Malti says she will beat Sunil up if he comes with a wedding procession. Sunil and Sonia perform a song on stage at their college youth festival "*Ab maa roothe ya baba*" ("Let Mummy or Daddy be cross/ I have said 'yes' to marry you")



Sunil and Sonia get married They have an intimate Hindu ceremony with no family present, only KC in attendance. He gives them his blessings and some jewellery from Sonia's (deceased) mother. They ride on the plane where they share a blanket. She asks him if he will love her and he jokes that he will write it in blood. They arrive at Kulu, Sunil's workplace. It's raining when the couple, drenched, arrive at the Kapoor mansion. They are greeted by Dheeraj Kapoor, who is drinking with his friends. Dheeraj immediately takes a (lascivious) interest in Sonia. Dheeraj has a room organized for them in the main building for the night. He gossips with his friends about what a "fire-cracker" Sonia is and that "money can buy everything… it dents all virtues". They laugh about judging a person by their looks.

First night together Alone in their room, Sunil and Sonia romance some more. Sonia is very shy for their first night together; Sunil quips, "The shy one has broken luck/ the shameless one eats milk and cream". Later, Sunil tells her there is no one else for them except each other. They talk about babies and she wants the boy to be like him, with magic in his voice, and he wants a doe-eyed daughter like her. After a sweet wake-up, Sunil has to head to work.

Sunil heads to his first day at work On his way to work, he meets Jagdish Kapoor, Dheeraj's father and owner of the company. Jagdish tells Dheeraj to bring money to the office to pay the employees. Sunil has forgotten his wallet, which Sonia notices. She hums while showering, arousing Dheeraj who can hear her. Sunil realizes he forgot his wallet and heads back.

Dheeraj tries to rape Sonia Just as Sonia emerges out of her shower, Dheeraj comes in, asking to take money out of the safe in the room. They make small talk about the peaceful location. Dheeraj stares at her and then asks for help holding the bundle of notes. He then tells her he will give it all to her, but she throws them down and tells him to leave. He keeps making advances and then tries to tear off her clothes, saying that no one will hear her.



Dheeraj dies Sunil returns just then and fights with Dheeraj for some time. While they're trying to strangle each other, Dheeraj grabs a burning stick from the fireplace and tries to hit Sunil, but he catches it and beats Dheeraj with it. Dheeraj escapes outside the room, takes some more hits, falls on a sharp gardening instrument and dies. A house caretaker calls the police, who arrest Sunil for theft and murder.

Sunil is jailed In court, the lawyer argues that Sunil was robbing the safe when he was apprehended by Dheeraj and then murdered him. Sunil says that it was a lie and he was actually trying to save Sonia from getting raped. The lawyer argues for Dheeraj's character integrity in letting them stay in his own bedroom and says Sunil is giving a false statement. He presents Jagdish and the household help as an eyewitnesses, who all saw the money on the floor. Sunil tries hard to convince the judge: "Is there a man alive that will watch his mother, wife, sister or daughter get molested and do nothing?" But no one listens to Sunil's pleas and he is sentenced. Before being taken away, Sunil repeats his catchphrase, "Don't go on words, Understand the meaning, Ok" and apologizes for hurting and disappointing Sonia. She will wait for him her whole life, she tearfully says. He is taken away. K. C. comes to Sonia's aid.

Prison van accident On the prison van, the other prisoners blame the woman for tricking Sunil: "The woman for whom you killed will find herself a new lover in two days" and so on. Sunil beats them up. There is rain and thunder and the van goes off a cliff in an accident. Newspapers publish that all of them on the van are dead; reading it, Sonia faints.

Sonia raises her son The doctor says that Sonia is pregnant. Malati curses her and argues with KC that she wishes Sonia would die as all she brought was trouble; now he brought the killer's wife here. The world would think it's a bastard. Malati says that KC has to choose who will stay, Sonia or herself with their daughters. Sonia, overhearing their altercation, chooses to leave quietly without informing anyone. Sonia gives birth to a boy. She tells the baby that she will fulfil all his father's wishes for him. She travels again, this time to the mountains, and raises him there. She sings the song "*Hawa Chali kaise*" ("No one knows why the wind blows/ except him") while we see her life as a schoolteacher, playing with her students all wearing red blazers. She only wears a widow's white now.

Sonia is fired at school Sonia helps her son, Rinku, and another girl, Pinky, with their lunch and is shocked when Rinku repeats Sunil's catchphrase "Don't go on words, Understand the meaning, Ok". She is called to the principal's office for a meeting. The principal convinces the other teachers that they shouldn't let a killer's wife teach in their school as she will be a bad influence, not to mention undermining the prestige of their school. Pinky's mother, Chandni, makes a case for Sonia, saying that she was a great teacher who had worked there for five years. Chandni makes a case for clemency for Sonia as everyone has a past. Sonia's only other supporter even compares the situation to Christ on the cross. Sonia, walking in, accepts being fired.

