



SEMAINE
DE LA CRITIQUE
CANNES 2018

Tillotama
Shome

Vivek
Gomber

Sir

A FILM BY
Rohena Gera

LE CERCLE NOIR FOR FILM D'INDIE

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DE LA CRITIQUE
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Sir

A FILM BY
Rohena Gera

2018 – India – Drama – Hindi, English – 96'

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SYNOPSIS

Ratna works as domestic live-in help with Ashwin, a man from a wealthy family. Although Ashwin seems to have it all, Ratna can sense that he has given up on his dreams and is somewhat lost... On the other hand, Ratna who seems to have nothing, is full of hope and works determinedly towards her dream. As these two worlds collide and the two individuals connect, the barriers between them seem only more insurmountable...

INTRODUCTION NOTE

India has a domestic workforce of 40 million people, mostly women, who work informally, with no rights, in conditions equivalent to modern slavery.

They have no government protections in terms of minimum wages or working hours, nor do they have any rights to health care, unemployment or any sort of social security.

To put it simply, these women are wholly dependent on their employers.

Many employers pay these women on the 7th or 10th of the month, so that they cannot quit as they cannot afford to lose 7 or 10 days of work.

In addition to their extreme physical and financial vulnerability they are subject to daily humiliations. They eat leftovers, sleep on a mat on the floor (in the kitchen, corridor, or if they are lucky in a tiny servant's room), use separate glasses to drink water, and use a separate toilet (sometimes a common toilet shared with chauffeurs in the building).

What is deeply disturbing is that this is broadly considered acceptable by privileged classes in India.

At the root of this acceptance of extreme injustice, is a deeply casteist and racist approach to human beings wherein one's "maid" is considered less human.

It is reminiscent of racism in the United States in the 50s, where black people were considered fundamentally inferior and other.

Please do see recent articles in The Guardian and The New York Times about a violent incident that illustrates the extreme injustices and anger simmering under the surface.

Currently in India, there isn't a major movement for the rights of domestic workers nor is there much awareness of the fact that we all (I include myself in this) are reinforcing the violation of fundamental human rights of the people around us.

Growing up I had a live-in nanny and I struggled with the fact that she lived in our house but was treated not only as unequal, but sub-human.

This is the context within which this story is set.

Ratna is a widow and a live-in domestic worker. But she is not a victim. She is a courageous and hopeful woman fighting for her dream of becoming a fashion designer... as unrealistic as that may seem in this highly classist society.

As Ashwin, her employer, learns more about her, he finds her interesting and inspiring. But they both know that the invisible wall between them is insurmountable.

Yet, they live side-by-side, in a space that is intimate, but divided, where two completely disparate worlds co-exist under one roof.

As a writer, I made the choice to tell a story that is true to what I believe could and would happen. It would be easy to create dramatic or violent incidents to illustrate the injustices of this world. But what I find most interesting is how taboo a positive emotion can be in this context, and how hypocritical our society is.

For the people that I know in India, it is far more disturbing to say that one can fall in love with one's maid, than to discuss the violent incident mentioned in the articles above. Violence allows you to maintain the separation with the other, whereas a love story attempts





to break through that barrier. And this makes people extremely uncomfortable... Producers and friends and family have told me that this is an impossible story. That it could never happen. And yet, nobody has the answer as to why not.

Of course, there are definitely employers who take advantage of the vulnerability of the women who work for them and exploit them sexually.

But this is not that story. This is a story of mutual consensual love between two adults, and the way in which even the most privileged individuals are oppressed by this society... and about how the most important things get left unsaid.

If, through the film, audiences can feel for these two people and root for them to be together, I believe that would be a real achievement as it would help to fundamentally transform one's idea of the "other".

To illustrate what I mean I would like to cite my experience watching *The Birdcage* in the cinema in 1996 in Bronxville, New York, with my mother who was visiting from India (I was working towards my M.F.A. at that time). My mother, a progressive woman in her own right, who had worked at a newspaper throughout my childhood, was nevertheless mildly homophobic, mostly out of ignorance. In India, homosexuality is still illegal, even today, so in the 90s it was still very taboo.

However, watching *The Birdcage*, where she was rooting for the gay characters, made her rethink her stand. At the end of the film, she asked me about my gay friends, and how their parents had dealt with their coming out. I had friends she had known for years were gay, but she had never wanted to talk about it. In less than two hours of a film that was pitched as a comedy, she had been able to overcome her discomfort and prejudice.

