

Opinion | Stree 2: Dishing Out Half-Baked Feminism

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Rajkummar Rao and Shraddha Kapoor in Stree.

The film's message is plain and simple: That it is the combined power of the virtuous male and female that wins the day

Written By: Jagdish Batra

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New Delhi, India

Film Stree2, directed by Amar Kaushik, has surprised one and all with its box office numbers. Being a sequel to Stree that appeared in 2018, it advances the story by focusing on the havoc unleashed by the headless ghost on the people of Chanderi. The horror-cum-comic stuff seems to be holding sway over the young lot who are thrilled by horror, as also the adults who enjoy the comic dialogues and situations.

Magical events going beyond the realm of cognition have always held charm for us and it is so easy to project these on screen. It was the lure of the magic that inaugurated the magical realist style in literature, thanks to Gabriel Garcia Marquez of Columbia and our own Indian-

British novelist Salman Rushdie. Humankind cannot bear too much reality, as TS Eliot rightly said. However, one must not miss the underlying message that the script writer Niren Bhatt intends to convey.

The story begins with the statue of a hooded female with the words 'O stree, raksha karna' (Hey woman, protect us) written on the wall behind. Clearly, the word 'devi' or goddess has been replaced with Stree which makes any woman glorified as a deity — quite a feminist twist! To fortify this imputation, this scene is followed by the recital of katha of the Stree by Pandit Rudra (Pankaj Tripathi). It's complete with the enactment by children of the part of the story where the male boy cuts the braid of the girl. But then we are also treated to the horror of a ferocious head appearing and taking away a girl with bobbed hair who has come out of her closet at night and is smoking a cigarette while reading a book — all signs of a 'modern', liberated girl.

Love, the staple of all popular films, thrives between a tailor Vicky (Rajkumar Rao) and a ghost (Shraddha Kapoor) without the hero knowing that his beloved is a ghost. She is unnamed and so let's call her 'she'. Young 'modern' girls go missing and the villagers believe it's for better prospects in the city that they have left, whereas the reality is different. When Vicky's friend Bittu (Aparshakti Khurana) loses his beloved Chitti (Aanya Singh) to the ghost, it becomes imperative for the friends to locate her. Another friend Jana (Abhishek Banerjee) is brought in and together they plan to retrieve the missing Chitti. In the process, we get to know that the headless ghost is of a certain village sarpanch who had murdered a courtesan — now the 'Stree' in the astral world — and is targeting modern women.

Rudra's girlfriend (Tammannah Bhatia), a dancer in the nearby town, is roped in to act as a bait to lure in the ghost. Unable to tackle the ghost there with the dagger given by his friend, the 'clean-hearted' Vicky has to leave it to 'she', who saves the group by fighting Sarkata using the powers of Stree's braid attached to her hair! There are other inventions also like Jana's friend Bhaskar appearing as a wolf to help the trio fight the ghost in the final scene. The women taken away by the ghost are found as bald statues at a place in the forest.

The movie brings out the message that it is the patriarchal society that does not like the modern progressive outlook of women. Its representative in the form of Sarkata takes away those young girls, shaves their head and shears them of their agency of speech, vision and mobility, rendering them zombies. Vicky's unnamed ghost friend 'She' is the daughter of Stree, the woman killed by the village chieftain and so she means to take revenge on him. The braid is the symbol of power of woman that is used to fight the demon. Whereas the male folk are not able to defeat the demon by themselves, it is the woman, even though in the form of spirit, who defeats the patriarchy. So, finally, it is the combined power of the virtuous male and female that wins the day.

There are weak spots, for sure; for example, the women's agency that is brought back with the 'killing' of the Sarkata is seen only in the form of a red saree-wearing group going to worship Stree. There should indeed be many other avenues where women's agency needs to manifest like having the freedom to choose — education, jobs, sports, partners, etc. The braid is an effective tool to fight, so is the writer supporting traditional hairstyle or the modern haircut that was anathema to the ghost? A funny scene (apologies to feminists) is one where the menfolk take up the puja thali to worship Stree as there are no more women around to do so. Why can't they take steps to make women feel at ease in society? The case of Jana being given the power of Sanjay of Mahabharata is done for the sake of capitalising on the mythical tale, though the story would not have suffered for want of it.

There is a good bit of masala for ordinary viewers in the film in the form of double-entendres which are welcomed with guffaws of laughter. Tammanna Bhatia's dance number is another such addition. So are the cameo appearances of Akshay Kumar and Varun Dhawan. On the acting front, Rajkumar Rao and Pankaj Tripathi have given their best, though Shraddha Kapoor's scope to exhibit talent was limited due to the demands of her character. The few songs that the film has are already climbing up the popularity chart. However, the Dolby sound system becomes too much to bear when explosive sound accompanies the sudden appearance of the head/ghost or a clash ensues between the Stree and the Sarkata. But that's the norm these days — nothing to complain there! A teaser that bothers me is whether the audience will feel inspired to read the old folklores or Puranic tales with a critical eye and locate the hidden meanings therein.

Jagdish Batra is an academic and writer, presently working as Professor and Executive Dean at O.P. Jindal Global University, India. Views expressed in the above piece are personal and solely those of the author. They do not necessarily reflect News18's views.

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