Chandni takes Sonia in Chandni apologizes to Sonia, who says she's very grateful for her support. She invites Sonia to work at her home as a manager and friend and their kids would be friends, too. Later, Rinku and Pinky play house together while their mothers knit and embroider. Pinky mentions a house for Rinku's dad, which saddens Sonia. Chandni consoles her and says she is young and beautiful with a small child and Rinku needs a father. Sonia says she has loved only once and never will, again.

Sunil returns as Sudhir Chandi's husband and Pinky's father returns. It is Sunil with a handlebar moustache. He sees Rinku and thinks him very cute and he chats easily with the boy. Sonia comes to look for her son and they recognize each other but stay silent and don't let Chandni know. Chandni introduces her husband as Sudhir. Sudhir asks Chandni about Sonia and hears of her past and current misfortunes (being a killer's widow) and about Rinku. Chandni says she pities Sonia and respects her dedication to her one



love, even if he's dead. Sudhir maintains an impassive face, but the tumultuous soundtrack reveals his raging emotions. Elsewhere, Rinku praises Sudhir to his mother, who keeps staring sadly and starts crying when he says, "If my daddy was alive, would he have loved me just as much?" Late at night, Sonia, crying and holding her wedding photo, sings "*Jab Bhi Jee Chaahe*" ("People set up a new life whenever they feel like it/ they put on many new masks on one face") while Sudhir ponders silently elsewhere. At the end of the song she regrets staying alone for so long.



Sudhir's Story Sonia tries to leave with Rinku that very same night. But Sudhir stops her and makes her stay, telling her that he is her husband. Sonia replies that her husband is dead; he's only alive to be the joy in his other family's life. She also had desires which she threw away in his remembrance, but he forgot everything about her. Sudhir replies that he remembers everything and tells his side of the story. We see the events in flashback. Sunil says that after the van caught on fire and catapulted down the hill, he somehow found himself alive. It was already night. He felt that God had given him a new life, seeing his innocence. He found himself handcuffed to another inmate and they staggered though the tall grass and hung from train tracks over a bridge, just before a train rolled over and cut he handcuffs. Then he swam to safety. He waited for the other inmate, but when he didn't appear he thought that he must have lied about knowing how to swim and drowned. But the stigma of the handcuffs still hung on his wrist. He was able to find a local blacksmith and threatens him to remove it. But the blacksmith wanted to give him up to the police. They fought and Sunil won, then made the blacksmith break open the handcuffs. Sunil then makes his way back to K. C.'s house where he says he's innocent. But Sonia had already left home by then. K. C. tells him about Sonia's pregnancy and that they haven't been able to track her down. Malati calls the police and tries to get Sunil arrested but K. C. helps him escape. He keeps running over tiled roofs and is shot at, finally again jumping into the water.

Sunil meets Chandni Then he started searching for her madly everywhere. His life had become a void. One day, he meets Chandni and her father, Deewan, on a train. Deewan was having a stroke and he helped them off the train, then missed getting back on as Deewan was still in pain and took them back home. Chandni tells him to rest but he says he will stay with Deewan overnight. Chandni accepts his help gratefully. But when Sunil tries to leave he sees a group of police cars flashing by and knows, "The four walls of a jail, handcuffs and a hangman's noose await you...no better place to hide".

Sunil becomes Sudhir He returns to Deewan and spoon feeds him some water. Deewan says that there aren't many good men like him in the world. He says his name is Sudhir. He consoles Deewan, who wants to die at will and not have the luxury to spend money to die slowly. He tells her that a man "soiled" his daughter with a bastard child and she would soon be an unwed mother; how can they face society like that? Chandni also cannot "adopt different means" (i.e., abortion) as it would endanger her life. Deewan cries that he doesn't know why he's being punished like this.



Sudhir decides to marry Chandni Sudhir speaks to Chandni, who tells her that she was in love. But love turned to crime and she's the root of her father's woes. Sudhir wants to help by giving his name to the baby, as that is all he has. But he won't truly marry her; it would be an understanding between them forever. Soon they are wed and Chandni says she will be forever faithful to his name. She offers to tell him her story, but he doesn't want to know and tells her to not ask for his past either. He hasn't touched Chandni ever.