I hope that my film will be interesting to people across the board as a love story... and yet will get people to rethink their prejudices, simply by believing in the love story of Ratna and Ashwin.

INTERVIEW

WITH ROHENA GERA

Can you tell me about the origins of SIR and why you wanted to tell this love story?

I've grappled with this class difference that exists in India all my life. When I was a child I lived in India and we had live in help in the house, and that was how we grew up. As a child there was someone who was my nanny, and she took care of me and I was very close to her, but there was clear segregation. I always had trouble with this dynamic, even as a child, and I didn't really know how to understand it. I then went to study in the US for my undergrad, and I was at Stanford talking about ideology and philosophy, and then I would come home, and everything was the same. It was very difficult coming in and out of India, and as much as you might want to change things you can't change them over night. I kept asking myself – what can we do?

As well as directing, you wrote the screenplay for SIR. Can you tell me about the writing process?

I have done a lot of commissioned writing work, and there are ways of working on scripts where you use certain devices to achieve what you want. With this I wanted to take a different approach, I didn't want tricks or devices I wanted to keep it simple and honest. I wanted to always be asking what would really happen in these situations and keep coming back to that again. Then when we came to shoot the film we workshopped the screenplay and really got to know these characters. I wanted to shoot this film chronologically, because I was always considering how hard it would be for the actors to portray this growing closeness. I didn't want them to have to shoot all the corridor scenes one day and then a scene in the village the next because they had to go through these emotions in their performances. We wanted to live this film as if it were true.



Why did you decide to explore this issue within the framework of a love story?

I started thinking about how you love the ones you choose to love. I then came upon the idea of tackling the issues I was still grappling with about class divides in India and exploring it through a love story. I wanted to ask how do we love the ones we love and even how do we give ourselves permission to love. I didn't want to tackle this issue in a preachy way, or to suggest I had all the answers and tell people how to think, and I certainly didn't want her to be portrayed as a victim. A love story allowed me to explore this impossibility of crossing these class divides through a dynamic that was based on equality, and restraint.

You have mentioned that you very much wanted to tell a love story, were there any specific influences that helped you shape the story of SIR?

For me the biggest reference (and it's a lofty reference so please forgive me for that), is Wong Kar-Wai's *In the Mood for Love*. It is a beautiful film built on this idea of restraint and the crossing of paths of two people, who share something but aren't able to fully explore it. There are little echoes of it in SIR, like when they cross in the empty corridor, this is a space that embodies the idea of separation and connection at the same time. There was something about how the characters move through this space that I find very beautiful and *In the Mood for Love* really helped me form my ideas for this movie.

The world you represent is centred on the divide between the world of Ratna, played by Tilotama Shome, and Ashwin, played by Vivek Gomber. What was your approach to showing this divide while at the same time showing how love could blossom under these circumstances?

I wanted to use the physical barriers that existed between them, but I never wanted to force this idea, it had to be natural. Because of the dynamic between Ashwin and Ratna they wouldn't ever just start talking, there would have to be an action that would bring them together. This meant that when this barrier was removed the simple act of standing face to face becomes electric. For example, when she cries in front of him he stands up, but he doesn't know what to do as he can't approach her and he can't reach out.



There is another scene where Ratna tells Ashwin how all parents want their children to get married and she reveals that she understands that he was under pressure to marry. This is something he knows deep down but hadn't yet accepted and it shocks him, not just because it is true, but because it is coming from his maid. I think there is this idea of intimacy within these dynamics, but also the impossibility of ever admitting to it. There may be many barriers between them, both physically and socially, but gradually they grow closer despite the divides that exist between them. After all, if you have someone living in your home there is bound to be a degree of intimacy even if it remains unspoken. With this idea in mind, you have to ask, why should such a love remain taboo? That is one of the central questions at the heart of SIR.

How did you want to explore the power dynamic shared by Ratna and Lakshmi?

It is an extreme power dynamic. For example, this can be seen when Ratna asks her friend Lakshmi (Geetanjali

Kulkarni) whether she's going to be fired for slapping the son of her employer. In this moment we realise what is at stake for these people, if Lakshmi is fired she doesn't just lose her job and wages she also loses her home. Their relationship also shows how the power dynamic can operate both ways, as much as Lakshmi's job is at risk she also knows that her employer can't raise her son without her. It's not an even power dynamic by any means, but it does highlight how complex these relationships are.

