

Film Review

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Is It All About Mothers and Daughters in Shakuntala Devi?

Shakuntala Devi is a 2020 Indian Hindi-language biographical comedy-drama film written and directed by Anu Menon.

When I googled “Shakuntala Devi biography”, I get several links that tell me “Her father worked as a trapeze artist, lion tamer, tight-rope walker, and magician in a circus and he got to know about her daughter’s mathematical ability while teaching her a card trick!!! Once he was confirmed about her magical power in numbers, he left circus and started shows with her on road and in schools and he even went to London with her to win the world and earn millions.” Having this information in mind, with high hopes, I started watching the movie based on her life, expecting to watch some of the circus scenes. I thought it would be entertaining for my 10-year-old daughter as well, which is very much required during this long confinement of Covid-19 pandemic. But to my utter disappointment, I find her father a jobless ordinary Brahmin instead of some exciting “lion tamer” in a circus! Yes, being a filmmaker myself, I know how you need to take some liberties in the narrative

when you transfer something on reel from real life, but this was “blasphemy” my frustration claims! Later I came to know the reason of the discrepancy between the two versions when Shakuntala’s daughter Anu gets furious as she hears her mother tagging her father as “homosexual” along with all other lies about her grandfather’s profession openly in the public event of launching her book on Homosexuality. Wikipedia informed again that the book was named “*The World of Homosexuals*, the first published academic study of homosexuality in India, for which she was criticized. In the documentary *For Straights Only*, she said that her interest in the topic was because of her marriage to a homosexual man and her desire to look at homosexuality more closely to understand it.” When confronted by her daughter, Shakuntala confessed she lied to make the background of the writer more fascinating – mathematical genius daughter of a ‘lion tamer’ father in India. Ahem! Ahem! ... who knows it best than me who became fascinated about the fact and just faced the disappointment by seeing her jobless Brahmin father who used his daughter’s ability to earn

and run the family instead of being an enthralling lion-tamer!

My reading of the film with a feminist lens could connect directly when little Shakuntala tells her passive mother and differently abled sister that she is the “Appa” (father) of the house because in every other house, it’s the father who earns and feeds the family. She does the same since her jobless father uses her by depriving her rights to education, to recreation and largely, to a free childhood. With this dialogue, we get to see how a child internalizes the basic gender stereotypes and sexual division of labour in a patriarchal society. The defined roles for male and female decide the authority irrespective of biological identify. She had to realize early that s/he who earns and runs the family, deserves to be heard and obeyed. She hated her father and did not want to even talk to him because he failed to perform his role as a ‘father’. She also promised to her dead sister that she would never be a mother like their own voiceless mother who failed to reply to her question “Why can’t you utter a word in front of father?”



Just after her vow of not to be like her passive mother, we see young Shakuntala in a flash forward (1954) as she controls her advance payment and asks her father to go home and to buy vegetables on the way instead of staying for her show. Her body language blatantly defies her father’s advice not to be too late at night in the “Bangalore Gentlemen’s Club” where the show was arranged to celebrate its annual programme.

Her way of introducing herself as “myself Shakuntala” stirs up laughter of sarcasm but she remains calm and spirited. Being the only woman in that gentleman’s club back in 1954

does not curb her indomitable and spontaneous presence. In fact, all the men were perplexed by her performance and their initial laughter of sarcasm changed to applaud of admiration immediately after and it was a win for her as always!

“Why it is so weird to see a woman solve math problems?” when asked to one of those gentlemen, seemingly her boyfriend in an intimate situation post performance, she is told that men are used to see women taking care of household chores and solving only domestic problems; and that’s why they find it weird when they find an exception. As if solving only household issues are something women take as their ‘choice’!

Shakuntala says household problem solving also requires math. This is a commendable skill indeed. Only a mother or a wife knows how to calculate the minimum budget to run the family and how to allocate her precious time for multitasking activities that they do in their daily life. Yet in most of the film it is called “sacrifice”. Realization of her mother’s plight in the end makes Shakuntala cry and feel for her “Amma”. But is it because she has finally understood her mother’s helplessness, or does she cry for herself as a mother who is hated by her own daughter now?

