HUMANITIES INSTITUTE
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SIMRAN 2017

Hansal Mehta

Hindi and English

OVERVIEW

Simran has been described as a 'heist, crime drama thriller.' It is also part comedy and part romance, though there are few song-and-dance routines. As such, it is the epitome of a 'masala', or mixed-genre movie. The story charts the fortunes (quite literally) of Praful, a young Indian woman living with her parents in America. Divorced and free-spirited, Praful is about to live the American dream when it all goes pear-shaped and she ends up being chased by the police instead. At the heart of everything is Praful's troubled relationship with her father. Director Mehta has achieved here a skilful and clever amalgam, with the tears coming close on the laughs.

CULTURAL SIGNIFICANCE

One clue is in the title. 'Simran' is a female character in a Bollywood film who defies her parents and marries her lover. Her mother watches the film on television and repeats the words from the climactic scene: 'Go, Simran, go. Raj loves you more than anyone ever could.' Praful overhears her mother utter this command just as she (Praful) was about to go out and rob a bank. During the bungled heist, she is asked her name and blurts out, 'Simran,' which then becomes the name by which she is know in the media, wo report the sensational story of the lady bank robber. Bollywood films intrude into life in America, providing another kind of dream (love marriage) in a country with its own fantasies of success.

MAIN CHARACTERS

Praful	Praful, the protagonist, works as a cleaner.
Mr Patel	Mr Patel, her father, is a self-made businessman.
Mrs Patel	Mrs Patel, her mother, loves Hindi movies.
Sameer	Sameer is Mr Right, but we are unsure if he marries Praful.
Mike	Mike is Praful's ex-boyfriend and manger at work, who harasses her sexually.

STORY

Work Praful Patel works as a cleaner in a hotel in Atlanta, USA, where she lives with her parents. She is young, divorced without children and positive about the future. She hopes to have her loan approved to buy an expensive apartment for which she has worked hard. It represents her chance to break free and live her own life.

Home At home, we see why she wants to leave. Her father is mean-spirited, doesn't trust her and wants her savings to be invested in his business. She, however, has higher ambitions than to become part of an Indian snack business. He complains that he has worked for her education and all she goes is fall in love and get divorced. She says she is moving out so as not to be a burden on him, but he recommends that she get married again. The conversation ends in rancour, and the father orders her out 'of my house.' When his wife tells him to calm down, he tells her to get out, too. But the wife can't, because she has arthritic knees and they cannot afford an operation.

Disaster When Praful's loan is a pre-approved, she goes to Las Vegas with a female cousin to enjoy a holiday. This escape turns to disaster when she becomes addicted to playing baccarat and loses most of the money she has saved to buy the apartment. Returning to Atlanta, she finds that her loan application has been rejected. 'Your credit rating is very low, Ms Patel,' the blonde-haired manager

tells her in icy tones. Desperate, she humbles herself and asks her father for a loan, but his response is to arrange a meeting with a possible husband, a young man named Sameer.

Debt Her response is to return to Las Vegas to win back her money, but, of course, she now loses everything she ever had in her savings. She gets drunk and is spotted by a private loan shark, who takes advantage of her condition. She borrows $32,000 from him and gives him her driving license as security. Then she loses that money as well, and returns home in debt. Too humiliated to explain what happened, she accepts her father's plan to meet (and possibly marry) Sameer. That is the condition he has set if he is going to help her financially.

Sameer Sameer and Praful meet a few times, and he begins to fall for her. He is educated, successful and nice-looking but too conventional for the high-spirited Praful. Her parents begin to plan the wedding. Praful, though, is too preoccupied with paying back the loan to focus on anything else.

Thief Her large loan has increased with interest to 40,000. A week later, the amount is 50,000 and she is threatened at gun point. Her ex-boyfriend and now manager at the hotel offers to help her but demands sex in return. She declines. With no other solution in sight, she begins to steal. It starts with simply taking dollar bills from a shop counter, when no one is looking. Then it escalates, somewhat farcically, to proper burglary. Employing the tips she has learned from a video on YouTube, she puts on a wig and sunglasses and pretends to be wearing a belt of explosives. She robs banks and gets about 30,000. During one heist, she says her name is Simran, which is taken from a Bollywood blockbuster, which her mother watches all the time.

