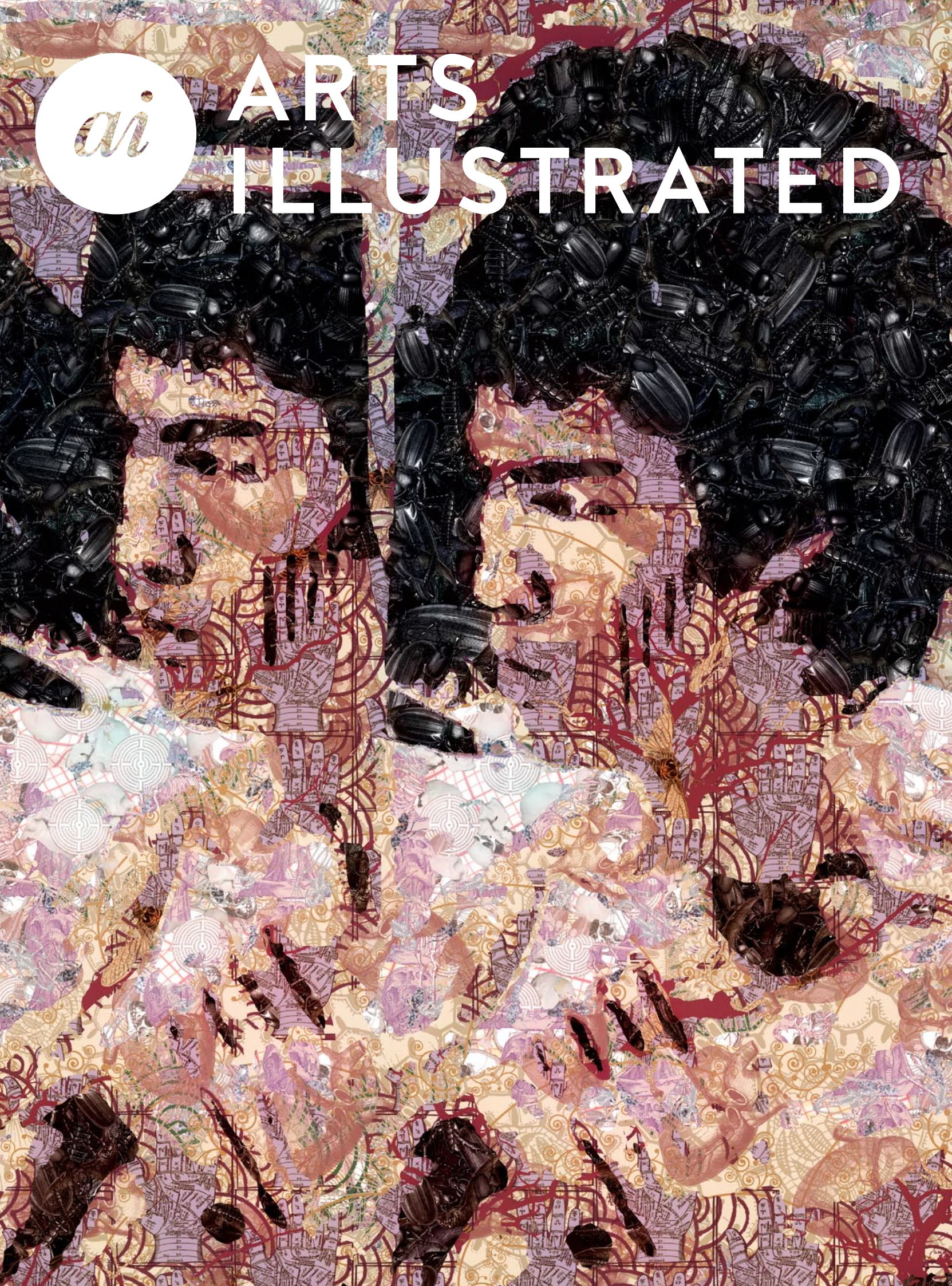




ARTS ILLUSTRATED



Editor's note

On September 6, 2017, I woke up to my newsfeed abuzz with reports of journalist and activist Gauri Lankesh's murder. I did not know her – what she dreamt, what she felt, what made her laugh or cry. The little I did know of her were through her words – searing, scathing, unafraid words. And then some more through the many heartfelt and powerful tributes that poured in. But that did not matter. Someone, who simply voiced her opinions, doing the job she was meant to do as a free-thinking journalist, was murdered. Just like that.