Sonia and Sudhir reunite Sonia wonders why people who can't write their own stories should be punished, and Sudhir has no right to snatch Chandni's respectability away from her. She is afraid the police would catch him and she'd be widowed again. They decide to keep staying there. At a house party, some performers sing and dance to the best remembered song from the film "*Ni main yaar maanana ni*" ("I will adore my lover/ No matter how people gossip") while Sudhir watches with his family and Sonia. At the end, all of them get up and start dancing except Sonia, while Sudhir whirls with Chandni then falls down comically.

Sister-wives Later, Chandni tells Sonia, who's cooking, that they must have been sisters in a previous life. Sonia replies they could have been co-wives and Chandni is actually fine with that. Sonia says that she is very grateful to Chandni but cannot tell her why.

Sudhir tapped to be Mayor Deewan and the older generation chat over drinks about how they should retire. One of them proposes that Sudhir should be mayor and the others agree. Sudhir doesn't want to, but they say his opinion is irrelevant and shoo him away. Deewan says he wants to have a school built in Haridwar in Chandni's mother's memory.





Divergent desires Deewan is off to a trip to Haridwar, and Chandni goes with him to pray for a son. Sudhir, Sonia and the kids stay behind. Sudhir takes Sonia on a long drive and laments at her bare hair parting without the *sindoor* (vermilion mark on married Hindu women's hair parting). He sings another fondly remembered romantic song "*Mere dil mein aaj kya hain*" ("What my heart years for today/ I will tell you.") Elsewhere, Chandni prays to Shiva to make Sudhir "mine in the real sense" but the flowers in her hand blow away, indicating some bad luck. Sudhir, sitting with both kids in bed, chats with them and tells Rinku that he will become his daddy too. It gets very stormy and Sudhir decides to stay behind at the farmhouse with Sonia and the kids (how they got there and where the kids were when they were romancing is anybody's guess). After the kids are asleep, Sudhir and Sonia finally spend the night together. Sudhir says all the walls between them have come down. Deewan and Chandni return home to find no one there; everyone was at the vacation house. The next morning, on the way to his mayoral election, Sudhir tells Sonia that he will tell Deewan and Chandni everything. At his swearing in ceremony, Sudhir recites a heartfelt poem, "Think again, how will I bear the burden of all this love...save some of today's love for tomorrow/ I am nothing. I am nobody" and the audience applauds.

Chandni confronts Sonia Just after Sudhir leaves, Chandni comes to the vacation house and sees the kids sleeping and the main bedroom in disarray with Sudhir's and Sonia's clothes scattered all over. She finds and confronts Sonia with her earring from the bed as proof of her hypocrisy, saying "A woman loves only once". Chandni says she's ashamed of herself having trusted Sonia and tells her to leave before Sudhir returns.

Sudhir and Chandni argue Sudhir returns home drunk and talks with Chandni about being a great man in office. He asks about Sonia and Rinku, and Chandni says that everyone knows what he's up to and he should have a care about his reputation and Deewan and her honour. Chandni calls Sonia a vulgar woman, angering Sudhir, who defends her. Chandni keeps pressing, saying that he was fickle and didn't care about her even though she had been with him for five years. He reminds her that he only gave her his name. "What does she have that I don't?" Chandni tearfully yells. Sudhir finally tells her the truth that Sonia is his wife.

Chandni prevents Sonia from leaving Sonia waits with Rinku at the train station. Chandni comes and apologizes to her and asks her to return and that she knows the truth. Sonia says that she herself is helpless and can't support anyone else. Chandni wants to "share our sorrows... you with a right and I with a social norm". If Sudhir leaves behind Sonia, Chandni would lose everything.

Inspector Singh arrest Sudhir Inspector Singh, who arrested Sudhir, is Deewan's old friend; he coincidentally drops into the party. He is now the district superintendent. After a round of introductions, it's Sudhir and Sonia's turn. DSP Singh seems to recognize them but doesn't mention anything. Later, he gathers details about Deewan and Sudhir from the local cop and also phones head office about details from the Kapoor murder and has the files sent over. Inspector Singh has a drink with him at the party. Singh steals the cup with Sudhir's fingerprints on it and matches it to the murderer's print on file. Singh gets back the formal fingerprint report, which is a match. The local cop advises Singh to be careful as Sudhir is the new mayor and the influential Deewan's son-in-law. Singh is conflict between duty and friendship. Suddenly, Singh comes to arrest Sudhir. Deewan tries to defend Sudhir, but Singh says that he has proof that Sudhir is a murderer by name of Sunil. He asks Sonia if Sudhir is her husband and Dheeraj's murderer or not. Sonia denies it! Singh browbeats Sonia, but she stands firm that a woman can never make a mistake in recognizing her husband. But Sudhir confesses in front of everyone that he is Sonia's husband, and as innocent of murder now as

he was five years ago.