Thawing ice Feeling more positive, Praful finds that she likes Sameer. The two families go for a picnic with beautiful autumn colours in a park. She also learns that Mr Right hasn't always been so strait-laced, which encourages her to tell him about her misdemeanours. Her gambling habit and robbing banks, though, is too much for Sameer, who simply laughs it off as a joke.

Attack That brief idyll ends when the loan sharks attack Praful at work and demand the money. Mike, the hotel manager and her ex-boyfriend, beats them off but takes the stolen money she has stored in her locker and refuses to give it back unless she goes to bed with him. When Praful defends herself by hitting him, she is fired. She then breaks off her engagement with Sameer and tells him and her father the whole truth. Hearing this, her father hits her and orders her to leave the house.

One last job She tells the loan sharks that the money was stolen, but they know that she is the 'Simran, the Lipstick Bandit' as the mysterious bank robber is called in the media. They force her to make one last robbery in order to get the money to pay them. They also supply her with a gun.

Revenge She chooses to rob the bank that had rejected her loan application. She is successful and flees the city. Meanwhile, Sameer, who is still in love with her, has transferred a large amount of money into her account to pay off the loan. Hiding outside the city, she calls him and tells him to find some nice girl to marry, someone unlike her. Her father calls and asks to be forgiven, which encourages her to return home.

Arrest Approaching the house, she sees police cars everywhere. Not wanting to humiliate her father by being arrested at home (it is a neighbourhood with many Indian families), she drives away and is chased by the police. She eventually turns herself in and is arrested. She is tried and sentenced to ten months in prison. Mike, her ex-boyfriend, has also been sentenced for theft (of her stolen money) and sexual assault. When her father visits her in prison, she enrages him by saying that she wants to invest all his money in the stock market.

Solution She is released early for good conduct and decides to sell the film rights to her story to a Bollywood producer for $50,000, the amount of her loan.

THEMES

Diaspora conflict One of the dominant themes of this film is the inter-generation conflict, which is exacerbated by the fact that this is a diaspora family. First-generation parents, who are born in India and migrate to the US, are pitted against their American-born (or at least American-raised) daughter. Stereotypes do appear. The family are Gujarati shopkeepers with a very strong work ethic and conservative life-style. The 30-year-old daughter, Praful, is already divorced when the film begins and having relationships with boyfriends. The tension is racketed up when she wants to use her savings to buy an apartment and live on her own. Working hard and saving is very Gujarati, but moving out to live alone is very American. Her father reflects 'Indian' values in his distaste for her 'boyfriend habit' since it will bring shame on the family. When he expresses this fear of losing face in society, she mocks him by saying nobody cares about him in the neighbourhood. 'Just chill!' she screams. Praful attempts to achieve her goal of independence by acquiring money, while her father wants her to invest in his business or, better still, get married. The sharp difference between first-generation and second-generation immigrants is expressed in a conversation that Praful has with a friend. 'I'll tell you a story,' she says. 'A young girl asked her mother what a boyfriend is and the mother said, "If you're a good girl, you'll get one." "And if I'm a bad girl?" the girl asked. "Then you'll get married." Funny, isn't it?' That chasm between Praful and her father is not very humorous; it causes heartbreak and almost dissolves the family.

