



Of Dimensions More than One: The trope of the Manic Pixie Dream Girl in Cinema

¹Author Harsita Hiya

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ABSTRACT

When exploring character types that further patriarchy, tropes like the Damsel in Distress and the Mary Sue are often discussed owing to the fact that they provide one with readily available critical talking points. There are, however, certain pervasive tropes plaguing female characters which slip through the cracks. One such trope is that of the Manic Pixie Dream Girl (the term being first coined by Nathan Rabin in 2007), female characters who appear independent, bold and quirky, yet are present on screen only for the growth and development of the male protagonists, and consequently, have no life of their own distinct from them. This essay is aimed at discussing the trope in detail, using specific cinematic examples that, on the one hand, propagate it (Jab We Met, 2007) and on the other, subvert its stereotypes (Eternal Sunshine of the Spotless Mind, 2004). It also discusses the misappropriation of the term, addressing Rabin's own rejection of it later, but emphasizes the need for its application as long as writers and creators continue to exploit the trope, promoting unhealthy expectations from both genders regarding the role of a woman.

Keywords:

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¹ Corresponding Author : MA in English, Jawaharlal Nehru University
Email – hiyaharsita@gmail.com , Contact No. 9971360672



Character tropes have existed in the performing arts since time immemorial. Stock characters that are based on social stereotypes appear with different names and professions, but eventually show characteristics that can be labelled as same or at least similar. In Elizabethan times, such characters were extremely common in Shakespearean drama (the clever side kick/jester, the wise old authoritarian man), especially when it came to comedies. Ben Johnson, in fact, is famous for popularizing the Comedy of Humours, wherein most characters possessed a dominant trait or 'humour', as he described it, which governed all their actions, and were named and behaved accordingly. The objective of character tropes is rather straightforward. They are meant to create among audiences, a sense of familiarity by picking out with these fictional manifestations, certain elements of contemporary society that are either relatable or carry cultural relevance. To this date, character tropes are an important part of Modern day cinema. While some of these can be categorized as harmless clichés, some come with the baggage of propagating certain problematic stereotypes.

Out of these, one heavily panned trope which continues to show up time and again is that of the Manic Pixie Dream Girl. This term was first coined by film critic Nathan Rabin in 2007 in an essay written for the AV Club while describing a character played by Kirsten Dunst in the movie Elizabethtown (2005). It was used by him to pin a name on the oft repeated usage in film of quirky female characters that enter the life of depressed male protagonists dealing with monotonous routines for the sole purpose of endowing them with a fresh perspective and enthusiasm towards life- a sort of *Joi de vivre*. In the words of Rabin Himself, the MPGD "Exists solely in the fevered imaginations of sensitive writer-directors to teach broodingly soulful young men to embrace life and its infinite mysteries and adventures."(Rabin). The inherently detrimental aspect of using such female characters is that they are never well-rounded. They are provided minimal



screen space (and, in some cases, this can go as low as none) to acquaint the audience with their own story and background, their own life separate from the male protagonist. These characters are rarely shown to grow and develop, and if they do, it is a process not considered important to the film and thus left to be dealt off-screen. They are one-dimensional and exist as physical manifestations of a long-standing fantasy, catalysing male dreams of self-realization. In this paper, I will attempt to show how certain examples in Modern Cinema have carried forward this stereotype by closely discussing the character of 'Geet' in Imtiaz Ali's 2007 film, *Jab We Met*, following up the same with an instance where the trope has been successfully subverted by looking at Michael Gondry's *'Eternal Sunshine of the Spotless Mind'*(2004). Further, I'll address how the term 'Manic Pixie Dream Girl' itself can be used in a reductive manner to criticize any female character that doesn't fit the mould of the subservient and feminine heroine whose purpose in life does not go beyond providing silent love and support to the leading man.

ILLUSTRATION OF THE TROPE— GEET (JAB WE MET, 2005)

In his 2007 article called *The Bataan Death March of Whimsy Case File #1: Elizabethtown*, Nathan Rabin had used the term MPDG for the first time when talking of Kirsten Dunst's flirty, full of life stewardess Claire Colburn in Cameron Crowe's negatively received movie *Elizabethtown*, and the description in this case, is neither misplaced nor ill-founded. The IMDB introduction for this movie reads: "During a hometown memorial for his Kentucky-born father, a young man begins an unexpected romance with a 'too-good-to-be-true' stewardess." The character indulges in whimsical activities and gives uplifting advice to Orlando Bloom's sullen, 'fresh off a suicide attempt' Drew Baylor. She smiles and enacts a camera click with her hands whenever she is experiencing a moment she wants to capture. The dialogues given to her, her musings on love and life



also support her classification as an MPDG.

