

**WOMEN AND DRUG ABUSE: A STUDY OF ABHISHEK CHAUBEY'S *UDTA PUNJAB***

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**Abstract**

*With the new improved and increased global communication and transportation, the menace of drug culture has noticeably materialized into a complex, widespread social problem and a grave matter of global concern. Naturally, India too is not spared from the harmful ramifications of narcotic addiction. The uses and abuses of drugs have proliferated across the nation preventing every possibility of social growth and progress. So, it is imperative and important to address the dire consequences of the network of substance abuse and the subsequent torment that the whole process engenders to humanity. Notably, several attempts have been made in both cinematic platforms and literary studies to bring into limelight the dreadful aftermath of drug use. And Bollywood, being the nation's greatest cultural ambassador across the globe has the power to reach the masses and sensitize them of the social evils. Director Abhishek Chaubey's film Uda Punjab is one such glaring example that graphically captures the pathos and predicament of the victims of this substance abuse process. This paper aims to explore and interrogate the extreme form of exploitation and vulnerability of women that lies underneath this terrible trap and thereby attempts to foreground the feminist aspect/perspective of this illicit web of drug addiction and trafficking, as represented in Uda Punjab.*

**Key Words:** Drug addiction, substance abuse, exploitation and women.

Drug addiction/trafficking 'the third largest business in the world after petroleum and arms trade' ("Drug Abuse in India"), poses a serious threat to public health, international peace and security, family concord, future of the young generation and undermines gender equality and women's empowerment. To make people aware and conscious of the morbid and murky consequences of the substance abuse process, the issue has often been dealt with/treated in cinematic and media representations. Cinema being the most popular form of entertainment has the power to reach the masses and modify and modulate common man's power of thinking. Bollywood in films like *Dum Maro Dum*, *Shaitan*, *Pankh*, *Fashion* and *Go Goa*

*Gone* has often approached and addressed the issue but either farcically or as only a ploy for the progress of the action and hence there has always been a paucity of exploration on the subject. But Abhishek Chaubey's *Udta Punjab* is a potent portrayal of the dreadful repercussions one encounters by being ensnared in the dungeons of drug abuse. In this context this article seeks to explore the exploitation of women, both in physical and psychological terms, prevalent in the substance abuse process as delineated in and through *Udta Punjab*.

Before delving into the main focus of the paper it is necessary to define and describe drug abuse as a phenomenon and its detrimental effects on society. In the Oxford English Dictionary the network of drug culture is broadly defined as "a subculture surrounding habitual recreational or illegal drug use; especially the practices, paraphernalia or language associated with the sale and use of recreational and illegal drugs". According to the world statistical data 'around 190 million people throughout the world are victims of substance abuse and not a single part of the globe is free from the curse of drug trafficking and drug addiction' ("Drug Abuse in India"). And India too is not an exception. The people of India have become a prey to the peril of this network of substance abuse. As per the 'reports of UN, 1 million heroin addicts are registered in India and unofficially there are as many as 5 million. The most commonly used drugs in India are—opium, heroin, alcohol, cannabis and propoxyphene' ("Drug Abuse in India"). Drug abuse has not only emerged to become one of the most lucrative illicit businesses in the entire world but also has generated and fueled crime and violence worldwide. So it becomes imperative to understand and analyze the root causes behind the growth of such a trade. 'The disintegration of old joint family system, absence of parental love and care in case of working parents, decline of old religious and moral values', etc ("Drug Abuse in India") lead to a rise in the number of drug addicts who take drugs to escape the hard realities of life. With the rise of globalization and opening up of national borders and international markets there is not only an increased import of goods, capital and labour, but also a globalization of organized crime. As a phenomenon substance abuse has jeopardized and hampered society in general and youth in particular. It impairs and weakens an individual's rational faculty and the power of judgment. The culture of drug abuse therefore makes a person psychologically, emotionally, physically, intellectually, morally and financially stunted and sterile. And in the labyrinth of this harrowing and horrifying system women are the worst sufferers. They are the victims of domestic violence and vehemence. Against the backdrop of *Udta Punjab*, this paper attempts to address the gendered nature of the substance abuse process which considers women to be the powerless, the victim and the vulnerable only to be physically used and abused by the male power.