American dream A second major theme is the power of the American dream. Praful's family is the classic case of immigrant success. They live in a nice house in a quiet suburb of Atlanta, where he runs a spice and snack import business. They are solidly middle-class. Praful works as a cleaner in a hotel, but is paid enough for her to save up for an apartment. Seven long years she has slogged away, mostly on her knees, and now she is ready to make the big leap into owning property. When she is shown the apartment by an agent, she is thrilled at its size and view over a park. She is offered the place on good terms to fulfil the ethnic minority quota in the housing scheme. The scene is leavened by humour, too. 'There's an Indian temple around the corner,' the man adds. 'Oh, that's a gurdwara,' Praful informs him. 'For Sikhs. We're Hindu.' 'Ah,' the man says, 'but there's a kebab place nearby, too.' Turns out Praful is vegetarian. Before long, though, Praful runs into the hidden barriers behind the dream. She has savings but, in the twisted logic of banks, doesn't have a good credit rating because she hasn't bought much on credit. Her loan application is turned down by a woman with ice in her veins, platitudes on her lips and the stars and stripes visible behind her. Las Vegas, the dreamiest city in dreamland, will light her spirits, she thinks, but finds herself trapped in gambling debts. When the tough loan sharks threaten her with a gun, she has no alternative but to do that most American of all things: rob a bank, just like Jesse James. There is a heavy dose of comedy laced in the tragedy of her downfall, but it is a steep decline, nevertheless. All these elements of the American landscape—insensitive bank managers, gambling, loan sharks and guns—are present in India, as well, but hey become more menacing when juxtaposed alongside the American dream of money and success.

CHARACTER ANALYSIS

Praful

<u>Character</u> Praful is the main character of the story, and she has a problem. She is independent-minded, but not independent in fact. Born in the USA, she has a free spirit and is fun-loving but also impulsive. She is sympathetic, if a little sharp-tongued, and brutally honest, except when it comes to confronting her own weaknesses. We like her and want her to succeed, although perhaps we would not choose her as our daughter.

<u>Illustrative moments</u>

Fun-loving Above all else, Praful is fun-loving, cheerful and free-spirited. This quality is on display throughout the film, but the most illustrative moment comes when she goes on holiday to Las Vegas. Her cousin pays for the trip, as Praful is saving for her apartment. Once there, she charges a new dress and expensive meals to her cousin's account and goes out for a stroll along a pedestrianised street. She haggles with a stall-holder over a $10 baseball hat with 'I love Vegas' stamped on it. In the end, the man gives it to her. 'My gift,' he says and waves her away. That same night, after winning at baccarat, she comes back to the stall-holder and gives him a hundred-dollar bill. 'My gift,' she says with a big smile and trots off feeling wonderful. That act of generosity expresses her devil-may-care attitude to life. It is impulsive, yes, and also silly, but she is person who enjoys life.

Hard working Praful is not just a party girl, however. She works long hours as a cleaner in a hotel, fighting off sexual advances from managers and insults from guests, in order to build up the nest-egg that will hatch the magical loan to buy an apartment. This practical side of her character, mostly buried in the film, is demonstrated in the very first scene. She is chatting with co-workers as they eat lunch in the staff room. 'Where's the apartment?' someone asks. Praful says it is in a nice area, with a park. Another person suggests that it must be expensive. '700,000 is the market price,' Praful says. 'I'm getting it for 400,000. Minority discount.' One of her co-workers jokes that she is '100% Indian', meaning cheap. 'Hey,' she says, 'I've worked seven years. Seven long years for that place.' No one can make fun of that fact. She is a hard worker. She deserves that apartment.

Honest Another one of Praful's endearing qualities is honesty. This means that she is sometimes seen as negative or sharp-tongued, but no one can accuse her of being two-faced. A good illustration of that candour comes in a dramatic scene with Sameer, her fiancé. After weeks of coldness, Praful has found herself attracted to Sameer, who, in truth, is a good catch. They are walking alone in a park, resplendent with trees in full autumnal colours. They sit down on a bench and begin to talk earnestly about how or if you can 'truly know someone.' Praful asks him if he thinks he really knows her. 'Do you think I have any flaws?' she asks. He says something about marital infidelity, but she brushes that aside. 'No, I mean bad habits, not single acts.' When he asks her to explain, she takes a deep breath, tells him to look away and blurts out, 'I'm addicted to gambling and stealing.' Predictably, he can only laugh. It's preposterous. She manages a weak smile, too. She has been honest, even if her interlocutor treats it as a joke.

Mr Patel

Character Mr Patel, Praful's father, is not an easy man to like. He is parsimonious, censorious of his daughter and not very kind to his wife, either. He is man stuck in his ways, mostly acquired in India, where he lived for half his life. He is quick-tempered and at times bullying, but he does love his daughter and tries to make up with her at the end.

