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The Journey of Self-Discovery and Redemption: Masaan, A Saga of Liberated Souls

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Abstract:

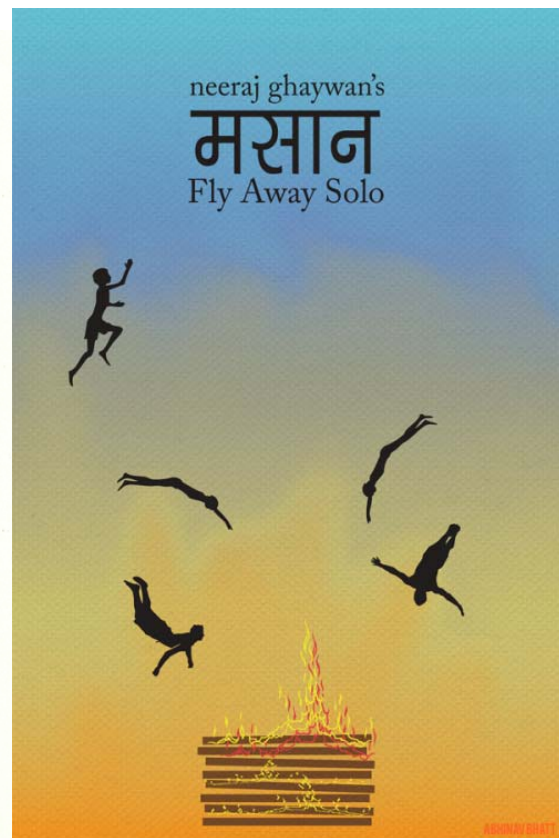
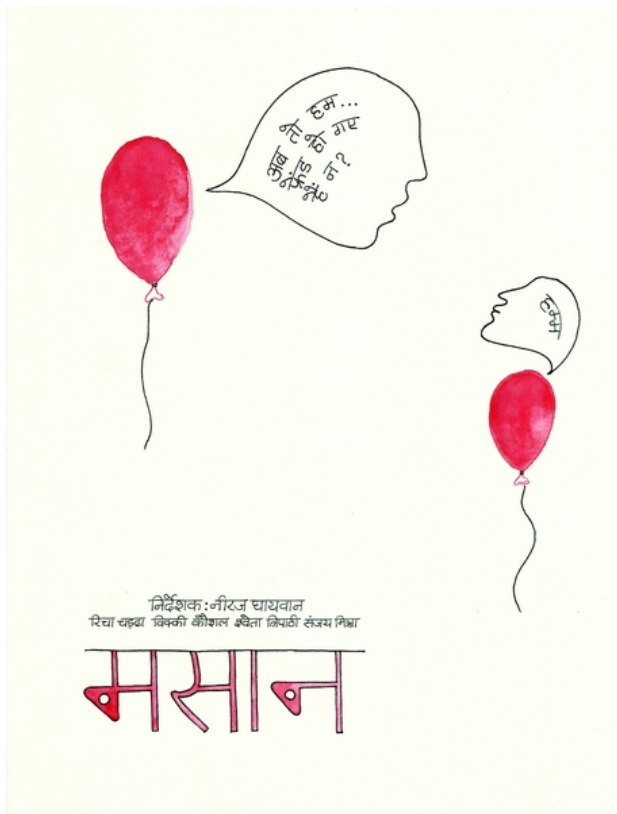
The Ganga, at Varanasi - the city of ghats, as believed in Hinduism is said to purify the soul of its sins and karmas after the body is cremated here on its holy banks, making the path of the soul easier to travel towards heaven, is one of the main character in *Masaan*, Hindi movie directed by Neeraj Ghaywan (India), who won the Best Director award at the SAARC Film Festival 2016. It portrays the tale of two lives in despair and in hope, looking forward to break the shackles of life, traditions, caste, religion and inequality.

The longing to break free and live as a liberated soul is every man's wish, whether he is from a rural or an urban background. We crave for worldly desires and are caught in the web of maya or illusion which gives momentary pleasure but results in lifelong scars and pains. It is time to make new bonds and new religions where there are no discriminations of colour, caste, creed, sex and the only criterion should be that we are all one soul awaiting our turn in the cycle of life and death to unite with the Supreme Power and attain eternal happiness.

Masaan or shmashaan means a crematorium, a place where dead bodies are cremated. The body is sent back to the Creator to be moulded again into a new form for the soul to continue in its journey of life, till it is liberated and attains moksha. This is so rightly indicated at the end

of the movie ‘*Masaan*’ - where a boatman beckons offering Devi Pathak (Richa Chadda) and Deepak Chaudhary (Vicky Kaushal) a ride towards Sangam, the sacred point of confluence which is said to wash away all of one’s sins and free one from the cycle of rebirth.

Keywords: The Ganga, Varanasi ghats, crematorium, inequality, sufferings, Sangam, moksha.



