

Beginning

Déa Kulumbegashvili, 2020

Screenwriters: Déa Kulumbegashvili, Rati Oneli

Place: Georgia, France

Studios: First Picture, OFA

Length: 130 minutes

Language: Georgian

Tsitsi-Sopo Kevkhashvili, University College London.

Dea Kulumbegashvili's auspicious debut feature film *Beginning* is centred on Yana (Ia Sukhitashvili), the stay-at-home wife of Jehovah's Witness community preacher David (Rati Oneli). The film traces her tragic psychological evolution in the shadow of patriarchy, religious persecution, domesticity, and maternal servitude.

Set in Lagodekhi, a remote provincial settlement of Georgia, the film opens up with a scene of a community gathered in the Kingdom Hall to discuss the Binding of Isaac. A long, nearly motionless scene shot through a static camera is then unexpectedly interrupted. Molotov cocktails fly through the windows and the hall explodes into flames. With an abrupt transition from stillness to panic, Kulumbegashvili manifests the dangers of being a minority religion in dominantly Orthodox Christian society.

The focus then shifts to the heroine, Yana. She has given up her future as an actress to support her husband's preaching and to raise their young son, Giorgi (Saba Gogichaishvili). She tries to persuade her husband to leave the prejudiced town, but is asked to stay, watching on as her husband preaches. Her fate seems to be providing care but receiving little in return. "As if life goes by," she states, "I have a feeling if I were not there".

Kulumbegashvili portrays a woman who cannot find her place in a demanding community of faith and societal attitudes of masculinity. Ostracized, Yana's complex character is a double outsider since she is marginalised within the community, which itself is the subject of discrimination. Often represented through Arseni Khachaturan's static camera technique (known as the Academy ratio), we see her in claustrophobic shots. We cannot fully unpack her character and the director is deliberately opaque about Yana's background.

Interestingly, the film forces the audience to use their imagination in a number of dramatically loaded sequences. In one such scene, a man claiming to be a detective named Alex (Kakha Kintsurashvili) shows up in Yana's living-room. Threatening, humiliating, sexually assaulting, he orders Yana to withdraw her complaint against the criminals who attacked the prayer hall. Though off-screen for most of the sequence, we sense his power through his voice. We have to

imagine his expressions and intentions, much like the oppressed constantly have to anticipate the movements of oppressors. Intangible but universalised, the detective becomes a metonym of society, which condemns with equal force women and religious minorities.

Another significant scene calling for our imagination and engagement is the rape sequence. The picturesque *mise-en-scène* features Yana amidst the riverside at night, surrounded by pink flowers and the soothing sound of the river. Then all of a sudden, the sequence takes a violent turn. The detective creeps behind Yana's back to assault her. We expect close-ups of emotionally tormented faces. Instead, the director places us at a distance in the shot. Accompanied by no soundtrack and only minimal diegetic sounds, it is as if we are made to witness reality in all of its cold brutality and consider how these characters can represent real relations of power.

The film progresses with the same sobering realism. After the abuse, for instance, David promises Yana that she will eventually be forgiven for being raped. This opens up another stage in a narrative arc where violence begets violence, and in which Yana unexpectedly poisons and kills her only child. Afterwards, she sits at the table, turning her back to the audience. This long sequence lasts for over three minutes. The audience expects an explanation, yet Yana remains quiet. Given the opening sequence, the viewer is encouraged to draw a parallel with Abraham's sacrifice of his son Isaac. Yana sacrifices her son, and herself, under the weight of a faith that leaves no place for difference. In a cruel twist, Yana expresses her agency by acquiring something to be guilty of.

Kulumbegashvili thus chronicles the tragedy of a woman who is persecuted by religious fanaticism and societal attitudes of masculinity. Far from a clichéd tale and simplistic distinctions of female empowerment or victimisation, the film prompts us to consider agency without overt resistance; an agency depicted by Ia Sukhitashvili's magnificent performance, where sensations are kept alive but undeclared, and the camera speaks with framing, angles, and *mise-en-scène*. After 130 minutes, the viewer is left pondering the violence of religious bigots, the detective, the husband, and what space there is left for freedom in a patriarchal society.