

# Parenthood and its demons in 'The Lost Daughter'

Maggie Gyllenhaal's English-language adaptation of Elena Ferrante's novel is caustically funny and brilliantly unsettling

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Last year, 18 film-makers from around the globe contributed to a lockdown anthology called *HomeMade*. One of the segments was directed by Maggie Gyllenhaal. It featured her husband, Peter Sarsgaard, playing a bereaved lover in the woods. Only 10 minutes long, it's funny, weird and touchingly real. I remember thinking when I watched it that Gyllenhaal—a cool and complex screen presence for almost two decades—seemed at home behind the camera.

Nothing, however, could have prepared me for *The Lost Daughter*. The film, which Gyllenhaal adapted from a 2006 Elena Ferrante novel of the same name, won Best Screenplay at the 2021 Venice Film Festival. It's now on Netflix, part of a strange year-end blitz of cinema for grown-ups that included Jane Campion's and Paolo Sorrentino's new films.

Leda (Olivia Colman) is a college professor from Cambridge vacationing in Greece. She's in her late 40s (though people tell her she looks younger), with a clipped British accent. Showing her the place where she's staying, the housewife asks if she's a teacher. "I'm a professor," she corrects him, with a look that says the distinction is important. We see her observing an American woman and a little girl on the beach, maybe a little too intently. And we see flashes of another woman, with a British accent, peeling an orange, a girl in her lap.

Leda strikes up a conversation with the American, Nina (Dakota Johnson). Then the daughter goes missing and everyone joins in the search. It's Leda who finds the girl, disconsolate because her doll can't be found. "I used to have a doll like that," Leda tells Nina. "Mina, or mini-Mama, as my mother used to call her." Two reveals follow. The doll has been stolen by Leda. And the woman with the British accent is her as a younger woman.

*The Lost Daughter* has the pacing and cut-up structure of a mystery—though one which withholds both answers and questions. Gyllenhaal does something we don't see often, painting parenthood as draining and unrewarding. Leda's twin daughters are loud, insistent—we feel their need to escape even before she does anything about it. Gyllenhaal and cinematographer Hélène Louvart, curiously, don't create a visual difference between the two time frames. Leda's turbulent past haunts her brimble present, so it's only right that



they look the same.

Colman, her face registering five kinds of pain at any given moment, is astonishing—and so are Jessie Buckley, scarily unhappy as the younger Leda, the deft, sympathetic Johnson, Sarsgaard in a sly turn, Ed Harris, Paul Mescal. But *The Lost Daughter* is so much more than an acting showcase, the kind of film that's created to support the kinds of performances that win Oscars. Gyllenhaal finds a unique tone—intimate, caustically funny, startlingly sensual. Her camera moves right in, so close to the body at times that we can't tell what we are looking at for a few seconds. Louvart brings the same erotic charge she did to *Search Party*, the immediacy complemented by the stand-like narrative flow assembled by editor Afonso Gonçalves.

The language used is a succession of cuts and bruises. "I'm working," Leda's husband says, indicating that she should control their children. "I'm suffocating," she retorts. Nina, driven to distraction by her uncontrollable daughter, asks the older woman, "Is this going to pass?" Leda, not woken to false assurances, replies: "You're so young and none of this passes."

Through my viewing of *The Lost Daughter*, something nagged at me, a feeling that I had seen something like this. And then it hit me: it was director Jean-Marc Vallée, who died at 58 on 25 December. Gyllenhaal's film and Vallée's two HBO series, *Big Little Lies* and *Sharp*



Stills from 'The Lost Daughter'

IMAGES COURTESY NETFLIX

Objects, are spiritual cousins. They are each derived from psychologically dense novels written by women and are built around complicated female characters, often recovering from or dealing with trauma brought on by family ties.

What reminded me most of Vallée, though, was the editing. *Big Little*

*Lies* and *Sharp* Objects have the same lacerating cutting between past and present as *The Lost Daughter*. Time and again, Vallée would cut from the present to something months in the future and then something decades in the past, all in the space of a second or two. It was something extraordinary in the TV landscape, an innovation along the lines of Terrence Malick's intuitive edits and Pablo Larraín's restless jumps in cinema. Vallée would have approved of how cleverly Buckley's Leda is spliced into the waking hours and dreams of Colman's Leda, a ghost of hard decisions past.

