

Irrfan Khan Tisca Chopra Tillotama Shome Rasika Dugal

QISSA

A film by Anup Singh

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QISSA

A film by **Anup Singh**

Germany/India/Netherlands/France 2013, 109 min, Scope, Dolby 5.1, Punjabi

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SYNOPSIS

Set in post-colonial India, QISSA tells the story of Umber Singh, a Sikh, who is forced to flee his village due to ethnic cleansing at the time of partition in 1947. Umber decides to fight fate and builds a new home for his family. When Umber marries his youngest child Kanwar to Neeli, a girl of lower caste, the family is faced with the truth of their identities; where individual ambitions and destinies collide in a struggle with eternity.



DIRECTOR'S NOTES

I recall ...

The tales of my grandfather. His fierce and inconsolable voice as it conjures the 1947 partition of India before my childish gaze.

The image of Shiva, our lord of creation and destruction: his matted hair wild with mourning and grief as he carries the corpse of his wife through the crumbling universe.

The sea, as we leave Africa forever.

QISSA, for me, is a gathering of such memories, family stories, fragments of history and mythology, and images of a lost childhood. To begin with, all blurred like a slowly materializing ghost, but steadily, relentlessly taking possession of my life during the making of this film.

In sharing this very personal story, which is layered on history and on fable, perhaps it would be best for me to mention that for me the very beginning is the sea.

Between the two distant shores of Dar-es-Salaam in East Africa and Bombay, a ship sped across the ocean with my parents and two younger sisters, and I -- hardly an adolescent -- being carried away from the land of my birth forever.

On the third day of the sea voyage, the anguish of leaving was suddenly brushed aside as a screen was unfurled on the deck of the ship. That night a film flickered like a flame between the boundless, starry sky above and the immeasurable ocean below.

That's when I knew that as long as I could invoke this experience of cinema, where it pulsed as a part of the larger cosmos, I would never lose the land of my childhood.

Now, many years later (and many more dislocations): By this time my family had emigrated to London and I was teaching at a film school in Geneva. My grandfather was dead and I was thinking about his journeys and mine. My grandfather could never let go the burning bitterness about his loss of home and it had made him a strangely loving father to his five daughters and three sons, a considerate father-in-law to his 17-year old eldest daughter-in-law, my mother. But he could also suddenly erupt into a ruthless and violent tyrant, seeking to control every breath taken by his family.

His journeys, loss and bitterness and violence; his face inconsolable like Shiva; my journey and my belief in cinema as an affirmation -- all converged suddenly and the UMBER of QISSA and his story flared into being.



THE LOST HOMELAND

In the more than 60 years of Indian independence, the old wound continues to bleed, and the bloodshed continues even today. In 1947, when the British colonialists tore India into two nations, creating Pakistan as the other, creating two communities out of one, and two homelands, it led to the killing of unnumbered people and millions more were made refugees.

One of the attempts in QISSA is to try and understand this fatal violence; to look into the inner consciousness of such a refugee like Umber, not very different from my grandfather. To try and see how the violation of one's home, identity, and nationhood could unleash within such a refugee a raging violence not only against so-called "enemies" but against the self and one's own family.

As our daily newspapers keep showing us, the loss of homeland has precipitated a cycle of violence in our world today. The idea of nation and identity – of homeland – is without doubt the explosive question of our time.

THE IDENTITY OF A MAN WHO IS A WOMAN

In a state of homelessness and poverty, the female child is often seen as a burden and a threat to family honour. To affirm and assert his own identity, Umber realizes he needs to "remake" his daughter's identity. Thus, in more ways than one, the search for identity becomes even more fundamental to this tale. And it immediately leads to the primal questions that the film seeks to address: What is a woman? Or a man?

DIRECTOR'S NOTES

THE DESIRE OF THE FATHER, THE MAKING OF A WOMAN

The film also seeks to investigate the desire and power of men to "remake" women as they like. The father, Umber, "makes" his daughter, Kanwar, into a son; and then as a ghost "transforms" a woman into a man.

What is this desire of the father? What is this ruthless rape to possess not only the flesh but also the spirit? A desire to never die? A craving for immortality? Or is there a more secret, darker coveting involved here?

In this world of male rapacity and possession, the bond between women takes on a larger significance. Even in the dark corners of life, even when they are powerless, women seem to retain the capacity to empathize, as does Mehar, Kanwar's mother. She can be fierce as a lioness in the defence of her children.

And Kanwar's bride, Neeli, who has been deceived into the marriage, overcomes her own bitterness when she sees Kanwar's oppression and seeks in every way to bring empathy, love and joy into their closed life.

What the film hopes to leave us with at the end is that the compassion and conscience of women can redeem and even lead men like Umber to atonement.

DIRECTOR'S BIO

Born 1961 in Dar-Es-Salaam, Tanzania, Anup Singh grew up in a Sikh family of Punjab origin. Their forced displacement is one of the main sources of inspiration for QISSA. Anup's first feature THE NAME OF A RIVER (2002) was in 30 festivals worldwide, won several awards and is available BFI's DVD collection. He has also directed film projects for Indian TV and consulted for BBC2, as well as writing film reviews for industry press including "Sight&Sound". Anup's third feature film project LASYA – THE GENTLE DANCE picked up the CNC (France) prize at the Locarno 2011 Open Doors industry days.



CAST

Umber Singh
Mehar
Kanwar
Neeli

Irrfan Khan
Tisca Chopra
Tillotama Shome
Rasika Dugal

CREW

Director Anup Singh
Written by Anup Singh, Madhuja Mukherjee
DOP Sebastian Edschmid
Production Designer Tim Pannen
Costume Designer Divya + Nidhi Gambhir
Make-Up/Hair Bärbel Scheid
Sound Design Peter Flamman
Sound Recordist Simone Galavazi
Editor Bernd Euscher
Music Composer Béatrice Thiriet
Producers Johannes Rexin
Bettina Brokemper
Co-Producers Nina Lath Gupta
Bero Beyer
Thierry Lenouvel
Locations Amritsar / Chandigarh, Punjab, India
Partners NFDC
Film und Medienstiftung NRW
Eurimages
ZDF/ Das Kleine Fernsehspiel
ARTE
Filmförderungsanstalt
MEDIA
Medienboard Berlin-Brandenburg
Deutscher Filmförderfonds
Camino Filmverleih
NFF
Fonds Sud
CNC

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WITH IRRFAN KHAN TILLOTAMA SHOME TISCA CHOPRA RASIKA DUGAL DANISH AKTHARI

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