



TIFF 2013 Film Review: Qissa

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Film Review by Preeti Thandi

Anup Singh's [Qissa](#) is a dark, complex and multi-textured tale grappling with different themes.



The main narrative is set in the **partition of India and Pakistan** but the themes of separation and identity dominate the story. Singh's own forced displacement from Tanzania is a source of inspiration for the film and he layers this personal story both on history and fable. It is also the director's attempt to try and understand the inner consciousness of a refugee, **Umber Singh** who is played by **Irrfan Khan** in the film. It is Khan's second film at TIFF 2013.

When Umber, a Sikh is forcefully uprooted from the **Punjab** region in Pakistan he rebuilds his life on the Indian side and makes choices. But the choices he makes have devastating consequences. He not only shapes his destiny but also re-shapes the destiny of his family. As Umber forges a new life he also forges new identities for his youngest child **Kanwar** played by **Tillotama Shome**. Umber's wife **Mehar** (**Tisca Chopra**) has little say when their fourth daughter is born and the father insists that their baby is a son.



Kanwar is in fact raised as a boy and this bizarrely disturbing fact gets even worse when the story advances. Umber then marries Kanwar to **Neeli** (**Rasika Dugal**). It is then that he is confronted by the reality of his own actions. May it be in the name of family honor or false pride, Umber's way to control the situation only takes the wrong turn. It is clear that the tale is cursed and doomed to begin with.

Mehar, Neeli and Kanwar are all helpless yet in another sense each woman is trying to protect the other. *Qissa* features three strong female actors – Tillotama Shome, Rasika Dugal and Tisca Chopra but the women in Singh's film are powerless in the face of their destiny. Despite the fact, Tillotama Shome and Rasika Dugal both give powerful performances. Irrfan Khan does a remarkably good job of speaking in Punjabi and the slow dialogue delivery seems to be deliberate to create that eerie haunting effect.



Qissa also evolves metaphorically like a lonely ghost and leaves you with a spectacle of its' tragedy. The film probes the male desire to remake women. Yet despite their defenselessness women can empathize and show compassion. But in the end it is the women who end up bearing the brunt of a man's ruthless actions. Even though the film progresses poetically, it leaves a sad undercurrent of doom and gloom. Due to its layers Qissa may be a tough film for audience to comprehend.