



The Ambiguity of Tribhanga: Who Bears What We Decide For Ourselves?

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Posted by Richa Shukla and Anish Mishra

Tribhanga – three bends in a body that sync to show a pose that artists have taken to enchant us for eons. And an apt title in bringing to us three generations, each unconventional to the other, and their coming together with a further unconventionality to intrigue us. How many times has this happened that your choices have come back biting you in the present? Netflix's original *Tribhanga* directed by Renuka Shahane is a bit about this as well. Jean Paul Sartre said, "*We are the outcome of our choices.*"

This tri-lingual movie lays bare the thin line separating the consequences of an act either defining it as revolutionary, or, mundane, disastrous about who bears the consequences of the choices which we exercise in our life. Is it just us or our family, our loved ones who face the wrath of our 'unconventional choices'? Philosophically, we also understand this movie which tries to disrupt the idea of a normal family (if ever this exists!)



A Dysfunctional Family is still a Family

There are moments in this film where Kajol, Tanvi Azmi and Mithila Palkar can be seen living, fulfilling and of course accepting the idea that a dysfunctional family is still a family. There are multiple layers along which one can see how in the dialectic of self/ other relationship our choices, dependency makes us vulnerable. One of the opening scenes of the movie, when Kajol reaches the hospital, the reporters ask her questions like, “*How are you feeling your mother is in Coma?*” To which she responds, *how would you feel?* And not to our surprise, they told her, “*But you don't have a cordial relationship with your mom.*” Kajol's response, “*So? She is my mother.*”

Feminist philosopher Sara Ahmed writes in *The Promise of Happiness*, “*There is nothing more vulnerable than caring for someone; it means not only giving your energy to that which is not you but also caring for that which is beyond or outside your control. Caring is anxious.*”

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Personal Identity

Philosophically, this film also rings a bell for us on the grounds of personal identity too. Despite our shared memories, shared love, how much can we know each other? How much do we know ourselves? *Tribhanga* dwells on our own reflections on our childhood, our reciprocity and of course our memories. The phrase ‘women can have it all’ is often achieved, but also questioned and challenged. While *Tribhanga* gives us a fine portrayal of the ‘having it all’, it also makes us ask how this ‘all’ is defined. Are domestic roles, having a partner, having a child categories that one chooses for oneself? Or rather are these roles that women have to fit into to say that yes, I now have it all. We also see this film as a way which tells us to celebrate unconventional bonds and unconventional women.

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Yet these choices do not come without backlash. Backlash from social institution's entrenched in patriarchy, be it marriage itself as is seen in India, or the idea of what a surname, or therein the lack of one, implies on one's moral character. *Tribhanga* dwells on these backlashes and how women have to take it in their stride while making us question if it is right for these repercussions to exist in the first place. Whether it's the backlash of these choices which all three lead characters have exercised in the film and the way many a times it has come back biting to them.

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Simone de Beauvoir, in her text *The Ethics of Ambiguity*, has written extensively on how ambiguous human existence is. It can never be defined in one way, can never be given one meaning. *Tribhanga* grooves over this ambiguity. It sees the mad dancing of imbalance which all the three lead women characters have to go through because of

male's presence, mis-presence or absence. It teaches, makes us learn and live this ambiguity which we all have been forgetting while trying to accept people around us only as mothers, wives, daughters and sisters. Well, they are all this but before these, they are humans and individuals too.

But beyond that is the fact that the film does depict Brahmin women, and a theme that perhaps could have been explored is the contrast between what the religion may encode, indoctrinate, as opposed to what women may want to choose. The conversation between Mithila and Kajol brings up themes of putting the *ghunghat* up, or doing a gender determination test, yet the contradiction between one's choices, and actions forced upon by an orthodox family, while keeping in mind the other partners accountability could have been further explored.



Yes, Our Choices Define Us, Anchor Us

The grandmother (Tanvi Azmi) is revolutionary, fierce, ready to change partners, yet one may argue dies alone. Did she not have it all? The mother is fierce, liberal and at the time theistic in contrast to her mother, but puts her child before, perhaps, the want of permanent companionship. The daughter finds companionship, love, stability, but perhaps at the cost of diminishing the range of her agency of choice, by limiting her personal liberty.

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However, can one really say that all these characters did not 'have it all'? What Kajol tells her daughter in the hospital really sums it up, "*Me and your grandma made some fucked up choices, but they were our choices, no one imposed them on us.*" And in the daughter, we see the perfect juxtaposition- someone ready to decrease the ambit of her personal liberty to ensure a different life for the generation after her. It embraces the idea behind why feminism is plural in nature and how it only lies in differences.

“ *The circle of events really put the consequences of revolutionary choices into perspective. For indeed some are made in order to overcome the very consequences that make them revolutionary.* ”

Yet in these choices, a theme that could have certainly been done with more exploring would be the accountability expected out of men depicted in the various roles. The normalised idea of a male partner walking out of marriages, with little accountability, is portrayed here too. Even in the case of Mithila's marriage, we see her saying her husband cannot speak up against his family. We see yet another agent of patriarchy, as Gerda Lerner would point out. Not all the time, but at times we forget that our choices are like our 'created homes' which comfort us during rainy days and cold weather. We can see the bearings of these choices when because of childhood sexual abuse, childhood trauma and her mother's unconventional life Kajol chooses not to get married. That was her idea of a comforting home which might not shower her with kindness but at least won't come back biting.

Thus, we see the distinct strands of feminism harmoniously (at least in the case of the mother- daughter duo) clash (akin to the identity-in-difference that we often study). One (Mithila) reclaims the role of a homemaker at some level, embracing the idea of a lack of agency in order for a stability she had seen amiss. The other (Kajol), one who rejects the role of a partner but embraces that of a mother. While in the grandmother we saw a search for a partner, but only on her own terms. This film makes us think that we all are humans and because we are humans, we are prone to err. The acceptance of every relationship/every person should be first as a human and then in that role.

But it is not just that the choices are presented to us, but the consequences of each choice is also equally intriguing. One cannot but think about how, with every 'revolutionary' choice that any individual might make, there are far-reaching consequences on those around them. The consequences of a grandmother wanting to only write, was her losing perhaps an ideal partner, and her daughter a father. When the grandmother wanted a partner on her own terms, her daughter had to be at the end of domestic and sexual harassment.

This leads Kajol to understand that a child does not necessarily need a father figure to grow up, and hence tries to ensure the elimination of that role for her child. Here we see the often-occurring consequences of a certain prioritising of trauma. While she is able to ensure that her daughter never gets harassed the way she did, she is unable to outmanoeuvre society, who was harsh on the grandmother for being a divorcee, on her for being a single parent, and now on her daughter for being an illegitimate child. This circle of events put the consequences of revolutionary choices into perspective. For indeed some are made in order to overcome the very consequences that make them revolutionary.

At last, it cannot be forgotten that these three women were upper caste Hindu women who had lots of privileges. A part of us is about our choices, our situations, our privileges and also our trauma. But a lot in us is also about the silences, contingencies, if's and but's, all these swinging by desire. At least *Tribhanga*, showed us what it means to live by these and live in the absence of these too.

Also read: [Film Review: 'Tribhanga' Shows A Problematic Feminist Womanhood](#)

Dr. Richa Shukla is an Assistant Professor of Philosophy at OP Jindal global university, Sonapat, Haryana. She specializes in Feminist philosophy, feminist phenomenology and existentialism. Recently she has started taking keen interest in Public philosophy too. Her works can be found at The Quint, Feminism in India, the Telegraph, The Medium, Springer and EPW.

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