

STORY (KAHAANI) 2012

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(Hindi)

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OVERVIEW

This is a fine example of a recent trend for well-written thriller scripts in Indian cinema. It concerns a young and pregnant woman who comes to Calcutta looking for her missing husband. From this somewhat conventional opening, followed by a casual police investigation, the film soon draws us into a vortex of confusing identities, missing files, hitmen and high-security intelligence work. To say anymore would spoil the deliciously complex plot.

CULTURAL SIGNIFICANCE

Some critics have noted that a central character in the film is the city of Calcutta or Kolkata itself. And there are many sumptuous scenes of the festival of Durga Puja, which is the city's annual celebration of a Hindu goddess. For example, the dramatic twists and turns at the end are intercut with shots of the final festival procession. And the Durga story is also relevant since it concerns retribution by a female deity. Two other points of cultural significance should be noted. First, one of the most popular songs from the film is a morose rendition of a song ('Ekla Cholo Re,' 'If no one answers your call, then walk alone) that was written in 1905 by Rabindranath Tagore. Second, the colour scheme of the film was inspired by a painting by Gaganendranath Tagore, who was a nephew of Rabindranath Tagore. A photograph of the painting can be seen at the end of this essay.

STORY

Terrorist attack The story begins with shots of a man, wearing a gas-mask, performing an experiment on rats. Next, we watch rush hour on the Calcutta metro system, and the camera tracks a young man who gets onto a train with a package. Then there is an explosion and all the passengers lie lifeless on the floor of the train, like the rats in a cage. The media report that more than a hundred have been killed in a poison gas attack, presumably carried out by terrorists.

Vidya Two years later, Vidya Bagchi arrives in the city during the annual Durga Puja festival. She is a computer specialist, she is heavily pregnant and she is looking for her missing husband. She tells the police that her husband, Arnab Bagchi, came to Calcutta from London two weeks earlier, on assignment for the National Data Centre. Arnab, like her, is a 'firewall expert,' who protects computer systems from viral attacks.

Mona Lisa Vidya tells the police that he stayed in a hotel called the Mona Lisa, from where he talked to her every day before he vanished. The police officer says he will do his best and sends his assistant, Rana, to take her to the Mona Lisa, which is not a hotel, but a rundown guest house. The owner looks through his old battered ledger, but can find no record of her husband. However, Vidya is able to prove that her husband stayed there by describing a piece of art work on a wall near his room; sure enough, when Rana and she climb the stairs, they see that painting outside room no. 10. Convinced, Vidya decides to stay in the shabby guest house, where the only running hot water is a young boy who 'runs' up the stairs with a bucket of warm liquid.

Frustrated search The next day Vidya goes to the National Data Centre and shows a picture of her husband to the personnel officer, who tells her that he never came to the Centre. Officer Rana takes her to the morgue, but none of the bodies there are her husband. Then he takes her to the outskirts

of the city, where her husband's uncle lived and where they see her husband's old school. But the search proves futile: no one has heard of Arnab Bagchi. The immigration system at the airport also has no record of such a man entering the country on the date that Vidya says he arrived in India.

Milan Damji Meanwhile, the personnel officer at the National Data Centre searches for computer records concerning a man called Milan Damji because he resembles Vidya's husband. But whenever she tries to access that information, she gets a message saying 'Restricted Access.' And her boss, who has authorisation to all computer records, refuses to allow her access. The personnel officer contacts Vidya and explains that this Damji joined the Centre two years ago and left a few days later without explanation.

Intelligence Bureau Suddenly, the personnel officer is killed by a man called Bob Biswas, who has a cover identity as a life insurance agent. Next, two officers from the Intelligence Bureau in New Delhi come to Calcutta because they are told a woman had tried to access Damji's records. One of them, Khan, takes over the small police station where Vidya first made her missing person report. He interviews Vidya and tells her to go back to London. Vidya refuses.

Revelation: Damji The search for Damji's records leads everyone to the old National Data Centre office. Vidya and Rana break in and take the relevant paper file, only seconds before Bob (the hit-man) arrives. Khan, the IB officer, again tells Vidya to give up her search. Again, she refuses, and he reveals that Milan Damji is the chief suspect in the poison-gas attack two years earlier. He was an IB officer who worked for the 'enemy' and has since disappeared. 'This is a dangerous game, Mrs Bagchi,' Khan says, 'You might get hurt.'

