

cinema



Serial killer seductress trips up on her plots

Gautaman Bhaskaran on the innate weaknesses of *7 Khoon Maaf*

Masters do not produce a masterpiece every time they paint or sculpt or write or film. Director, producer and music composer Vishal Bhardwaj is a case in point. He made two excellent movies, *Maqbool* and *Omkara*, and produced an equally excellent work, *Ishqiya*. His *Kaminey*, which preceded *Ishqiya*, disappointed me. And so does his latest, *7 Khoon Maaf*.

Son of a popular poet and lyricist (a government employee by profession), Ram Bhardwaj, Vishal began by playing the harmonium for virtually unknown ghazal singers in New Delhi's Pragati Maidan. Till, he began to compose music for Gulzar, first for his television serials like *Jungle Book* and *Alice in Wonderland*, and later for his film, *Maachis* and so on. The acclaim for its music earned Vishal the Filmfare R D Burman Award in 1996. He garnered several other honours for music, but it

was *Maqbool* that he helmed which catapulted him to an incredible height.

Based on Shakespeare's *Macbeth*, a tragic play on a regicide and its aftermath believed to have been penned between 1603 and 1607, *Maqbool* had us enthralled with Vishal imaginatively adapting it to the Mumbai underworld and its murky meanderings. With an apt cast that included Irrfan Khan, Pankaj Kapoor and Tabu, the movie was grippingly narrated. Not a false note there.

So was his next Shakespearean attempt, *Omkara*, inspired by *Othello*. Setting it in the badlands of the Indian state of Uttar Pradesh (which has with its sheer numbers the power to make and unmake a government in Delhi), Vishal scripted his film as close as possible to the original play, even establishing an affinity between the Shakespearean names and those in *Omkara*. So *Othello*, the Moorish general in the Venetian army whose possessive jealousy



* A promotional poster of *7 Khoon Maaf*, directed by Vishal Bhardwaj (left).

wrecks his marriage with the exquisite Desdemona, was named *Omkara*. Desdemona became *Dolly*, and *Iago*, that handkerchief-planting villain of the play, was Vishal's Ishwar Langda Tyagi.

Omkara, a spectacularly crafted work of deceit and rivalry as well as sexual suspicion, endeared to the masses across the globe. I still remember that evening at a public square in Marrakech during the film festival there, when the people, mostly Moroccans and other Africans, went delirious with joy when they watched *Omkara*.

Saif Ali Khan as Tyagi was an enormous hit, and it surprised me no end. I had never imagined till then that this Khan had such a great potential. He was amazing as the scheming villain, planting that disastrous seed of mistrust in *Omkara* about *Dolly*. Arguably, Vishal's best work till now.

He wrote, composed music for and produced *Ishqiya*, a movie again about anti-socials. With extraordinary performances by Vidya Balan, Naseeruddin Shah and Arshad Warsi, the film looks at the lives of three people — two men who love the same woman, and who pretends to love each of them in turn for her own little secret goal. Again set in Uttar Pradesh, Vishal's story and script captures the essence of crime and criminality there — sometimes humorously, sometimes seriously.

Injecting a sense of light-heartedness into the narrative, Vishal avoids being didactic or pompous, balancing the terribly grave moments in the movie with witty situations.

Now, his latest, *7 Khoon Maaf*, has been scripted out of a Ruskin Bond seven-page short story, *Susanna's Seven Husbands*.

Admittedly great movies have been created out of great literary works. Roman Polanski transformed Thomas Hardy's immortal classic, *Tess of the d'Urbervilles*, about an impoverished peasant girl challenging the sexual mores of the day, into a magnificent visual extravaganza. David Lean spun reels of magic with Boris Pasternak's *Dr Zhivago*, tracing the physician's life as it ebbed and flowed with the Russian Revolution and the subsequent Civil War. In India, Adoor Gopalakrishnan used the writings of Vaikom Mohamed Basheer, Paul Zacharia and Thakazhi Sivasankara Pillai to helm sensitive cinema.

Unfortunately, Vishal appears to have faltered in his effort to translate words into visuals. *7 Khoon Maaf* follows Priyanka Chopra's *Susanna Anna-Marie Johannes* as she goes about her serial killing, aided and abetted by three of her trusted lieutenants, including a one-eyed dwarfish man and a maid (played by crooner Usha Uthup). Three of the seven men she marries have been essayed on screen by Neil Nitin Mukesh, Irrfan Khan and Naseeruddin Shah.

Mukesh is a convincing Major Edwin Rodrigues, who loses his leg in the Operation Blue Star at the Golden Temple, and is also unsure whether he can produce a child, and this sexual frustration turns into raving jealousy when he sees *Susanna* in a provocative dance with another soldier.

I was reminded here of a scene from

Polanski's *Bitter Moon*, where the sexy Mimi (Emmanuelle Seigner) does a raunchy number with another guy in the presence of her paraplegic husband on a cruise ship. It was sadistically saucy.

As good, if not somewhat better than Mukesh is Khan. As Wasiullah Khan, he is a gentle poet by the day and an atrocious wife beater by the night. Khan brings out this spilt personality with a touch of sheer intensity, smoothly switching his expressions and emotions. From a genteel poet, verses flowing with the softness of a flower, he changes into a monster, troubling and tormenting *Susanna*. He cusses, scarring her mind as deeply as he wounds her body.

Equally good at grabbing our eyeballs is Shah as Madhushudhan Tarafdar, a doctor who saves *Susanna*'s life in the beginning, but later begins to toy with poisonous mushrooms and an evil idea. It ends in a Russian roulette, but, of course, we know by now, whose name has been etched on that bullet.

The list of good-for-nothing husbands goes on, and at interval we are told that there are four more to come — or go. Vishal gets impatient at this point, or maybe out of ideas to spin, and gets down to marriages and murders at a hurricane speed. Some of the ways he devises to keep us with *Susanna*'s never-ending cycle of slayings are amusing: after one particular funeral, we see her slip out of a black dress into a white gown, taking the marriage vows — and in the same church!

But, by then, the story is sagging and I was fighting my yawns. It is not easy to think of seven situations that will drive a woman to murder. And why should she in the first place?

The plot unfolds in current times, and the weapons to sever matrimonial ties need not have been a gun or an overdose of Viagra/heroin or a man-eating panther or the more tranquil snow. Really, no.

However, a major handicap in the entire work is the rather insipid Priyanka. She is never able to get our sympathy as *Susanna*. Charming she is, but she is so haughty at the same time that conceit overpowers character.

We feel no pity for her, and *7 Khoon Maaf* ends all warped up.

While *Susanna* goes on her killing spree, with not the slightest trace of remorse on her aging face, the lone policeman on her trail is bewitched by her beauty and is longing for her legs — an obsession that traps him inside the coffin. Death looks so serene on his face, and innocence so illusory on hers.

Justice, natural or otherwise, seems to have been gravely miscarried and right into a church. That is where Vishal's plot ends, all his skills, and they are in no small measure, utterly wasted in something as silly as this.

Maybe, Vishal should stick to Shakespeare, whom, he once told me, he adores. The grapevine has it that he is planning *Hamlet* with Aishwarya Rai and Hrithik Roshan.

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