

# Horsing Around

Q.G. Murugun is God-fearing, vegetarian and anti-smoking, imbibes alcohol only when severely depressed, has a flair for gymnastics, fights for justice and believes in true love. The perfect Shaadi.com profile, you say? Hold onto your Stetsons, because there's far more to this man (that meets the startled eye the way a .44 Magnum cartridge says hullo-goodbye to a brittle skull). Quick Gun Murugun, for thus he is expanded, is no average cowherd. He dresses like a stoner John Wayne crashing a gay pride parade, has an oedipal weakness for domineering but suitably conservative women, and ruthlessly sheds the copious ketchup-blood of his beef-eating nemeses without the vaguest hint of irony. Oh, and if provoked, he grows a new set of arms. If you're the paranoid type, you'd best look elsewhere for that dinner date.

A cult pop-culture devouring monster created by the institute of mad scientists at Channel V some years back for a lark, QGM kicked his dormancy last week with a mega 400-plus-print silver screen outing in four different languages. The *Quick Gun Murugun* movie follows the many adventures of its title character as he grapples with a tonsured Andhrite who typically plots for world domination – a goon named Rice Plate Reddy, brilliantly performed by veteran Tamizh movie villain Nassar – and his gang of assorted dosa-mongering ruffians, rowdies and rascals. Murugun's violent heroics are primarily driven by the need for peace in a cruel world, the disarmament of military hotels everywhere, and the torrid loves of two women: the demure Locket Lover who, like the name suggests, lives and loves out of a locket, and the film's token thunder-thighed vamp, Mango Dolly.

The central protagonist, played by Telugu comedian Dr. Rajendra Prasad, is meant to be a clownish composite of MGR and Rajinikanth – spoofing the faux cowboy movies and social consciousness of the former, and the much-parodied super-heroic persona of the latter. The trouble, though, is that Dr. Prasad only possesses about an ounce of the charisma that came so easily to the two men his character attempts to mirror. To be fair, he tries hard to fit the giant shoes that he has been rationed, but the effort is a desperate one. Rajinikanth, for instance, for all his grievous assaults on one's suspended disbelief, sweats charm. When he speaks, the whole world stops to listen. Rajini's one raised palm alters the course of traffic, freezes birds in mid-air and sends Chuck Norris into extended therapy. When Dr. Rajendra Prasad emotes, however, it feels like you're being force-fed a chutney-smearing cardboard 'react' sign. Then again, you pick your horses for courses. In his new election-cut-out-sized avatar, Murugun looks considerably more jaded since his sprightly bar-hopping days on Channel V, but his penchant for timely kitsch seems none the worse for the wear.

Paralleling the treatment of African-American ghetto-born 'brothas' by the blaxploitation films of the 1970s, *Quick Gun Murugun* compounds the cliché Old Bollywood-generated view of the south Indian male as a violent non-sophisticate with a nouveau riche sense of style and an elevated sense of vulgarity. Like Sweet Sweetback or Shaft, the 'machi' – a Madrasi brotha from anotha motha – is creative with his insults, loves his women plus-sized and has a predilection for shiny bling and shinier firearms.

*QGM*, of course, is meant to exploit the ethnic stereotype rather than the targeted ethnic group itself – the way films like *Kill Bill* or *Kung Pow* quote their chopsocky ancestors with a nudge and a wink – but, given the film's wide multilingual release across India, one has to stop and wonder if its intended effect might not be adequately comprehended by the character's new audiences. The fact that these viewers might not all be familiar with the nature of *QGM*'s sense of irony debates its efficiency as a vehicle of Tarantino-esque genre-subversion. It is exactly this ambiguity, though, that will cleverly function to the film's advantage at the box office, should all go well, serving to attract the metro-dwelling cable TV veterans as well as regional audiences with a limited exposure to global cinema. The urban English-speakers will watch it for the satire; the vernacular audiences, for the formula-bending narrative and the film's undeniable visual appeal.

Shashanka Ghosh, the director of *QGM*, explains the production team's approach to distribution: “It was a carefully thought-through thing where, underneath all the irony, there's a rock-solid storyline that follows the adventures of a cowboy. You'll enjoy the movie if you're in the know, if you appreciate the spoof element of the film; but even otherwise, it should allure you with the strength of its narrative. We tried it, in fact, with a series of test audiences in all languages before the release.” According to Ghosh, each version of the film varies mildly from the other, as scenes, dialogues and even marketing tactics have been moulded to fit the expectations of different demographics.

The English version, for instance, has been promoted heavily via online social platforms such as Twitter, Facebook and Blogger. Says Ghosh, “My core audience is the youth, and one of the largest user bases for the internet is exactly that. So we created a presence on the web, which also ended up useful from a viral point of view. Word of mouth promotion has worked marvellously over the first weekend, in that regard, though I do wish we could have done more to boost awareness among our Hindi audiences. We're working on strategies for that right now.”

He also acknowledges the likelihood, however distant, that the reanimated *QGM* might make an episodic return to television, where the concept has worked best. Other possible iterations of the character could populate comics and video games, according to Ghosh. The vote is still out on the large screen success of *Quick Gun Murugun* and its millennial tongue in a retro cheek, but a template seems to have

been evolved for a subversive new genre in Indian cinema. And there's much meat left in it still.

*Vinayak Varma*