Electronic files Vidya and Rana go to an address they found on Damji's paper record, where a street-vendor says that a Mr Sridhar often came to Damji's flat. Bob attempts to kill Vidya but fails and is himself run over by a car. Using Bob's mobile phone, Rana and Vidya are able to find Sridhar's office, where Vidya accidentally shoots him during a struggle. Vidya and Rana recover sensitive electronic files from Sridhar's computer, which leads them to another contact. Vidya calls this man and proposes to give him the documents in return for his help in finding her husband. That man refuses to help. Then Vidya gets an anonymous call ordering her to hand over the files if she wants to see her husband alive.

Damji killed Vidya meets the caller, who is Damji, with back-up from Rana and Khan. When Damji demands the files, she wonders if he will really reveal the whereabouts of her husband. In a fight, he kicks her in the stomach, dislodging the prosthetic belly she has been using to fake a pregnancy. She stabs him in the neck with her hairpin and, as he is lying injured, shoots him with his own gun.

Revelation: Vidya After she disappears into the festival crowd, Rana explains to Khan (and the viewers) that there never was an Arnab Bagchi or a Vidya Bagchi. The woman who arrived in Calcutta using that name was the wife of an IB officer killed by Damji in the poison gas attack on the metro two years earlier. When she identified his body in the morgue, she collapsed and had a miscarriage. Later, she invented a story in order to get the police and the IB to help her track down her husband's murderer. Her name, her identity and her pregnancy had all been faked in order to exact revenge.

THEMES

Names A subtle theme that ultimately supplies the answer to this complicated puzzle of a story is the unreliability of names. This issue is foreshadowed in an early scene, just after Vidya arrives in Calcutta. While she is riding in a car with Rana, she asks why he is called 'Rana' when his name-badge reads Satyoki. 'Everyone here has two names,' the adorable Rana explains. 'An official name and a pet name.' This makes Vidya smile. 'Interesting,' she muses. 'Everyone has two names.' She would smile, of course, because she also has two names. Then she has to contend with the Bengali pronunciation of Vidya as 'Bidya.' Soon, we discover that her husband, Arnab Bagchi, resembles a man called Milan Damji—or maybe it's one man with two names. A name should correlate with a personal identity and history, but this clever thriller shows us otherwise.

Storytelling The role of storytelling is, of course, highlighted in the title. 'A story' is what we are told we will see. But a tale told by whom? While the film-maker is certainly one storyteller, there are also others within the film itself. Rana sums it up toward the end, when he says to Khan, 'You told her a story—that Milan Damji does not exist. And she told us another story. Mrs Bagchi was a story.' The woman who called herself 'Vidya' invented a husband and showed the police the photo of a man who looked like Milan Damji, the person she wanted to hunt down and kill. She also invented her pregnancy, in order to win sympathy and conceal her sinister intention. This clever use of the technique of metafiction, stories about stories, places this film in a special category in Indian cinema.

Femininity and motherhood A third theme is that of a woman's gender and role in society. A heavily pregnant woman (even if that is an illusion) who takes revenge by killing her husband's killer is not a common character in an Indian film. Indeed, at every turn, Vidya confounds gender stereotyping. In an early scene, she solves a computer problem in the police station; four or five strokes on the keyboard resolves the 'glitch' that had been troubling officer Rana for days. Similarly, Vidya never takes no for an answer and usually returns a man's command by issuing orders of her own. At the end of the film, for example, the retired head of the IB praises 'Vidya' because she accomplished something that none of his other male officers could: find and eliminate Damji. 'Vidya' herself says that during the search she forgot that she wasn't pregnant and felt the child inside her. In other words, her faked pregnancy brought back thoughts of the child she lost through a miscarriage caused by her husband's killing. Her search for the man who killed her husband can be seen as an attempt to reclaim her child. Her final words in the film are, 'I want my child back.' The motherhood theme is also reinforced by the final shots of 'Vidya' merging with hundreds of women in a procession honouring Durga, the mother goddess who protects her children.

CHARACTERS

Vidya Vidya is the woman who comes to Calcutta looking for her husband. Vidya Bagchi is a pregnant wife searching for her husband in Calcutta. Or that is what she says; in fact, only one of the four elements in the previous sentence is true. She is certainly clever, confident and able to handle whatever the male-centred world throws at her. But, in other respects, she is not what she appears.

