

REVIEWS

Changing mores of urban India

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Vicky Donor. Producer: John Abraham. Director: Shoojit Sircar. Hindi, 117 minutes, 2012

Vicky Donor, released in April 2012, is a comedy about the life of Vicky Arora, a young middle-class Punjabi man living in South Delhi, who becomes a commercial sperm donor. It is an addition to the look-feel-smell real genre of small films that are changing the face of Hindi cinema. When it was released, it was marketed, for all intents and purposes, as a sex comedy. Thankfully, it veers safely away from the risk of regressing into one. Instead, it takes a light-hearted look at the changing life of urban, middle-class India. It is rare to find a film about men and reproduction and, hence, this film needs to be noticed.

The film begins with the desperate attempts of Baldev Chaddha (Annu Kapoor), a sperm bank owner, to persuade Vicky (Ayushmann Khurrana) to become a sperm donor. Vicky relents after much persuasion, motivated by the opportunity to make some quick money. He realises that his unusual career choice will not win him any great admiration from women and hides the truth from Ashima (Yami Gautam), a bank executive he is wooing. They marry, only to discover that Ashima cannot conceive naturally. Subsequent revelations about Vicky's involvement in sperm donation drive their marriage to the brink of divorce. Dr Chaddha invites them to meet the scores of children conceived with Vicky's sperm. They reconcile and end up adopting one such child, who was left at an orphanage after her parents' death.

The film is an interesting exploration of the various facets of the evolving morality of urban life, not just pertaining to sexuality, but also to family relationships, gender roles and culture. The entire film is filled with delightful vignettes which capture this change; whether it is Vicky's mother and grandmother, two ageing widowed women, sharing a daily drink, or Ashima's father's awkward attempts to discuss the sexual prowess of Bengali men with his daughter at the dinner table. The film also captures beautifully the tension between the younger and older generations as they engage with a multicultural society, where traditional prejudices about caste and region persist but are also becoming increasingly irrelevant. This new, ambiguous moral world is a reality for the younger generation, who continue to live with their parents, seek their approval for marriage, but still carve out an independent personal space. The older generation is also not shown as static, but as trying to assimilate rapid social change into their lives.

As compared to this changing, fluid modern moral world, the arena of commercial assisted reproduction is regressive and predatory. Baldev Chaddha pursues Vicky because he fits the stereotype of the masculine Aryan man, upper-caste, fair, good-looking and muscular. The eulogising of his "high quality" sperm is, at once, both comic and pathetic. Interestingly, at no point in the film does Vicky look like a victim, quite unlike the typical portrayal of an ovum donor or surrogate mother, where the element of exploitation pervades as a subtext. Apart from one flippant remark that expresses his discomfort at having become a "father" without any effort (*baithe baithe baap ban gaya*), Vicky has no thoughts about the children born with his genetic material. Ashima's instinctive revulsion challenges this comfort. She accuses Vicky of "shagging for money", likening his work to prostitution. The older generation has varied reactions. While Vicky's mother is completely outraged, his grandmother and Ashima's father see a human, more benevolent dimension to this act. The film brings out the complexity of contemporary marriages, where the couple attempt to bring in more equality, trust and freedom. Ashima, with great trepidation, reveals the truth about an earlier failed marriage to a complete nonchalant Vicky, who tells her that she could have obtained a discount for the bridal make-up, as the marriage was so short-lived. She feels hurt that Vicky was not as candid with her.

Ashima's encounter with the children born from Vicky's sperm moves her as she recognises traces of Vicky in them. Undoubtedly, her response is also coloured by her desire to have a child and the frustration of not being able to do so. The film ends on a neutral, safe moral note, with the adoption of an orphaned child – a morally irreproachable act.. Had the filmmaker chosen a different ending involving surrogacy or an ovum donor, he would have had to grapple with more difficult moral questions.

At the risk of over-analysing what is essentially a comic film, *Vicky Donor* leaves the viewer with several questions, even while it does not raise some important ones. What is it about the exchange of reproductive material which evokes the uneasiness and outrage, which would not be associated with, for instance, an exchange of kidneys or blood? This, although the risks involved for the donor are much lower.