Sunil is at court In court, Singh says that he and the judge were both present the last time. Sunil says he would have rather served in jail instead of the trials he endured while living like a fugitive. The prosecutor describes Sunil's history and questions his so-called "trials" since he's enjoying life with two beautiful women and is set to inherit Deewan's wealth.



Chandni's testimony Chandni shouts that it was all lies and is called to the stand to give her testimony. She says that Sunil had no greed for wealth even though he had access to her father's vast estate. She further says that Dheeraj was a lowlife "rascal with obnoxious habits" who made a hobby of baiting women with wealth or marriage. The prosecutor says that Chandni is lying. Chandni says that Sunil was not her real husband. If she kept quiet and let the innocent Sunil be punished, she wouldn't ever be able to forgive herself. Sunil only gave his name to her daughter, Pinky; he has never even touched her. Then Chandni drops the bombshell: Pinky's real father is Dheeraj Kapoor. Dheeraj baited Chandni with promises of marriage, got her pregnant and refused to marry her, even accusing her of sleeping around and being pregnant with another man's child. If Sunil hadn't appeared right then, she would have died by suicide. K.C., defence attorney to Sunil, wraps up the argument with Dheeraj's rape attempt on Sonia, Sunil's good character and Dheeraj's accidental death by falling on a garden hoe. "No law in the world looks upon such an action as a crime", he says.

Sunil acquitted The Judge agrees with K. C. and acquits Sunil of all charges. Sunil thanks Chandni for her love that made her shoulder the stigma of being an unmarried mother. She says their relationship was one of shared pain. Sonia proposes that all three of them continue to stay together, as both children need their father: "This relationship is immortal now". Deewan and K. C. hug.



Closing scene Sunil rides a horse with Rinku on his shoulders and Pinky sitting in front of him, while Sonia, Chandni and Deewan enjoy the beautiful weather under a garden umbrella. Sonia is now wearing a bright blue sari, while Chandni is dressed in widow's white.

CHARACTER ANALYSIS

Sunil Sunil is the unassuming hero of the film, a strong yet ambiguous role. He starts out as a charming, overconfident but loving youth who is reformed as a kind, responsible father through the obstacles he faces and the pain of being separated from the love of his life. His sense of justice also grows stronger as the plot progresses.

Charming At the beginning of the film, we see Sunil with his candid sense of humour, joking about lover's suicide, telling Sonia, "Don't go on words, Understand the meaning, ok?" and overconfidently approaching K. C. to ask for his blessings to marry Sonia. He exudes a casual charm that captivates everyone he meets, with the exception of Malati, though he is excellent son-in-law material. Even in hiding as Sudhir, he manages to charm Deewan and his old buddies to make them elect him mayor, steal Chandni's heart and be a funny and loving parent to Pinky.

Romantic Sudhir's chemistry with Sonia is simply electrifying, unlike many other hit-or-miss pairings in Bollywood. Their gestures, smiles, unsaid emotions, even grief, light up every scene in which they appear together. And while bedroom scenes are left up to the audience's imagination (typical Bollywood), the little that we see has sparks flying everywhere.

Protective If there's one thing the otherwise flippant Sunil is serious about, it's the love of his life, Sonia. When he accidentally returns home and finds Dheeraj about to rape her, he doesn't hesitate for a second before beating him up, then throwing him out of the window. He would surely have killed Dheeraj with his own hands had the villain not fallen on a hoe and impaled himself. Soon after, he beats up the other prisoners in the van when they slander Sonia. Then, even after years with Chandni, when she calls Sonia names, not knowing their true relationship, he doesn't hesitate to put her in her place. And at the scene of his mayoral inauguration, he reveals the truth in front of everyone so that Sonia wouldn't have to suffer a widow's fate any more.

Kind Sunil is naturally kind-hearted, as seen early on when he waits for the prisoner that he

escaped with for hours, but the poor man had drowned. He also doesn't harm the blacksmith even though he tries to trick him and get him arrested. Then, on the train, he helps Chandni and Deewan, who was having a stroke, return safely home even though that was not his train stop. He treats everyone he meets kindly and with compassion and respect, especially the "fallen" and "stained" Chandni, who was an unwed mother. He didn't even want to know about her past or ever take advantage of her sexually.