Mann Kasturi Re... jag dasturi......this song of the movie *Masaan* is its soul , as it holds in it the entire plot just so perfectly. It feels so real and exceptional when we take in the literal meaning of the lyrics of the song; the heart is like the Kasturi, that doesn’t get closure. The mind is like

the musk, which is a metaphor comparing the human to the musk deer, which goes mad; searching for the scent of musk around it, not realizing that the essence comes from within itself. It aptly implies to every human life, for we seek happiness by chasing it externally, but tend to forget that happiness, its essence lies within each and every individual.

When we have a film like *Masaan* with a heart, then obviously its soundtrack is music with a soul. The Indian Ocean band gives its trademark music along with the background score and music composed by Bruno Coulais. To add to it we have the soul stirring lyrics written by the screenplay writer himself, Varun Grover.

The music of *Masaan* is so much like the city it is set in, Banaras, the spiritual center, the songs and music become nostalgic and meditative, having intricate layers and a connection so evidently personal and overpowering that one can perceive the intermingling of the profound with simple and life with death. The movie has three songs which are so much a part of the script and one of the songs is based on the work of the Hindi poet Dushyant Kumar Tyagi.



Himanshu Joshi, Nihilil Rao, Rajul Ram, Amit Kilam and Tuheen Chakravorty of Indian Ocean.

The movie *Masaan* has a spiritual aspect to it. Neeraj Ghaywan's directorial debut *Masaan* gets its title from the character Deepak Kumar (Vicky Kaushal) who is from the Dom community or *Masaanis*, as they are generally referred to in North India. *Masaan* is derived from the Sanskrit word *Shmashaa*, *Shamshaan* in Hindi, which means a crematorium, a burning ghat.

Masaan has Varanasi (Benares) built into its story as one of its main characters and is a story about releasing the soul and set it free. Neeraj quit his successful career in marketing in 2012 to pursue filmmaking under the tutelage of director, Anurag Kashyap.



Debutant Director – Neeraj Ghaywan



Screenplay writer & Lyricist – Varun Grover



Cinematographer – Avinash Arun



Editor – Nitin Biad



A Celebration of Life, Death and Everything in **Between** – is the sub-title of *Masaan*, and Fly Away Solo is its English title. The crew did the entire shooting of the movie in Banaras and they stayed away from temples and its rituals and sadhus, instead focused on the human story. Neeraj Ghaywan says that his film is about escape, of the characters of a modern small town in India, which is restless and wants to break free from its shackles of convention, moral and existential crisis and the rigid socio-cultural structure.

A joint venture between Manish Mundra (Dhrishyam Films), Macassar Productions, Sikhya Entertainment and Phantom Films, *Masaan* premiered at The Cannes and bagged two awards – the Promising Future Prize (Un Certain Regard Avenir Prize) and the International Federation of Film Critics (FIPRESCI) Awards at the prestigious 68th Cannes International Film Festival in 2015. It was also showcased in the Un Certain Regard section at the movie gala and received a five-minute standing ovation post its screening.

At the **SAARC Film Festival at Sri Lanka in 2016**, Neeraj Ghaywan won the **Best Feature Film Trophy for Best Director** for *Masaan*.

Neeraj Ghaywan says that *Masaan* appealed to the Cannes audience because,

“It was honest to the characters and true to the world we were writing about. Of course we needed film festival buzz because this is not a commercial film – but we figured we would work hard and leave everything else to the universe.”

At the World Soundtrack Awards in 2015, Film Composer of the Year Nominations went to Bruno Coulais for *Masaan*.

Back home in India, *Masaan* picked up a handful of awards, the top most being the **National Films Award (Golden Lotus Award)** – the **Indira Gandhi Award for Best Debut Film of A Director**, was handed over to Neeraj Ghaywan. The other awards included :

- Filmfare Award for Best Debut Director 2016 – Neeraj Ghaywan
- Zee Cine Award for Best Actor in a Supporting Role 2016 – Sanjay Mishra
- Zee Cine Award for Best Actress in a Supporting Role 2016 – Shweta Tripathi
- Zee Cine Award for Best Male Debut 2016 – Vicky Kaushal
- Zee Cine Award for Most Promising Director 2016 – Neeraj Ghaywan
- Zee Cine Award for Best Editing 2016 – Nitin Baid
- Screen Award for Best Male Debut 2016 - Vicky Kaushal
- Screen Award for Most Promising Debut Director 2016 - Neeraj Ghaywan
- Guild Award for Best Debut Director 2016 - Neeraj Ghaywan
- Stardust Award for Best Screenplay 2015 – Varun Grover
- Stardust Award for Performer of the Year (Female) –
Editor's Choice 2015 – Richa Chadda
- Asian Film Awards 2016 – Best Newcomer Nominations – Vicky Kaushal
- Cannes Film Festival 2015 – Golden Camera Award Nominations - Neeraj Ghaywan
- Cannes Film Festival 2015 – Un Certain Regard Award Nominations - Neeraj Ghaywan



