

Film Review

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Title *Badla*
Director Sujoy Ghosh
Date of Release 8 March 2019

The Femme Fatale and The Avenger's Quest

*"The wolves prey upon the lambs in the darkness of the night,
 but the blood stains remain upon the stones in the valley
 until the dawn comes, and the sun reveals the crime to all."*

-Kahlil Gibran, *Secrets of the Heart*

Recently released 2019 Hindi film *Badla* is a crisp and action packed crime thriller served straight up for whodunit buffs and audiences keen to take a break from run-of-the mill tra-la-la Bollywood affairs that are being churned out ad nauseam. Sujoy Ghosh's ace directorial venture starring Big B, Taapsee Pannu, Amrita Singh, Tanveer Ghani and Tony Luke is equal parts compelling and poignant, cutting straight through the clutter and hitting the mark bang-on.

This official remake of Oriol Paulo's 2017 Spanish film *The Invisible Guest* (*Contratiempo*) puts an interesting spin on the original, by reversing the gender role casting pattern for most of the major characters. Despite the presence of one of the Hindi film industry's male doyens in the film's star cast, *Badla* could pass off for many as a 'women characters' movie' with the two lead women characters coming across as the most deliciously layered, unapologetic, powerful, and unrelenting among the film's cast – a move probably planned this way by the film's makers. The film is a thorough entertainer and the dame-game every bit hugely absorbing as Naina, (the femme fatale) and Rani, (the avenger) are paired antagonistically and characterized at opposite ends of the moral spectrum.

*"When one woman strikes at the heart of another,
 She seldom misses, and the wound is invariably fatal."*

-Choderlos de Laclos, *Les Liaisons dangereuses*

This Hindi adaptation of the Spanish *Contratiempo* sees the sinuous themes of adultery and revenge being addressed through the device of an ongoing murder trial involving a highly successful married businesswoman (Pannu's character) and her dead secret lover (Tony Luke). Amrita Singh portrays the haunting Rani Kaur indelibly as the grieving yet fearless and determined mother (the scorned woman) of the brutally murdered young man Sunny.

Rani emerges intermittently through the entire course of the film, as the unremitting shape-shifting/ self-camouflaging/ formidably intimidating ghost on an unwavering quest for just retribution to be delivered to the rich, powerful, vile and ruthless Naina Sethi, who has been effortlessly quick to cover up her sinful tracks.

True to its title, the movie delves deep into the sinews of the science and art of patiently and perfectly calculated revenge – drawing on characters, philosophy and plot elements from the *Mahabharata*, amongst others. While Amitabh Bachchan and Taapsee are effective and flawless in their roles as the unstoppable, super successful lawyer Badal Gupta and entrepreneur-of-the-moment Naina Sethi respectively, it would be no understatement to say that it is Amrita Singh who pulls off being outstandingly terrific in her depiction of Rani.

Singh's Rani is always subtle but does not lack in menace where required, charm and warmth where due, the hollowing grief of a bereaved mother, camaraderie with a fellow actor/ husband/ friend, or the undaunted purpose of an unsparing sleuth on a search for her missing son. She conveys tremendous emotion and intent even with one mere look or just a turn of the head. Therefore, *Badla* is equally Rani's film and Singh is a treat to watch in it as Rani Kaur – the relentless housewife who masterfully avenges her son.

*"It is a long time," repeated his wife; ...
'Vengeance and retribution require a long time; it is the rule.'
'It does not take a long time to strike a man with Lightning,' said Defarge.
'How long,' demanded madame, composedly,
'does it take to make and store the lightning? Tell me?'"*
-Charles Dickens, *A Tale of Two Cities*

The device of disguise is used as a recurring trope throughout the film by the two 'former veteran actor couple' characters – Sunny's anguished parents who form a redoubtable team. Rani Kaur as Seema Mathews and Nirmal Singh Toor as Badal Gupta lure the devious Naina into a labyrinth of ruses devised to creep up on her when she least expects it, exposing her lies and cold-blooded crimes. The narrative moves at a blink-and-you-miss pace as the suspect/ defendant finds herself cornered to reveal minute details to a discerning listener, face-to-face with a volley of piercing questions and maneuvers.

'Beware the fury of a patient man.'
-John Dryden

Tanveer Ghani and Tony Luke form the surprise lot of the film as far as the cast goes. Tony is convincing as Naina's breezy (to begin with) photographer boyfriend Arjun Joseph whose persona remains something of a mystery

given the multiple versions of what happened 'that unfortunate evening'. Tony pulls off both the manipulative, unapologetic Arjun as well as the guilty wreck Arjun on the verge of a breakdown and confession.

Tanveer Ghani has a hard to miss presence on screen as Rani's devoted and ailing husband Nirmal – former actor and expert mechanic. Nirmal (Nimbi) possesses an appearance, persona and manner that are hard to ignore and Ghani says most of that which is required of his character with his penetrating gaze. However, for most of the screen time the audience sees Bachchan on screen playing Nirmal disguised as Badal Gupta, interacting with Naina in a ploy to get her to confess to murder/s committed and covered up by her.

*"There is no satisfaction in vengeance unless the offender
has time to realize who it is that strikes him,
and why retribution has come upon him."*

-Arthur Conan Doyle, A Study in Scarlet

Big B delivers the ultimate punch of the plot with aplomb (dropping hints sporadically along the way) as he plays Gupta with an expert precision and tempered control that only a seasoned hand could display – adding wit, sarcasm and unforgiving mind games with a uniform conviction. Taapsee compliments Mr. Bachchan's theatrics consistently and with complete commitment sporting a high impact no make-up look and fluctuating circuitously between despair, cluelessness, innocence, challenge; mischief, teasing, testing, lying, confiding, and confession.

A majority of the film involves the volleying back and forth of interrogation and truth, lies or half-truths between Naina and Badal. Here too, the give and take or hide and seek is layered between – the 'framed' defendant placed opposite to the lawyer, the 'guilty' defendant placed opposite to the never-lost-a-case Gupta, and a Machiavellian entrepreneur-murderer seeking to save her empire and reputation, placed opposite an ailing father in disguise on a quest for legitimate vengeance to be delivered.

*"It is the unemotional, reserved, calm,
detached warrior who wins,
not the hothead seeking vengeance
and not the ambitious seeker of fortune."*

-Sun Tzu, The Art of War

The film then, is as much a murder mystery as a crime film, and as much a probing revenge drama as a shrewd psychological thriller. *Badla* explores the philosophy of revenge/ retribution and the power of the channelized fury of the righteous. The background score complements and enhances the overall pace and dark veneered appeal of the movie. Clinton Cerejo's

“Aukaat” voiced by Bachchan is a real treat complete with a sinister vibe that will give you goose bumps. The film is solid in treatment, nicely tied up with regards to editing and emphatic in conveying an emotional truth which justifies a revenge that is central to its plot – a realization and rush finds itself heightened by the painfully earned release felt by Sunny’s parents at the denouement, complete with the hysterical frenzy seen in the plight of the distraught Naina ... trapped!

*“Though the mills of God grind slowly,
yet they grind exceeding small;
though with patience He stands waiting,
with exactness grinds He all.”*
-Henry Wadsworth Longfellow
