



VISUAL: REHNUMA PROSHOON

Unlocking the secrets of ‘Khufiya’



BLOWIN’ IN THE WIND

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We humans are a bundle of paradoxes. We desire safety to avoid danger, yet we crave a full, adventurous life. We yearn for freedom, yet we seek the protection of higher authorities. We hunger for the truth, but often fear the full revelation. We wish to express ourselves freely, yet sometimes silence speaks volumes.

By now, it’s no secret that the film *Khufiya* revolves around the mysterious world of secret services. Our curiosity is drawn to secrets, just as Adam and Eve were to the forbidden fruit. The rebel inside us resists authority, unaware that defiance may be part of the authority’s grand design. As we delve into our curiosity, we realise that we have unwittingly become a part of a larger scheme, not intended for our amusement.

Based on Amar Bhushan’s espionage novel *Escape to Nowhere* (2012), and deftly directed by Vishal Bhardwaj, the latest Netflix sensation has compelled me to revisit the allure and peril of secrets. The film unveils a factual thread connecting Delhi’s South Block to the hidden alleyways of Dhaka as well as to a small town in the US. Amar Bhushan’s former role as head of the counter-espionage unit of India’s Research and Analysis Wing (RAW) lends unparalleled authenticity to his blend of fact and fiction. The film, with its surveillance operations, intrusions into private lives and complex stratagems, jolts us out of our comfort zone. Even the familiar Dhaka appears as an unfamiliar terrain, a credit to the cinematographer’s use of soothing colours in the depiction of our capital city.

The story revolves around the mission of undercover diplomat Krishna Mehra, known by her initials, KM. Her mission is to apprehend a rogue agent responsible for the death of her contact in Dhaka. As

a spy thriller, the film exposes the secret tools and mechanisms used to identify moles. The intricate web of cross-border and cross-agency intrigues pulls us into the clandestine world of espionage, where real-life events acquire new relevance.

At a time when India grapples with allegations of involvement in the assassination of a separatist activist in North America, the film’s release is sure to capture attention. The timing is especially intriguing as the story unfolds against the backdrop of the early 2000s and the Kargil War. True to its title, *Khufiya* unveils many secrets. Character portrayals, such as the enigmatic political leader Brigadier Mirza and the socialite Heena, who is willing to trade secrets for her ailing father’s treatment, reveal two facets of Bangladesh unknown to the common public.

The film both enlightens and confuses us. We do not know whether we are to read between the lines to make sense of Tabu’s secret love (no pun intended) for her Bangladeshi asset, Heena, played by Azmeri Haque Badhon. It is perhaps better to limit the range of fiction to stop it from adding fuel to “the geopolitical chills.” The film has local relevance before the national election as it harps on the familiar theme of fundamentalism. It also serves well in reminding us of the ideological divide that we have not been able to overcome in more than 52 years of our existence; a fact that makes us view nationalist politics in progressive and regressive terms.

The film can then be compared to a dog whistle; its message is understood by a particular group but eludes others. The sense of impending doom may influence political actors and their foreign allies, yet the film’s ultimate celebration of motherly and “sisterly”

love will bestow it with a more humane appeal.

The touching hidden love story of a stoic diplomat and a mother’s unwavering fight for her son balance the intellectual elements of secret agents in the film. If your ears are attuned to love’s melodies, you’ll view the film as a tale of love and friendship. But if you have tuned into the world news channel, you’ll discern how integrity is traded and loyalty becomes a pawn in a political chess game. You’ll learn how everything is a commodity and can be purchased.

Frankly, the film left me disturbed. Vishal Bhardwaj, renowned for his skill in translating classics into cinematic art, has previously shown how Shakespearean themes can be adapted to contemporary Indian settings. He has earlier shown us how the theme of usurpation found in Shakespeare’s *Macbeth* can be located in a Mumbai slum in *Maqbool* (2003). He has traced Shakespearean jealousy in Meerut, Uttar Pradesh in his adaptation of *Othello* into *Omkara* (2006). He completes his Shakespearean trilogy by characterising Hamlet as *Haider* (2014) in Kashmir, who is imbued with the *rooh* (spirit) of freedom and troubled by the killing of the rightful owner of the land. *Khufiya* is no exception; it demands that we delve beyond the spatial surface. We should also question the timing of its release and understand the motive.