Shakuntala could not calculate or predict the fate of her love life (can anyone?). Her lover betrays her and hides the news of his wedding arranged with someone else. When she finds his wedding invitation card by chance, she shoots him. In fact, she also represents power and authority from the very beginning of the film, which is obvious in that social context, but we miss some details of her journey of struggle. That perhaps, could explain the vulnerabilities of a ‘strong’ woman to the outside world. That could make her more palpable as a human being. For example, we do not see her journey abroad and how she reaches London in 1955. According to wiki biography, she traveled to London with her father, but in the film, she travels alone! The struggle around this journey is completely missing in the film. It looks like it was not that difficult for her - a

young Indian woman from an ordinary background, to move to London all by herself because she is so self-confident!

The film starts with the claim that this is actually a story of a mother told by her daughter. Hence, I expected it would be a mother-daughter, love-hate relationship, cycle of a daughter being a mother, and so on and so forth. I miss further exploration of Shakuntala's works on astrology and some more details of her books on homosexuality and murder. All these aspects of her life are so different from each other that one wonders what prompted her to pursue these fields and practice like an expert. Perhaps, to tell the story from daughter's point of view limited the narrative. But undoubtedly, giving little more focus on these diverse wings could unfasten possibilities to understand her character way better.



Shakuntala reaches to Tara Bai's guesthouse in London. At breakfast, when other male tenants wonder about her solo journey, Tara Bai counters them by giving her own example. She says that just like them, the men, single women can also travel abroad alone and try their luck to establish themselves; and it has been as simple as this! But had it really been as simple as this in 1955? I find it quite an imposing theory at a superficial level, particularly because we do not get to know anything about Tara Bai's background and her struggle. Not a single reference is mentioned of this fearless lady who could stay in London alone; earn by keeping men as paying guests; and who tells Shakuntala that nothing could be more scary to men than a woman who follows her heart and laughs out loud! What a fascinating character she is! Perhaps Shakuntala became more inspired by her persona during her days in a foreign land? The narrative tells nothing fur-

ther in this regard. They just converse couple of times in the film. When Shakuntala wonders all about these gender stereotypes, she reminds me of those who proudly say, "I am not a feminist and know nothing about feminism but only believe in humanism and women's rights!" What Shakuntala surely knows and understands is the hierarchy in patriarchal society. Remember how as a child, she had pointed out the sexual division of labour to her mother and sister saying she was the one who earns for the family and therefore, she owns the power? It seems just like the conventional pattern of patriarchy; the representation remains same irrespective of temporal and socio-cultural differences. That is why two Indian women Shakuntala and Tara Bai talking of gender issues and making fun of it in 1954 London, resembles the dialogues of modern liberal women in 2019 India in a web series called "Four more shots please!"

Shakuntala has to take a break from her shows and busy schedule for her daughter and there is a huge confusion in calling it "sacrifice". Anu says her mother never sacrifices and the narrative supports it. But if this break is not called a sacrifice, then from where does the realization or the issue of leaving a sizzling career for her daughter comes? Especially when the father never denies and refuses to do his duty as a father, why could she not balance it asks him to join her abroad instead? What if a man does the same - leaves his wife and moves abroad with their only child for his career and the wife refuses to join him, we will surely respect her decision? Had the relationship between Shakuntala and her husband Paritosh been established with more care and space, the authenticity of the causes of their differences, conflict and dilemma, followed by their divorce could be better manifested, particularly since the husband is not shown as a big bad villain.

I have two more points to mention here. Let me jot down the problematic one first. Shakuntala and her daughter realize that they never look at their mothers as "*Women*", but they consider them only as "*Mothers*"! Now, what it is like "treat as woman"? Doesn't it estab-

lish the concept of gender binary of male-female only? I guess something like “Treat as Individual would have been a better expression that could do more justice to the intention of breaking the gender stereotype through the narrative. A biopic has to follow the facts, yet the representation and the focus on gender roles might have been dealt with more caution, as nothing is more complex than to do justice to gender problems. The whole narrative is centered on the concept of motherhood and its definition. Shakuntala herself takes full advantage of being a biological mother. She blackmails her husband (and later he would be son-in-law) by showing her 3-inch mark caused by C-section and claims her principal rights over her daughter because she had to bear the pain of delivery! In the end, Anu also realizes, she should give more time to her daughter when her friends tell her how they left their blooming career for their children and how that decision has been worth taking.

