

REVIEW

Tree Roots in the Grove

Aktan Arym Kubat's *This Is What I Remember* (*Esimde*, 2022)

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This Is What I Remember tells the story of migrant worker Zarlyk, who, having lost his memory during a work accident, had gone missing and was believed to be dead by his family for over 20 years. At the beginning of the film, Zarlyk is brought back to his family in his native village in Kyrgyzstan by his son. Mute and apathetic throughout the film, Zarlyk continues to cope and thrive through his one true passion: collecting garbage.

When Zarlyk (played by Aktan Kubat himself) arrives in his native village again, things seem very strange – he does not respond to any interactions, doesn't seem to remember Kyrgyz rituals, and seems very numb and unresponsive overall. Even so, he is introduced to his grandchildren by his son and wife. Zarlyk is taken in to live with the young family, who do their best to take good care of him despite his amnesiac disorder, which is likely incurable. We soon learn that Zarlyk's former wife Umsunai (Taalaikan Abazov) has remarried in the meantime. She is wed to the small-town mafialike criminal Jaichy, who is abusive towards her. Her new mother-in-law is domineering towards Umsunai, urging her to practice a strict Muslim faith, keeping her from visiting her former family, and controlling her every step. Umsunai is visibly shaken by the arrival of her former love and husband Zarlyk and torn whether she should leave her new life to return to what used to be her family. As Zarlyk picks up his habit of collecting garbage again, which he used to do during his time as a migrant worker, his son and daughter-in-law feel ashamed of him, yet he stubbornly continues to pursue his self-assigned task.

The film tells us a lot about human relationships as well as the dynamics in isolated communities in the countryside. The various characters rely on different ideals and coping mechanisms in order to feel content and proper. Some have turned to religion and cling to their faith to save and guide them. Others focus on their nuclear family, and yet others rely on drinking too much alcohol. All in all, it seems to be quite hard for the remaining adults to accept

Zarlyk's disorder. He is perceived as strange and repeatedly referred to as „crazy“. Especially his son and his daughter-in-law struggle with the new situation and the chaos it brings, fearing that it may be dangerous for the children and that their reputation might be damaged from it. There is a glimpse of hope though. Zarlyk's old classmates take him back in, and when they spend a day drinking and being silly like schoolboys again, he is welcome to the group.

All of the adults seem to care an awful lot about what the other villagers think. This is not the case with Zarlyk's seven-year-old granddaughter Syrga (Ainazik Seyitkanova), who approaches him without reserve, cutting his hair, playing with him on the trampoline, and helping him pick up garbage. She does not ask for him to be any different than he is, to give more or to be more.

The rhythm of *This Is What I Remember* follows a slow pace. The film does not hurry, it seems to be patient with Zarlyk when the remaining characters are not. Depicting the beauty of the landscapes of Kyrgyzstan, it initially has a documentary quality to it, yet the camera pans and character movements are incredibly well-planned and staged. The film makes it look like it was easy, like the intimate glimpse that the audience is granted comes quite naturally.

The film ends and begins depicting tree roots in the grove. Just upon Zarlyk's arrival at the beginning of the film, he accidentally knocks over a flowerpot with a beautiful pink flower. Throughout the film, we repeatedly see this flower again, being repotted, watered by his granddaughter Syrga and, towards the end of the film – when acceptance of the situation has settled in – being tended to by Zarlyk's daughter-in-law, who wears a soothing smile on her face.

It seems that the fragile, disrupted flower is a metaphor for Zarlyk himself. Seeming culturally uprooted at the beginning of the film, it is his granddaughter who initially begins to accept and spend time with Zarlyk, without preconceptions or prejudices. Only towards the end of the film can Meerim (Elnura Osmonalieva), his daughter-in-law, accept the new situation without perceiving it as a cause for shame or as a threat to their reputation. He is beginning to be rooted in his community and in society again. At the end of the film, his son claims, “Zarlyk has his own business, we will call him when the food is ready”. This shows a deep understanding and acceptance of his father's peculiar needs and occupations, who is currently busy painting the trees in the grove with white paint.

This Is What I Remember is a film about morality, religion, human fragility, about pride and hatred, corruption, and about the abuse of women. It is about community, solidarity, and about being patient with one another. And ultimately, the film is about an environment drowning in litter and poisoning, neglected and needing care, just like its protagonist.

This Is What I Remember is a tender and observant film. It excels in depicting

an intimate story by giving it relevance beyond the scope which it portrays. Like the main character Zarlyk himself, the film is quiet and loud at the same time, yelling at the audience with a silent urgency of the issues that it portrays.