Defiant The single-most important feature of her character is defiance. Vidya will not back down from anyone, whether he be a police officer or a hotel manager, in her search for her missing husband. The clearest display of this characteristic comes in a conversation with Khan, an officer of the Intelligence Bureau, who is sent from New Delhi to Calcutta to interview her. He is stern and rude to everyone, including her, when he replies to a suggestion she makes about the search for her husband. 'Mrs Bagchi, you're not listening. We don't know each other well, but let me decide what I should or shouldn't do.' Three minutes later, when he advises her to go back to London, she smiles and says, 'Mr Khan, we don't know each other. But let me decide what I should and should not do.' It's a perfect tit-for-tat, only this time it comes from a supposedly ordinary woman speaking to a high-ranking security officer. Vidya's determination does not recognise status or gender, especially when they are combined.

Clever One way of describing Vidya's 'story' would be to call it 'deceptive,' but given that she is on right side of morality, if not the law, it is more suitable to say she is 'clever.' She is extremely cunning throughout the film; indeed, the fact that her deviousness is not discovered until the end is evidence of her intelligence. That revelatory scene is an action sequence, in which she finally meets Milan Damji. During a physical struggle, she uses her prosthetic big belly as a weapon, whipping it out like a hidden knife. With that key element of her false identity revealed, the rest follows until we know exactly who she is, what she is doing and why. But she played the part well, fooling everyone and outwitting even the self-satisfied intelligence officer.

Ruthless Vidya is not only determined and devious; she is also ruthless in her pursuit and kills two men in the process. The more sensational of these murders is the second, when she shoots Milan Damji, the man who caused her husband's death in a poison-gas attack two years earlier. The two of them meet in a deserted lane, while the rest of the city is busy celebrating a festival. After an argument, she falls to the ground and he is about to shoot her, when she pulls out her prosthetic belly and smashes it against his hand. When his gun goes flying, she removes a hair pin and stabs in the foot, kicks him in the groin and stabs him in the neck. Then she recovers his gun, slams in the magazine and shoots him as he tries to limp away. That would be enough for any heroine, but not

Vidya. When Damji has fallen to the ground, she advances and puts two more bullets into his bloody body. It is a gruesome, brutal killing.

Rana Rana is the young police officer who assists her. Rana is a capable and very likable police officer. He becomes, in effect, Vidya's guide to Calcutta, driving her around the city on her hunt for her husband. He is very polite with her, and yet they begin to develop a rapport that has a subtle undercurrent of romance.

Impressionable Rana is young, unmarried officer of only six months experience. Unlike his colleagues in the suburban police station, he is neither jaded nor harsh. But his enduring quality is his youthful openness, as shown in his first scene. Vidya has come into the police station to seek help in finding her missing husband. While a senior man speaks with her, Rana is frustrated with the computer, which keeps flashing a message 'system error.' When the interview is over, Vidya gently suggests that she might help with the computer problem. Rana is all smiles, if a little uncertain that this pregnant woman from London can do anything. When she solves the problem in a matter of seconds, Rana stands open-mouthed in admiration. 'That was amazing, madam,' he says. It is the beginning of the most important relationship in the film and it starts with a young man impressed by the IT skills of a married woman.

Protective The callow youth soon becomes the heroic defender. Driving Vidya around the city during her search, he becomes her 'charioteer.' That role is actually suggested by his official name, Satyoki, who is a charioteer in the Mahabharata epic. Rana lives up to his name by fending off harm and leading Vidya into battle. His concern for her is memorably displayed when he attempts to shield her from Khan's arrogance. The Intelligence Bureau officer is bullying her in a closed office, when Rana comes in without knocking. Affronted, Khan demands to know who he is, and he simply says he wants to talk with Vidya. 'Out! Out!' Khan bellows to the underling, who reluctantly complies. He cannot countermand a superior officer, but he has at least shown that he is watching out for Vidya.

Intelligent The other key feature of Rana's character is his sharp-eyed investigation. Although this only becomes clear in the final scene, when he informs the dumbfounded Khan about the false identity assumed by Vidya, in retrospect we can see examples throughout the film. A key moment occurs when Vidya takes him (on a wild goose chase) to a school where she says her husband studied. In the school playground, Rana meets a young boy in a school uniform and notices that the symbol on the boy's uniform is a flying swan. Later, Rana sees another boy with the same symbol in Vidya's guest house and realises that Vidya had invented the story about the school from talking with that second boy. Now, he begins to doubt Vidya's story and by carefully observing her words and movements, he is able to solve the complex mystery of her identity.

Khan Khan is an officer from India's Intelligence Bureau, who also gets involved in the search.

Milan Damji Milan Damji is the man they are looking for.

Bob Biswas Bob Biswas is a contract killer.



(Vidya arriving in Calcutta)



(Rana leading Vidya on her search)



(The 19th-century painting of Calcutta that inspired the colour scheme of the film)