It's surprising to see a film so frank about the difficulties of parenthood. In one scene, Leda's husband offers shelter to a hitchhiking couple. Leda is fascinated by how the couple made a life together while abandoning children from previous relationships. To her, they are the ones who escaped. Her daughter quotes W.H. Auden's *Cat in a Hat*: "Where do they come from? Those whom we so much dread? As on our dearest location falls the child? Of their crooked living." Gyllenhaal's film exists in the shade of such a wing.

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Author Anees Salim

COURTESY PENKUN

## A novel about loss, emptiness

Anees Salim's latest novel, tragicomedy at its best, unearths the magic in the mundane

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In an unnamed city, which nevertheless feels suspiciously like Hyderabad, a king is dying. He lies in his palace, Coteh Mahal, attended to by a straggling caregiver, showing no visible signs of life—save periodic tingling and loud farts. We know he is a "fallen ruler" who has lost his kingdom, possibly when India ended the practice of proxy wars for royal families in 1871—his legacy tarnished by the accounts of various historians. "Like every fallen ruler, my father harboured a grudge against historians," says Azam, one of his two legitimate sons. "Historians seldom do justice to the fallen."

One thing he seems to have been remarkably good at is procrastinating his multiple social encounters spawned numerous children—no one is sure of the exact number. While clearly a poster boy of neglected parenting, the king was astute enough to keep a record of the children he had personally baptised, documenting their names in a thin book with pages "almost as flimsy as butter paper".

In Anees Salim's latest novel, *The Odd Book of Baby Names*, this thin book is central to the tragicomic story, adding a touch of whimsy to a multiple perspective narrative that manages to be sad, funny, wise, playful and, most importantly, engaging. In an interview to *The New Indian Express* published on 12 December, Salim describes his novel as one essentially about loss of power, hope, love, memories and bonding. "Though all the characters in this book are siblings, they walk different paths, they lead different lives, many of them stay unknown to each other, and each is doomed to bear a sense of emptiness till the end. It is the sense of loss that is their common inheritance."

The book begins at Coteh Mahal, where the obese and always inebriated Moazzam—his other legitimate son—is having a bath, serenaded by hundreds of squarons. A sudden shriek sees him exiting the tub and running down the palace corridors "wearing only an amour of lather and a few accidental perfumifications by way of rose petals". The news of their father's death, fake though it turns out to be, brings Moazzam and Azam, who dislike each other, to his chamber. Soon, we learn that Azam is never obsessed with this book of baby names. "I wanted to find the book of baby names just to dip it in petrol and surrender it to the flames," he says.

From there, it's a hop, skip and jump into the minds and lives of his other children, the illegitimate ones: suicidal Ilumera, the daughter of his mistress, Hydier, the amazing caregiver, Shahana, a poet with a tragic past and doomed future; the ghost of Sultan, a maestro marbles player and Shahab's best friend; the stringy Muneer; the homicidal Zubab; and the persistent Owais.

This is not a novel that embraces history or attempts to be a sweeping epic of fates. Instead, it unearths the magic in the mundane with a rare sharp lens, magnifying the bleak humour, inevitable horror and unexpected beauty of existence, in prose that is as ingenious as it is poignant. The vignettes culled from the lives of all nine narrators that dart in and out of the pages, sometimes intersecting, leave a reader desperately wanting more. I know it did.

*The Odd Book of Baby Names*, by Anees Salim, Penguin, 288 pages, ₹200.

# Young artists to watch out for this year

As we start the year, here is a list of early-career artists working in different media who reflect on our times

Rishu Kumar

Artistic and writer once told me, in the context of the arts, "It's important to invest in and engage with your generation—a collector must follow artists of their time, and artists should deliberate with writers and curators of their own generation." This thought has stayed with me, especially when it comes to younger artists who reflect our times.

In the context of young contemporary artists, a few strong themes emerge. Firstly, they are willing to experiment. Rejecting the hegemony of the West and eschewing any desire to follow in the footsteps of their seniors, their art is void of any baggage of the past. Secondly, there is a renewed focus on skill. There seem to be more well-executed works with a strong technical base. And lastly, the foundational ideas are more rooted in their own traditions, homeland, and immediate environment. Here is a list of early-career artists to look out for.

**ABHISHEK DODIYA: A FRESH APPROACH TO METAL**  
Dodiy's work is about dismantling and reconstruction. The inspiration often comes from deep observation of his sur-

roundings—he lives and works in Bhavnagar (Gujarat), known for its ship-breaking industry. "I invite viewers to experience the open-endedness of the surface of my work that revisits lived events, compounded with complexities of emotions," says the artist, who completed his master's from The Maharaja Sayajirao University of Baroda in 2020. In his particularly noteworthy *Cyclone* series, he has used metal sheets that seem malleable to the softest touch. His documentation of the recent devastating storms in the coastal areas of Gujarat is a grim reminder of the potential impact of the climate crisis.

