

Film Review: ‘What Will People Say’ tells the conflicted story of a teenage girl in a globalized world

- “What Will People Say” is Norway’s offering for the 2019 Best Foreign Language Film Oscar
- It underlines the dilemma that some immigrant parents face while trying to insulate their daughters from a stereotypically Western way of life

CHENNAI: Films that tell a personal story can often be more powerful and moving than their fictionalized counterparts and director Iram Haq, whose Pakistani parents raised her in Oslo, weaves her own dreadful experiences into “What Will People Say” — Norway’s offering for the 2019 Best Foreign Language Film Oscar. Although the film missed out on being shortlisted for the award, it is nonetheless a powerful piece of cinema.

“What Will People Say” underlines the dilemma that some immigrant parents face while trying to insulate their daughters from a stereotypically Western way of life, which the elders label as debauched.

Nisha (an arresting performance by newcomer Maria Mozhdah, who proves to be the soul and spirit of the movie) is an intelligent and attractive teenager, who aspires to be a medical doctor and tops her class. She speaks Urdu and follows her native culture

and mannerisms at home, but once she steps out of the house, she is no different from other Norwegian children. Nisha loves to dance at nightclubs and is interested in boys. But she keeps all this a secret from her parents, especially her extremely rigid father, Mirza (an excellent performance by Indian actor Adil Hussain). But one night, he finds her with a white boy in her room, and all hell breaks loose. She is quickly packed off to a remote village in Pakistan and looked after by a strict, almost cruel aunt and uncle.

Haq may have fictionalized parts of the story, but she, much like Nisha, did have a torturous year in Pakistan and was estranged from her father for a long time, making up with him just before he died. Haq said in one of her interviews that it took her years to come out with her story, which emphasizes in no small way the agony that kids of immigrants face. In extreme cases, fathers murder their own daughters in the name of honor, driven to such crimes over worries over what people will say.