Do you think that a love story such as this could exist within the confines of cosmopolitan Indian society?

I think to admit to a relationship such as this publicly would be almost impossible, so if it did exist no one would know about it, because the societal constraints are still dominant. I believe that if someone did admit to being in such a relationship they would be completely ostracised. I think the only solution would be to move out of the country, providing you could afford it. Once they are in a different country they would just be two



people from two different cultures that speak different languages. You have to remember that even though they are both Indian they come from different cultural backgrounds – ways of dressing, and eating, would be different for them. I think a couple would have to be far away from their families for such a relationship to work.

Can you tell me how you explored the themes and ideas of family in SIR and how that ties into the contrasts of city and country life?

Your proximity to your family is often tied up with ways of behaviour and how closely you adhere to traditional values. As Ratna is a widow, going to the city affords her a degree of freedom because the city gives you anonymity. For Ashwin, he used to live in New York and now he is coming back into Mumbai where his family lives and he is trying to cope with living up to his family's expectations. Ashwin lives in a gilded cage. For Ratna it is the complete opposite.

What was your approach to how you wanted to represent village life in India?

I was very specific about where I wanted to shoot the village scenes. We could have shot those scenes much closer to Mumbai, but it was important to me that Ratna came from a place in nature that is beautiful. Her reasons for coming to the city are financial and also for the greater opportunities. I wanted to acknowledge that people that live in the country are often very happy there and don't want to move into a slum in the city. I never wanted to talk down to people in the country because there is a tendency in films to show villages in the country as pathetic, dusty places. It was never that for me, the countryside is beautiful. I spoke to a villager in the location where we shot, and I asked her what she thought of Mumbai. She told me that she has a daughter that works there, so I asked her if she wanted to go to Mumbai and she said, "what does Mumbai have? It doesn't have this air and this water, but you have to go

for the stomach," – by that she means you have to go for the jobs, but why would you want to leave these beautiful lands where they farm and lead good lives.

One of the aspects we haven't discussed is that Ratna is a widow, how does this change the dynamic?

For a widow from a village the city can be an amazing place, because you can leave your old life behind and have more freedom. Of course, what it means to be a widow will change depending where in India you are, because it is such a large country and no place is the same. Even amongst progressive, cosmopolitan people it can be the case that if someone is a widow their life is basically over, perhaps with fewer rules governing clothing but still, with a lot of constraints. Amongst the people I know, I don't know of any widows who have moved on and started over with another man. If they have children they have to dedicate their lives to their children, and no one will care whether or not she wants to be with another man or that she may want companionship. That is totally negated in Indian society, a woman's sexuality is rarely talked about.

Can you tell me how you came to cast Tillotama Shome?

I had Tillotama Shome in my mind to play Ratna for a long time. I was concerned that she would say no because she played a maid in Mira Nair's *Monsoon Wedding*. I was so frightened she'd think I was type casting her. I saw her in *Qissa* where she played a girl raised as a boy, and she was really fantastic. I spoke to Tillotama a year before we started filming, and nothing was in place. She would ring me every six weeks and find out where we were with the project and how I was getting on. She was adamant it was her role, and she didn't want me to give it to someone else, which was great.

What I knew of her before I met her was that she is incredibly sincere and gives everything to the role. I felt that she would do what it would take and play the character of Ratna in her entirety, both inside and out. There was one thing though, Tilotama didn't speak Marathi, and I always wanted it that Ratna would speak to her sister in Marathi because that is where she is from, and she wouldn't speak to her in Hindi because that is the language that she would have learned in the city. Tilotama did a lot of work and learnt the language, but



as well as that she also went further and did a lot of work with her physical behaviour thinking about the character, so she could feel more like she was a woman from the village.

What was it about Vivek Gomber that made you cast him as Ashwin?

Finding the right person to play Ashwin was a different matter. There are a great deal of good actors in India, but I needed someone who could really understand who Ashwin is and what he's going through. I needed someone who could make it seem effortless to play the role of a sophisticated, cosmopolitan man. I really struggled, and thought of all different actors, even thinking if I should look at South Asian actors in the UK or US, or wherever, but I worried whether they would

be able to speak Hindi. Someone then suggested Vivek to me, and I was surprised because I have seen *Court* where he plays a lawyer and he seemed so at odds with what I was looking for. They assured me he would be perfect, and I looked him up and met him. He auditioned, and he inhabited the character, and owned the space around, and I was so relieved because I knew I had the right person.