And something in my everyday bubble of earthly life with all its vicissitudes – sometimes uplifting and sometimes debilitating – snapped... something. The madness had been let loose on our streets and retaining a semblance of sanity behind closed doors wasn't a choice, however privileged, anymore.

When we set out to work on this issue on Sanity/Insanity, we were trying to explore the many meanings, old and new, these words conjured up. Through the stories and artists we encountered, we realised the landscape is vast, the perspectives many, and the definitions fluid. That's what art does, sure, but here, even art preens and revels with the unexpected newness it meets.

What we did not see, and what Gauri Lankesh's murder brought into sharp focus, was the current of hatred that threatened to upset this sense of sinuous, fluctuating acceptance by creating hard lines and loud symbols slowly and steadily erasing nuanced ideologies. 'Sanity' had become a quicksand of right and 'Insanity' the frozen lake of wrong. There was no escaping the fervent righteousness of the former and the silencing of the latter.

Unless, as poet and childhood friend of Gauri's, Mamta Sagar, wrote in her poem titled 'For Gauri':
'With a heart brimmed with agony / let's spread peace... let's spread love...'

And, thankfully, for those of us wishing to sidestep the quicksand and the frozen lake, there is no escaping the collective grief and the rousing hope of Mamta's words.



Praveena Shivram
praveena@artsillustrated.in

Cover Artist



Like much of my practice to date, my work is primarily autobiographical, but an unusual biography at that. Coloured by a condition, I imagine and perceive connections between things that others most often do not. Over a period of almost a decade and a half, I constructed and imagined life through a grand and heroic virtual journey. It was something I felt so strongly connected to that I didn't give it too much thought as to how it would be received by a few others. The cover for this particular issue, therefore, has special significance and resonance to me as something that blurs the line between what is considered sane and insane.

In the first chapter of my journey, I started by hitting a stratospheric mental high and literally vomited out a massive 'script' over a series of a thousand e-mails or so (I am sincerely sorry to those who received it). This script was a grand remix of art, from song lyrics, poetry, film plots, literature and visual art taken from both high and popular culture. In the subsequent chapters of my journey, this 'script' structured my reading of reality. I tried to fit every event and encounter in my life into its ambiguous plot.

One of the fundamental metaphysical elements in my journey was the mirror. And one very critical sequence from a popular film structured everything that I was to go through eventually. This is the final fight sequence in the film *Enter the Dragon* between Bruce Lee and the antagonist. This game of cat and mouse inside a hall of mirrors succinctly sums up much of what I imagined I was living through. It was the perception of a powerful and scathing presence that constantly reflected my own ugly image back to me and broke one self-image after the other in the process.

This is one of the most intense autobiographical references and one that has been on my mind for a very long time. For this cover, I found the perfect context in which to articulate this image. Rather than one print alone, which is how many of my pieces are reproduced, it is important to me that this is a cover and will therefore be reproduced in quantity, a metaphor for a hall of mirrors of its own.



Avinash Veeravaghan



The Line & the Circle

In conversation with Chennai-based director duo, Pushkar and Gayatri on their film *Vikram Vedha* that takes on the epic Vikram-Vetaal legend and converts it into a commercial format, all the while blurring the lines between the story and the teller

It was in my second viewing of *Vikram Vedha* that I noticed the circles. But I'm getting ahead of myself. First, let me tell you a story.

The generous King Vikramaditya, a man of his word, promised a tantric that he would capture the Vetaal or ghoul who hangs from a tree at the edge of a burning ghat. The Vetaal evades capture by playing mind games with the King. He narrates story after story, and at the end of each he poses a riddle to the king. If the king answers it, the Vetaal goes free. If he doesn't, the Vetaal surrenders. However, it is prophesied that if the king knows the answer and yet doesn't reveal it, the Vetaal would cause his head to explode.

Vikram Vedha (Tamil), directed by Pushkar and Gayatri, follows the framework of this Vikram-Vetaal legend. Vikram, a self-righteous cop has vowed to end Vedha the gangster's reign over the city. Vedha evades capture by playing mind games in the guise of stories that he narrates to Vikram about their intersecting worlds. Vedha presents one conundrum after another, chipping away at Vikram's cocksure belief in the line between good and bad, and the superiority of the cop as the

upholder of morality. Vikram soon realises that his view of morality has been a blinkered one.

In its first viewing, *Vikram Vedha* is a complex film about the line – a blurred one – that divides good and bad, man and beast, cop and gangster. The blurred lines are not only in the core idea of moral ambiguity, but also appear in the narrative that oscillates between Vikram and Vedha. The distinction between protagonist and antagonist is obliterated. The movie pushes the envelope on the medium it inhabits – there are blurred lines between the story and how the audience interprets it, and between what one observes and what one remembers.

