

HUMANITIES INSTITUTE
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REVENGE (BADLA) 2019

Sujoy Ghosh

(Hindi)

OVERVIEW

As with other films by this director, this is a superbly written story full of twists and turns that keep you riveted until the final frames. Adapted from a Spanish film (*The Invisible Guest*, 2017), it sets up a version of the 'closed-room murder mystery'. A woman (Naina) is accused of murdering her lover (Arjun) in a hotel room, but she denies the charge and explains that another person must have gotten into the room to commit the murder. Most of the film is a conversation between her and Badal, the advocate hired to defend her, while flashbacks are used to dramatise her version of what happened in that hotel room and why. The final reveal is brilliant and, as with all the facts in this story, it is cleverly foreshadowed.

CULTURAL SIGNIFICANCE

This highly entertaining film is unusual in that it is an entirely Indian production set and shot in Scotland. The use of Hindi is justified, in the film and in reality, by the many Indians who now live in that cold country. And while it copies the story from a Spanish film (the only major revision being that the woman and not the man is the murderer), it also manages to 'Indianise' the story with several references to the Mahabharata epic. In the epic, the father of the heroes was blind, as justice is said to be. In the epic, the father's charioteer tells him the truth, just as Naina is supposed to be telling the truth to Badal. And, when the truth is exposed, a mother's revenge is said to be the same as the revenge of the epic brothers' wife.

MAIN CHARACTERS

Naina	Naina is a young woman suspected of murder.
Arjun	Arjun is her lover and the murder victim.
Badal	Badal is the advocate hired to defend Naina.
Jimmy	Jimmy is Naina's lawyer who hired Badal.
Rani	Rani is the mother of a boy killed in a car accident.

STORY

Suspect and advocate The story begins when Badal (not to be confused with *badla*, or revenge), a tall and distinguished advocate, goes to the apartment of Naina Sethi, a young, married woman. The television news in the apartment gives us the base-line information: Naina has been accused of killing her lover, Arjun. The news also adds that Naina has pleaded innocent, claiming that she has been framed. We also learn that Badal has come to Naina at the request of her lawyer, Jimmy.

New evidence During her interview with Badal, Naina appears relaxed but focused, saying that Jimmy told her 'everything is under control' because there is no evidence against her. Badal gives her the bad news that there is a new witness with damning evidence and that the witness will be interviewed that same day. 'I'm afraid you might be arrested by this afternoon,' is Badal's dire prediction. He urges her to tell him the whole truth, so that the 'loopholes' in her statement can be 'plugged' and not used by the prosecution against her in court. Naina prevaricates, says she is suffering because her husband and child have left her and repeats her claim that she is being framed. Badal interrupts, 'If you don't tell me the truth, you'll be arrested in less than three hours.'

Her story Finally, Naina opens up and explains what happened at the Glen Mohr Hotel. She and Arjun, who had been together as lovers for three months, were told to go there by text. While in the hotel room, she received another text from the blackmailer threatening to tell everyone about their affair. Arjun then decided that they should leave the hotel with the blackmail money that they had brought with them. Suddenly, Naina was knocked unconscious. When she woke, Arjun was lying dead in the bathroom with the money scattered around him. The police arrived and arrested her on suspicion of murder.

Facts Police investigators find no evidence that another person was in the hotel room: no guest saw anyone arrive or leave; no footprints left inside or outside the room; no windows were opened; the door was chained and locked from the inside. The police case is that when Naina planned to break off the affair and offered money to keep him quiet, he refused and she killed him.

Naina, however, maintains that someone must have already been in the room and that the crime was carefully planned to implicate her. Badal doesn't believe her and wants to know the truth: Who framed her? What was the motive? Who is this mysterious murderer who vanished into thin air? 'You think you're smarter than me,' he says, 'but you're not. 'You've wasted precious minutes of your three hours.'

Naina's version Finally chastened, Naina retells the story. She and Arjun were driving back from a secret rendezvous when she had an accident and killed the driver of another car, a young boy named Sunny. Arjun persuaded Naina not to tell the police. A passing car stopped and asked if everyone was all right. They said yes, and he drove on. Naina and Arjun put the boy's body in his car and she drove it into a lake. During that time, another passing car asked Arjun if he needed help; they had seen his car crashed against a tree and invited him to their home. They are the dead boy's parents. When the man called his son, the phone rang in Arjun's pocket; he surreptitiously slipped it out and placed on the couch. However, Rani, the mother, is suspicious and makes a note of Naina's car.