Righteous Like most of Chopra's heroes, Sunil has a strong sense of justice that may or may not align with the law. He knew he was innocent of killing Dheeraj, so it didn't weigh on his conscience too much to remain in hiding rather than give himself up to the police after he was miraculously saved from the van accident. But soon he realized he had no way of tracking down Sonia and had to spend his years in a sham marriage with Chandni, not knowing even whether Sonia was alive or not. This caused him comparable grief to having been in prison, as he says in the final courtroom scene, but that didn't stop him from revealing his identity.

Sonia Like Sunil, Sonia starts off as a girlish, innocent heroine, head-over-heels in love and played to a tee by the heartthrob Sharmila Tagore. But even early on, we see her determination and strong will, which carries her though the many misfortunes in her life, from losing her husband, home, job, and even a second home with Chandni and Pinky. She is also faithful and when she learns of Sunil's second life, naturally finds it hard to accept.

Innocent At the beginning of the film. Sonia is the very picture of youth and innocence. Sunil and Sonia romance in the stunning snowy Shimla landscape, and she naively tells him that she wished that time would stand still forever and so on. Even after marriage, she is innocent enough to not have noticed Dheeraj's lascivious stares until the last moment. But the rape attempt scars her and she quickly attains a certain gravitas as a young widow.

Strong-willed From the scene where she defies Malati to marry Sunil with no melodrama, just a quiet statement of what she will and will not do, to the part where she leaves the safety of that home rather than destroy it, she has an agency seen so rarely Bollywood heroines of the time. She makes her own choices and lives by them, quite happily, in fact. Yes, she is a widow and a single mother, but there is no martyrdom in her becoming a school teacher, or raising her son alone. For instance, she is not shown at the ubiquitous sewing machine, or crying buckets over her son as she puts him to bed, but rather frolicking in the snow with a bunch of happy schoolchildren.

Faithful Despite her short-lived marriage, Sonia decides to remain faithful to Sunil's memory; as she tells Chandni, "*aurat sirf ek baar pyaar karti hai… baar baar nahin*" ("a woman loves but once, not again and again"). And when they reunite, she is justifiably shocked and betrayed by Sunil's actions, revealing her broken heart in the song "*Jab Bhi Jee Chaahe*" ("People set up a new life whenever they feel like it/ they put on many new masks on one face"). But she also forgives him when she learns the rationale behind Sunil's behaviour and has no qualms in resuming her romance/ marital life from where it abruptly ended earlier. Of course, her excessive faithfulness was perhaps clearly all for the plot; as she herself says, she was young and pretty so she shouldn't have had any problems in finding another person to love and marry.

Chandni Chandni, played by Rakhee in one of her earliest roles, is a perfect foil to Sonia and a balanced third angle in their love triangle. She doesn't let her wealth and status come in the way of her loving and compassionate nature, though she is also somewhat selfish and co-dependent.

Compassionate Our introduction to Chandni is when she argues passionately to save Sonia's job at the boarding school, making a case for everyone having a past and that her husband's crimes were not her fault. When she fails, she graciously invites Sonia into her home as a friend and caregiver to Pinky.

Wealthy Her entire demeanour points to her wealthy background and upper-class status, though she wears it lightly. She's the apple of her father's eye and thinks nothing of owning several luxurious houses and cars and has clearly never had to worry about making ends meet.

Selfish Perhaps her wealth and status also made her somewhat careless and naive in thinking that pre-marital sex with Dheeraj was a good idea. In conservative Indian society, any daughter who brings shame upon the household name and besmirches its honour is considered selfish, at the very least, for considering her own happiness above that of her family. Her selfish act causes Deewan enough stress to have a heart attack. Even though Deewan is wealthy and could easily have used his

money to “hush up” some people, the gossip-mongers wouldn’t leave them alone had Chandni been an unwed mother. What happens after the end of the film, therefore, remains a mystery.

Co-dependent Compared to Sonia, Chandni certainly seems weaker and more codependent. Her inner desire is to always be loved and desired, even when the situation isn’t in her favour. This led her to get involved with Dheeraj and be easily misled by his promises. But instead of charting her path as an independent, unwed single mother, she happily grasped Sunil’s helping hand, even though she must have guessed that he had a dark past. Even after having revealed the scandal at the very end, she still remains in an ambiguous codependent situation with Sunil, who it appears is still raising Pinky.

THEMES

Sexual Violence *The Stigma* is thematically a bold film and an early example of Chopra’s engagement with taboo social constructs, though, in his typical style, he steers clear of proposing anything too radical as a solution or putting the audience in any severe moral/ ethical dilemma. Postcolonial upper class/ upwardly mobile Indian society, conservative as it is when it comes to any discussion of sexuality (especially of the premarital kind), has shied away from topics like rape, but here Chopra brings not one but two rapes front and centre.

