THAT GIRL IN YELLOW BOOTS

Come, Ruth will show you a good time…….

There are only a handful of thrillers in Indian cinema that have left audiences in jeopardy with its climax. You are ambiguous about whether to feel apologetic upon witnessing the turn of events or adopt a Panglossian attitude, thereby settling for the adage: “Whatever happens, happens for the best”. That Girl in Yellow Boots fits perfectly suits this category.

SYNOPSIS

Ruth (played by Kalki Koechlin), a 20 year only Brighton born girl, hovers around the Foreigners Registration office. Wishing to stay in the country, she seeks to prolong her stay. After taking an 8-month training as a masseur in Pondicherry, Ruth comes to the city of dreams, Mumbai, not to pursue her own, but on a different quest: To find her estranged father who abandoned her in her childhood. Working as a masseur in a parlor in Mumbai, Ruth utilizes her free time in search of her father, with the only piece of information linked to him being a letter she received from him. Will she finally be able to trace him, having nothing but stark memories of his presence in her childhood and with the only bits of information being his name and his profession? More importantly, will she be able to come to terms with the truth in this journey of salvation? Read on…….

BACKGROUND

Ruth’s elder sister, Emily killed herself at the age of fifteen. Ruth’s father was so disturbed, he left his family for good and never returned. Her mother was so infuriated with his decision that she decided never to mention her father to her while growing up. Such was the animosity that her mother didn’t even remotely disclose the circumstances related to Emily’s death.

Review

Ruth (played by Kalki Koechlin) receives a letter from her estranged father, who left in mysterious circumstances in her childhood. Stating his desire to meet her ever since, he confesses that it took him a great deal of courage to even pen down the letter and send it over. **Displaying just a miniscule intent of reaching out to her was all that Ruth required to set out on a journey to find her father who conveniently left no other details to trace his whereabouts, in the very same letter.**

Working as a masseur in a parlor in Mumbai, Ruth approaches her work with utmost sincerity. She delivers a quotidian body massage and offers her clients an optional ‘Handshake’, a term used figuratively for handjob. All her clients opt for the alternative, except Diwakar (played by Naseeruddin Shah who shares great camaraderie with Kalki), who is probably the only client who has any moral compass, considering all of Ruth’s clients are middle-aged to sexagenarians.

With her chin uptight, a faint smile and bright, radiant eyes, Ruth traverses the government offices, waiting patiently in line to get her documentation for renewing her Visa. Having to maintain her composure in front of the cheap-thrill seeking misogynistic officers, she displays her resolve**. A resolve, to see this journey through, to extract something that would fill up that emotional void that has been haunting her for so many years, pushing her to seek for answers, much against the displeasure of her mother.**

**Anurag Kashyap, in his effort to highlight the discrimination faced by “firangis” in India, may have exaggerated the screenplay in the first ten minutes of the film a tad bit too much, but in the context of the events to follow, it makes perfect sense. Use of local flavored histrionics to alienate the central character fits in correctly, bearing resemblance to a real life setting on any given day. Idiocy reeks of those government offices of Mumbai, and this is not even the battle she has set out to fight!**

Ruth gets in contact with a friend who offers to help trace her father’s whereabouts. He had supposedly lodged himself in an ashram in Goa. But when Ruth got there, she found out that he had left the ashram in mysterious circumstances five months ago. The friend agrees to dig deeper and ask around.

Ruth watches sermons of Osho, whom she views as her spiritual outlet. She’s supported by her supposed boyfriend; whose nature is as obscure to her as his activities. He loves her, but not more than drugs. He invites her to sit next to him, before launching himself at her, in an act of love. They grow intimate, before Prashant withdraws hastily to smoke drugs. She retires to bed, he tries to make amends. Pulling out a condom, he forces Ruth into having intercourse with him. She holds her ground, rejecting his advances. He is deeply troubled by this. She wants to trust him, but she can’t. Her mind’s preoccupation with the search for her father always gets the better of her. He doesn’t care hoots about her problems. For him, sex is the goal. Driven by impulse, Ruth attempts to placate him. She offers to give him a handjob. He accuses her of treating him like one of his clients. **Their relationship is at best, toxic. She desires companionship in love, he yearns for carnal pleasures. Even though his sexual frustrations get the better of him, he settles for handshakes from Ruth, hoping over time she can indulge physically with him.**

**Kashyap must be lauded for the timing of Prashant’s entry into the frame. He walks in at a time Ruth is watching an episode of Osho. There’s an underlying theme here that deserves a mention. Her search for purpose or meaning in life is constantly hindered with the negativity and drama associated with the people she is close to. She doesn’t mind him living his drug-laden lifestyle. But she expects companionship from him. She wants him to focus his affection towards her when he gestures her to sit next to him. She sees Prashant as her respite, someone who she can call her very own, someone who can add meaning in her life, but only to be disappointed by his euphoric antics. This is a recurring theme that features in the film.**

Another screenplay tactic that Kashyap utilizes is that of repetitive clips of her washing her hands with soap, dumping the wet tissues etc to depict Ruth’s growing popularity amongst her clients, something very ‘Requiem for a Dream’esque.

One day, Ruth walks in her house, only to find the lock broken and a bunch of goons having gatecrashed her home. They happen to be Prashant’s dealer friends and demand Ruth to pay up on his behalf for the drug money. Against her will, her hard-earned money is taken as Prashant’s payment.

