

Laapataa Ladies: All about missing brides is India's offering to the Oscars

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Kiran Rao's Laapataa Ladies, India's offering for the foreign language Oscars, reminded me of the 1960 Ghunghat. Helmed by Ramanand Sagar and with stars as bright as Asha Parekh, Bina Rai, Pradeep Kumar and Bharath Bhushan among others, Ghunghat was all about mis-

taken identity in which two brides after a train accident go home to different husbands with their 'ghunghat' playing tricks. In Rao's latest outing, which comes after her Dhobi Ghat released over a decade ago, it is again a train which plays the villain. Phool Kumari (Nitanshi Goel) and Pushpa/Jaya (Pratibha Ratna), both heavily covered in their red ghunghats (veils) get swapped during a rail journey.

Phool's helpless husband Deepak Kumar (Spash Shrivastava) seeks the help of a cop, Shyam Manohar (Ravi Kishan) – who is less of a thug and more of a humorist with some rib-tickling lines. If you ask me, he is the best thing happening in the movie. Chewing pan forever, he is a delight to watch. Pity, actors like him are not given much work and far metier parts.

Unfolding in rural India, Laapataa Ladies does in a very satirical way damn male patriarchy. Watch Manju Maai (Chhaya Kadam), who runs a tea stall on the railway station platform where Phool lands all distressed after missing her husband. Manju takes the new bride under her wing and teaches her a thing or two about life and living. Really, women do not need men, Manju tells the young bride, "We can do everything, including producing babies..." She has chosen to live alone without male company and is absolutely happy about it.

Laapataa Ladies has messages all right, but they are veiled and are not thrust on your face. It has great moments: look at the way Pushpa steals jewels from the house where she mistakenly ends up. We almost hated her then. But there is a twist that comes in the end. The concept of sisterhood runs throughout the entire film, and male dominance is given a sound thrashing. Watch the scene at the police station where Pushpa's husband walks in to claim his bride only to be humiliated and thrown out by Manohar. We begin to feel a new sense of respect for the men in Khaki. Characters are written with a lot of care. Even Chhotu (Satyendra Soni), who helps Manju, comes off memorable.

However, Sneha Desai's script appears a tad clumsy, a disappointment after Rao's far more captivating Dhobi Ghat. I suppose comedies need a lot more finesse and expertise to take them all the way to the goalpost. The movie tends to wander a bit, and perhaps tighter editing could have made the story of missing brides even more delightful. But as a Chennai director once quipped, directors hate editors, who are never allowed to do their job with 100 per cent ease. Well, well!

Laapataa Ladies is now playing on Netflix.

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