Blackmail Back home, Naina is distraught at what she has done: lied to her husband, accidentally killed a young man, lied to his parents and got her lawyer to lie by concocting an alibi that she was in Paris on the day of the events. She also has pressures at work, where she has been working on a property deal that would make her career. She doesn't want to jeopardise her family and her job by telling the truth. The police are persuaded by her false alibi, but Rani knows the truth and confronts Naina, begging her to reveal where her dead son's body is. Naina refuses. She and Arjun are then contacted by the blackmailer, which brings the story back to the present.

Summing up Badal sums up the facts: two dead bodies, Arjun and the boy. The police are only aware of one body, for which Naina is the suspect, but they don't know about the second body, the dead boy. Badal's strategy is to prove that Rani had a motive for killing Arjun and could have done it because her husband worked at the hotel. Naina then gives more details. First, the boy was still alive when she pushed the car into a lake. Second, the blackmailer could be the driver who stopped when he saw the car crash.

Badal's version Now, Badal suggests that it was Naina (and not Arjun) who wanted to hide the car accident and that Naina killed Arjun because he was going to reveal the truth to the boy's parents. Naina denies this and sticks to her version of what happened. But Badal claims that he knows the truth because Rani, always suspicious, shadowed Naina and discovered several details.

Revelation When Badal says he will not defend her in court, she finally confesses that she did kill Arjun, which prompts him to confess that there is no 'new witness'. He made that up in order to pressure her into telling him the truth. Naina gets a call from Jimmy, and Badal leaves the room. The shocking revelation then comes when a second man arrives claiming to be Badal. Confused, Naina unscrews the pen left behind by the first Badal and finds a recording device with her confession to both murders. Looking out the window, she sees the false Badal with Rani. He takes off his disguise and is revealed as the dead boy's father.

THEMES

Truth 'The truth is blind,' as Badal reminds Naina, but it is also elusive, as the film demonstrates. For two hours, we are left wondering who, if anyone, is telling the truth. Naina tells two stories, one of innocence and one of guilt. Her lawyer falsifies a statement to provide her with an alibi. Arjun, her lover, makes up facts, too. Rani assumes a false identity in order to gain an audience with Naina. Badal, it appears, is the only one committed to the truth, but even he admits that he knows nothing and will only know what Naina tells him is the truth. The truth, he says, is not the same as evidence, which is based on facts and tiny details. But he is also a liar. There is no 'new witness' and he is not really Badal. Despite this spider's web of falsity and deceit, the truth is ultimately constructed out of facts, the details that Rani collects and that culminate in Naina's own confession recorded on a hidden microphone. The truth may be slippery, but the film delivers it in a shocking revelation at the end.

Revenge The more human theme of this beguiling film is revenge, as indicated by its title. The truth of the mystery and the motivating energy of the complex story is a mother's desire to punish whoever is responsible for her son's death. Even prior to the revelation at the end, there are hints of Rani's avenging spirit. For instance, Rani angrily confronts Naina with her knowledge of the car accident and accuses her in unequivocal words: 'You are responsible for my son's disappearance. You took my son away. Was it really that easy?' When Naina refuses to admit any responsibility, Rani sets out on a determined path of revenge. Hers is not the biblical eye-for-an-eye retribution. She does not want to kill Naina, only to make her pay for her heartless action. As Badal tells Naina in the final sequence, referring to the *Mahabharata*, a woman knows that revenge is not always the best answer, but sometimes forgiveness is not an option either.

CHARACTER ANALYSIS

Badal

Character Badal is suave, confident, articulate and a fraud. But his dishonesty serves the just cause of unearthing the truth from an intelligent and devious woman. He has charm and wit, often using enigmatic phrases, such as 'You may have the truth, but they [the police] have the evidence.' He can also be arrogant and speak angrily, as he attempts to manipulate Naina to reveal what actually happened to his son. To do that, he must assume a false identity.

Illustrative moments

Confident In his disguise as a top-level advocate, Badal appears convinced that he can get Naina acquitted when her case comes to trial. The confidence is illustrated in the first few minutes of his conversation with her. He sweeps into her apartment, opens his briefcase and declares that he has never lost a case and that he will win this one. 'That's why your lawyer hired me,' he says. Throughout the long conversation, which takes up most of the film, he exudes control and authority, quoting maxims about the 'truth' and 'facts'. He is all business, will truck no prevarications or emotional diversions from his pursuit of the unvarnished truth. Although his confidence is based on a lie, it is not misplaced: he manipulates Naina into making a confession for two murders.