*Udta Punjab* is an intriguing illustration of how the ghastly menace of drug abuse has enfeebled and incapacitated the state's social fabric and economic progress, "wolfed down an entire generation or its psyche, hindered every possibility of reform and sucked the land of five rivers dry" (Verma). In the film the journey from horror to hope has been traced through

the lives of the four protagonists—Tommy Singh, an addicted and rebellious pop star, Sartaj Singh, the once corrupt but later redeemed ASI, Preeti Sahni, a sharp and strong doctor who runs a rehabilitation centre and a hockey playing migrant labourer from Bihar. The story of the film is located against the backdrop of Punjab where a drug addicted Tommy Singh, a popular pop sensation and a youth icon plays a major role in influencing the youth of the state to take drugs and imitate his lifestyle. In a way he is indirectly and implicitly responsible for the spread of such a dreadful practice among the masses and thereby facilitates the smooth operation of a corrupt illicit business. It is in this world of Tommy Singh, ruled and reigned by the male power and authority that women become subject to extreme form of desecration and disrespect.

Most notably, the whole system of drug abuse is predominantly a male centric world. According to the 1997 NHSDA (National Household Survey on Drug Abuse) survey “men reported a higher rate of illicit substance use, 8.5% to 4.5%, nearly double. Men report higher rates of cocaine use (9% versus 5%), alcohol use (58% versus 45%), binge drinking (23% versus 8%) and heavy drinking (8.7% versus 2.1%)” (Anderson 286). Anderson further points out that a similar pattern was traced in marijuana use also. In this context, he also refers to Johnston. O’Mailley and Bachman’s MTF (Monitoring the Future) study at the University of Michigan, which document that males use all forms of illicit drug at a higher frequency and thereby degenerates into the realms of darkness and ruthlessness. The above statistical data is strong enough to prove that the whole business is governed and ruled by the male population of the society. However, in recent times there is an increasing incidence of drug abuse by women also, but reports suggest that ironically it is the men who are the perpetrators of such practices within them —“there are instances of boyfriends getting them hooked to drugs, sexually abusing them and abandoning them” (Kanchan). So at the core and centre of this system lies the exploitation of the women in the hands of their male counterparts. Zilberman and Blume in their article “Domestic violence, alcohol and substance abuse”, has aptly pointed out this concomitant connection and causal relationship between substance use and domestic violence:

Substance use is involved in as many as 92% of reported episodes of domestic violence. Alcohol frequently acts as a disinhibitor, facilitating violence. Stimulants such as cocaine, crack cocaine and amphetamines are also frequently involved in episodes of domestic violence by reducing impulse control and increasing paranoid feelings. Alcohol use seems to be involved in up to 50% of the cases of sexual assault... Studies report rates of alcoholism of 67% and 93% among wife batterers.

The fact that drug and gender violence are interrelated can also be easily exemplified by an incident of ‘Dec 2013 where an addicted husband cut the nose and lips of his wife in front of her children when she refused to give away her jewellery to exchange it for drugs’ (“Gender Perspective on The Impact Of Drug Use, Drug Trade and Drug Control Regimes”). According to the UN policy brief July 2014 reports ‘when women do become part of criminal

gangs and drug trafficking, they are often forced to have sexual relations with other members as part of their initiation' ("Gender Perspective"). Such an action many a time leads to the infliction of 'Sexually Transmitted Diseases, gynecological problems, tuberculosis, mental health trauma and psychiatric disorders' (Anderson 287). They were also often compelled to act as 'drug mules'. 'Drug mules are often forced to swallow or insert drugs into their bodies and are misled about the quantities they will be carrying, the means of transporting them or where they will be going. Empirical evidence prove that approximately 6 out of 10 migrant women are victims of rape or other sexualized violence as they come in contact with drug smugglers' ("Gender Perspective"). Therefore it is important to note that substance abuse is one of the main causes of gender based violence. Most notably Punjab, India's one of the most colorful and vibrant states has fallen into the grip of this ghastly menace and subsequently is threatened by the dangers of this deadly practice. In the article "Why has India's Punjab fallen into the grip of drug abuse?" Sanjay Majumder of BBC news has observed in his survey of therapid retrogression of Punjab and its horrifying women abuse in the hands of drug use:

The women are the most difficult to treat...Many of them are abandoned by their families. Most have been sexually molested when they try and seek help, by unscrupulous counsellors and doctors, even police.