Finally, I loved the statement by Anu’s mother-in-law that no mothers can be perfect and no need to try to be one too. And fathers are included promptly too, by Anu’s husband Ajay and the gender balance is restored. Being a mother of a daughter (10 year) myself and balancing many ropes, I know like many others that how difficult and stressful (if not impossible) it is to be a multitasking Maa Durga simultaneously performing with her ten hands. I realize how tricky that term “Doshobhujā” (the Goddess with ten hands) is to glorify (read fool) women to make them feel that they are amazing super-power-packed modern editions of the Goddess; when in reality, they have been suffering of sleep deprivation, fatigue, hypertension, depression and other physical and mental health issues due to the immense pressure of performing to perfection as ideal wife, ideal mother, and finally as the “ideal woman”.

The film certainly does justice to the cause of foregrounding gender issues in a popular domain. But it failed in its possibility to be more comprehensive and layered narrative to fathom the complex, authoritative, ambitious, successful, and dominating personality of

Shakuntala Devi, who also had to suffer with her own motherhood dilemmas. Did she ever regret or repent to have a baby? Why Anu could not stick to her decision of not having a baby? It was also because of peer pressure that she went back home to her daughter leaving her dream-like exhibition to her husband. Could she not ask Ajay to go back and check on their daughter? Even if it happened in reality, could it not be changed on reel?

Nowhere in the film the question of choice is raised. If Anu chooses to give time to the baby by choice that is absolutely fine; and at least one parent should provide ample time to the baby if the other one is busy with work outside. But having children and doing justice to one’s talent outside simultaneously requires a solid support system and still it gets difficult to take proper care of a child in her/his formative years. Nowhere in the film, household chores along with daily duties and responsibilities of raising children are acknowledged as ‘work’. And thus, these extremely important “unpaid and thankless” jobs are considered either as “natural and mandatory” or “sacrifice” for women only because patriarchy never value these work tantamount to a paid job that brings one money and fame.

Even after multiple researches and time allocation studies that proved how the economy of a state depends on these unpaid household chores by women, the basic pattern of power relation to money has not changed over the years. Women just have to be happy either with the patriarchal concept of the glory of motherhood; or with the dilemma and guilt of not doing justice to their talent as an individual and their duty as a mother to rear a child with equal importance. Shakuntala Devi has to go through the guilt for not being able to provide a stable disciplined ‘normal’ childhood to her daughter. She never wanted to become like her own passive and voiceless mother but ironically hated by her daughter for being too dominating and too vocal to hear other’s voices. Even such a strong, brave, determined, and free-spirited woman like hers, could not escape the motherhood guilt. Irrespective of time, socio-economic background, and cultur-

al differences, Shakuntala's mother, Shakuntala as a mother and Shakuntala's daughter, all have to suffer the motherhood challenge and guilt without any choice.

Shakuntala's case in this regard must have been an exception because not every woman or individual is a genius, but she too has to go through the ordeal. I think genius men also have to go through similar kind of dilemma and problem balancing family and their talents, but needless to say, they get all the support from the society and most of the time from the family. If his family (read wife) fails to be as much supportive as his talent requires her to be, the guilt is on the woman in this case. Therefore, no matter if you are a genius yourself or a genius's partner, the motherhood and balancing act fall upon a woman, failing which she inevitably deserves to suffer the guilt. I am delighted to hear Shakuntala saying on stage that a daughter sometimes should also see her mother as a "genius" too. That is where all the problem of Shakuntala and Anu's conflict lies. Not only a daughter, but also the family, the society, and the genius herself should understand and provide support just as they do to a genius man in most of the cases.

Role of the state is undeniably very important

to provide equal work opportunity for both men and women; either by providing child-care support or by recognizing domestic jobs and childrearing as work with remuneration and other benefits to one parent irrespective of gender. This issue has not been addressed in any mainstream Indian film as far as I know, but that is a different topic to be discussed elsewhere. For the time being, let us applaud to Anupama Banerjee, real life daughter of the legend whose eyes and memories are borrowed by the makers of the film to portray her mother's journey on screen. Let us appreciate the effort of the entire cast and crew who made it visible for us. It is indeed the film that made me curious, to remember, and to research for more information about the super talented "Human Computer", Writer and Astrologer Shakuntala Devi who is an inspiration and indomitable spirit personified. This is certainly a commendable effort to make the narrative expanding from personal to political space focusing on women's status and gender roles in patriarchal society, despite the missing points I discussed earlier. And I think the film's most important and laudable message given to the masses (contradicting patriarchal concept of glorification of motherhood), is that 'no mother is perfect and no need to be one indeed; and same goes for the fathers as well.' Amen.

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