Assisted reproduction breaks the vital connection between reproduction and parenthood, which is still, in some sense, sacred. The dissociation between the two creates an ethical and emotional no-man's land, where relationships are not clearly

defined and existing values are not relevant. In a sense, these questions are much more disturbing for men than for women.

Motherhood is a liberal concept, not necessarily linked to reproduction. Women become mothers in many ways - by giving birth, by breastfeeding, by caregiving -- whereas fatherhood is more narrowly understood to define only genetic inheritance. Some men may be recognised nominally as fathers for those children with whom they share lineage (eg eldest uncle, grandfather) or through marriage to the mother. Society ritually and legally condemns men for neglecting children whom they have "fathered"; implying that passing on your genetic inheritance (and that alone) creates parental responsibilities. Conversely, doubts about the paternity of one's child provoke shame or anger in men, notwithstanding their emotional bond with such a child. Within this moral frame, sperm donation is an immoral act. The sperm donor is an irresponsible father and the legal father is not a father at all. At the same time, there is no doubt that sperm donation

enables (other) men to become fathers who nurture and care for children. Many women who donate ova or act as surrogates speak of the satisfaction of enabling another woman to experience motherhood. This dimension, which is so well understood and appreciated where exchange between women is involved, seems to be completely overlooked in the case of men, as if to suggest that the desire for parenthood is not intrinsic to men, whereas the absence of such a desire would be automatically considered unnatural in women. Does this not negate men's needs and create a gender unequal concept of parenthood? Are more liberal definitions of fatherhood not possible *and* desirable?

It would be unfair to criticise a single film for not raising all these complex moral and social issues, important and troubling as they are. It would be heartening to see *Vicky Donor* trigger more such endeavours.

Of snowstorms, swordfights and blood trails: the underbelly of clinical trials

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Markus Swan. *Assassin in Svanstrand: insider trading on clinical trials, snow storm with beheadings. e-book: Clinical Trial Magnifier Limited; 2012. 258 pp. Kindle price INR 230.73. ISBN: 978-988-19041-3-3*

The world of clinical trials is ethically fragile. Huge amounts of money are at stake and a handful of people are privy to a lot of confidential information about the trials. This imbalance in money and knowledge sometimes results in an unholy nexus. Known as insider trading, progress reports of a trial are sometimes passed on to investors so that they can augment or deplete their share in the investment before the trial results are officially made public. The person(s) passing on the information would also have vested interests in the profits. This unmitigatedly unethical practice is explored by the book, using the genre of a murder thriller.

Johan PE Karlberg (using the pseudonym Markus Swan) sets his fiction in the picturesque locale of Svanstrand, a hamlet in Sweden, in winter. The story revolves around a desperate killer nicknamed "The Fox", a handsome police inspector, Kacka, his efficient assistant, Madelene Trolle, Markus Swan and his wife. The narrative is woven in with the required elements of a thriller: death threats, murders, sword fights, decapitated bodies (of humans and animals), spy cameras and several miles of "Fox chase". There's also a story of unrequited love.

The story begins when Swan visits his summer house in Svanstrand in the autumn; he happens to get a brief view

of two people fighting, but dismisses it as a local skirmish. However, when he returns with his wife to prepare for a family Christmas, things start to snowball. First, a headless body is fished out of the waters. It is believed to belong to a man killed about two months earlier, presumably in the tussle that Swan witnessed during his last visit. In a sub-plot, two women from Lund are admitted to the city hospital with acute liver damage. Swan learns of a herbal drug trial for weight loss that is on at nearby Lund. He speculates that there is a connection between the trial and the critically ill women. Many killings, Fox-hunts and death threats follow before the story reaches its climax and the killer and their motives are exposed.

The novel reveals the dark underbelly of some clinical trials and the extents to which drug companies can go to make huge profits and in that sense it is extremely timely. In 2012, India was in the news after it emerged that more than 200 trial participants had died within a span of six months. However, this news is unlikely to ensure that informed consent will be taken from participants in the future, let alone that compensation is given for injuries or deaths in trial.

As a literary piece, however, the novel loses pace at various points, such as when Swan talks at length of other infamous and unethical clinical trials. While such information is important, this is not explicitly a history of medicine narrative, and the format does not allow for such ruminations that dilute the tension that has been built up. There are other historical