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Dear Jassi

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Dear Jassi

Abstract

This is a film review of *Dear Jassi* (2023), directed by Tarsem Singh Dhandwar.

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Author Notes

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***Dear Jassi* (2023), dir. Tarsem Singh Dhandwar**

For anyone who has ever romanticized the tragedy of Romeo and Juliet, preferring to dwell in the dewy-eyed passion of the lovers than their outcomes — *Dear Jassi* offers a cold shower. Although there are soft and touching scenes among this film’s principal characters, its true-life storytelling pushes deeper, and its horrific conclusion is light years away from any balcony or stage effects. Introduced and framed by a Hindi narrator sitting in a lush meadow, we are told right from the film’s first frames that this will be a harrowing journey, and a tragedy. It is as if the color that vibrantly lifts from the screen in these first images dreamily obfuscates what is coming in a way that is similar to how Jassi and Mithu, the film’s lover protagonists, become indifferent to all of the signs of their impending fate.

Set in the pre-internet 1990s, Jassi is a teenager when she arrives with her mother from Canada, where they have immigrated, to visit with family in the Jagaron region of India. There she falls for a rickshaw driver and prize fighter when she is taken by her cousin to one of the fights that take place in the public square. Mithu seems to be a reluctant champion: though he is held aloft by his friends and supporters, he speaks little and shies away into the crowds as soon as he

can. He's in it for the money, not the prestige. Although he and his family live next door to Jassi's family, their caste prohibits any social interconnections.

The game that Mithu plays is called Kabaddi, in which opponents cross a mid-line to tag another, repeatedly saying the word "kabaddi" so that they cannot draw breath until they return to their side. Mithu's capacity to hold his breath for extended play, is his gift. But the game also serves a larger purpose: it is sitting in the stands that Jassi first is drawn to him, impressed by his stamina. The scene acts as a metaphor: we understand intuitively that their relationship will be tested from the moment it begins, and that almost everything will be ranged against them. The 'held breath' in their context will be their own love for each other, as they scramble to be together.

It takes the cunning of the cousin, whose own romance is more of a shadow of Anita and Bernardo in *West Side Story* than any sub-story of Romeo and Juliet. Mithu is lured out of his shell and the two would-be lovers play cat and mouse using vehicles: Mithu uses his Rickshaw as a context for helping her family, and she uses a moped to literally circle him repeatedly. Jassi has the upper hand. As a young woman of privilege in both India and Canada, she seems frustratingly unable to set her passion aside, even when her parents' warnings and the brutal outcome of the cousin's affair should frighten her. Back in Canada, where the spectacular coastline of Nova Scotia is made to seem drab dull in browns and greys, she tries to manipulate their future in long-distance calls from the rear of the salon where she works. Her parents routinely take her earnings and tell her what she can and cannot do; yet still Jassi longs for Mithu and schemes to be with him.

Back in Jagaron, Jassi's confidence is boosted by being held in such love. Convinced by her that he should come to Canada to prevent her arranged marriage, he gives up all of his savings to a travel agent who promises him a visa. When it becomes clear that he has been scammed, there

seems little possibility of realizing the dream and the couple become estranged. When Jassi returns to India, it easily re-emerges, now fueled by a deeper desperation.

Mithu begins visiting Jassi in her family home by coming to a back window, clearly standing in here for Juliet's balcony. Eventually their devotion is discovered and we know we are on the roller-coaster to hell. While Mithu's mother seems unable to fully understand what he is doing or anything that is happening around her, Jassi's mother becomes ever more terrifying, setting us up for a final scene that seems incredible, even as we are told it is true.

As in the play, the couple secretly marry in India and enjoy a few days of unbridled happiness. The film is not interested in their passion; we have come to see that this is a deeper love than any lustful desire of youth. Tarsem lights these scenes, often at night, in suffused sky light which seems to originate from the metropolis or the coming dawn: we're never sure. Their happiness is measured in everyday activities, eating on a bridge, shopping hand in hand. When the marriage is discovered and her parents manipulate her into denouncing it on paper, Jassi contrives to find a court that will let her speak. Her courage seems to only become emboldened despite the fact that it is clear that she cannot win.

To say the ending is traumatic is an understatement. In reviews of the film, critics have pulled it out as an unnecessary and pornographic violence. And yet there is nothing gratuitous: the final scene, while horrific, is brilliantly shot. Tarsem keeps the camera at a distance on a shed, inside of which we hear Jassi being repeatedly abused. The banality of evil comes in its everydayness: in this Romeo and Juliet, the lovers have no choice over their own outcomes. And yet there are very few scenes of graphic violence. Most of the worst sequences take place off-camera.

Tarsem's newest film is both a departure from previous work and a fulfilment. Like Richard Linklater, no two of his films are alike. *Dear Jassi* is implicitly Indian in its use of wide framing, depth of field and lingering pacing. It's hard to believe that this is the same director who made *Mirror Mirror*.

The film ends by returning to the Hindi narrator we met at the beginning. His summary and repetition of what he first told us are a necessary way for us to recover from what we have just seen. It also provides us with the feeling of life going on. We understand that this kind of thing continues into our own time. Lovers die, but love can and does have the last word, through its story.