Masaan team at the Cannes Film Festival after bagging two Awards



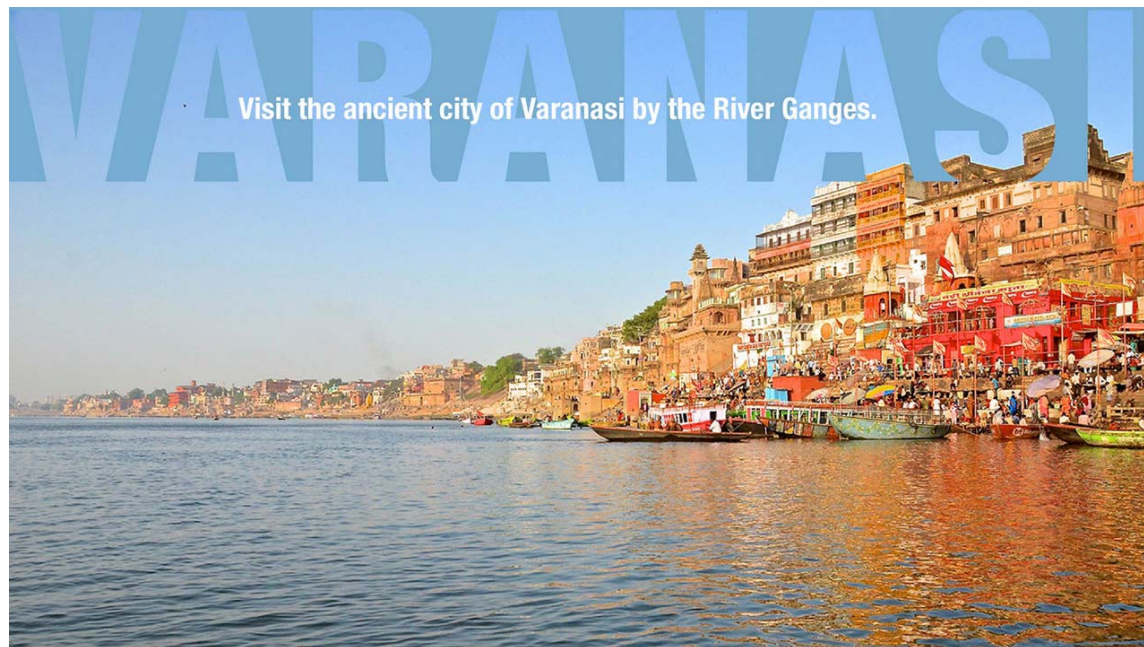


Standing Ovation for *Masaan* at the Un Certain Regard section at the movie gala at Cannes Film Festival 2015

After winning the National Award, both Neeraj Ghaywan and Varun Grover decided to donate 50,000 each their cash prize towards relief work for farmers. Though a small amount, they wanted to make it public so as to draw attention to the agrarian crisis and to encourage possible contributions.



The strength of *Masaan* lies in its characters. One of the main characters of the movie is the place where it is set, Varanasi one of the oldest cities in the world; deriving its name from the two rivers that flank the city, the Varana to the north and the Asi to the south. This spiritual capital of India gives a spiritual experience, as by immersing oneself in the sacred river The Ganga, will cleanse one of their sufferings and wash away their sins.



Varanasi is the holiest of the seven sacred cities in Hinduism and Jainism, and played an important role in the development of Buddhism. Hindus believe that death at Varanasi brings salvation. It is also known as ‘Maha-smashana’ or ‘The Great Cremation Grounds’, where the most inevitable cycle of life and death is celebrated and revered, thus bringing one face to face with the balance of life and death. It is also known as Banaras, Kashi – “The City of Light” or “The Luminous One”. Light in Hindu philosophy has great meaning for it exemplifies the wisdom that destroys the darkness of ignorance. Sin and evil are understood to be the acts of ignorance. The washing away of one’s sin and attaining immortality will come through wisdom and understanding. To die in the city beside the river of life is to die with a promise of redemption, a promise to be liberated from the endless cycle of life and death and reincarnation and to gain moksha or eternal absolution. So for centuries thousands of people have come to Banaras to die and thousands have brought the ashes of the dead here to immerse them in the holy waters.

Intertwined and connected to The Ganga and Varanasi, are the lives of the other four major characters of *Masaan* and the three parallel stories about them. The movie opens with the story of Devi Pathak (Richa Chadda) who gets trapped in a police case after a curiosity led sexual encounter turns tragic. The second story is about Deepak (Vicky Kaushal) who is from a lower caste of the Dom community, who falls for Shaalu (Shweta Tripathi), a girl from a higher caste. The third story is about a morally degrading Vidhyadhar Pathak (Sanjay Mishra), who is Devi's father, his relation with an orphan kid Jhonta (Nikhil Sahni) around a betting game, where people would bet on little boys diving in the river to get the most number of coins.



