

Masaan (मसान, 2015)

Meheli Sen

dir. Neeraj Ghaywan; prod. Vikas Bahl; screenplay Varun Grover; photography Avinash Arun Dhaware; music Indian Ocean, Bruno Coulais. digital, color, 109 mins. Drishyam Films et al., distrib. Pathé.

Masaan is one of the most compelling films to have emerged from Bollywood, a testament to the industry's recent investment in the verisimilitude of the portrayal of Indian lifeworlds. However, *Masaan* also remains something of an exception: as an Indo-French coproduction that debuted at the Cannes Film Festival to thunderous acclaim from the international media, a reception rarely bestowed upon more mainstream Hindi-language films. The film features no stars and includes only three songs, all of which are atypically non-diegetic. Contemporary scholars of film melodrama, among them Christine Gledhill, have stressed that realist and melodramatic modes need not be hermetically sealed off from one another. Indeed, in many instances, realist and melodramatic tendencies can be adjacent or even overlay each other. *Masaan*, I suggest, remains an example of how realist texts can deploy the melodramatic mode to maximize cinema's expressive possibilities.

Set in present-day Varanasi—one of India's most ancient cities, and one of its holiest for practicing Hindus—*Masaan* narrates two ill-fated love stories which briefly intersect. Devi (played by Richa Chaddha) bears the consequences of a police raid when she secretly meets her boyfriend, Piyush (played by Saurabh Chaudhary), in a hotel for sex. Deepak (Vicky Kaushal) inappropriately falls in love with upper caste Shaalu (Shweta Tripathi), only to lose her to a tragic road accident. The film chronicles their struggles to overcome these adverse circumstances. It also tells the story of a city caught in a time warp. Varanasi is both ancient and modern: static in its timelessness and seething with 21st century energies all at once (Gangopadhyay). The film has been rightfully lauded for its deft presentation of the city, particularly of the ghats, where devout Hindus cremate their dead to ensure the salvation of the departed soul. While



Courtesy of the Everett Collection

the plot focuses on Devi and Deepak's struggles against entrenched vectors of social discrimination—especially those of caste and gender—the film is equally rich with philosophical themes.

In *Masaan*, the social is vividly textured. Devi and her father, Vidyadhar (Sudhir Mishra), must pay the price, both socially and financially, for her single indiscreet encounter with Piyush. Inspector Mishra (Bhagwan Tiwari) could easily blackmail them for enormous sums of money as women must follow the rules of chastity before marriage, even as the city and the country are in rapid transformation. The threat of public humiliation is so overwhelming that Piyush kills himself, while Devi must soldier on, chafing against Varanasi's »small-town« conservatism. Similarly, Deepak easily falls in love with Shaalu, but a socially sanctioned relationship between them remains impossible: She hails from an upper caste, comfortably middle class Hindu family, whereas Deepak's family is of the Dom ethnic group (»untouchables«) and cremates corpses for a living. When not in school or with friends, Deepak is always in the crematorium, covered in dirt and soot from the endlessly burning pyres.

The entanglements of these lives and the spaces they inhabit provide verisimilitude in *Masaan*—they are easily recognizable as authentic and believable. However, it is the melodramatic involvement of the social with the emotional—what scholar Deidre Pribram evocatively calls »socioemotional«—that makes the film especially moving to audiences of all backgrounds, both domestic and international.

In a remarkable departure from typical performative modes, both Devi and Deepak remain muted in speech and gesture in the film's early segments. In fact, following the incident of police brutality and Piyush's suicide, Devi seems inscrutable, with defiance structuring her erect posture and refusal of shame (Ghosh 334). Not even the inspector's insulting gaze nor her father's rebukes can elicit anything beyond monosyllabic responses or frosty silence. Deepak is painfully awkward, almost tremulous, in his tentative courting of Shaalu. Unsure and acutely aware of his lower-caste identity, Deepak can only record Shaalu's words interspersed with Bollywood songs as a token of his love for her. Unlike the confident and articulate Shaalu, who quotes love poetry at will, the language of romance is inaccessible to Deepak. Fittingly, it is a song sequence—»Tu Kisi Rail Si« (»You pass like a train/I shudder like a bridge«)—at the festival grounds that communicates Deepak's efflorescent emotions to the audience. Music and *mise-en-scène* do the work of emotional expression in this key moment in *Masaan*.