Addressing this issue of the pervasive influence of the menace of drug abuse that is gradually annihilating the future of Punjab, eminent actress and filmmaker Nandita Das in her interview to Usmeet Kaur of the *Hindustan Times* has rightly opined:

It's high time that everyone, including filmmakers, sensitise the people and create awareness against drug abuse and other social evils. Cinema can play an important role in eradicating social evils. I don't feel there is anything wrong if filmmakers focus on real issues and sensitize people to bring in a positive change in society.

Abhishek Chaubey's *Uda Punjab* can be considered as a befitting endeavor in the need for such a call.

*Uda Punjab* is not simply a well-crafted documentation of the dismal effects of drug use in Punjab but can also be studied and considered as a revelation of the victimization of women in the entire process. In the film the women voice and perspective is represented by two characters—a poor, nameless Bihari migrant (played by actress Alia Bhatt) and Preeti Sahni, a doctor who runs a de-addiction centre. The character of Alia migrates to Punjab and begins to work in the farm lands for her survival. The girl's misfortune falls literally from the sky in the form of a heroin packet. She accidentally gets hold of it and this particular incident changes the whole map of her life. It is because of her ignorance and unfamiliarity of the subject that she finds herself involved in the whole trap of drug smugglers and trafficking. Having realized the gravity of the situation she runs for her life but ultimately is held captive and immediately finds herself in a hell-hole, where she is subject to severe sexual abuse. Nevertheless, she continues to fight and resist their evil intentions but is eventually forced to

surrender and submit due to the insertion of drug dose into her body. It seems as if the members of the gang were seeking out their revenge of not getting the packet by their repeated raping of the girl. It must be noted that how every time before she was physically exploited drug was inserted into her body, to kill her spirit of defiance and protest. It must be addressed that how she was no more a human being rather dehumanized into a creature. She was not anymore a life, but a body and a commodity to be used and reused to satisfy the male carnal desire. The height and intensity of her trauma and pain can be glaringly felt in the scenes where she cries her heart out. In this context the role and functioning of jurisdiction and the political parties must be noted. Behind this illegal racket of drug culture how a secret, mutually-beneficial nexus between the greedy politicians of the state and the corrupt narcotic police department is operating and thereby allowing the trafficking of drugs, in exchange of monetary gain need to be addressed. It is important to note how the police, whose duty is to protect and safeguard an individual from all forms of danger and damage, ironically becomes the very instrument of torture and torment. The inspector, the supposed saviour who could have rescued the girl from the clutches of this dirty trap, ends in sexually exploiting her. In this regard I would like to focus on the point of the namelessness of the character. The character perhaps has been deliberately kept anonymous to highlight and emphasize the universality of the crisis and predicament that women are subject to in this venal, dirty world of drugs driven by men. So it can be argued that this is not the tragedy of a girl in particular, but women in general. This could have been the story of anybody who by unfortunate turn of events might just get involved in this filthy politics. That is why only after she comes out of this web of inhumanity and cruelty, she is given an identity. Sitting on the beach of Goa, her dream land and enjoying the taste of liberation and emancipation she spontaneously calls herself 'Mary Jane' which seems to share an uncanny resemblance with the word 'marijuana'. It must be pointed out that even though she is the worst victim of the most vicious circumstances she is dauntless in her attempt to defy and challenge the wretchedness and exploitations that she undergoes. She had thought that the packet of heroin would endow her with a bright and better fortune but fate had something bitter in store for her. Unfortunately she got trapped and dragged in a network of atrocity and criminality. Even amidst this extreme moment of crisis she has an undying determination to fight against the cursed and ill-fated expedition of her life. Despite so much darkness in her life the girl stands for unyielding mental strength and power and carries a strong desire of hope against hopelessness. She is physically battered and shattered by male power but not broken and beaten mentally. Interestingly in her one night meeting with Tommy Singh, she becomes instrumental in influencing him with positivity and sanity and bringing about a regeneration and redemption in his life. To Tommy who is aimless and purposeless in nature, she gives him a purpose in life to win over his addiction and to follow the path of brightness and hopefulness. After meeting her Tommy gets a window to a new life and a new beginning. It is the portrayal of the other female character, Preeti Sahni that reinforces and reaffirms the



