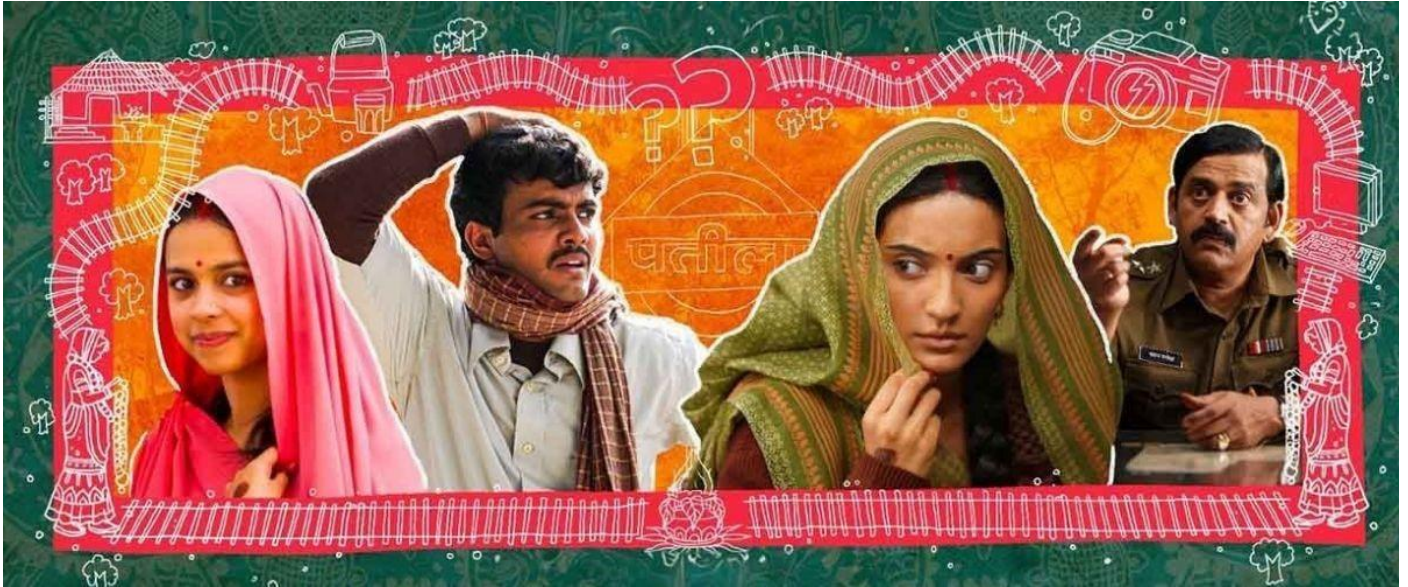


Critique

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Old Wine in An Old Bottle!

A Critical Review of *Laapataa Ladies*



The hype surrounding *Laapataa Ladies* took some time to get to me. While reading about it in newspapers and devouring social media posts, I vaguely remembered watching a similar telefilm during my school days. Then I read about director Anant Mahadevan's claims about the film being a copy (or remake) of his telefilm *Ghunghat ke Pat Khol*. Yes, that was the very film I had watched when we did not have cable television in Director's Cut, a show featured on DD Metro. This bit of trivia is one point to justify the heading of my review of *Laapataa Ladies*. Here, I am not attempting to make a comparative study of the films.

This was director Kiran Rao's second film after her brilliant *Dhobi Ghat*, a realist fest. Following similar lines, after more than a decade, Rao presented *Laapataa Ladies* to the audience, a film that every other woman wanted to watch. Projected as a feminist tale, presented in neo-realist style, *Laapataa Ladies* unfortunately reaches the same end as any Bollywood entertainer.

Set in 2001, when the internet and mobile phones were not known to the common Indian, a comical mishap occurred. Two brides in long veils

unintentionally land up at destinations that they are not bound for. The two women with distinct personalities, the soft-spoken Phool and the outspoken Pushpa (Jaya) wait for their fates to unfold as the film progresses. The director implies that within the same woman lies Shakti and benevolence. Phool and Pushpa both mean the same but have distinct personalities. Phool is the picture-perfect representative of Bharatiya nari, while Pushpa embodies liberal ideals. They are like Parvati and Kali, the two forms of the Goddess. While the former pays obeisance at her husband's feet, the latter is a fearsome warrior destroying evil. The concept has been a favourite for filmmakers over the years and can lure in both sides of the audience—the flag bearers of Bharatiya Sabhyata and the liberal idealists. Like a well-planned public service advertisement, the sari-clad, feet-touching, family-devoted Indian women are ready to change the world. While there are women (and men) who are capable of achieving many things at the same time, the mass fantasising of the image is farcical.

Pushpa is dragged out of the overcrowded train by a naive Deepak, who forgets to call out his

wife's name aloud to wake her up. The train almost left the station, leaving him too stunned to speak! So, he drags another man's wife out of the train, thus giving Pushpa (Jaya) a new lease of life. The audience is given glimpses of the women's husbands just as Phool and Dipak board the train. We learn that Dipak has not received any dowry and is taunted by Pradeep's mother (Jaya's mother-in-law). On the other hand, Pradeep had received a hefty dowry that included gold, a motorcycle, and a mobile phone. To analyse critically, the personalities of Dipak and Pradeep seem to justify Phool and Pushpa's actions after the mishap. The naïve Phool, chided for naivety by Manju Mai, hopes for a union with her husband, who is equally concerned for her. Though cynical towards the end, Phool and Dipak meet in the filmiest style possible. Puspa (Jaya) is haunted by her overbearing and possibly criminal husband and overbearing in-laws. Thus, she prefers to take the opportunity of the mishap and seeks shelter with Dipak's family, though deep in patriarchal values, is amiable. The realist style of filmmaking is in direct contrast with the classical narrative that the film explores. It fits the bill in cinematography, character visualisation, setting and dialogue but fails miserably.

The film's climax reduces Pushpa (Jaya) from the hero who sets out on her journey to the sidekick when the corrupt but kind-hearted policeman decides to take charge of the situation. The melodramatic end strips the film of all the novelty it tried to explore through the two lost brides, making way for the formula Bollywood keeps close to its heart. After

meticulously planning her exit, Pushpa has a 'change of heart' after seeing a grief-struck Dipak and takes the risk of losing everything.

Pushpa is a clever woman who plans to take advantage of the situation and fulfil her dreams of higher education. She is right to state that her disguise and lies are due to the fact that the people around her would not let her leave without an escort. However, the melodrama that unfolds in the end reduces all her efforts as an individual.

Phool on the other hand, decides to wait believing her husband will come and fetch. She gains self-confidence after being away from the protected home, stays with two unknown people of the opposite gender, and works at a tea stall. The comic and sarcasm about Phool's inability to recall Deepak's village's name cannot be missed. Her loving maternal family and in-laws match her innocence.

The film's inability to explore Manju Mai's character and lack of focus on the female constable 'sports quota' draws attention. While Manju Mai's only role is to provide counsel to Phool, the latter is only used by inspector Shyam Manohar as a conversation subject to induce fear in Jaya's mind. While trying to be vocal about women's independence, none except Jaya and Manju Mai aspire to break the cocoon.

The film is entertaining, with subtle melodrama and good cinematography. However, looking for novelty is futile. Old wine served in an old bottle—a fairy tale wrapped in the newfound passion for the realistic style of filmmaking.

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