Clever Cunning deception is the name of the game throughout this film, and Badal is no exception. From the first moment he appears to almost the last, he assumes a false identity and tell lies, all in the cause of justice. A good illustration of his cleverness concerns his use of a photograph in a newspaper that purports to show that the dead boy's father worked at the same hotel where Arjun was murdered. His presence would help Badal build up a case that his wife, Rani, had not only a motive but also the opportunity (through her husband) to murder Arjun. But the photo has been altered to include the father in order to encourage Naina to tell more lies, which Badal can eventually transform into the truth.

Naina

Character Naina is a fascinatingly complex character. In her initial scene, she appeals to us and Badal as a woman who has lost her husband and is hounded by the police because of a false accusation of murder. She is tense and angry, but also seems composed and confident. Perhaps that should have been our clue that she is not all that she pretends to be.

Illustrative moments

Ruthless Despite her creditable appearance and behaviour as a person wrongly accused of murder, and a woman abandoned by her husband and child, Naina is a wickedly ambitious person. So selfish, in fact, that she kills twice in order to protect her career. She says that she acted to shield her family, but that doesn't ring true when all the facts are in. The most sensational example of her ruthlessness is her decision to kill Arjun, who has told the truth to the dead boy's parents. When Naina learns what he has done (he didn't consult her because he knew she would have persuaded him not to tell the parents), they are in the hotel room. Feeling trapped, with no way out, and desperate to protect her career, she picked up a heavy metal doorstop and killed him.

Remorseful However cruel and ambitious, Naina is not without a conscience, which is why she can appear sympathetic. A good illustration of her capacity for remorse occurs even before the accident and the murder. She and Arjun are on a lovers' rendezvous when her husband calls on the phone. She takes the call and lies about where she is and what she's doing, but when she speaks with her little daughter, tears form in her eyes. Next, she tells Arjun that she can't go on with their affair because it's destroying her family. Arjun says that they both know they are in love, but Naina replies, 'You know this is wrong and so do I.' Seconds later, she swerves and causes another car to crash and leave the boy seriously injured. It is remorse over her marital infidelity that makes her take her eyes off the road and cause the accident that leads to two murders and her destruction.

Rani

Character Rani is less complex than Naina because she has one purpose: to find the truth about her son's disappearance. At first, she is just a normal woman, who wants to help a man whose car has broken down on the road. Soon, we see that she displays mental strength and perseverance in her search. She, like all the characters in the film, is not above deception if it serves her purpose.

Illustrative moments

Determined Rani has a fixed purpose from which she does not deviate until her goal is achieved. She wants to get revenge for her son's disappearance and that means finding evidence that will convict the person responsible, who turns out to be Naina. Rani's initial suspicions harden into belief as she pieces together the facts about what happened. Once she knows the truth, she goes to Naina, under a false pretence, and confronts her. When Naina denies any role in her son's disappearance, Rani asks her to imagine what she would have done if it had been her child. 'You are powerful, while I am not,' Rani says. 'But because I have nothing to lose, there is nothing I won't do to find my child.'

Perceptive Rani is also an observant person and as intelligent as Naina, her adversary. We are shown several examples of her attention to details, which, in retrospect, we understand enabled her to work out what actually happened. An early illustration is the scene when she and her husband bring Arjun back to their home, where the husband fixes Arjun's crashed car. First, the missing son's phone rings in Arjun's pocket when the father calls him. Although Arjun invents a plausible explanation, Rani sees through it, knowing that her son never leaves his phone in the house. Second, just before Arjun leaves them, Rani's husband gives him a gold lighter that he found in the car while fixing it; later, Rani sees Naina use that same lighter, despite Naina's alibi that she was in Paris. Third, Rani observes closely when Arjun gets in the car and notices that he adjusts the seat, indicating that he was not the driver, as he had said. Fourth, Rani memorises the license plate (N4INA), which leads her to Naina. All four observations take place within a span of five minutes, and later Rani uses them to reconstruct what happened to her son.



(Badal in conversation with Naina)



(Rani, left, confronts Naina)