The Journey of Self-Discovery and Redemption: Masaan, A Saga of Liberated Souls

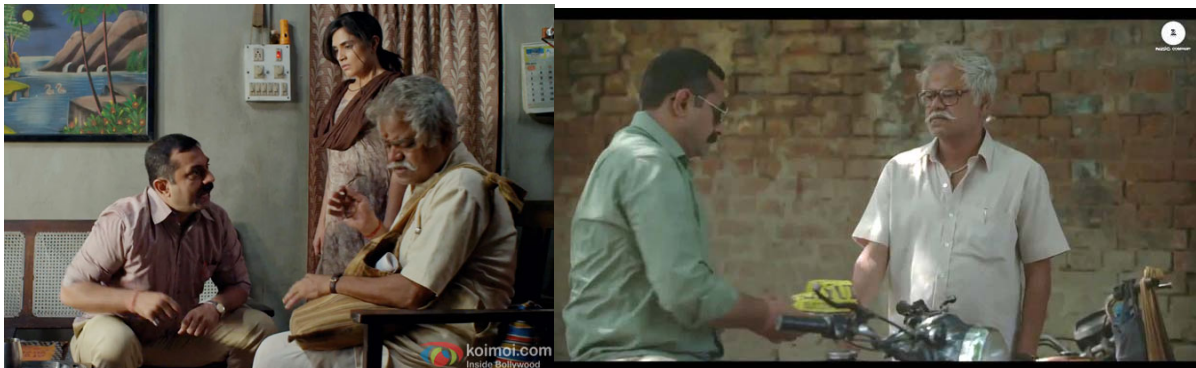
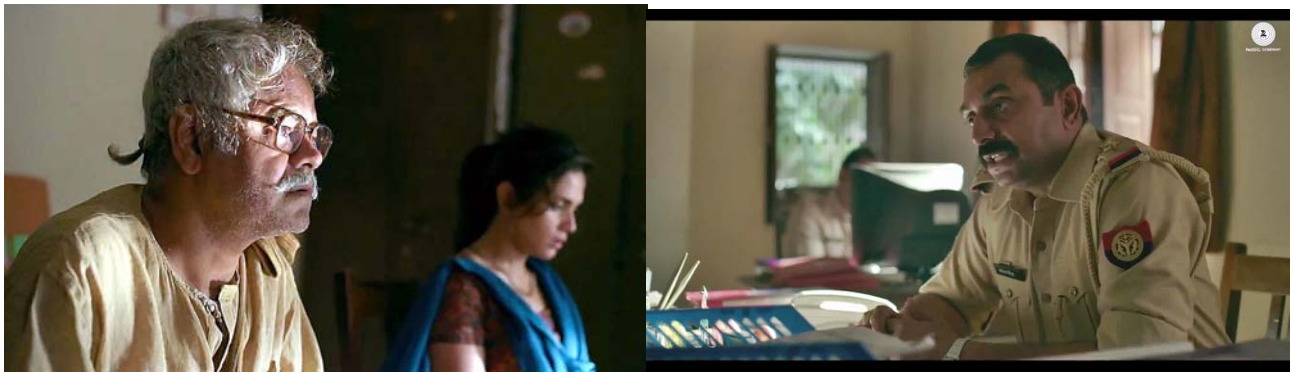




The female protagonist Devi portrays as a very strong woman who knows her mind and what she wants from life. Though from a lower middle class from a small town, she has big dreams and wants to be independent. She has good knowledge about computers and at the same time is very caring and emotionally attached to her father Vidhyadhar Pathak, played by Sanjay Mishra, who has brought her up single handedly after her mother's death when she was young. Devi's relationship with her father could well be one of the most poignant relationships ever captured on screen. Vidhyadhar plays a retired Sanskrit professor, who now sells trinkets on one of Varanasi's many ghats. Their relationship is not expressed with affection, not even with a complete understanding of one another, but an eventual acceptance of what the other person is and respecting their differences. As he battles to save family honour, his moralities are dwindling too, which we see in the way he places bets on his little assistant Jhonta, a boy of six or seven, who takes part in diving competitions where they excavate coins from the depths of the Ganges. Though reluctant initially, he becomes very serious and starts betting big amounts but when Jhonta literally drowns during one of the diving sessions, it opens the eyes of Vidhyadhar and he realizes about his shameful behavior. Fate comes to him and completes the circle. Jhonta gives him the gold finger-ring he had grabbed in his last diving session, which was of Shaalu and

Deepak had thrown it in the Ganga with anger, hurt when he had retrieved the ring from the ashes after her body was cremated.

