

In 'Agra', a grim portrait of the repressed Indian man

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Director Kanu Behl's Hindi feature film examines the sexual obsession and frustration of men, mental health and the transactional nature of human relationships in a patriarchal society where space is in short supply

The city of Agra is known to the world for the Taj Mahal, the 17th-century Mughal monument to eternal love. The romance of the Taj, however, is far removed from the life of Guru, the protagonist of the Indian writer-director Kanu Behl's Hindi feature film *Agra*, which premiered last week at the Directors' Fortnight run parallel to the Cannes Film Festival in France. More relevant to the story than the Taj Mahal is Agra's association in the north Indian public mind with the Institute of Mental Health and Hospital, once known by the damaging moniker Agra Lunatic Asylum.

Neither the monument nor the institute are seen on screen here. Instead, centrality goes to Guru's dingy house, which lies at the heart of the conflict in his family. The troubled 24-year-old and his mother occupy the ground floor, while his father occupies the upper storey with a live-in partner. Guru is dissatisfied with this arrangement and demands a room on the terrace for himself and his girlfriend. His mother, bitter about being abandoned by her husband, wants a section of the building apportioned to her and her niece. The atmosphere is thick with an acrid rage as members of the household constantly clash.

Guru is lonely, desperate for a woman in his bed, brimming with a volcanic intensity and potential for savagery. His entire being stands on a foundation of rejection and the paternal tyranny he faced as child. His universe now revolves around his unfulfilled primal desires. Throughout *Agra*, he is conscious of two wants: sex and space. His journey towards finding both informs the script's examination of gender segregation, male sexual obsession arising from repression, familial cruelty, mental health and the transactional nature of human relationships in a patriarchal society saddled with real-estate shortages.

Titli 2.0

In an India where a rape is reported once every 16 minutes or so (as per National Crime Records Bureau statistics) and marital rape is yet to be criminalised, Behl is evidently invested in studying masculinist aggression. In that sense, *Agra* is an extension of his debut feature *Titli* (2014) and his short film *Binnu Ka Sapna* (2019). *Titli* was about a young man in Delhi anxious to escape the toxic relationships thrust upon him by birth, and the overriding focus of both films was how patterns of problematic behaviour within families get repeated by successive generations. What *Agra* carries forward from *Titli* and *Binnu Ka Sapna* is an exploration of sexual violence and patriarchy.

In *Titli*'s most nerve-wracking passage, a bride silently resists her husband as he tries to force himself upon her in their tiny room in an over-crowded house. The terrifying scene lasts for over two minutes, with the only sounds accompanying the woman's struggling breaths being the rustle of the

couple's wedding attire and the jingle-jangle of the bangles on her arms. *Titli* joined an increasing tribe of Hindi films to address domestic violence and marital rape in the past decade. In a brief passage in *Bhaag Milkha Bhaag* (2013), the male protagonist listens helplessly from behind a thin partition in a refugee camp as his sister fights off but ultimately succumbs to her brutish husband. *7 Khoon Maaf* (2011), *Lipstick Under My Burkha* (2016), *Secret Superstar* (2017), *Gully Boy* (2019), *Thappad* (2020) and *Darlings* (2022) all foreground spousal abuse. Their scenes of intimate partner violence aroused shock, anger and disgust, and also empathy for the women under attack, while underscoring the male entitlement at play.

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Agra, co-written by Behl and the screenwriter Atika Chohan, offers a sharp contrast to these films' more mainstream sensibilities. Since it is presented from the man's perspective, it is also trickier to reckon with. Guru is the creep every woman has encountered – the sort who undresses you with his piercing stare, all the while getting a rise from your discomfort. (Warning: Spoilers ahead, till the end of the paragraph.) His sexual encounters range from imaginary to actual and consensual, between which lies sandwiched a chilling attempt at rape. The absence of platonic female company and warmth in his life is exemplified by *Agra's* most unnerving scene, when he mistakes tenderness for lust and assaults a woman who is simply being kind to him.

The narrative contextualises his character before arriving at this point, thus ensuring that though he is by turns repulsive, pathetic, contemptible, pitiable and even frightening, he does not attract hate. But this does not come across as a bid to garner sympathy. Instead, for those who recognise the self-destructive nature of patriarchy, which harms men even as it seeks to subjugate women, *Agra* is an unsettling reminder of why society should study the victim-turned-victimiser phenomenon, the heterogeneity of evil and persecution, if we wish to combat these things.

Agra's primary preoccupation is the self-interest underlining all human ties, including Guru's blossoming relationship with Priti, a physically challenged woman who runs an internet cafe. The film appears cynical about love and family as Guru barter with those closest to him. Their compromises are believable, but also deflate conventional notions of human emotion – implying, among other things, that the idea of love is a romanticisation of carnal hunger, a concept invented by human beings that allows us to feel superior to other species. It is one thing to read analyses of hormones and instincts by biologists and anthropologists, and quite another to watch negotiations within families and friendships as spelt out in this film.

