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Lost Ladies

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Lost Ladies

Abstract

This is a film review of *Lost Ladies* (2023), directed by Kiran Rao.

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***Lost Ladies / Laapataa Ladies* (2023), dir. Kiran Rao**
Trailer: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=o9VMEIMGtR4>

The sophomore feature of indie filmmaker Kiran Rao (whose first film *Dhobi Ghat* also premiered at TIFF, in 2010), *Lost Ladies* is a light-hearted tale of confused identities that skirts some very dark material but always lands you on the bright side. It is a candy-dream of a film, one of the sweetest delectations I have savored in a very long time.

Who are the titular ladies, and why are they lost—or, in a more literal translation of the Hindi *laapataa*, “without address” and thus missing or untraceable? The opening of the film feels almost like the set-up for a comedy sketch. Phool (Nitanshi Goel) and Deepak (Sparsh Shrivastava) are married in Phool’s village and then travel together to begin their new life in Deepak’s village. It is a convoluted journey, involving two buses and a train, and Phool makes it while still wearing her bridal finery: a red sari and veil (*ghoonghat*) that covers her face and directs her gaze bashfully downward. The veil, in particular, creates a problem. Because their wedding happened on an astrologically auspicious date, Phool and Deepak’s train compartment has three identical brides in

it—and none of them can see very well. In the rush of travel, Deepak dashes off the train with the wrong bride, but he does not realize his error until hours later when he finally arrives home. Surrounded by his entire extended family, he unveils the woman he thinks is his bride—to discover, to his family’s collective shock, that he has been traveling with a stranger, Jaya (Pratibha Ranta).

Lost Ladies is, as *Variety* magazine put it, a “feminist romp.”¹ (It is thus loosely akin to the 2023 pop-feminist juggernaut, Greta Gerwig’s *Barbie*.) Rao’s objective, she explained in the *Variety* interview, was to unravel the patriarchy “without a war” by showing women who learn to thrive inside “conventional family set ups,” figuring out how to “make their way without necessarily tearing the fabric of society apart.” Tonally, then, *Lost Ladies* is disarmingly congenial. It pokes gentle fun at social conventions so that they might be gently and lovingly changed. “I find much of society, not just Indian society, quite like living satire in so many ways. Then you don’t really need to do very much other than show it for what it is, and [to] keep it in that tone, in some way hopeful and optimistic in what otherwise can be quite despairing times, was very much the goal,” Rao told *Variety*.

This consistently sunny tone is an impressive achievement given that *Lost Ladies* touches on some very dark topics: rape, spousal abuse, alcoholism, dowry murder, bride burnings, forced marriage, and more. Remarkably, Rao manages to imbue these topics with the moral gravity they deserve without being dragged down by them. In this film, comedy is a means of taking people seriously.

As a comedy of mistaken identity, *Lost Ladies* hinges on the custom of veiling. Distraught at having lost his bride, Deepak tries to find her by showing the one photo he has—the wedding photo (figured above and in the film trailer) wherein Phool’s face is very much hidden—to anyone

he thinks might be able to help. Oh, sweet foolish Deepak. This is an idiot's errand, and a series of lightly comic exchanges ensues. One shopkeeper starts lecturing Deepak about how it's pointless to try to recognize somebody without a picture of her face. "The face is everything," he says. It gives *pechhaan* or recognition. At just this moment, the shopkeeper's wife pops out of the back to hand him something. She is wearing a black abaya with a veil. The loveable corniness of this joke does deft work. Veiling appears here as a lived-in problem, a matter of the standard-issue human hypocrisy and general ridiculousness that is shared by Hindus and Muslims alike (and presumably everybody else too). In *Lost Ladies*, we are worlds away from the policy abstractions of global agencies' efforts to "save" Muslim women.²

The wedding photo also captures the film's aesthetic. Painstakingly curated, and just a little twee, *Lost Ladies* has a Wes Anderson-adjacent golden-hued nostalgia for wittily rendered pasts. Rao manages to make even train-station grime feel adorable, and she loads the film with such loveable stock figures as a semi-corrupt but good-hearted police chief hammily chewing his *paan* (betel leaf). The opening credits nod to classic Bollywood by giving the film title in Hindi, Urdu, and English, but the story is set elsewhere in the exotic reaches of the archaic past: the year 2001. For plot reasons, our ladies have to get lost before the dawn of the smartphone (nowadays, one is never *laapataa*). The film makes the most of its temporal setting with a delightful commitment to the old media: brick-like Nokia phones; plastic point-and-shoot cameras; the grubby keys of internet café desktop computers.