Devi is bold enough to explore her sexual desires to satiate her curiosity but when things go wrong and the boy, Piyush with whom she is caught in the act ends up committing suicide, she is very clear about the fact that she is not the one responsible for his suicide, but his guilt itself made him end his life. She has feelings for Piyush and had liked him, which was more than just the initial physical attraction. After his death she goes to meet his parents to offer her condolences only to be hit and humiliated by Piyush's father. This was the breaking point for Devi, when she lets go off the unopened gift given by Piyush before their secret rendezvous.





The dialogues written by screenplay writer Varun Grover belong effortlessly to the everyday as much as the powerfully portrayed ordinariness of the characters.

When Devi gets a job at the Railway station at the ticket counter, she does her work very efficiently. Her colleague Sadhya ji, played by Pankaj Tripathi turns out to be a very interesting character and his dialogues are bound to stay with the audience for a long time to come. They are so philosophical and thought-provoking, it makes one wonder in awe about the stark reality of life.

yaha 28 traine rukti hai..

aur kitni nahi rukti.. 64..

matlab yaha aana aasan hai..

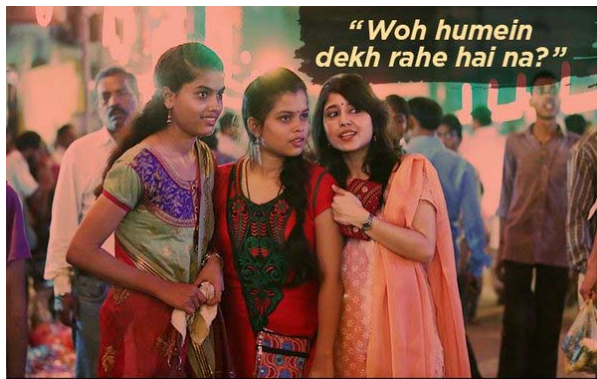
yaha se jaana mushkil..

At Varanasi Railway 28 trains halt whereas 64 trains that cross through it don't halt. Sadhya ji says that, how easy it is to get there but so hard to leave.

So very true about life, everyone is so afraid to die; they all want to live, though it may not be the kind of life they had wished for. It is so easy to come here, but so difficult to leave, with all the clinging, longing, attachments and desires. It is not just about the weakness and shackles that the society imposes on us, but the mindset and will to choose; either surrender to these setbacks, fight against them or simply hold back with an open mind.

The second protagonist is Deepak Choudhary (played brilliantly by Vicky Kaushal) is set on the famous Harishchandra Ghat of Banaras. He is the son of a dom (the community of the most untouchable people who cremate the dead) who wants to escape from the shackles of being born in such a community that limits him. He is studying engineering and has big dreams for his future. Shaalu Gupta (played by newcomer Shweta Tripathi) is the naïve, innocent character, portraying a completely believable small town girl, who is hopelessly romantic and lives in a world of Hindi- Urdu poetry. She has the innocence that comes to someone who has never been exposed to the seamier side of life. Deepak is antithetical to Shaalu's creative and intellectual personality. He has never heard of Nida Fazli, Bashir Badr and is far away from poetry and sher-o-shayari.

We get to see a very pure and romantic love between Deepak and Shaalu sketching a picture of simplicity, awkwardness and candor that only a small town romance can have. They meet by chance and fall in love at first sight, which blossoms into a full-fledged commitment. Their love was about caste and religion; ready to go against their families and the world.

