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Holy Smoke!

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Holy Smoke!

Abstract

This is a review of *Holy Smoke!* (1999).

Jane Campion's *Holy Smoke!* is a complex and multi-layered text that at times appears simplistic, (particularly with regard to the characterisation of Ruth's family members) and it is at times seriously flawed. But it is worthy of viewing because it is a story about quest—the quest to find out who we have become, or if (as Ruth asks of Miriam), "[we] know why [we] are here?"

Like many leading female characters, Kate Winslet's Ruth is in search of the transcendent, but she is also searching for an escape route that will take her away from her middle class Australian family. She finds it in India, that cultural space that enables her to reinvent herself and become the soft, kind and spiritual being she yearns to be. And, yet again, like many female characters, she supposedly finds enlightenment in the guise of a male guru/Messiah figure, who, of course, requires her to "marry" him. This spiritual bliss is shattered by the good-intentioned actions of her family. Afraid for Ruth's safety, they trick her into returning to her physical home, Australia, where they isolate her in the outback. Enter Harvey Keitel's character, PJ, a self-assured and overconfident American "exit counselor".

Ironically, this is a story as much about Keitel's character (and his journey from being spiritually lost to being spiritually found) as it is about Ruth. In Ruth, PJ finds a worthy opponent. Through her treatment of him he learns that his life lacks deep love and acceptance. Yet again the irony of the film surfaces as PJ learns about spirituality and the praxis of those ancient and sacred writings (such as the

Upanishads) which he spouts back at Ruth in order to discredit her guru. However, it is Ruth, not PJ who understands those texts, and it is PJ who is exposed as the fraud. Ruth is truly devastated when she fails the guru through her unkind actions towards PJ. She shows not only true remorse but a deep comprehension of the consequences of her actions and demonstrates that it is the essence of the teachings that matters, not the messenger. PJ, on the other hand, has exhibited the superficial and deceptive techniques and behavior that he has accused Ruth's Indian guru of, including improper sexual relationships (with Ruth's sister-in-law). Ruth has become PJ's mirror, and the reflection is not a pleasant one.

I confess I take issue with Campion's continuing preoccupation with relationships between flawed, physically overpowering men and the women who are forced into manipulative and deceitful behaviors in order to survive the horrendous ordeal—this is yet another such relationship. The men in this film, especially the Australian ones, appear to be spiritually barren, devoid of "living water" like the dual terrains of the film. Andrew Bunney in *dB Magazine* argues that they are portrayed as powerless. I believe this needs clarification. The men are not powerless: they are inert, and there is a difference: They are also either disinterested in spiritual quest or are emotionally crippled, thus perpetuating the notion of Australia as a secular and ungodly nation and its men as beer swilling and insensitive.

Ruth's brother, Robbie, is the only male in whom the light of quest flickers as he asks his mate, "What do you believe in?" "Anarchy," replies his friend. Robbie is bereft of spiritual role models and unable to search beyond his narrow frame of reference. Thankfully, the women, including Miriam, Ruth's mother, aren't. Sophie Lee's characterization of Yvonne, Robbie's wife, is stereotyped and caricatured echoing her work in *The Castle*. However, in Ruth's sister-in-law we have an inarticulate but fellow traveler who is aware of the void in her life: Her mistake is to believe it can be filled by sexual encounters with film stars whose photos she tapes to the drawers of her bedside table.

Holy Smoke is a film that clearly shows women's spiritual quest—a quest beyond the boundaries of male dictates—a film that ends in a journey to the self and to God through helping others rather than a journey towards false Messiahs. Love it or hate it, as many have, it is worth reflecting upon.