Broken house

Agra's cut-and-dried worldview, brutal though it is, demands a conversation. For the record, the film may not be about Valentine's Day and candle-lit dinners, all-sacrificing motherhood and selfless solidarity – hackneyed tropes of commercial cinema worldwide – but it does not fully dismiss the existence of elevated sentiments that rise above physical needs and practical considerations. We see this in a flash of compassion from Guru's cousin Chhavi – despite his earlier viciousness towards her – when Guru breaks down before her; and in the genuine pain with which his mother recounts his childhood traumas.

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The writing is not judgemental towards characters in challenging circumstances. For instance, it distinguishes between Chhavi and Mummy in their frantic pursuit of a piece of property, which they prioritise over even their self-respect, and another woman whose seeming privilege gives her the freedom to reject a man when she realises she is being used. Through the women and Guru, *Agra* makes the point that for persons of limited means in the world's most populous country, ownership of even a single room is priceless, translating variously into a means of income, security and, in a conservative society that polices sexual relations, the privacy needed for intercourse. That said, when a character discards a man who is accustomed to women learning to live with his roving eye, and when Guru himself schools his exploitative Daddy, *Agra* also illustrates the possibility that harmful patterns can be stemmed and cycles *can* be disrupted by individuals with and without privilege.

The house in this multi-layered narrative is a metaphor for Guru and for his family, an edifice raised on a fractured foundation that can get a second shot at life if it is pulled down and rebuilt.

Agra's portrayal of a continuous cost-benefit analysis in relationships lends an unexpected dimension to the definition of "normal". Irrespective of whether Guru's fevered imagination is the product of a diagnosable psychiatric condition or symbolic of the fantasies of a sexually starved man, he has the appearance of a wreck in comparison to the rest of his family. Yet of all these supposedly normal, healthy people, he is the only one with a crystal-clear vision of his needs from the start, the honesty to admit them bluntly and the purposefulness required for the pursuit of his goals. The other individual as shorn of pretence as Guru is Priti, who too would be socially perceived as being broken.

Agra is intriguing, although its scepticism and bald frankness are not easy to digest. Every element contributes to its starkness. The sex scenes are not prettified by the cinematographer Saurabh Monga or gentled with soft music and a build-up of chemistry between the characters. This is neither "love-making" as served up by mainstream cinema, nor ridiculously implausible intercourse like in porn. The sex here is functional, and its presentation resembles a home video. Affection does rear its head in *Agra*, but comes much after a couple's bodies are satiated.

Homecoming

The film's hyper-realism is punctured only by the sound design from Pritam Das, capturing the insistent whir in Guru's mind and the swirling colours that intermittently fill the screen - perhaps best described as Vincent van Gogh's *The Starry Night* liquefying, or a melting rainbow.

Mohit Agarwal, even as a debutant actor, brings a visceral heat to Guru's restlessness. Agarwal's boyish face is at odds with Guru's most egregious conduct, and adds to the complexity of this unlikeable-yet-unhateable character. Priyanka Bose - who played the hero's biological mother in the Oscar-nominated *Lion* (2016) - is *Agra's* Priti, the only one who truly "sees" Guru. Bose balances Priti's pragmatism with a vulnerability that takes the ick off her unambiguous bargaining.

Vibha Chibber as Mummy, Sonal Jha as Daddy's present partner and Aanchal Goswami as Chhavi are all excellent. The most compelling casting choice though is Rahul Roy, whose presence lends a poignance to Daddy for those who are aware of the star's career path. Roy was catapulted into the spotlight in 1990 when his debut Hindi feature *Aashiqui* became all the rage. After a couple of high-profile projects, he struggled for three decades. Hindi film songs from the 1990s are often heard in the background in *Agra*, evoking nostalgia for a time when Roy was a household name. The selection also points to the transience of youth and success, as illustrated by his experiences. The dreamy lyrics, ironically, underscore *Agra's* hard-headed assessment of relationships.

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country, ownership of even a single room is priceless, translating variously into a means of income, security and the privacy needed for intercourse.”

Age has been good to Roy, and Agra gives him an opportunity to showcase not just a handsomeness essential to Daddy’s ability to repeatedly attract younger women but also the artiste in him, a far cry from the youth who mooned after his lover with a deadpan expression in *Aashiqui*. This is a fine actor.

Agra’s producers – Saregama India, UFO Productions and Behl’s own O28 Films – have not yet announced release plans. The route it takes will be significant, considering the conservatism of India’s Central Board of Film Certification (CBFC), the statutory body under the central government that clears films for theatrical exhibition. Indian cinema has evolved vastly from the days when kissing couples were camouflaged by flowers and birds, but the CBFC remains stiff-necked. Curbs on entertainment have tightened to such an extent since 2014, when the rightwing Bharatiya Janata Party formed the government in Delhi, that pre-emptive self-censorship in the interest of self-preservation has become rampant, including among streaming platforms that have so far been largely left to self-regulate. *Agra* could seem a risk in its current form, yet any concession to appease censors by re-cutting the film would diminish it.

The optimistic view is that just as “life finds a way”, to quote Steven Spielberg’s *Jurassic Park*, so too good cinema will find its audience. The premiere on the French Riviera has already generated interest in the film in *Agra*’s home country. With its ongoing clashes between modernity and traditionalism, and large swathes of its male population exposed to online imagery from sexually permissive societies while facing restrictions to sexuality in the real world, India, more than any other place on the planet, must see this film.

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