

Critique

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I'm Not the River Jhelum



I'm Not the River Jhelum (India, Hindi, 2022, 95 mins) directed by Prabhash Chandra

How does one set about describing this film? Dare I call it a patchwork, a beautiful patchwork, where image and poetry, narration and narrator (known or unknown), sound and word merge into a kind of silken fabric that you can barely grasp? *I'm Not the River Jhelum* is a mix of many things: silence, gaze, fear, disquiet, poetic meditation, all this without a real sense of time. There is no 'story' in mind. We usually know it, but there is a thread that meanders, bringing in different characters (not too many) and then letting them go. Buttressed by solid cinematography (the setting is Kashmir, but a different Kashmir from the picture-perfect scenes we are usually given) that turns long-held shots (almost like photographs) which figure prominently in the narrative into tokens of silence, the film is interspersed with poetic verses – reflections on death, beauty and the Jhelum river. An astonishing work which won an award for the Best Debut Director at the Kerala International Film Festival this year.

The extended opening shot itself is one of a lake with hazy mountains on the horizon. It seems to last forever. Then, the sound of ripples and the camera moves and merges into the eyes of a young girl (Afifa) and then to her face covered with a scarf – a transition technique frequently used in the film. Her eyes hold anxiety, her hands are on what appears to be a book, bound like a manuscript, and she fiddles with the attached cord.

As the film unfolds, we learn not to question where it leads us. The next shot is in a graveyard, full of dry leaves and racked by time. "The dead are selfish," intones a man (we only see his lower limbs) as he walks amidst the graves. "They make us cry...and don't care. ..they stay quiet in the most inconvenient places...we have to carry them on our backs to the tombs, as if they were children...they are a bad conscience...the worst thing in our lives...." At last, we see his figure – tall, bearded, wearing a

phiran. His pensive words seem to echo the feelings of an entire populace.

This middle-aged man is Afifa's uncle (her father will enter the story a little later). Gentle and loving, he talks to her about science, astronomy and gravity and gifts her a book on the cosmos. Their home is modest and as grey as their surroundings—hills, lakes, rivers, streets, houses, clothes. "What is the existence of the earth in this universe?" he asks her. She has no answer. "Just a tiny speck," he says.

Outside, we have the usual shots of empty streets, closed shops and homes, rifle-carrying men in uniforms, and the occasional sounds of sirens, gunshots, or houses blown up. Intermittently, we have overhead shots of a still, quiet city. This is how a beautiful valley is picturised – bleak hills and dales and tragic and haunted by the people's hearts.

It is in these difficult conditions that Afifa goes to school down a lonely pathway with three of her friends. They are the only students present. And little wonder, which parent will allow their children to step out when all you see on TV is barbed wire, and images of an attack on a CRPF bus filled with jawans?

And then, poignant shots of a poor madman roaming the streets, talking to himself, threatening god knows who, trying to direct traffic on a road where are practically no cars, shouting, saluting a passing vehicle, throwing stones at a man approaching him, yet another unhappy metaphor for the turmoil of a people. The man will be seen again in the film, sometimes panic-stricken, sometimes beside himself with rage. More protests. Afifa steps out in the dark (who knows why?) with her friend Shibu. As they walk, a voice calls out to them to stop. Scared out of their wits, the two girls run for their lives, separate – and Shibu disappears. Disappearance, in these volatile times, is routine.

Afifa is on edge, even as army men bark orders for everyone to line up outside their homes. Her uncle steps out. Soon after, we learn (in a piece of stylised acting and intoning) of the horrendous tortures he endured. There are shots of a naked man grovelling in pain, yet another disappearance.

Poor Afifa has a fever. Her father (we learn nothing about her mother) drives to a pharmacy to get medicines. And as he steps out of the car, Afifa calls and tells him that men in uniform had barged into the house to enquire after him. The father seems alarmed and indecisive, which is where one suspects that he is perhaps on the side of the militants or knows where they are hiding.

Shibu has not returned, and it's been three days. Prabhash Chandra has used different techniques and artistic forms to speak of her absence and denote the palpable tension around her. A tableau – almost an anti-play - where Stoney-eyed performers, mainly girls, stand stiff and erect around a man in uniform and ask the same question in monotone: Shibu has been missing for three days. Do you know where she is? A certain modernistic expressionlessness in the dialogue has been used almost throughout the film as if to counter the strength of the image.

And all this speckled with philosophical poetry on the river Jhelum, a river that is mucky, mossy, sluggish: I am Not the River Jhelum, says the narrator, in what is an utterly melancholic meditation. "I am not a poet or a beloved, not a saint or a colour, not a poppy field or a beloved, not a daughter or an aunt or the moonlight. I am a stranger; I am without a face....broken, disgraced, mad...."

On one of the days when these incidents happen – some are perceived to have occurred – TV news informs us about the abrogation of Article 370 of the protests in JNU. Finally, Afifa's father (he has so far not been detained) sends her to Delhi for further studies. It's the only choice, he says. She stays with relatives who care for her and love her, but what Afifa's heart cries out for is the land she left behind – and the aunt reads from the book Afifa has in her hands, the same bound manuscript we saw in the film's first shot, a poem that is a hymn to the beauty and innate nobility of Kashmir - despite the deaths, despite the disappearances, the violence, the sense of negation and loss, the political unrest and personal confusion. A quiet yet ambitious first film that carves a new path, a path which leaves creative blanks for the viewer to fill.