The world is evolving into a perilous place where information is the ultimate currency. Access to such information can confer advantages on one group over another. How this information is employed, and for what purpose, is even more critical. A fictional film is an unlikely source of factual insight into our political and cultural reality. But when it does happen, we can no longer remain complacent. It invades our consciousness and gradually influences our decision-making abilities. The extent to which our minds are attuned to such frequencies will play a pivotal role. Lucky are those who would watch the film for its glamour and the breakthrough inclusion of a Bangladeshi actress in Bollywood. For others, the unlocked secrets of *Khufiya* may be quite disturbing.

University: Our factory of miseducation



EDUCATING EDUCATION

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In his book *Excellent Sheep*, referring to today’s university students in the title, William Deresiewicz writes about university education abroad, “We have constructed an educational system that produces ‘intelligent’ individuals who have no idea what they want to do with their lives: no sense of purpose and, what is worse, no understanding of how to go about finding one.” Can we claim to have done anything different? What is the purpose of our universities? To get jobs, right? Indeed, each of us who pass through university in Bangladesh is merely an employee at work, a consumer in the market, and a submissive citizen of the state. But university is meant to be different from school, than college, and should be more than about being equipped with skills. It should be

“good” or “bad,” but we forget that in a system where memorisation and rote-learning remain prevalent, in most cases, academic results largely depend on how students’ merit is being assessed in the first place.

This is where the patterns of exam questions play an important role – we still have exams at the university level that do not require students to think and critically reflect on what they learn. Often, it is highly questionable whether the grades and CGPAs we use to measure student achievement reflect actual intelligence, but then again, what do we mean by intelligence in the first place? If it means being able to think critically, be creative and original, then I myself have seen many students with “bad” CGPAs show an indication of these qualities. How we assess our students

promote the learning of humanities and liberal arts even when someone is studying STEM. Subjects like philosophy, history and literature are essential to a university student – to anyone, really – understanding their identity, their culture, who they are, and where they came from. These subjects are what teach students how to think and not just what to think, and we need to make these disciplines essential to any university education.

Five, make teaching, and not research, the main goal for university faculties. Better yet, separate teaching positions from teaching and research positions. It is because we measure the success of a teacher by the research they are doing, instead of whether they’re fulfilling their teaching duties properly, that our students are very often not learning anything inside our classrooms, simply because they are not being taught. Teaching properly and teaching well takes time; we have to give time and effort to planning our lessons for our audience, we have to pay attention to the wonderful variety in the students listening to us. It takes time to truly care. It takes time to focus on not only teaching, but teaching that translates into



University education should not be a rat race or just a competition.

VISUAL: STAR

about creating the next generation of thinkers, right? Even in terms of skills, haven’t we been failing largely?

Indeed, our universities are factories – often factories of miseducation. So, what do we do about it? Today, I present a list of what I wish we could do.

One, effectively eradicate the toxic forms of student and teacher politics in our universities, and bring back good politics. Politics, in its truest sense, is meant to be a means of mobilising voices and democratising processes. Choosing a student representative, protesting for someone’s rights, electing teachers to represent the university in policy spaces – these are political practices, too. This is far from the meaning of the word in our universities today, and frankly, it has long gone too far.