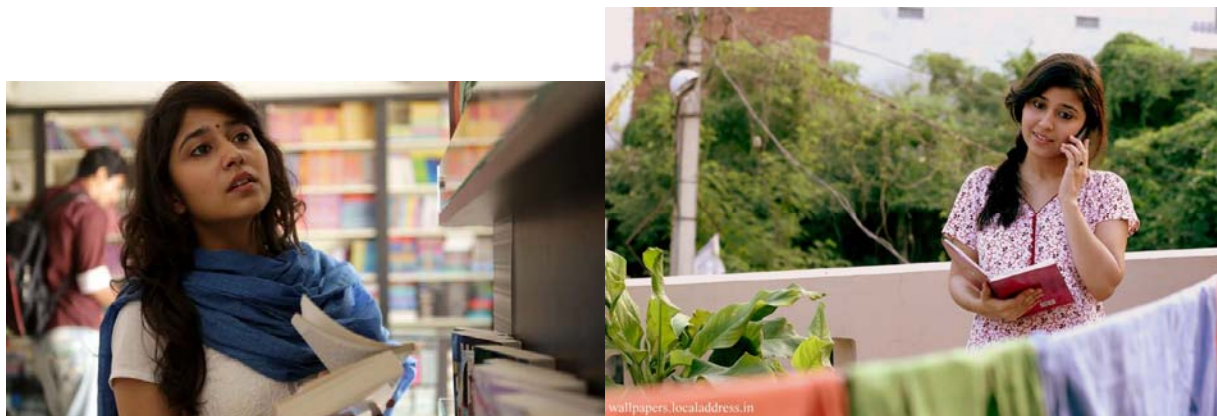


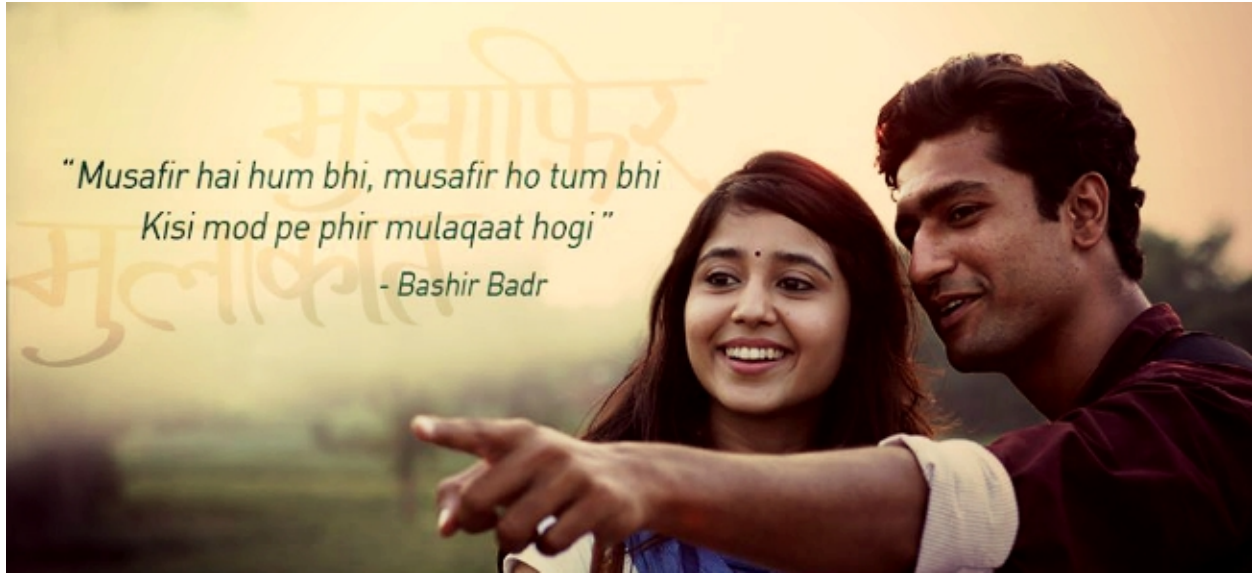
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The love for literature and poetry in *Masaan* is Varun Grover's love for Hindi and Urdu literature that he has poured out in the film through Shaalu, whose character is inspired by Hindi writer Vinod Kumar Shukla. Shaalu is shown to be a big fan of poetry. Varun Grover says, "She read the poets I love. It gave us the opportunity to be realistic," citing renowned writers Brij Narayan Chakbast, Akbar Allahabadi and Bashir Badr. Director Neeraj Ghaywan adds, "I got very interested when Grover spoke of how in our own country, our literature is not valued."





“Chiraagon ko aankhon mein mehfooz rakhna

Badi door tak raat hi raat hogi.....

Musafir hain hum bhi musafir ho tum bhi

Kisi mod par phir mulaqaat hogi.....” – Bashir Badr

This couplet by Bashir Badr which Shaalu quotes somehow reveals how her love story with Deepak is going to end. Grover choosing this quote over others is so apt, which means – “Keep the desires burning inside you, as it would be really tough for a long while. Me, you are both mere wanderers, but still I believe we’ll meet someday, somewhere.”

This was precisely the way rendered in *Masaan*, Shaalu drifted and Deepak eventually moved on after grieving over her, but with a hope that someday, maybe at some different place, and maybe in some other person, they will meet again. The power that a simple poetry holds, and the way the writing was executed is simply sublime.

The cinematography by Avinash Arun Dhaware is par excellence; it is as evocative as the film's tortured soul. The plight of Deepak and his mental agony is so entrancingly captured that any emotional soul is bound to shed tears. Deepak comes to realize that the body he is about to cremate is that of Shaalu, who had a terrible accident in the bus in which her whole family was travelling on a religious trip and he recognizes her body from her finger-ring about which they have had a conversation. He is devastated and shell-shocked. They were about to embark on their marital relationship once she was back from the religious journey and here she was lying dead, ready to be cremated. Deepak after being in shock for a few days breaks down on the banks of the river Ganga where he is drinking with his close friends, who were a part in making the love grow between him and Shaalu. He is inconsolable just like the flowing river. He asks the most unanswerable question to his friends, his body crumbling in pain :