In my second viewing, the circles became apparent. At a pivotal point in the movie, Vedha tells Vikram that this line between good and evil that Vikram believes so fervently in doesn't actually exist. In reality, they are both inside a circle. Their two worlds have not intersected – there is only one and they are both at the centre of it.

In retrospect, this referencing of circles happens often in the movie. A chain sprocket is all

that Vikram needs to find to make his vintage bike work. The song, *Karuppu Vellai*, mentions circling back to the beginning of things. Simon, a key character in Vikram's world, laments that the blood on his hands is affecting his son in a Karmic spiral – 'the sins of the father will be borne by the son'. There's also the tenuous but deliberate use of a popular cinematic device – the Mexican stand-off – where a set of characters hold each other at gunpoint, equally vulnerable and equally dangerous to each other, like points along a circumference. The story can also be viewed from the lens of Stephen Covey's concepts of Circles of Control, Influence and Concern – Vikram's reality does not reflect his belief about what is in his control, what he can influence and what is of mere concern to him. His self-righteousness blinds him to the fact that the lines between these circles are also blurred.

Over an e-mail interview, the directors Pushkar and Gayatri gave us an insight into the circle they inhabit. But left me with a lingering question: what if one finds that the line that encircles their world also encloses yours and mine



Excerpts from the interview

Given the fact that it draws its inspiration from the Vikram-Vetaal legend, do you think this cop and gangster story could stand on its own without the foundation of the legend in the viewer's psyche?

To answer your question, we will go into how the story evolved in the first place. It was one of those regular, random discussions we were having about the idea of right and wrong/black and white, the greys in between and, more importantly, how these categorisations change depending on whose perspective we are looking from and at what point of time and space.

This long chat led to the Vikram-Vetaal legend, which has an interesting structure of the Vetaal asking a morally ambiguous question at the end of the story. We found this really interesting and decided to fit our thoughts into this structure in a modern setting.

We wanted a milieu that had hard emotions – betrayal, guilt, pain and death. Hence, the cop and gangster. We see the outer 'cop and gangster story' itself as an accessible and familiar path to the larger play on morality. That was the core story that we wanted to narrate.

At different points through the movie, elements of the legend are strewn through the narrative. This repeated referencing could have fatigued the audience, but you seem to have struck a balance that stops well short of

excessive. Why the sustained references and how did you keep a check on their effectiveness?

One reason for this could be our deep fascination with the 2,000-year-old myth and the rich visual imagery it offers! On a more serious note, after we fixed on this structure of storytelling, we didn't want to shy away from it. Instead, we embraced the concept and referenced it throughout the narrative. It was a very conscious choice and after we did a few drafts of the script, we went back and forth to check where else we can subtly infuse the imagery/referencing to enhance the impact of the myth.

Initially, we took it for granted that everybody in India would know about the Vikram-Vetaal stories. But, to our great surprise, our assistant directors (some of them born in the 1990s) had no clue of the tales. That's when we decided to have the title sequence. This led to the idea of the film itself being a story that the animated Vetaal tells King Vikramaditya and at the end of the film, we have the Vetaal, perched on Vikramaditya's shoulder laughing away, teasing the audience with the final question. We think it's a gut feel on how much to push a conceit. It's quite possible to get carried away, but our reasoning was that viewers appreciate making these connections.

Overlaid on the legend is the core idea at the heart of every cop and gangster story – corruption and the blurred lines between good and bad, right and wrong. It's so easy to get carried away with the

eternal flamboyance of the cop-gangster genre that I am curious to know the things you had to let go to ensure the story stayed true to your vision rather than a genre?

Firstly, we did not approach this story as a cop/gangster genre film. The typical cop/gangster story has an escalation of events, a tit-for-tat rhythm that provides the bulk of the second act. This usually keeps the audience engaged. The other genre convention is the clarity of who you are rooting for. It could be the cop or the gangster, but you generally pin yourself to one of them. Indian cinema and, to a significant extent, cinema from across the world is still focusing on the protagonist/antagonist conflict for storytelling. We wanted to blur the lines between these two; how we tried to achieve this was by constantly shifting the perspective between Vikram and Vedha. So, initially when we look at Vikram's world, he's sorted in his views: a diligent cop who steps out of the system for the greater good of the common man and Vedha is portrayed as this sinister, cold-blooded gangster. But, when Vedha starts narrating his stories, we glimpse into his world which is not just about blood and gore, but filled with deep emotional sentimentality.