First of course is Sonia’s attempted rape, which is shown as a cat-and-mouse chase, to a rousing background score. But all of Sunil’s pleas fall on deaf ears in court when he tries to argue that he was saving his wife from Dheeraj. The prosecuting attorney upholds Dheeraj’s good character and sweeps the rape angle under the rug, arguing instead that Sunil was after Dheeraj’s money. This is a typically patriarchal response; within the moral universe of the film (and Bollywood) it wouldn’t do to accuse a married woman (and especially the heroine) to have a flirtatious character that tempted the rapist or the usual victim-shaming cues such as she was wearing skimpy clothes, etc.. In fact, Sonia isn’t even questioned as to the veracity of the rape claim, thus silencing her voice and making her helpless. It’s not uncommon for wealthy and powerful men in India to covet the married wives of others, so there is certainly some permissibility involved there as well.

Then there is Chandni’s actual rape- though it would be hard to technically classify it as such since Chandni was in a consensual relationship with Dheeraj, albeit under false pretences. Dheeraj got her pregnant and refused to marry her, even accusing her of sleeping around and being pregnant with another man’s child, in a typical instance of victim shaming and gaslighting as is usual with Chopra’s villains. But insofar as any sexual relations outside of marriage are taboo in upper and middle-class Indian society, Chandni is guilty of “staining” herself, but she is not a “fallen” woman as she was deceived. Thus her confession at the end is an extremely courageous act (especially given her relatively weak/ codependent character) that brought the stigma she escaped back on herself. But there, too, is the extenuating circumstance of being victimized by a clearly villainous womanizer that prevents society from pointing too many fingers at her.

Illustrative moment: Dheeraj builds up his attempt to seduce Sonia deliberately by enticing her with money. Walking into the room right after she was freshly showered, Dheeraj stares at her lasciviously and then asks for help holding the bundle of notes that he took out of the safe. He then tells her he will give it all to her, but she throws the money on the ground and tells him to leave. He keeps making advances, chasing her and tries to tear off her clothes, saying that no one will hear her as it is such a quiet and peaceful place.

Motherhood After rape / consensual sex, the next obstacle to be navigated by our heroines is pregnancy and motherhood. Sonia and Chandni handle it very differently, though both of them brave the possibility of crushing social stigma. In fact, *Daag* would have been quite the path-breaking feminist film had not the entirety of the two heroines’ concerns and conversations revolved around a man.

Sonia gets pregnant, in typical Bollywood fashion, right after her wedding night (or was it before?), but then misfortune strikes and Sunil is declared a murderer. On the prison van, the other prisoners blame her for tricking Sunil without knowing anything about her, “The woman for whom you killed will find herself a new lover in two days” and so on. Stuck with an abusive aunt who doesn't hesitate to wish her dead, call her a killer’s wife and the unborn child a bastard, she chooses to fend for herself alone by leaving. Dressed in widow’s weeds, she gives birth at a faraway hospital all alone, then manages to find a respectable job. When her past catches up to her even there, she has to again suffer the slander of bringing disrepute to the organization and being a bad influence as a murderer’s widow.

She again readies herself to leave before being taken in by Chandni. And when she realizes that Chandni's husband is indeed Sunil, she tries to leave again, not once but twice, but is stopped on both occasions, once by Sunil and the second time by Chandni, both of whom beg her forgiveness. Among Bollywood heroines of her era, Sonia shows considerable grit by raising a child by herself with no other support and choosing to leave, time and again, rather than place herself and her son in any uncomfortable situation.

Moving on to Chandni's circumstances: in a very typical response, Deewan cries to Sunil about Chandni's misfortune. Instead of seeing the pregnancy as an auspicious event and welcoming a new family member, as a grandparent ought to, Deewan thinks it a punishment. Sunil calmly says that there are other ways around it, i.e., getting an abortion, which Deewan says isn't possible due to medical complications and that he cannot think about losing his daughter. That (unstated) abortion is even a possibility to be discussed and dismissed points to how ingrained the stigma of unwed motherhood is (and continues to be) in India. Parental and societal pressure is immensely against unwed mothers leading to ostracization at best and murder at worst. Even women themselves would rather die than be unwed mothers, just as Chandni herself says. There is very little space for the woman's own choice (on whether or not to continue with the pregnancy) that doesn't factor in social stigma. Thankfully for Chandni, Sunil appears as her saviour at just the right moment and in giving her his name, saves both her and her father from social ignominy. So for those 5 years, she is perfectly respectable to all appearances. Until Sonia appears in her life, she doesn't have to be too concerned about the stigma of being an unwed, single mother, though it does seem to tear her up from the inside. Of course, Deewan's wealth and Sunil's support also means that she raises Pinky without much hardship. It is not coincidental, either, in this scheme of things, that Sonia has a boy and Chandni has a girl, "seeds" of their respective fathers, revealing deeply ingrained attitudes towards gender and male- preference.