fact that women are vulnerable and defenceless in this male-centered world of crime and violence. It was her effort to eradicate the evils of the system that had made her a soft target of the masterminds of the corrupt camp. Her crime was that she dared to defy and challenge the powerful system. The political leaders of the state, who in their promotions of the election, very cunningly and craftily harped on the pernicious impact of substance abuse on the young generation and the immediate need to fight against such a deadly practice, in reality, were themselves the dealers of drug. Preeti with the support of Sartaj, the ASI showed the courage to expose the hypocrisy and duplicity of the legal and political departments and consequently had to suffer. It is extremely ironical that she in her attempt of giving a new life to a drug addict loses her own life in his hands. In this context it is important to consider that she did not even get a proper justice for her brutal and ruthless murder. Rather the custodians of law and order for their own self interests misrepresented the whole affair in a very convincing manner to make it appear incidental and not intentional. Preeti being an educated woman was well aware of the outcome of any outrageous action related to this grim and gloomy world. That is why when Sartaj asks her to come to the factory along with him to collect evidences against the illegal business she immediately refuses on the ground that she is a lady and hence it would be extremely unsafe for her to step into the seamy and sordid world of narcopolis. However she does become a part of this operation but only under the company of Sartaj, one who belongs to that world. If she had not been accompanied by Sartaj perhaps her fate would have been the same as that of the nameless migrant girl. But ultimately her awareness of the crisis ends in futility and vain because she gets mercilessly murdered by a young drug addict.

Therefore it can be aptly argued that this network of illegal drug industry as represented in the film is a male dominated world where there is no role of female agency and power. It is a field where the women are always positioned at the gunpoint and rescue is not possible without the male intervention and force. The migrant girl despite her undeterred fighting spirit is rescued only after the two male protagonists of the film come into the frame. It is only when a personal crisis affects their lives the male characters are redeemed and reborn with a new and optimistic approach towards life. The harsh realities of life made them undertake the journey from self-indulgence to self-actualization. On the one hand when Tommy loses his fame, fortune and support of his family and eventually realizes the ground reality and the dreadful scenario that his lifestyle has created, it is only then that he gets his wake-up call. On the other hand when the corrupt ASI Sartaj finds his younger brother to be a drug addict he decides to expose the racket by staying within the system. So ironically both of them were the victimizer and the victims, people who were indirectly responsible for the proliferation of the curse of drug abuse and drug trafficking but ultimately becomes influential in eradicating and eliminating the evils of the practice. But at the same time it must be noted that both the women characters in the film are equally represented as strong and powerful. They retain their revolutionary and rebellious spirit till the last moment. One in

her fight against the fatal practice succumbs to its power and the other fighting against all odds triumphantly flies out of the cage and lands in her dream destination Goa. Thus in the film there exists a central underlying conflict and clash between two sexes/powers, the women population who despite being aware of their marginality attempts at emancipation and empowerment and the dominant (male) society that spurns and scorns them.

*Uda Punjab* therefore can be studied as a faithful and honest documentation of the impact of the deadly practice of drug abuse and the subsequent gender violence and humiliation that the whole process ensures. The narrative can be considered as a powerful/caustic critique of the moral corruption and hypocrisy of the powerful political leaders and police departments which allow substance abuse to continue.

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