A reader of the *Journal of Religion and Film* might plausibly ask where the religion is here. *Lost Ladies* is fairly clear on this front. Its quarrel is with custom, not religion, and it deflects from religious questions with a characteristically light touch. "Do we have time to be religious?," sighs an older female character, irritated that Jaya keeps spending hours at the village temple. Even those

visits turn out to be hilariously mundane: the temple is the one place in the village where you can get reliable cell phone service.

Still, the relative absence of religion is, in historical perspective, interesting. Rao and her ex-husband Aamir Khan (the A-list actor whose production company is behind this film) have for many years been vocal advocates of progressive causes. If we take them as representing a certain sector of the Indian left, then *Lost Ladies* could be said to articulate something like a secular-left aesthetic—calibrating this aesthetic to a political moment when the left is very much under siege.³ An earlier production, like the 2014 Khan vehicle *PK*, could poke heavy fun at religion (although it still got into trouble). In the political climate of 2023, that kind of satire would be decidedly inadvisable.

As *Variety* reports, *Lost Ladies* is based on Biplab Goswami’s award-winning screenplay “Two Brides” (Aamir Khan was on the award jury). The script was then doctored by other screenwriters, including Sneha Desai—whose recent projects include *Maharaj*, a film dramatization of the Maharaj Libel Case, the famous 1860s trial that centered on the alleged sexual corruption of Hindu priests. *Maharaj* seems (as of the time of writing) to have stalled out in post-production, likely because of its controversial subject matter. If it is ever released, it will assuredly stoke controversy—and perhaps even provoke legal charges under the Indian Penal Code.⁴ In the 19th century, social reformers understood religious issues and women’s issues as necessarily intertwined (as discussed by historians like Tanika Sarkar, Usha Thakkar, and Mrinalini Sinha). In the 21st century, by contrast, the savvy social progressive opts to leave religion alone. A feminist romp does best without it—thus articulating a secularism that “subtracts” religion from its purview, rather than critiquing religion.⁵

As Rao says, her aim in *Lost Ladies* was to show how women can thrive within conventional social structures. Two characters lead the way here (spoiler alert!): Jaya and Manju Mai (Chhaya Kadam), who runs a tea stall at the train station where Phool gets stranded. Both contrast with Phool who, as Manju Mai says in no uncertain terms, is a sweet-hearted dupe to the patriarchy. (She and Deepak are a good match: it does not seem a coincidence that Phool can be pronounced “fool.”) Manju Mai is the station matriarch, presiding over a loveably ragtag band of vaguely Dickensian beggars. She schools Phool in independence and has little patience for a world in which women do not know their own addresses. Manju not only knows her address; she has her own apartment, which Phool visits. A shot of Manju relaxing in a chair there is carefully composed to show posters of B.R. Ambedkar and the Buddha hanging on the wall behind her; she is, we are to infer, Dalit. If Manju negotiates a space for herself outside family structures, Jaya learns to thrive within them. Her keen intelligence drives the final stretch of the film. Jaya saves the day—ultimately discovering a new family in the process, and maybe even new love.

Does this film’s title have a larger significance? Are many or most ladies in some sense lost, stuck inside social convention? Perhaps. If *Lost Ladies* is implying a claim of that type, however, then its proposed solution to this predicament is quite clear. It takes other ladies in the neighborhood to do the finding. Government agencies need not apply. Go talk to Jaya.

As in Shakespeare’s comedies (including his *Comedy of Errors*), *Lost Ladies*’ temporary chaos has longer-lasting effects. The Phool who makes it home to Deepak is, thanks to Jaya and Manju Mai, a slightly different Phool than the one who got lost at the beginning of the film. Deepak is also slightly different. Their love burns brighter because they can now better see the social conventions that keep everybody lost— not just the ladies.

¹ Naman Ramachandram, “Kiran Rao Talks Toronto Feminist Romp ‘Lost Ladies: ‘We’re Taking Apart Patriarchy without a War,’” *Variety*, 7 September 2023. <https://variety.com/2023/film/asia/kiran-rao-toronto-lost-ladies-aamir-khan-1235714514/>

² See, for instance, Lila Abu-Lughod, *Do Muslim Women Need Saving?* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2013).

³ For an earlier secular-left aesthetic, see Karin Zitzewitz, *The Art of Secularism: The Cultural Politics of Modernist Art in Contemporary India* (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2014).

⁴ For legal context, see J. Barton Scott, *Slandering the Sacred: Blasphemy Law and Religious Affect in Colonial India* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2023).

⁵ For a different but historically related formation of “subtraction” secularism, see Charles Taylor, *A Secular Age* (Cambridge, MA: Belknap, 2007).