Illustrative moment: At the hospital after giving birth to a boy, Sonia tells the baby that she will fulfil all his father's wishes for him. They will go away where no one knows them and he will grow up without the shadow of being a murderer's son.

Family *The Stigma* tantalizingly teases alternative family/ romantic structures but ultimately subsumes any radicality within convention. To begin with, there is the loving but brief marriage between Sonia and Sunil, who dote on each other. But love soon turns bitter when Sonia realizes that she had wasted her years in Sunil's remembrance while he was apparently happily married. To takes Sunil quite the effort to convince her otherwise, that he was in fact married only in name, had tried everything possible to search for her and finally resigned himself to the fate of spending his days in agony worse than being in jail. Then there is the marriage between Sunil and Chandni, which, he clarifies to her on the wedding night itself, would be one of appearances. He has no interest in her past and neither should she want to know more about his. He would only fulfil his duties as a husband and father in public. But seeing him up close over the years, Chandni cannot help but fall in love with him. This puts the relationship squarely in the realm of bigamy: Sunil with his two wives (as the prosecuting attorney says) and Chandni and Sonia as sister-wives (*sautan*). Now, this configuration was not uncommon in earlier years (in both Hindu and Muslim communities), but with the rise of a "one love above all"/ monogamous ideology in romantic literature and cinema post-Independence (not to mention revised Hindu marital laws), polygamy became less than desirable. It certainly wouldn't do for the hero of the film, therefore Sunil *must* remain romantically detached from Chandni and mirror Sonia's widowhood in his inner life, if not in social standing. While it would still be somewhat socially acceptable for Sonia and Chandni to cohabitate as sister-wives, that would also diminish Sunil morally. Thus several strong alternative possibilities to reimagine the conventional family structure remain unexplored or discredited: a) Sonia could have met and loved someone else; b) Chandni could have separated herself from a one-sided romance and found someone else; c) Sunil could also have fallen in love with Chandni; in fact, given how desirable Chandni is, that would have been perfectly natural except that Chandni was "used goods" though for no fault of her own and Sunil never articulates it that way; or d) the three of them could have come to a polyamorous and nonexploitative understanding which would have been the most practical solution, given how Sunil appears to continue to father both children and share the same household with Deewan and Chandni. This rejection (of bigamy and polyamory) is directly unarticulated and revealed only by cultural cues: when Sonia believes herself a widow, she wears only white saris while Chandni dresses in bright colours; after Sunil is exonerated of his crime, Sonia now wears bright colours while Chandni wears the widow's white in the closing scene, even though she was always aware that her "original husband" Dheeraj (the father of her child) was long dead.

Illustrative moment: This peculiar triangle and its logical conclusion is foreshadowed by one of the best remembered songs from the film, "*Ni main yaar maanana ni*" ("I will adore my lover/ No matter how people gossip/ I won't be tamed/ No matter how much the sister-wife stirs poison"). In the next scene, Chandni tells Sonia that they must have been sisters in a previous life as they get along so well. Sonia, who's hiding the truth of her prior marriage with Sunil, replies they could have been sister-wives and Chandni, surprisingly, is actually fine with that.

Sexuality (Lust / Desire) As in all of Chopra's films, the "good" characters here too find themselves in unfortunate circumstances, while the "bad" ones are rotten to the core. Sunil and Sonia's romance is sweet and wholesome, loving and funny, as seen during their hill station trip with their college friends in the opening sequence. It's unclear if they were sexually active before marriage given how quickly Sonia gets pregnant, but the audience would usually give them the benefit of the doubt and in any case they do end up getting married. Later, after their reunion, they hesitate only barely to pick up where they left off. In contrast, Chandni gets sucked into a sexual relationship with Dheeraj based on her own misconception that he would marry her, or he may have led her on to the bedroom with his charming words. In any case, when Chandni confronts him about it, Dheeraj makes it very clear that he has no intention whatsoever of getting married; he already has many lovers and illegitimate children and how many of them would he give his name to? Dheeraj just couldn't care less once his desires are satiated and discards Chandni without a thought. And while these relationships are mutual, we also have the one-sided love that Chandni develops for Sunil over the years, looking at his integrity of character, his love for her child and his responsible handling of Deewan's estate. It's clear that Sunil, for his part, made a calculated move in marrying Chandni as it would hide his identity and hopefully save him from incarceration. But the internal logic and morality of the plot and Bollywood convention almost necessitates that he would never covet Chandni, though he's always honest and kind with her, even when she slanders Sonia as a cheap woman unknowingly.

