

Film Review: 'Shadow of Water,' a trek through the jungle with a predictable ending



VENICE: The latest outing of Sanal Kumar Sasidharan, the Indian director who makes movies in his native Malayalam (the language spoken in Kerala), *Shadow of Water* (Chola) appeared in the second most important category, Horizons, at the Venice Film Festival. One of his very early creations, *An Off-Day Game*, was remarkable for the manner in which it tore apart caste divisions and the biases associated with them. Its climax was shocking and completely unpredictable. His next work, *S Durga*, ran into censor problems because of its original name, *Sexy Durga*. It was a story of a young couple who are eloping in the middle of the night, and the uneasy experiences they have. Sasidharan conveyed fear without actually resorting to any violence, truly Hitchcockian!

But *Shadow of Water* is several notches below *S Durga* and *An Off-Day Game*. To begin with, the director appears to be on a familiar, beaten track – of a young couple and their nightmarish night in the jungles of Kerala. Janaki (Nimisha Sajayan) looks like a schoolgirl, but she is in love with a wimpy boy (unnamed, played by Akhil Viswanath), and decides to take a trip to the city, chaperoned (nobody knows why) by his boss, a burly guy who is called Aasan or Master (Joju George). Janaki is clearly nervous, perhaps having bunked classes and coming away on the sly. Her lover hardly seems confident of handling his girl, who is upset in the first place that he has brought along his boss. And it all goes horribly wrong.

Shadow of Water throws up more questions than it cares to answer. What was the Master's interest in taking the young couple on a trip in his vehicle? Did he have an ulterior motive? And after a traumatic experience in a city hotel room, Janaki's behavior appears bewildering. One critic called it the Stockholm Syndrome. But can anyone develop it in a matter of few hours? Surely it takes days.

It is a weak plot and not scripted with enough care. If Sajayan goes overboard with her hysterics, the men are uni-dimensional, almost caricaturist. The movie, at two hours long, seems stretched with long scenes in the vehicle and the forests that ultimately lead to a tragedy we all knew was coming. Honestly, it is time Sasidharan moved on from his stories of fear and angst.