Fresh off this example, it isn't difficult to see that Kareena Kapoor's character, 'Geet' in Imtiaz Ali's 2007 blockbuster romantic comedy film 'Jab We Met' presents a perfect fit for the MPDG. In the beginning itself, there is no room for doubt that this is primarily the male protagonist's story. Aditya, played by Shahid Kapoor, the brooding, despondent son of a rich industrialist who is grieving the recent loss of his father as well as his estrangement from his mother, is the one we see first on screen. We travel with him through long silences, gloomy colours and cold office spaces, until he wanders off and climbs onto a train, lost in a reverie, and encounters Geet, who is travelling back to Bhatinda from Mumbai, with grand plans of eventually eloping with her lover, Anshuman, to Manali, plans she doesn't mind sharing with anyone as she blabbers on with an open heart. The moment Geet enters the story, the screen bursts into life. She talks without pause, dreamy and effervescent. Through her personality and mannerisms, she accurately illustrates the description of MPDG put forward by Julianna Joyce in her essay Deciphering the Manic Pixie Mythos: Contemporary Depictions of Alternative Femininity (included in the Apollon E Journal):

"The Manic Pixie Dream Girl exhibits no true desires of her own, does not have any real aspirations, and is simply there to help the male protagonist. She is easily amused, childlike in her social interactions, and seemingly incapable of truly taking care of herself without the male lead, i.e., her childlike ways give her the uncanny ability to raise the brooding (usually white) male from his failure-induced depression." (Joyce)

This is what plays out for us on the screen, for even though Aditya is initially disinterested in her chatter, Geet presses on. She notices his sullen demeanour, and offers herself up as his "agony aunt" (Jab We Met, 11:00-10), urging him to confide in her about his problems. When Aditya gets off at a secluded station, unconcerned that the



train is about to leave, Geet runs to his aid, not thinking twice about jumping off to help a man she had met merely moments ago. In spite of being loud and proud of always catching a train on time, she risks and eventually ends up missing the one to her home, just to bring back Aditya, a man who was, at that point, little more than a stranger to her. As the story progresses, we see instances that support Joyce's assertion that an MPDG is "seemingly incapable of truly taking care of herself without the male lead". While left alone late at night in the Ratlam Station, Geet is harassed by a bunch of goons and even mistaken for a prostitute, her troubles finally coming to an end when she runs into Aditya's arms. She thanks him profusely, telling him, "Aaj pata nahi kya hone wala tha" (God knows what would have happened to me tonight). (Jab We Met, 25:57-59)

After a long and eventful journey, Aditya takes Geet safely back home. He even helps her elope to be with Anshuman. When he returns, he gives his mother her dues, and devotes himself to his company, his personality entirely transformed and set on the right path all thanks to Geet. He laughs more, jokes around and embraces rain and the little things in life. Geet faces a lot of trials— she is rejected and sent away by Anshuman, and, unable to make her way home due to shame, spends months at an Ashram—but the audience finds out about these developments only when Aditya does. Until then, her story is left off screen. Once again, Aditya rescues her. He puts Anshuman his place and helps her do the same. He even takes her back home to her family. The happy ending that concludes the movie with the two of them uniting then comes as no surprise.

Rabin's categorization here, in the above case, astutely points out the problem of featuring a female only as the vehicle to a man embracing his life. What we see of the character is what the male lead thinks of her and what she in turn, represents to the male lead. We are provided on a platter the feelings that this character inspires in our protagonist—love, boldness, motivation, and so on. We never actually see any interiority



in relation to the female character in questions. Whatever Geet's life is, when not linked to the male protagonist, is avoided and kept in the shadows until Aditya himself becomes embroiled in it.

SUBVERSION OF THE TROPE— CLEMENTINE (ETERNAL SUNSHINE OF THE SPOTLESS MIND,2004)

In this Michael Gondry directed movie about two people beginning a relationship after a train ride, unaware of their previous commitments and conflicts due to a process that erased their memories, the character of the female lead played by Kate Winslet is often classified as a Manic Pixie Dream Girl. This film was released before the term was even coined. Winslet plays Clementine Kruczynski, who enters Joel's humdrum life much like a burst of sunshine. She talks of taking risks in life, isn't miserly when it comes to laughing, dyes her hair the brightest of colours from red to blue to green, and infuses this infectious energy into our dull protagonist as well. Joel Barish himself starts thinking that this will be the girl who will save him. This categorization however, is completely misplaced for Clementine was a character that subverted a trope before it was even called out as problematic. She is a well-rounded, human character and her relationship with Joel is not a fun-filled journey to his self-realization. After the initial phase, the film makes sure to depict the complications in their relationship owing to their conflicting personalities. Clementine's quirks aren't that amusing for Joel when on one drunken night, she wrecks his car. Her inability to consistently deal with his quiet and mellow take on life shows that she grows as a character. In fact, in one scene of the movie, the entire issue of the male gaze fuelled MPDG trope is directly addressed, way before it's time when Clementine lashes out at Joel and tells him:

"Too many guys think I'm a concept, or I complete them, or I'm gonna make them alive. But I'm just a fucked-up girl who's lookin' for my own peace of mind; don't assign me yours." (ESOTSM, 1:22:15-30)



This quote hits the nail on the head, and on its own does enough to subvert the stereotype of the impossibly whimsical saviour girl who has no actual depth. Another bit from the movie which tackles this head on is the following exchange between Joel and Clem in the last scene of the movie:

“Joel Barish: I can't see anything I don't like about you.

