

Impressum

Ashutosh Vardhana: Monsoon Wedding: a film

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EDITORIAL INTRODUCTION

Monsoon Wedding: During an upper middle-class wedding of a westernised family in Delhi, the bride's father learns that his rich brother, on whom he depends financially, is a paedophile and the bride wonders whether she should confess to her arranged-marriage Indian fiancée from America, whom she meets for the first time four days before the wedding, that she has only just ended an affair with her boss, a television producer. How should the bride, the groom, the father resolve their dilemmas? What would you do?



© Mirabai Films
Monsoon Wedding, a film directed
by Mira Nair

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THE PLOT

In an upper middle-class family in Delhi, the daughter, Aditi (24), has an affair with her boss, a married television producer. Her parents arrange a marriage for her. The groom is Hemant (32), an engineer who has been living in America for several years. All the protagonists are westernised, love modern technology and fashion and speak a mixture of English, Hindi and Punjabi.

The bride's mother, insists that no expense is spared for the wedding, while her husband, Lalit (50), is humiliated on the golf course when he asks a business friend for a loan. He depends financially on his rich brother Tej.

Lalit's niece Ria (28) wants to go to America to study creative writing and the rich grey-haired slicker, Uncle Tej, offers immediately to pay for it. Ria is not at all happy.

CHILD ABUSE

We see Tej in the kitchen alone with eight-year-old Aliya, where he strokes her hair and places a flower behind her ear. As he turns, she throws it away in disgust.

Ria has been watching Tej with increasing agitation since his arrival. As family and guests celebrate on the eve of the wedding, Aliya makes some shockingly knowing remarks about love and French kissing before wanting to go to sleep. Ria follows her and is just in time to stop Uncle Tej taking her home.

Ria accuses him of being a child abuser, reveals in public what he has done to her when she was just 10. The women try to shut her up. They don't want any scandal!

Since Ria is not listened to, she cuts herself off the family, drives away and seeks shelter in a cheap hotel.

AFFAIR

While the family is asleep, Aditi, unsure about her impending marriage, sneaks out of the house to meet her lover, the married TV producer, for a final farewell. They make love in his car, are overtaken by a downpour and disturbed by the police.

The bride, Aditi, discusses with Ria whether or not to tell her bridegroom, Hemant, about her past. If she does, he may reject her (especially if his responses are traditional Indian rather

than modern and western: she cannot know which of his ideologies is stronger): there will be a family scandal, even though she has done nothing that thousands of Indian girls of her age have not done and are not doing.

If she does not talk openly, she feels that she is being dishonest, and she will have to bear a secret for the rest of her life even though she would prefer to share everything with her future husband. Her ideal is a completely trusting marriage, whatever may have happened before.

Talking involves the greater risk.

She decides to be honest and tells Hemant everything. Even though he presumably has had his own affairs during his years in America, his traditional male Indian instincts are stronger than his western liberality. He is deeply perturbed and seems inclined to reject her.

However, if he does that, it will cause an immediate scandal, for the wedding will be off, while 300 or more guests from all continents are already assembled.

Eventually, Hemant comes to terms with what he has heard. He compliments Aditi for her honesty, for having taken this great risk, and the wedding can go ahead.

DILEMMAS

The father, Lalit, meanwhile tries to persuade Ria to come back home. Without her, he says, the wedding has to be abandoned. He is deeply in debt to his brother Tej.

At first, Ria refuses. She knows that by returning to the family which wants a cover-up, she will exculpate the paedophile. His denial will be believed. He will be able to continue his activities.

On the other hand, if she does not return, Aditi's wedding will be ruined, her uncle Lalit may be in financial trouble.

In this tragic conflict of loyalties (whatever she does, she will offend against one set of values or the other), Ria eventually chooses to return.

It is during one of the wedding rituals that Lalit makes his heroic decision. He does not want his daughter's wedding polluted by the participation of the child abuser, disowns him and tells him in front of the family to leave, regardless of the economic consequences this may have for him and of the stain on the family honour which will result. As recommended by the Gita, he does his duty and lets God take care of the consequences.

DISCUSSION

I saw this film together with some friends. Each had a different opinion.

'Typical Muslim family! This is all the result of forced marriages,' said Mr Blank. 'In England we do not tolerate such things.'

Mrs Sushila Patel (53) deplored the immorality of the child abuser and of the bride.

Mr Haidar (69) said that this could never have happened in a Muslim family. 'Muslims do not abuse little children,' he said categorically. 'The Holy Koran does not permit it.'

Mr Rashid (63) said: 'It just goes to show that women should be guarded and should not be allowed to study or to work. If they do not work, they cannot fall in love with porn film producers.'

'This only happens in English families', said Mrs Chatterji (58). 'Such films should not be made. They sully the reputation of India. We should not wash our dirty linen in public.'

'Wrong', said Tasnim (32), a social worker. 'Honour, izzat, is not in what people say but in what they do. A family in which children are abused is not more honourable only because outsiders do not talk about it or do not know about it. Our main concern should be with stopping child abuse and rape rather than with stopping people complaining about it.'

'Izzat is a pernicious concept. Instead we should be talking about honourable behaviour. It is in the name of izzat that Indian women, both Muslim and Hindu, are restricted and suppressed. If a woman is raped by her husband or by an outsider, or if her children are abused, or if she is beaten, then the menfolk, her mothers, the community elders (all men), lean on her to make sure she does not speak up, does not leave her husband, does not seek a divorce. So the abuse and the suffering continues. We make it continue in the name of izzat.'

'All this would happen less frequently if we abandoned the notion of izzat, gave equal rights to women, allowed them to pray together with their men and if there were as many women community elders as there are men.'

That was Tasnim's opinion.

'Izzat is an evil superstition that leads people to mad rages. Only yesterday (18 Feb 2002) a Manchester man, Faqir Mohammed (69), was sentenced for killing his 24-year-old daughter Shahida because her boyfriend had entered her bedroom while he was at mosque,' said Kiranjit (23). 'Should age not show more wisdom and

constraint? Izzat is a male hobby practised at the expense of women.'

In this film, like a monsoon rain, auspicious and cleansing, we see the traditional rules broken. In each case openness prevails. Tej is exposed, Lalit supports his niece by expelling him from his family. Aditi stands by her modern lifestyle by talking openly about it. By telling her fiancée all, she is not confessing a sin. Hemant learns to respect his future wife as an equal and not to expect from her a behaviour that he does not expect of himself.

And how would you have behaved in a similar situation? Told your future husband all? Covered up for the child abuser or exposed him? Accepted a wife 'with a past' or rejected her? Write to the Editor or email us!

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