

## There's Something About Sylvia

Some years ago, I was commissioned by director Soni Razdan and producer Pooja Bhatt to write the story of a film called (straightforwardly enough) **Love Affair**. Like the recently released **Rustom**, the script of **Love Affair** is based on what is known today as the Nanavati scandal, an infamous love triangle-cum-murder trial that shocked the nation in 1959.

The facts are public knowledge : On April 27 of that year, Naval Commander Kawas Nanavati came home from months of offshore duty to find his wife Sylvia in the throes of a passionate affair with a local businessman and playboy, Prem Ahuja. Nanavati confronted Ahuja, demanding that the latter marry Sylvia and take responsibility for the Nanavatis' three young children. When Ahuja scoffed : "I don't have to marry every woman I sleep with", Nanavati lost his officer-like cool and fatally shot Ahuja thrice in cold blood. The courtroom drama that followed was nothing short of sensational, with salacious reporting by the tabloid Blitz, and a jury that was so swayed by emotion that Nanavati found himself acquitted of first-degree murder (needless to say, this turned out to be the last trial by jury in India).

Subsequently, Nanavati was found guilty by a higher court and served three years in prison. Upon his release, he, Sylvia (the marriage intact) and their children left India for a life in Canada.

At first, I wasn't excited about turning this story into celluloid saga. It had been done before (in potboilers like *Yeh Raaste Hain Pyaar Ke* and *Achanak*) and the narrative treatment in both these films was saccharine and sanctimonious. Nanavati was a man of honour, holier than the Pope, more patriotic than Gandhi. The villainous, leery Ahuja was a sleazebag who deserved the fate of being shot to death in his bedroom with nothing but a towel around his waist.

And Sylvia? She interested me least of all – appearing as the repentant wife in a light sari, doe-eyes downcast and awash with tears, a distressed damsel begging for a second chance at marriage and forgiveness for the cardinal sin of adultery.

Still, I started my research.

In the late 1940s, Sylvia was a mere teenager in England when she met the handsome Kawas Nanavati. They fell in love, returned to India to marry and settle down, and child bride Sylvia soon became a mother of three. Nanavati, it appeared, was a loyal husband, but he was away for long periods of time on naval duty, and the young and sensuous Sylvia felt neglected, older than her 28 years and an outsider in a rigid foreign culture. She was far away from home, saddled it seemed, by babies and the demands of an aging mother-in-law, and found it hard to make friends in the clique culture that was elite south Bombay.

A chance encounter with socialite Mamie Ahuja would breathe fresh air into Sylvia's stale life. Mamie introduced Sylvia to her brother Prem, a charismatic and sexy bachelor, and there was instant chemistry. Prem wooed Sylvia, with invitations to parties and soulful conversations undertaken on long, intimate drives. Soon, Sylvia and

Prem became lovers. Despite her attachment to her husband and children, Sylvia went against the grain of conventional women of the time : she gave in to the natural desire she felt for her attentive suitor, unleashing rather than suppressing the sexual fire within her.

Kawas Nanavati discovered the affair months later. By then, Sylvia sensed that Prem was a philanderer, and that the affair was doomed. But Sylvia, honest and genuinely conflicted by the situation, confessed to her husband that she'd fallen in love with Prem. Nothing could have prepared her for what was to come next : Prem's murder at the hands of a stoic but rage-fuelled Kawas.

How would Sylvia have felt? Surely the idea of her husband killing her lover would have left Sylvia just a little bit more than shell-shocked? Perhaps even angry and betrayed? For it appeared that when Kawas Nanavati took fate into his hands and confronted Prem Ahuja with a loaded gun, Sylvia became a mere pawn in a power game between two male egos.

In the hysteria that followed Nanavati's arrest, in the public media frenzy that was building up to the trial, Sylvia remained a silent spectator. All that we know of her during this time is convenient assumption : that she felt afraid, guilty and remorseful for her "mistake". On the first day of the trial of K.M. Nanavati vs the State of Maharashtra for the murder of Prem Ahuja, Sylvia's persona was fragile and shaky whereas Kawas strode into court, a man of steel principle, a hero to millions of romance-starved ladies who wished their own husbands had the guts to kill for them.

But it was here that Sylvia's story took an interesting turn. Instead of dissolving into pitiful tears, she found her own iron resolve. Sylvia stood by Kawas. Her lover was dead, but Sylvia decided to make herself responsible for her husband's predicament, and the survivor in her rallied for the sake of their marriage, family and future.

For me, this is where the character of Sylvia comes to life, and starts to shift shape from a pampered, protected wife to the proverbial pillar of strength. It was Sylvia who had to keep things going now. The Nanavatis were outcasts. Kawas' navy career was an uncertain mess, the children were taunted at school, and daily headlines got more lurid by the day ("Three Shots That Shook The Nation"! "Love, Sex and Betrayal"! "Now Buy Your Very Own Prem Ahuja Bath Towel and Nanavati Revolver"! ). There were no more parties and invitations – Sylvia was broke and a social pariah. In the midst of all the drama, Kawas' mother died and the family, it seemed, could not have been more shattered.

But somehow Sylvia, a tough English girl, kept her head above water. She survived on borrowed funds, nurtured her bewildered children, and supported a shaken Nanavati in court. Whatever turmoil she felt within, she kept her outer demeanour intact. Not only did she fully back her husband's character, she also told the truth about her feelings of lust for Prem – in this way, she did not present herself as a naïve, passive victim of a manipulative playboy, but as a woman who had made the choice to have an affair.

When the High Court sentenced Kavas to life in prison in 1960, Sylvia was bruised but not beaten. It was now that she chose to actively campaign for her husband's release.

Sylvia and defence lawyer Rajni Patel approached the young, rising lawyer for the prosecution, Ram Jethmalani. It appeared as though Nanavati could get a Presidential pardon and be freed, if a deal could be struck. This involved the simultaneous release of a minor criminal, a Sindhi called Bhai Pratap. By now, the case had become a political hot potato between the Parsi (Nanavati) and Sindhi (Ahuja) community, and a move like this would appease both sides.

But Nanavati's release also depended on Mamie Ahuja's consent. As Ram Jethmalani remembers today, it was Sylvia, Mamie's one-time friend, who ultimately convinced a hostile Mamie to let "bygones be bygones".

Sylvia's substantial role in the proceedings have never been shown on film or in the countless pulp fiction tales that have been spun from the scandal. But when Nanavati walked out of jail on a summer day in 1965, the Sylvia by his side was no longer a dependent wife. She was a true partner who had fought to save her husband – and succeeded.

In ***Love Affair***, I wanted to present Sylvia as the active protagonist that she was, and not the decorative fluff that she is in macho, jingoistic ***Rustom***, which I watched with some disbelief.

For Sylvia is The Story, the key to the interlocked destinies of both the men in her life, the destroyer and the sustainer in equal measure, the character who embarked on the deepest emotional journey and bore the hardest life lesson.

But with *Rustom* in theatres, and the script of *Love Affair* in a vault, Sylvia will remain, in public consciousness, at best a meek, hazy enigma. At worst, she is a spineless, sobbing shadow, eclipsed by the blinding white purity of her husband's image. Modern Bollywood, for all its talk of evolving strong female characters, has managed to overlook yet another one.

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