

Om Puri – a man wronged

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TURMOIL: Om Puri's personal relationships, at least with two of his wives, Seema Kapoor and Nandita Puri, were terribly strained. Photo by E P Sajeevan/Wikipedia



By **Gautaman Bhaskaran**

It has always been my principle not to write about the personal lives of celebrities – especially about their sexual affairs or marriages. Of course, I would always comment on their public behaviour. I have been a vociferous critic of actor Salman Khan's misdemeanours in Rajasthan, where he "hunted" black buck or in Mumbai where he "ran his car over" sleeping pavement dwellers.

However, I am going to go against my principle now – and talk about Om Puri's turbulent personal life. His death shocked me. I had just seen him in December at the Dubai International Film Festival, where he came to promote the teaser for Solar Eclipse-Depth of Darkness. In a small speech he lamented that Bollywood was notoriously age-conscious. "It hardly writes roles for older actors. Such parts are very few, and they all go to Amitabh Bachchan. But I do not envy him. He is a hardworking man. The makers want to play safe. It is pure economics." Puri portrays a cop in Solar Eclipse.

And I then remembered his extraordinarily powerful role in the 1993 Ardh Satya, where too he had essayed a man in uniform. The kind of brutality he exuded there had to be seen to be believed.

Unfortunately, while his professional life was peppered with stars, his personal relationships, at least with two of his wives, Seema Kapoor and Nandita Puri, were terribly strained. Nandita is a journalist – and if I remember right – her interview with Om had led to the two falling in love. That was years ago.

Their marriage did not make the kind of headline that Nandita's book on Om did in 2009. Her biography, *Unlikely Hero: Om Puri*, drove what seemed like an unbridgeable wedge between the two. And they separated.

The biography spoke explicitly about Om's sexual affairs. One of them happened when he was just a boy of 14. The actor was understandably livid, and said that he had not given his consent to the book. He had not even been shown the manuscript, he contended.

The biography also referred to Om's long relationship with another woman. He retorted: "This lady whom Nandita talks about in such an undignified manner was Laxmi, who raised me and my brother's orphaned children. My relationship with this wonderful woman was a homage to her loyalty for looking after me unconditionally". The actor was furious when he told the Times of India this soon after the book was published.

Om was initially married to Seema, who was actor Anu Kapoor's sister. This union lasted barely eight months, and Anu had been quite angry with Om. But he refrained from going public with his accusations.

I have always felt that in any marital dispute, both partners are to be blamed. The degree may vary. But most important, I think that Nandita as a professional journalist should have stopped herself from writing about Om's intimate life. And, don't you think that Nandita should have kept her husband in the loop about what she was all set to publish. To me, Nandita's action seemed unfair – a classic example of trying to sell a book on its sensationalism.

I am told Nandita was inconsolable during Om's cremation. She loved him all right. But maybe, she pandered to a tabloid tendency, which she should have not done. Clearly, Om was a man wronged.

Fire at Sea

The Chennai International Film Festival began here last week with a brilliant documentary, Gianfranco Rosi's *Fire at Sea*. Winner of the top Golden Bear at Berlin in 2016, the movie is a moving account of a summer in the tiny Sicilian island of Lampedusa that has become the destination for thousands of men, women and children running away in sheer fear from bloody wars, unimaginable violence and horrifying famines in Africa. Rosi spent many months there to document the migrant tragedy which hit endemic proportions in 2015. He saw hundreds – including babies in arms – dying as they tried to cross the Mediterranean Sea in overcrowded leaky boats.

It was heartrending to hear the desperate voice of a woman – as the film began unrolling – pleading for help to the coastguards at

Lampedusa. What was remarkable was the calm assuring voices of the guards as they asked the woman and the dozens of people on her small boat to just hold on a little. "Help is on its way", they said, while she wailed, "We are dying. Our boat is sinking. There are women and children here". Rosi in those few minutes takes us most graphically into the enormity of this human tragedy.

Fire at Sea also transports us to the other side of the human story – where we see the simple lives of the simple fisherfolk who live on the island. There is a 12-year-old boy who makes slings from the barks of trees, and he and his friend practice their aims. In fact, a large part of the narrative is seen through his eyes. Then there is an old lady, who asks the local radio jockey to play her favourite song. There is also a doctor, the only one there. Rosi has this great ability to contrast peace and tranquillity with horror and suffering – giving the viewer breathing space, so to say.

Interestingly, there is no voiceover, and Rosi conveys all that he wants to through hauntingly beautiful visuals. And what striking photography.

Most importantly, Rosi does not get into any analysis. No judgements. He lets his audience decide what it wants to. And as we leave the auditorium, we begin to wonder where the world is going to, and why men are so obsessed with transforming it from one of peace and beauty to one that is violent and ugly.

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