Clementine Kruczynski: But you will, you will think of things and I'll get bored with you and feel trapped because that's what happens with me.

Joel Barish: Okay.

Clementine Kruczynski: Okay.” (ESOTSM, 1:43:00-25)

PROBLEMS WITH THE TERM ITSELF/ RETRACTION

In a 2014 article published by Salon, Nathan Rabin retracted the term, regretting its widespread misuse, and calling it an unstoppable monster. He claimed that he had never imagined the ubiquitous status it would once reach, and how it had become an easy go to for lazy writing and criticism. In the essay he rues,

"Manicpixiedreamgirl" became the title of a young adult novel about a teenage boy obsessed with a free-spirited female classmate, something I only learned about when a reader directed me to the book's Amazon page. The author did not choose the book's title, I learned in my one exchange with him over Facebook; it was his publisher's idea. I couldn't bring myself to read it. Critics began coining spinoff tropes like the "manic pixie dream guy." Mindy Kaling name-dropped Manic Pixie Dream Girls in a New Yorker piece on female-centric films. And last year I had the surreal experience of watching a musical called Manic Pixie Dreamland, about a fantasy realm that produces Manic Pixie Dream Girls. Sitting in the dark theater, I thought: "What have I done?!" (Rabin)

According to him, giving his idea a name is what made it powerful and pervasive, and



this power was spinning out of control. He goes on to strongly condemn its widespread manipulation, and calls for the complete withdrawal of the term from Modern pop culture vocabulary.

One can see why it is not difficult to misconstrue the term itself as sexist. Although Rabin's intention on coining it was to bring to light the male gaze orchestrated one-dimensional characters who were becoming a fixture in pop culture, it is also quite reductive to claim that any woman character with quirks would inevitably fall in the category of the Manic Pixie. Often this term has been wrongly used to describe female characters who are written as strong, independent and happy. As it has been pointed out, the character of Clementine has many a times been classified as an MPDG, when in reality, she transcends and subverts the basic attributes of one. This term has also been applied for Diane Keaton's character in the Woody Allen classic Annie Hall, when her purpose in life was clearly more than bringing Alvie, the male protagonist, clarity and spirit.

Many have shown open disdain for this sort of indiscriminate classification. Zoe Kazan, who wrote and played a writer's imaginary girlfriend in the 2012 movie 'Ruby Sparks' has criticized it twice, stating in a 2012 interview published by Vulture that she was "not a fan" of the term, and that it is wrong to classify different characters under a single, reductive rubric as this. Popular author John Green has gone so far as to claim that his novel Paper Towns is an attempt to destroy the patriarchal dream of the Manic Pixie Dream Girl. It has been observed by a critic that we must understand things have gone too far just by acknowledging how this term of being a whimsical paper doll is nowadays being consistently used against actor Zooey Deschanel, an actual person!

To conclude, I will state that it would be in itself reductive to not notice the layers to MPDG as a term. It is fraught with problems, but has also divulged the use of female



characters as mere foils without back stories to be something Hollywood still uses without shame. Ben Beaumont-Thomas, in his 2014 essay in *The Guardian*, deceptively titled *Why the Manic Pixie Dream Girl Must Never Return*, backs the usefulness of the term, urging that “a backlash against the cliché should not be conflated with a backlash against the trope itself.”

“Kazan and Rabin are rightly uncomfortable in thinking about women in terms of stock subgroups, and yet this is exactly how a male-dominated film industry thinks about them – and after a trickle-down process, how ordinary men will end up thinking about them. By lampooning it in a tangy phrase like MPDG, a trope which has crept along suddenly gets the light shined on it, and its ridiculousness becomes so well articulated that it’s difficult to get away with it again.” (Thomas)

Sophia Beams, in *The Misuse of “Manic Pixie Dream Girl” is Only Furthering Sexism in Media*, published by Medium in 2020, also asserts that the misappropriation of the term is the real problem, and not the term itself.

“Contrary to what the term is used for today, it was focused more on calling out media-makers who included these characters for inappropriate reasons.” (Beams)

Rabin is perhaps not wrong to retract the term and disown its uncontrollable proliferation, but it will be a long time until the MPDG disappears from our screens, and even longer until actual, real women are not criticized for being themselves.

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