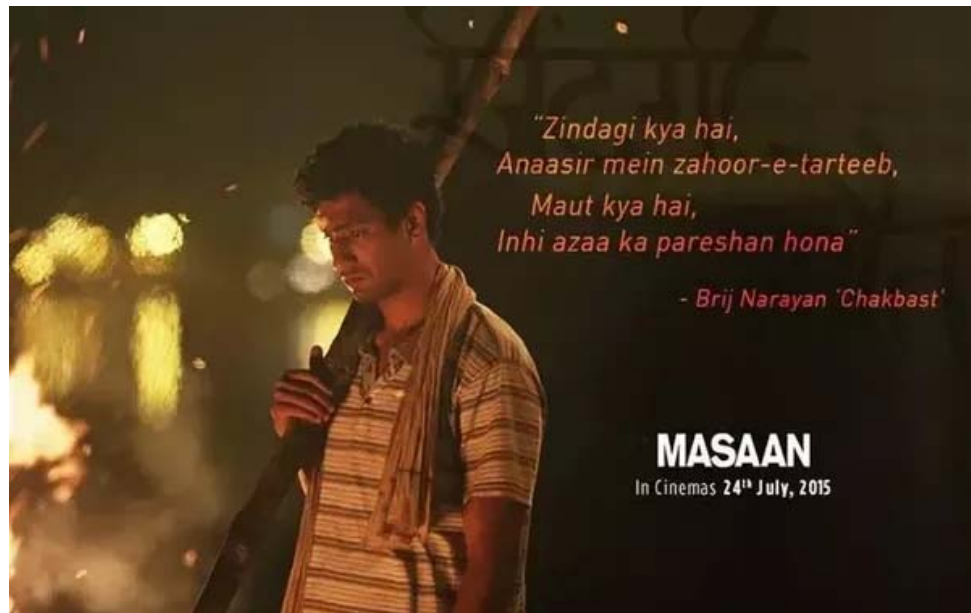
Will this unending suffering ever end?

There is no answer to this question; it is a question that desires solace, not truth.

This dialogue is not an extraordinary one, but the way it is treated by the character and the cinematographer can't be expressed in words. That gives the film its beauty, its simplicity.



" Saala ye dukh kahe khatam nahi hota hai be ? "



Zindagi kya hai anasir mein zahur-e tarteeb,

Maut kya hai ini ajza ka pareshan hona - Brij Narayan Chakbast

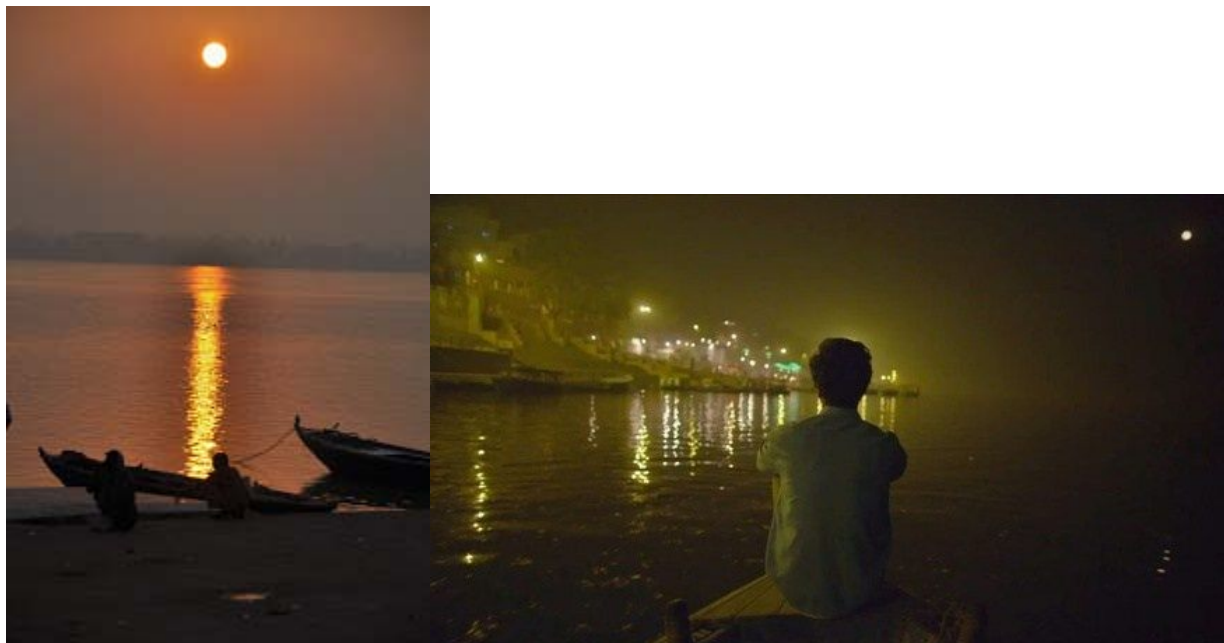
(“Life, When elements become ordered, that’s all
Death, But a moment when into chaos they fall”)



Devi lets go off a part of her life and is ready to move ahead. She doesn’t let the past hold her back but mourns for her lover and cries her heart out at the Sangam, where she offers the

unopened gift to the river Ganga; signifying that both she and Piyush have been cleansed and now she is free of her past baggage to embark on a new journey.