While *Masaan* is supremely restrained in the first half, often relying on silence or music to communicate the affective states of its protagonists, emotional outbursts increasingly punctuate its »muteness« in later portions. Attentive to pacing, *Masaan* cautiously and gradually builds up to these melodramatic revelations and coincidences. Midway into the film, Devi's simmering resentment against Vidyadhar explodes into a torrent of angry words, as we learn that she holds him responsible for her mother's untimely death. Both father and daughter therefore remain enmeshed in a circuit of old and new guilt.

However, the most shocking moment of revelation involves Deepak's discovery of Shaalu's corpse at the crematorium. Like him, we had no knowledge of the accident that has killed her, and, like him, we are stunned by this catastrophic discovery. This is a moment of intense pathos and identification. A dreadful interregnum follows, as all emotional expression is blocked and Deepak stumbles around to find a pathway to grief.

As someone who deals with the materiality of death in the most quotidian ways, cremating Shaalu devastates him. Deepak's grief, when it comes, crashes over him—and us—like a tidal wave, against a serenely illuminated Ganges. He breaks down in tears while drinking with his friends, screaming into an unyielding void. A little later, Deepak absently tosses Shaalu's ring into the river, only to plunge into the water to frantically hunt for it. As Deepak thrashes about in the indifferent river, the song »Mann Kasturi Re« (»The heart is a musk deer/Such is the order of the world«) anchors this sequence of melodramatic affect, as the lyrics foreground the film's larger metaphysics about the impermanence of life and the futility of attachment. Deepak finally collapses on the riverbank, and as dawn breaks over the holy city, he at last finds a modicum of tranquility.

Devi, likewise, must find a way to work through guilt in her mourning of Piyush, an emotional minefield she avoids for much of the film. In the penultimate sequence, when she finally approaches Piyush's father perhaps to offer condolences or apologies for her part in the tragedy, *Masaan* reverts to its minimalism: The camera remains discreetly stationed outside the family home, while we hear the old man's anguished sobbing.

Although human subjects oscillate between restraint and sudden outbursts—even Vidyadhar breaks down in tears when Devi announces she is leaving home—objects come to be voluble in *Masaan*. The film presents the city of Varanasi as a transactional domain, where economies of desire are tethered to the economy-as-such. Weighty vectors of death and salvation are subject to market imperatives, but romantic love appears to liberate commodities, at least temporarily, from predictable conduits of exchange and circulation. The gift from Piyush to Devi remains unopened, numinous in its mystery. As a token of their doomed relationship, it is fitting that she consigns it to the holy Ganges at the film's end. Shaalu's ring functions as a reverse MacGuffin: mentioned in passing to him, it enables Deepak to recognize Shaalu's corpse when he spots it. Thereafter, it condenses his grief and loss until he flings it into the water. In a superbly melodramatic turn, it is this ring that finally frees Devi and Vidyadhar from blackmail—and that braids the two narrative strands together at last.

References

- Gangopadhyay, Rudrani. 2020. »Some things get lost«: Tracking an Ancient City in Modern Times in *Masaan*.« Presented at AAS-in-Asia 2020: Asia at the Crossroads: Solidarity through Scholarship, Kobe, Japan, Aug 31-Sep 4, 2020.
- Ghosh, Abhija. 2019. »Curiosity, Consent and Desire in *Masaan* (2015), *Pink* (2016), *Lipstick Under My Burkha* (2016) and *Veere Di Wedding* (2018).« In »Bad Women of Bombay Films: Studies in Desire and Anxiety, edited by Saswati Sengupta et al., 331-43. New York: Springer International Publishing.
- Gledhill, Christine. 1987. »The Melodramatic Field: An Investigation.« In *Home Is Where the Heart Is*, 5-39. London: British Film Institute.
- Pribam, Diedre. 2018. »Melodrama and the Aesthetics of Emotion.« In *Melodrama Unbound: Across History, Media, and National Cultures*, edited by Christine Gledhill and Linda Williams, 237-51. New York: Columbia University Press.