**DIYVA SINGH: A RELOOK AT MEMORY**

Singh's practice is rooted primarily in paintings that explore themes of isolation and memory. These emanate largely from a poetic engagement with the very idea of "time"—she is currently working with instant film/Polaroid, a contrast to the slow process of oil painting. "I borrow from disciplines of photography, writing, as well as cinema. These varied elements come together within my work," says Singh, who completed her master's in fine arts from the Shri Narad University in Umar Pradesh in 2018.

Her paintings evoke the same sensibility as a period photograph would. Initially, instant photography was a replacement for drawing, merely capturing the moment she could reference for her paintings. Gradually, though, her photographs began to look like her paintings, and vice versa.



Sarah Naqvi's 'Shahnaik-Identity'.

**GURJEET SINGH: SCULPTURES THAT TELL FRESH STORIES**

Singh was introduced to art through his family. "As a child, I saw women of the family always engrossed in decorating the house, stitching and embroidering," says the artist, who completed a master's with a gold medal from the Government College of Art, Chandigarh, in 2019. He was involved in all the activities at home, learning the techniques from his sisters even as he helped his father at his scooter repairshop. His stuffed soft sculptures in bright textile, embellished with embroide-

ered patterns, are a response to his surroundings and experiences. Singh's sculptures of imagined characters revolve around "stories behind closed doors, abuse and neglect, identity and loss, and are often highly personal".

**KOYAL RAHEJA: QUESTIONING THE SYSTEMS OF THE PAST**

Raheja questions the conundrum of the body as a living organism and one that loses its signifying behavioural elements, reduced to a tool, regulated by its mechanical efficiency. Her work elaborates on the

behaviours and transfiguration of a docile body that shifts to a dictated one. In a recent series exploring ideas around gesture, space and self, she draws figures performing the regulatory gestures of a school assembly, each individual equally distant from the other. Raheja's "bodies" subsume regimented, lyrical and minute variations. "Through my work, I try to question systems and structures of the past and present using different lenses of conformity, rebellion, and separation," says Raheja, who graduated from the Studio Arts College International in Florence, Italy, in 2019.

**KUMAR MISAL: SHINING THE SPOTLIGHT ON THE FARMER**

Misal, who comes from a farming family, celebrates the act of growing food in a manner that rejects political undertones. His approach to art is based on natural aesthetics that reflect the relationship and significance of nature in rural life. This is visible in the process as well. Misal makes his own paper and often uses mud to stain it. The very surface, therefore, becomes indispensable, and being "arm-made", important to his cause. Misal completed his master's from the JJ School of Art, Mumbai, in 2020.

**SARAH NAQVI: A BOLD TAKE ON SOCIETAL STIGMAS**

Naqvi is a multimedia artist who engages in narratives themed on religious and societal stigmas. With textiles and embroidery as the primary mediums, Naqvi uses the cathartic nature of the process to address issues of marginalisa-

tion. This stems from their education in textiles at the National Institute of Design, Ahmedabad. "I was a restless child, always creating things but destroying them in the end. That was probably the genesis of the rebel in me," they say. Their work strategies classical painting, technology and performance. In a recent work, *Blasphemy of Solidarity*, Naqvi uses the image of a quilt of a protester from Delhi's Shaheen Bagh, the site of a months-long sit-in in 2019-21. It embodies the strength and warmth of resilience, and a hope for India's secular future. Naqvi, who studied liberal arts at Xavier's College, Mumbai in 2018, is currently in Berlin, Germany, for the De Auteurs Residency programme.

**SONALI SONAM: CELEBRATING BEAUTY IN THE MUNDANE**

Intrigued by the idea of non-static beauty, Sonam draws inspiration from her surroundings and sociopolitical scenarios. Her work, influenced by the miniature style, investigates the natural world in the urban. In her view, beauty is not personal; rather, it is dependent on the spectator, and changes with time. "I am interested in how a collection of mundane activities can become a new reality, where once we all exist but at the same time it becomes strange to us," says Sonam, who completed her master's from the College of Art, Delhi, in 2021. In her recent series, *Re-imagining The Mundane*, she creates scenes of natural beauty through the flora and fauna in city environments.

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