What was the dynamic between Vivek Gomber and Tillotama Shome like on set?

They really bonded and trusted each other. One thing that helped during filming was that, being a low-budget film, we didn't have space for separate rooms for the actors in which they could rest between shoots and I think that helped with developing closeness between

Vivek and Tillotama. We shot this for the most part in order, there was this real bond that developed between the actors. It was very intense and exhausting for both of them, and they were really there for each other. There is a scene at the end of the movie where she is on the phone to him, and Vivek didn't need to be there, but he was there on the day actually on the phone to her off camera. There was another occasion like this for a scene that is no longer in the movie where Vivek is on the phone to Tillotama and again she didn't need to be there that day, but she phoned from her home on cue so that he would feel like he was really talking to her. They did a lot of work for each other trying to help each other be these characters. They did so much for me and for each other, and for the film.

ROHENA GERA'S BIOGRAPHY AND FILMOGRAPHY

Educated at Stanford University (B.A.) in California, and Sarah Lawrence College (M.F.A.) in New York, Rohena has worked in film and television for almost 20 years.

Starting her career at Paramount Pictures Literary Affairs office in New York in 1996, Rohena has since worked in a range of roles from Assistant Director to screenwriter to independent producer/director.

Rohena's most recent project *What's love got to do with it?* a micro-budget feature documentary premiered at the Mumbai Film Festival in 2013.

She independently produced and directed a non-profit campaign called *Stop the Hatred* to fight communalism. This featured 16 national icons including Amitabh Bachchan, Zakir Husain, Aamir Khan, Ashutosh Gowariker, Sachin Tendulkar and various others. This was screened in 240 cinemas nationwide and across all national television channels that are members of the Indian Broadcasting Foundation.

She has been commissioned to write for mainstream Hindi cinema directors including Kunal Kohli and Rohan Sippy as well as Santosh Sivan and Ram Madhvani (who represent independent Indian cinema). She co-wrote *Kuch Na Kaho* (featuring Abhishek Bachchan and Aishwarya Rai, produced by Ramesh Sippy) and *Thoda Pyaar Thoda Magic* (featuring Saif Ali Khan and Rani Mukherjee, produced by Aditya Chopra)

She has also written more than 40 episodes for the very successful television series *Jassi Jaisi Koi Nahin*, adapted from the same source as *Ugly Betty* (*Betty La Fea*).

In her tenure as Communications director for Breakthrough (an international non-profit headquartered in New York) she released one of their music albums through Sony Music and executive produced a music video featuring Rahul Bose and Anupam Kher.

The UN Foundation invited her to serve as an advisor for their wildlife conservation campaign in India.

Having grown up in India, but having lived in California, New York and Paris, she is both an insider and an outsider to Mumbai.

Sir, Rohena's current feature film project was selected by Critics week at Cannes for the competition section, and has already been picked up by MK2 films for international sales as well as by a well-known French distributor Diaphana. It also received the support of the World Cinema Fund (Cin mas du monde) of the CNC (National Centre for Cinema) in France for post-production.

CAST

Ratna	Tillotama Shome
Ashwin	Vivek Gumber
Laxmi	Geetanjali Kulkarni
Ashwin's father	Rahul Vohra
Ashwin's mother	Divya Seth Shah
Vicky	Chandrachoor Rai
Nandita (Ashwin's sister)	Dilnaz Irani
Choti	Bhagyashree Pandit
Ankita	Anupriya Goenka
Raju	Akash Sinha
Sabina	Rashi Mal

CREW

Director	Rohena Gera
Screenplay	Rohena Gera
Production	Brice Poisson (Inkpot Films), Rohena Gera
Coproduction	Thierry Lenouvel (Ciné-Sud Promotion)
Executive Producer	Rakesh Mehra
DOP	Dominique Colin
Production Designer	Parul Sondh
Costumes	Kimneineng Kipgen
Make-up	Serina Tixeira
Sound	Arnaud Lavaleix, Guillaume Battistelli, Nicolas d'Halluin, Jean-Guy Véran (Mactari)
1st Assist. Director	Chakshu Arora
Editing	Jacques Comets
Assistant editing	Baptiste Ribault
Sound designer	Daniel Gries
Music composer	Pierre Avia
International Sales	mk2 films