Illustrative moment: Sudhir takes Sonia on a long drive and laments at her bare hair parting and how she must have suffered as a widow even while he was still alive. He then sings a very emotionally intimate/ mature song, "*Mere dil mein aaj kya hain*" ("What my heart years for today/ I will tell you...You have worshipped me as a god/ I will do the same for you). Elsewhere, Chandni, stunningly dressed in a typical female worshipper's white sari with a red border, prays to a large Shiva statue to make Sudhir "mine in the real sense" as she loves him. But the flowers in her hand blow away, suggesting that her prayer would never come true.

Appearance (vs. Reality) Very little in *Daag* is as it appears to be on the surface. Sunil, in particular, is a master of spinning tales and hiding the truth, though of course for his own self-preservation and while attempting to cause the minimal amount of damage to others. We see this right from the beginning when he appears in K. C.'s office with a fake case but really to ask for Sonia's hand in marriage. He is honest about being without a family when K. C. asks, but his origins don't matter too much as Sonia herself is also an orphan and according to Malati, a burden to boot. Nearly every character has something to hide: Dheeraj wants to keep exploiting more women and satiating his desire without taking responsibility for it, all while keeping up the appearance of being a respectable businessman; Chandni doesn't want to reveal her shameful unwed pregnancy to the world and keeps up the appearance of being a typical, happily married rich woman, helped along by her father Deewan; and Sunil pretends to be a loving husband and father.

Perhaps the only character who presents herself exactly in her own truth is Sonia, though she too is an escapist, choosing to leave rather that stay and fight for her own due. Then there is the period of time when Sonia and Sunil hide the fact of their marriage from Chandni and even go on a trip with the kids, where they spend the night together after years. The plot, too, aids in creating mystery, especially at the point when we are led to believe that Sunil died in the prison van accident. Of course, it's hard to ignore the elephant-sized loophole why Sunil would choose to return to the "scene of the crime" and how, impossibly, he was never recognized before DSP Singh spots him. Given Dheeraj and Chandni's relationship, it seems far-fetched that they are geographically too distant and in these small hill stations with few permanent locals, the upper class is quite tightly knit and gossip-prone.

Illustrative moment: After Sonia has just moved in with Chandni, her husband, whom Chandni had already praised to the skies, returns from a business trip. Suddenly, we see it's none other than Sunil, looking older and sporting a large and then-fashionable handlebar moustache!

Justice Chopra is rather fond of the climactic courtroom scene, especially in his early films. *Daag*

features not one but two courtroom scenes. In the first instance, when Sunil is originally sentenced, no one even considers the claim that Dheeraj tried to rape Sonia and his appeal falls on deaf ears. Only Sunil knows that Dheeraj actually fell on a gardening hoe and impaled himself while fighting and would have killed him if he could, thus exonerating the hero of the moral/ethical burden of taking a human life, no matter how heinous the villain. But his true crime occurs afterwards, when he chooses to escape justice by hiding his identity: “The four walls of a jail, handcuffs and a hangman’s noose await you...no better place to hide”. Perhaps the hellish ordeal of pretending to be Chandni’s husband was his real punishment, in order to “refine” his character from a flippant youth to a responsible householder by facing numerous obstacles and realising the true depth of his love and longing for Sonia? In the climactic scene, he provides an impassioned appeal for his innocence and Chandni’s scandalous confession also helps bolster his case. Chandni, too, faces “plot justice” as punishment for her “sin” (premarital sex/ unwed motherhood) within Bollywood and Chopra’s model of morality; she must continue to suffer from her unrequited and fruitless love for Sudhir for the rest of her days while raising a child born of the despicable man who raped and betrayed her.

Illustrative moment: In the final courtroom scene, Sunil says how he wished he would have served his jail time instead of trying to escape punishment. These 5 years were a literal hell for him, having failed to find the love of his life who had disappeared.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1) Romance is an integral part of the film, seeing how it’s “A Poem to Love”. Which character do you think has the “truest love”, so to speak?

2) Discuss, with examples, how social attitudes around single and unwed motherhood are portrayed in the film.

3) Do you think the triangular relationship between the three main characters is plausible?

4) What do you think of Dheeraj as the villain of the film? Does his honesty offset his nefariousness in your eyes?

5) Why do you think Chopra wrote Sunil and Sonia’s characters as orphans? How does their lack of family attachment move the plot?

6) *Daag* has a rather unconventional, woman-oriented plot. Do you think the film delivers its initial promise of looking at gender issues differently?