

The Song of Scorpions is both melodious and mysterious

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Golshifteh Farahani in the film.



By **Gautaman Bhaskaran**

The Song of Scorpions by Anup Singh is indeed a song, most melodious and mysterious. The movie, which had its first ever screening last week at the Locarno International Film Festival, comes from a director who earlier gave us Ekti Nadir Naam (The Name of a River) and Qissa: The Tale of a Lonely Ghost, a fable set in the bloody days of India's Partition that also underlines the country's craving for a male heir. The desire is almost obsessive.

With The Song of Scorpions, Singh once again gets into the folk form, and narrates the strange story of a young woman, Nooran, played brilliantly by Iranian actress Golshifteh Farahani – who has the mystic power to draw out the venom of a deadly scorpion from a victim through a song she sings. The person is thus cured.

The Song of Scorpions is set on the undulating golden sands of the Thar Desert in Rajasthan, the sights and sounds of the mesmeric atmosphere caught most imaginatively by cinematographer Pietro Zuercher. I was just bowled over by the light and shade contrasts he presents – the harshness of the daytime desert rubbing shoulders with the darkness of the night, illuminated by the light of a million stars, twinkling away guiding Singh's folklore conveyed through the pain and pathos of love, humiliation, revenge, pardon and forgiveness. I think Singh has this unique ability to fathom the human mind, and, in a way, his plot resembles a Shakespearean drama, minus the dramatics.

For, both Irrfan Khan's Aadam, who essays a camel dealer in the movie, and Nooran display a kind of gentleness that will put to shame the loud histrionics of many Indian actors. And in a quite sort of way, they push Singh's narrative, a romance in fact, that also includes Nooran's grandmother, played with superb finesse by Waheeda Rehman (Remember her in Chaudvi Ka Chand, Guide, etc?).

Aadam admires Nooran from a distance, the shimmering sandy hillocks often standing formidably in the way of his love, and when he finally gathers guts to profess his affection, a series of unfortunate incidents plays spoilsport. He gets beaten up, his camels are stolen and his own anger turns into an Othello-like retributory rage. Nooran is bewildered, hurt and devastated till she also gets on to the path of revenge. But not for long, the realisation of the divinity of love dawns upon her. And she discovers her sweet song – all over again – the melody regaining its magic mantra. (Farahani is a fantastic singer.)

In fact, The Song of Scorpions is full of such contrasting ideas and imagery that add so much to the delight of viewing. We see bustling cities against the solitude of the vast sandy expanse. We see camels racing against motorbikes. We see the ancient vis-a-vis the modern in Singh's sojourn of a story, where the dark ways of men and women twist and turn, playing hide and seek among the lofty dunes.

Singh tells me from Locarno that his interest in folklore has been kindled by what is happening all around us.

For one, "we see everywhere in the world today that our sense of religion, as well as of reason and the idea of what it is to be tolerant and humane, have been grossly violated. What is worse, almost daily, we are forced to recognise our secular culture's inability to provide us with a value to forcefully resist this violation... Traditionally, folktales have always attempted to question certitudes. With my movies I hope to use that tradition to continue questioning our certainties about ourselves and our community as well as our prejudices about our neighbours and the rest of the world."

Singh elaborates further: "As I started writing the tale, I realised that my nightmare was actually about our deepest relationships, not only between men and women but all of us and our world. Yes, in the world we live in today we breathe in a poison of some kind with almost every breath we take. The poison of bigoted politics, ignorance, indifference and violent reprisals. In response, we can choose to breathe out into the universe the poison we take within us or we can choose to breathe out a song. That's our critical choice today: to breathe back into our world poison or a song. Finally, I hope my film is a love story between all of us and the universe we live in."

Singh adds that "the thought of The Song of Scorpions first came to him after he had heard about the rape and murder of a young woman in a moving bus in Delhi in 2012. I was haunted by it and it was about a year later, while still completing Qissa, that The Song of Scorpions,

from the first image to the last, came to me in a nightmare.”

But happily, Singh’s latest outing in Thar is, while talking about the ravishing of a woman, a poignant poem of self-discovery – traversed through the sting of a scorpion, the woe of a woman wounded and the malevolence of a man mauled and manhandled.

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