Chutiyapa’s characterization is authentic, raw and mercurial. He’s compliant and doesn’t lose his cool readily on being corrected in incredulous matters. But in matters related to his work, he’s authoritative, to the point of being didactive. When Ruth shields her money from being snatched, he lashes at her, not once but twice. Striking her hair gently, he teases her, seeing through her vulnerability at being outnumbered and powerless to exclude herself from this melee.

A few days later, Ruth gets intimated about her dad’s whereabouts from the acquaintance of hers in the ashram. The acquaintance’s source request to meet up with them at the ashram in Pune. At first sight, it looks as though the latter feels disturbed by the thought of even mentioning him. But gradually, she opens about his anomalous behavior, about how he was forced to leave the ashram in mysterious circumstances. Ruth is shocked when she finds out that her father who formerly went by the name of Arjun Patel, had changed his name to Benjamin Patel. **A seed of doubt has been planted in Ruth’s mind. Why would the ashram ask him to leave the place? What was so unusual about him? Kashyap might have introduced this element to let the audience into Ruth’s mind. They are as perplexed over the anonymity of this man as Ruth is. But Ruth herself, was unperturbed. Her goal was to get to her father. Any incident preceding that wasn’t of any significant importance.** The most important piece of information she gets is his location in Mumbai. This was the closest Ruth had come, and now, she wouldn’t question anything. Why would she?

Without wasting time, she heads to the Police Station, hoping to extract her father’s address. The officer suggests she should visit the local post office, where they could help her out. At the post office, the postmaster refuses to divulge any details. Instinctively, Ruth slips a small amount of money, as donation to these causes, asking him for his help, in case he stumbles upon any piece of information. The bribery pays off and a day later, the postmaster gives her the address. Her eyes lit up, with renewed vigor, she decides to get ready to set off to his place. She takes off two dresses from the closet. With a faint smile, she ponders over which one to wear. Her eyes seem weary, but within her, there lies a feeble spark, waiting to be ignited.

She reaches the building, and walks into the flat, but doesn’t find him there. She’s asked to wait by the maid servant and obliges. In the meantime, she browses through his collection of photographs. But as she begins to scrummage through, she stumbles upon her own pictures, much to her displeasure. Pictures of her pillion riding with Prashant, walking on the streets. And then, she comes across his picture. The picture was of none other than her most frequent client at the massage parlor. Left flabbergasted, she storms out of the house. She can’t believe her very own father was her most regular client at the massage parlor. In a fit of rage, she calls up Chutiyapa and asks for a gun.

The scenes at the climax are of sheer cinematographic brilliance. With minimal dialogues, Kashyap depicts the plethora of emotions every character experiences and interlinks them perfectly. Ruth, in a state of disbelief, locks herself up in one of the parlor rooms, unable to come to terms with the horrid truth. The parlor woman tries to get Ruth to talk to her and make sense of the altercation. Prashant, who enters at about the same time to apologize for his brazen behavior, is wildly perplexed, as he has been throughout the movie, and is left bewildered at the sight of seeing a gun in the parlor. And Benjamin, with his feelings quashed, leaves the parlor, a dejected, lovelorn man. The background score in these scenes complements the visuals so effortlessly, it makes you fall in love with the entire depiction. You’re left in utter disgust at Benjamins incestual desires. He’s blinded by his own sexual desires and justifies his actions without a sense of remorse.

How could it have gotten any worse for Ruth? Her relentless pursuit of her past had finally unfolded in the most bizarre and unforgiving manner possible. Leaving the parlor, she gets into a taxi and stares at Prashant with a cold-hearted gaze through the window pane.

NASEERUDDIN SHAH

The only character who has genuine concern for Ruth, Shah delivers in his short role with a powerful performance. He is reminiscent of the old retired Indian uncle with a steady retirement and pension in place. He frequents the parlor for massages on a regular basis and shares a great rapport with Ruth.

He expresses his annoyance to the parlor woman

Shah is left disgruntled and unsettled when he finds out Ruth gives her clients handjobs, along with the massage. He reprimands her, questioning her morality, her value system. He wants to confront Ruth and seek answers. She can’t face him. He argues with the parlor woman, and demands an explanation, only to be warded off for being too intrusive in her business. He is respectable, holds a high moral ground. His disappointment stems solely from his concern for Ruth’s wellbeing, and Shah displays this with panache.

Ruth’s life is presumed to be smooth sailing before she receives the letter. That single letter wreaked havoc in her life. It triggered her instinct to sail against the wind. She could have easily let it pass, blocking her past from affecting her present. But she valued the truth more than anything.

If anything, this is far from a story of redemption.

PRIVATE DETECTIVE- BUGS BUNNY+ Julia Roberts

Kalki’s scenes with Prashant seem labored at times, with Ruth seemingly forcing her angst and frustration at his behavior. Her dialogue delivery comes across as strained in the confrontation scenes with Prashant. We want to feel for her, but her demeanor doesn’t evoke the same emotion to the audience as it would have liked to. The director wants you to feel for the character and her plight with the circumstances surrounding her, be it her druggy boyfriend, her landlord or the drug cartel head, but her performance is wanting for immersion in the teeth of the character. This is where the movie severely falls short of delivering, and it doesn’t hook you in the search for her father.

Prashant handcuffs himself in Ruth’s home to get rid of his inhibitions. You can see he wants to make it upto Ruth, but maybe, his desire for transformation has come about too late. He has already embroiled himself in a drug money fiasco, invariably dragging Ruth along with him too. He views handcuffing himself as the best way to suppressing his need for drugs, which he wants to let go off desperately.