This is the law of nature, nothing remains constant, change is inevitable and one has to move ahead in life and not keep on clinging to the past.



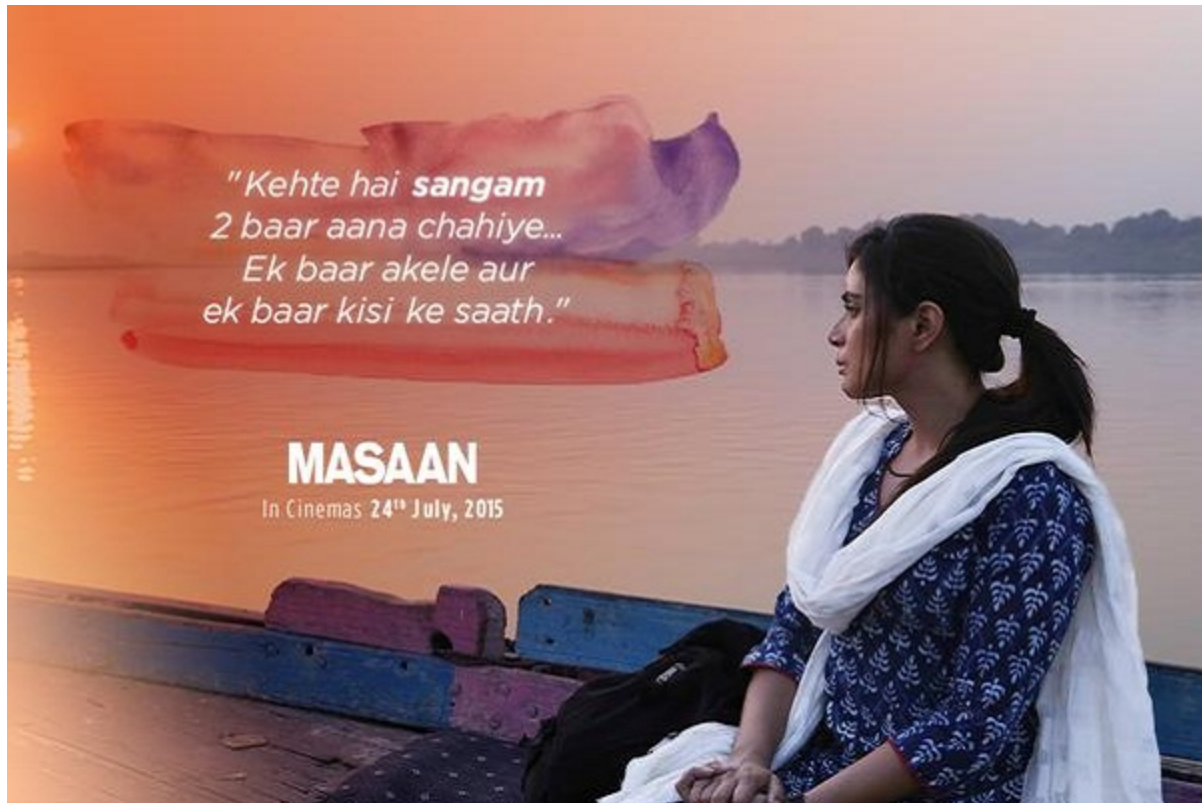
Masaan concludes with both Devi and Deepak finding some semblance of life, on moving away to another city to pursue their dreams. But the river Ganga stays with them as it changes course, so does their course of life changes. They were bound to meet as it was written in their stars as much as in the holy waters of Varanasi. The existential turn in *Masaan* makes one contemplate about the questions at the heart of life : How does one live after passing through a trauma? How can one confront the everyday routine of life in the midst of loss? The crux here

is – “Acceptance” one needs to accept as it is and live in the present moment and not hold on to the past or be rosy-eyed about the future.

One needs to let go off things to move on. It could be anything – feelings, people, and aspirations, these hold us back in life. Hate is a baggage and so can love also be, maybe sometimes. Let it all go. Let the heart get its closure, let it go to the final step in the grieving process, for nature is bound to complete the circle.

Ultimately we find that the characters have broken the shackles of life and reconciled with their fate to move towards the future with renewed hope. The future might be uncertain; nevertheless it provides redemption to their souls thereby mending the broken hearts.

Masaan is not just a movie but a journey that takes you to a place you cannot completely return from.



Baat hui naa puri re.....

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