

## At Tokyo Film Fest, women turn villains

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UNSCRUPULOUS: Laura Koroleva plays a deaf and mute woman in Sveta, a Kazakh movie. She kills a woman to save her job with no remorse.



By Gautaman Bhaskaran

Are women so wicked and diabolical? I know I am going to be trolled and lambasted for even asking this question. But you know I saw two movies at the 30th edition of the Tokyo Film Festival, now on, which suggested that women could be notoriously evil when they wanted to be. But let me quickly add here, men can be no less notorious.

One of the two movies which tackles women and crime and which played in the Festival's main competition, Sveta, focuses on a deaf-mute girl – and the actress, Laura Koroleva, who essayed the title role – cannot actually hear or speak. So, this made her look strikingly authentic.

As one reviewer wrote – and which I quite agree with – there are no excuses for murder, though there could be reasons, and the director of Sveta, Zhanna Issabayeva from Kazakhstan, spins a story of a deaf-mute couple and their two adorable looking children – and how the family faces the possibility of having the roof over its head removed. When the bank gives Sveta an ultimatum to pay up her mortgage or lose her apartment, she is devastated. Adding to this is her employer's decision to fire her, because the garment factory where she works – and she works harder than the rest of the women there in order to make up for her disability – has begun to run out of orders.

Narrated in Russian sign language, the film traces Sveta's predicament – compounded by her young husband's indifference to the looming threat – and how she manipulates life in her favour. She kills the woman in the factory who stands between her and her job, and gets back to work the following day with no guilt or remorse.

But then there still remains the mortgage to be settled, and Sveta coaxes and cajoles her husband to bump off his seriously ailing 92-year-old grandmother so that he can inherit her house. "We can rent that to pay our mortgage, and in five year time, we could own two houses", she pushes her husband to commit the crime.

It may seem so amoral that a strong woman like Sveta, toughened by her life in an orphanage, gets down to such heinous measures. Koroleva's performance is exemplary, but her acts may appear so notoriously evil. But still, she does all this to keep her family together and under a secure roof. Is that right, and one is left with serious doubts!

The movie ends. And Sveta escapes any form of punishment. She walks out of the whole mess with a clean conscience, and if one were to ask her, she would undoubtedly quip, but I did it for my family.

I remembered a Woody Allen film here. Called Match Point, a married tennis coach in England murders his mistress when she becomes too uncomfortable for him, and threatens to ruin his marriage. And he escapes neatly with none, not even the cops, smelling a rat that the woman was killed in cold blood. The Match Point hero, Jonathan Rhys Meyers, and Koroleva seemed so similar to me. Both had the least of qualms.

In the other movie, The Home in Turkish, by the first-time Iranian Helmer, Asghar Yousefinejad, a house becomes a bone of contention, and a woman the manipulator all over again.

Totally a chamber piece – set inside a single house – The Home has a riveting script and a camera whose energy never lets us have a dull moment in a narrative that is tragic. We see the death of man but the body is never shown – and his family, including his only child, a married daughter, Sayeh (Mohadeseh Heyrat), arrives to make sure that he is buried without any delay as the custom requires.

But complications arise when Ahmedi from a medical centre reaches the house carrying the last will and testament of the dead man that cites his wish. He wants his body not to be buried, but given away to the medical institution for research. Sayeh, however, is dead against this, and insists that her father must be given a burial, a decent burial. His body cannot be mutilated under any circumstances, she insists, cries and throws up a hysterical tantrum.

It is only when Sayeh's husband reaches the house, we are let into a horrible secret. The woman who had never visited her father since her

marriage six years ago, had begun seeing him in the last weeks of his life. And she had slow poisoned him so that she may inherit his house! The husband and wife are naturally nervous. What if the poisoning comes to light during the autopsy! Obviously, unlike Sveta – who indulges in unthinkable crimes to save her family, however wrong this may be – Sayeh is motivated to murder her own ailing father to satisfy her greed, the greed that is tempered with vicious impatience. As the director said in a note, “the central theme of the film is the fact that social conditions separate humans from their core identities, and the recognition of their nature is becoming more difficult. People in such situations wear different masks every time they face each other and play multiple roles in their lives. The characters’ escape from their own realities shatters the pillars of a traditional family, and ultimately an unexpected event results in the spiritual collapse of the whole community.”

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