The idea of switching perspectives is not to just constantly keep the audience engaged, but leave them with the question at the end: who would they stand for after being presented with both sides of the coin?





Both the actors get scenes and songs that are signature elements to their screen persona. In fact, they are also introduced differently – Madhavan is casual in his ‘entry’ while Vijay Sethupathi makes a statement by swaggering into the police headquarters. Madhavan gets a romantic song and Vijay Sethupathi gets the gangster’s den song. There is a deliberate harnessing of two different schools of cinema and audience sensibilities. Would you say the challenge of bringing this together was oddly liberating as filmmakers?

One of the big dichotomies that exist in Indian cinema, to put it bluntly, is mass versus class. The so-called lowbrow versus highbrow cinema. When we were talking about the base concept of blurring the line between good and evil, the idea of blurring the line between this perceived mass and class also took shape. Here was an idea that intrinsically offered us a way to actually do both and question the existence of this divide. It offered a way within its setting of telling a deep,

complicated story which can appeal to the larger audience and not be just a niche film. Yes, it was oddly liberating, as you say. So the choice of how Vikram and Vedha were presented was to show that both these sensibilities can coexist and at the end of it there is very little difference between the two.

Vedha’s narration of stories to Vikram doesn’t toe the conventional route of flashbacks from a single character’s point of view. It seems like an inspired use of the third person flashback. Did you have any concerns about whether the audience, accustomed to first person flashbacks (although badly constructed), would understand it or was this your Vetaal moment with the audience?

The way we see it is that they are not ‘flashbacks’ from Vedha’s past. They are stories! The beauty of using the Vikram-Vetaal structure was that. We were convinced that this would not be a large leap for the audience to take, as the set-up

itself was Vedha saying, “Shall I tell you a story?” Now Vedha becomes a character within those stories. This idea really excited us. This was another line we could blur, the line between the narrator and the filmmaker.

The story had to work on two levels within the context of the film. It had to show Vikram the world from which Vedha comes, his moral compass and his emotional anchor points. The stories are also a carefully sequenced set of events that Vedha reveals to Vikram to plant clues in his head. Vedha does this for his own selfish reasons: for Vikram to figure out the answer to Vedha’s questions.

The women in the movie – Priya and Chandra – are more than just characters who are associated with the protagonists, they are much like erasers that smudge the line dividing Vikram and Vedha’s worlds. How hard was it to keep their character arcs independent of the main protagonists? Or was that a concern at all?

We were very clear from the beginning that the female characters should not just be a function of family/relationship. Only when they are involved in the plot will the characters have any relevance. This extends not just to the women but to any character that does not affect the plot, in the sense that the story will progress even if the character that is removed is a redundant character... there needs to be a function in the plot. That said, Priya clearly serves an ideological purpose to the film. While Vikram is self-righteous, thinks in black and white, Vedha is completely grey with a twisted sense of morality. Priya is the one who stands in the clear space between them. She believes in the law of the land. She sees the wrong in Vedha, but believes he too needs representation. She goes to the extent of criticising her righteous husband who may falter in the court of law. While with Chandra, we wanted her to be this passionate, fiery character with the ultimate moral ambiguity. She gives in to temptation and betrays the love of her life; but it’s just her human frailty. Priya and Chandra were constructed as characters who have their own arcs that cross paths with those of Vikram and Vedha rather than being intertwined with them. This is what creates dramatic tension.

For you, as filmmakers, where did you situate yourself in this narrative – as puppet master holding the strings, or as the one who made the puppets in the first place?

Stills from the 2017 film **Vikram Vedha** by Pushkar and Gayatri.

All Images courtesy of Pushkar and Gayatri.

We would like to believe that we are both the creators of the puppets and their masters; but, the delight is when the puppets assume a life of their own in the little world we created.

We think the word ‘realism’ or ‘realistic films’ is overrated. While the pitching needs to be natural and there needs to be a suspension of disbelief, we also strongly believe in the audience as our co-creators. We want to make them privy to the world we’ve created, to look at the characters from their point of view, open to their interpretations.

In that sense, there’s a constant effort towards breaking the fourth wall and creating a sense of familiarity and ownership, only to be broken down by a plot/character twist they didn’t see coming.

And, finally, between the two of you, who would be mostly Vikram, the ‘righteous’, and who would be most-Vedha, the equally righteous ‘other’?

We are just simple, happy, shiny people with neither the angst of Vikram nor the jaded quality of Vedha. We think we are ‘Happy Existentialists’!



Gayatri and Pushkar