Illustrative moments

Mean-spirited Mr Patel is a tight-fisted small businessman. He has climbed his way up the migrant ladder to middling success and his habits are set. One of them is fiscal restraint, which puts him in conflict with his impulsive daughter. His parsimony is illustrated in an early scene, when his daughter is still hopeful of getting the loan for her apartment. She comes home with food for everyone to eat. 'Why the sudden generosity?' her father asks. When he finds out about her loan application, his tone changes to caution. 'Buying property is no small matter,' he says. 'Have you checked the area? Is there a chance for appreciation?' Praful prattles on about her savings, and he says, 'If you have saved that much money, you should invest it in my business.' The conversation soon becomes an argument, with father and daughter trading insults. It ends when Mr Patel loses his temper and tells his daughter to leave the house. He then turns his anger on his wife for siding with Praful and orders her out, too. He is mean-spirited and abusive with his words.

Traditional Having been born in India and lived there for half his life, Mr Patel is a man with traditional values. Crucially, in this story, that means a daughter should not have boyfriends, or at least does not talk openly about her love life. It also means that a daughter, especially one as troubling as Praful, should be married. That conservatism is expressed in a scene early on in the story, just after Praful has her loan application rejected. She asks her father to buy the apartment with her as 'a joint venture.' He is standing with his back to her, peeling potatoes. 'I will help you,' he says. 'But I have one condition.' Praful asks him what that is. 'We have got a very good marriage proposal last week. The owner of a shop in Rajkot, the boy is nice-looking. If you agree to meet him, then…' He turns and finds that his daughter has left the room.

Regretful Mr Patel, however, is not a monster, any more than his daughter is a loose woman. Despite all his unkind words, he does begin to relent at the end. Praful is unmasked as the 'Lipstick Bandit' and is on the run from the police. Mr Patel telephones her and with tears in his eyes asks her to forgive him, to come home and bring peace to the family. It is not easy for him to climb down from his high perch of superiority, but he does. Even then, however, Praful refuses his olive branch, and he is thrown into deeper despair. He must be at fault, he thinks, for raising such a bad daughter. He might be right, but that is beside the point.

Sameer

Character Sameer is an intriguing character. He appears to be straight out of central casting: handsome, well-adjusted to American life and successful. He wears button-down shirts and chino pants and keeps his hair cut short. But he is more than that caricature suggests. He has an easy-going manner, laughs at himself and is generous of spirit. One feels that one could trust him, no matter what the stakes.

Illustrative moments

Conventional Sameer is a 'straight down the middle of the road' kind of guy. Praful herself sums him up this way: 'You're a good boy. You see your fiancé only with chaperones. You wear tailored pants and shirts. Decent. Mr Right.' Her appraisal comes during a scene that illustrates Sameer's conventional outlook. They are sitting on a park bench, opening up to each other. She asks him if he thinks she has any character flaws, and he says, 'I think of myself as being progressive, so I'm not bothered by your past, I mean boyfriends. But I would expect fidelity from my wife.' He says it with complete sincerity, trying to reveal his deepest fears, completely misunderstanding what she meant by 'character flaws.' But his conventional life and attitudes do not stretch to comprehending Praful's gambling habit and criminal activity.

Compassionate Mr Right is also Mr Compassionate. Sameer's generosity is shown in one of the final scenes. Praful is on the run from the police. She learns that Sameer has transferred $50,000 into her account so that she can pay back the loan and start a new life, hopefully with him. She calls and tells him to meet her outside of town. She is furious. 'That money was for your degree course, wasn't it?' she asks. He nods yes. She accuses him of trying 'to be a saint' and says that she doesn't want any favours. He looks at her hard and says, 'It's not a favour. Favours are when someone expects something in return. I don't want anything in return. And I'm not a saint. I just did what I thought was right.' When she returns the engagement ring he gave her, he says, 'You should surrender to the police.' Maybe Sameer is not trying to be a saint, but he certainly acts like one. Praful has once again thrown away a good thing.

(Simran in a moment of honesty with Sameer)

(Simran enjoying life in Las Vegas)

(Simran in pain at work)

(Sameer in deep conversation)