

View from Venice: Not happily-ever-after love stories

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A scene from Light Between Oceans.



Rate

By Gautaman Bhaskaran

Hollywood tops in the art of storytelling, and what is cinema without this. Long years ago, Ismail Merchant — whose partnership with the artistic James Ivory led to so many lovely films — had said and said and said that a movie must, above all, be able to present a good yarn. Which much of Indian cinema has not been able to, and often it jars in contrast to what American dream merchants dish out.

At the ongoing Venice Film Festival, designer Tom Ford's — who wowed the fashion world as the creative director of Gucci and Yves Saint Laurent — *Nocturnal Animals* (his second movie after *A Single Man*) also wowed critics, including me.

A gripping tale of love and revenge and redemption, *Nocturnal Animals* is based on Austin Wright's Tony and Susan. The book is set in 1993, and the movie as well, in times when mobile phones were not all that widely used. Ford chooses Texas — "A place I am familiar with" — to unfold his thrilling piece of drama that certainly had this writer hooked. With the lead parts played by Amy Adams and Jake Gyllenhaal, *Nocturnal Animals* reveals the mastery that Ford has over the medium. As he transports his story from the present to the past and back to the present, one had no confusion about the narrative. Such was the auteur's control and command over his work that the frames slipped from one point in time to another with flawless finesse and extraordinary ease.

Adam's Susan Morrow runs an art gallery in Los Angeles (and not the bored wife and mother as in the original, the book) and is married to a Wall Street millionaire (not a doctor). Some 19 years ago, she had been in love with a romantic writer, Edward (Gyllenhaal). The relationship could not work, largely because Susan and her mother (a rich aristocrat, who sneered at working class men like Edward) found the man lacking in motivation and drive. "You have no ambition, you are not driven", Susan tells Edward before calling their affair quits.

But after all these years of zero contact with Edward, Susan is surprised to find a book in her mail, a novel written by him. Titled *Nocturnal Animals*, it is about a man, his wife and

daughter who on a highway one night are waylaid by a group of ruffians.

As Susan reads *Nocturnal Animals* over several nights (an insomniac that she is), she begins to reflect on her own past and her life with Edward. Ford cleverly pushes the plot from Susan's own eventful relationship with Edward to the terrifying sequence on the motorway — where Tony (also Gyllenhaal) takes his wife (Isla Fisher) and young daughter (Ellie Bamber) on a drive towards a family vacation. The car is run off the road by a bunch of goons, and the father's worst nightmare begins.

Susan is moved by Edward's book — which is dedicated to her — and cannot but help reminisce over the most private moments from her own love story with the author. Trying to look within herself and beyond the glossy surface of the life and career she has chosen, Susan interprets the book as a tale of revenge, a tale that forces her to re-evaluate the choices she has made, and re-awakens a love that she feared was lost — as the story builds to a reckoning that will define both the novel's hero and her own.

Nocturnal Animals swings back and forth to Susan now and Susan then, the scenes interspersed with Tony's troubles and tragedy. Ford appears quite adept at handling such multiple narratives without causing the least of unease in a viewer. And some of the choices he makes are not just challenging but also prove what a great designer he has been. The sequence of placing two flame-haired dead women naked on a bright, red sofa is startling, but produces a great visual affect.

Here is another work at Venice that caught my attention. It was called *Light Between Oceans*, and was shot on Cape Campbell, a really small, wind-swept peninsula in New Zealand in 2014. Based on a best-selling novel by M L Stedman's, also called *The Light Between Oceans*, the film looks mesmeric and tells a heartbreaking story of a couple's moral dilemma. The movie is, above all this, a "battle between truth and love" — as director Derek Cianfrance (known for works like *Blue Valentine* and *The Place Beyond the Pines*) described his work. Indeed, the film is all about the quandary that Tom (played by Michael Fassbender) and Isabel (Alicia Vikander) face as they get married and live in small island, Janus Rock, off western Australia, in the years following 1918.

Tom comes to Janus Rock as a lighthouse keeper, a spot that is completely isolated. Wounded physically and mentally by World War I, Tom seeks absolute solitude, but meets Isabel, who lives in a town across the island. Having lost two of her brothers in the war, she is lonely and desperate for love, and Tom and Isabel seem like made for each other. They get married after a courtship across the stormy waves of the sea.

They want to start a family, but fate comes in the way. Isabel loses two of her children, and then one night, Tom finds a drifting boat at sea that has a dead man and an infant girl, surprisingly alive. The couple pass through a moral dilemma, questioning each other whether they should report the matter to the police or just keep quiet — and raise the child as their own. While the husband would rather adopt the child after notifying the police, the wife implores him to remain quiet and pass off the little one as their own.

Five years later, however, things take a tragic turn when Tom runs into the child's real mother who assuming that her husband and child were lost at sea, is a grieving wreck. For Tom, this could not have been more morally disturbing, and he turns himself over to the police, despite Isabel's vehement pleas not to do so.

Fine performances etched out against the magical scenery of the sea and the sand, *The Light Between Oceans* is emotionally draining and painful — and provokes a debate in us, the debate about right and wrong. But ultimately as the director told a media conference soon after his work was screened that it was all about forgiveness, and we see this so clearly even as the flicker from the lighthouse tries to help all those out at sea find their way to the shore. Tom does this, helping the child's biological mother unite with her baby girl — even as he lets his and Isabel's lives plunge into gloom.

* Gautaman Bhaskaran is covering
the Venice Film Festival, and may be e-mailed at gautamanb@hotmail.com