Two, rethink the definition of merit and break, once and for all, the persisting “bad student” fallacy that our university meritocracies thrive on today. Breaking this fallacy means realising that a good CGPA may mean a good student, but a bad CGPA does not necessarily mean a bad student. Why? Because we haven’t yet ascertained an assessment system where we can completely reliably determine this. If someone loses their interest and classes actually kill their curiosity, they tend to not give their best. We don’t think twice before filtering our students into

says a lot about what we expect of them: do we want them to learn to think or do we want them to be able to write down, like *totapakhis* as Rabindranath said, what others have thought? Do we want to groom our next Rabindranaths or just tertiary-educated individuals who can recite, flawlessly, a Rabindranath classic from memory? Even the admission test questions for getting into university need to be revised in terms of what we want from our incoming students.

If it were up to me, I would want to know why they want to go to university in the first place, their stories, and whether they have passion. These are aspects one has to think about when applying to universities abroad, but for us, our admission criteria remain at the stage of testing how much our students know by making them answer a bunch of MCQs, often requiring information that nothing but memorisation can yield. Yes, how we assess quality matters.

Three, initiate the much needed focus on students’ well-being and mental health. Stop presenting results publicly on results boards. University education should not be a rat race or just a competition. Students should be able to focus on improving their own learning without their failures being displayed for everyone to see.

Four, and very importantly,

actual learning.

Six, reform the university admission “quota” system. No, we don’t need quotas in place for children of university faculty – I’ve seen this do more harm than good. We need quotas for students entering university from socioeconomically struggling backgrounds. We need classrooms filled with a variety of students – the son of a rich businessman as well as the daughter of a farmer, a conformist as well as a rebel. We need quotas to balance access to universities and we need diversity for our universities to be places of debate and conversation, creativity and original thinking.

Finally, where needed, we need to improve the living conditions in our university halls and cafeterias, because no student should have to endure in an environment that is not meant for learning or living. To do this, we need to streamline power and free the administration from the grips of politics; it’s more than just a matter of money. If student leaders – often those who fail their courses year after year – illegally hold onto student seats in halls, then investing in better student halls won’t make much of a difference. It becomes, above everything, important to build strong institutions within our universities and, if we really want to make a difference, we need to begin by calling a spade a spade.

CROSSWORD BY THOMAS JOSEPH

ACROSS

1 Swindles

6 Thomas Hardy heroine

10 West Pointer

11 Without others

13 Fuming

14 Italian fashion center

15 Not masc.

16 King Kong, for one

18 Op or pop

19 Barry Manilow hit

22 King, in Latin

23 Equipment

24 Yawning, perhaps

27 Nuisances

28 Ready for business

29 Skillet

30 Men at Work hit

35 Illuminated

36 By now

37 Candle makeup

38 Ham it up

40 Chicago airport

42 Bold one

43 AI of “Today”

44 Sediment

45 Wasn’t thrify

DOWN

1 Verne specialty

2 Insertion sign

3 Second U.S. president

4 Ran into

5 Ticked off

6 Circus performer

7 Yale student

8 Comforts

9 Greet with a “grr”

12 Comes in

17 Films, slangily

20 Sports venue

21 Deal maker

24 Seethed

25 Best

26 Make good as new

27 Church leaders

29 Cobbler’s cousin

31 Mike of “Shrek”

32 Not dozing

33 Singer Carpenter

34 Use, as force

39 Casual top

41 Little jump

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10-3

10-3

YESTERDAY’S ANSWERS

CASABLANCA
BATTLESHIP
NADIR
SATTIN
ASINOTTO
BEATERS
NATLE
EMER
NEXT
BATTLESHIP
ACRES
LEAVEN
DENISE
BEAMER
SEE
IN
TAWA
VAVAS
VERSE
SINGOT
NEED

BEETLE BAILEY

BY MORT WALKER

GRRR! SNORK! SNXXX! WHEEEZE!

IS THAT SARGE? YES...

SNIK! WHEEZE! GRRRR

WITH OTTO ON BACKUP VOCALS

OTTO

BABY BLUES

BY KIRKMAN & SCOTT

DAD, YOU'RE MAKING OUR LUNCHES?

YES! YES! YESSSSSS!

IT'S "MAKE KEVIN BART DAY," AND I'M GONNA WIN!