

Anaarkali of Aarah says NO, and it means NO

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The poster for Anaarkali of Aarah.



By **Gautaman Bhaskaran**

It is always refreshing to watch Indian films that weave their stories around women, and in a highly male-dominated culture such works work wonders for the female psyche. Swara Bhaskar stars in Anaarkali of Aarah.

Bhaskar first came into my view in the 2011 Tanu Weds Manu – where she plays the heroine, Kangana Ranaut's best friend, trying all the time to knock some sense into the leading lady, defiant to the point of destroying herself. When I look back on Bhaskar's performance, I feel that I remember her better than Ranaut, and I told Swara this when I met her at Fuzhou during a film festival there in 2015. Bhaskar had come with her movie, Neel Battey Sannata. Here she is a maid in Mumbai and she is desperate to see her young daughter study and shine. And Bhaskar – in a role that was quite a contrast to the carefree part she had in Tanu Weds Manu – portrays the angst of a mother whose uses the little money she earns as a domestic help to get her girl into a different kind of life.

Bhaskar's latest effort, as Anaarkali in Avinash Das's debut movie, is wonderful. As a dancer in the town of Aarah in Bihar, she is not pure and holy as she herself announces, but she is not a prostitute either. And "even if I were one, I would still have the right to refuse a man if I so chose to", she contends with unbelievable firmness. The film makes this point so strongly that nobody can miss it.

Yet, the vice-chancellor of a university who lives in the town makes a fool of himself by getting drunk and stepping on the stage, where Anaarkali is dancing and singing, and paws her in full view of the audience. She is outraged and after repeated attempts to stop him, slaps him. The man is humiliated, his male ego bruised beyond belief, and he is not going to take this lightly. With a police officer by his side, the vice-chancellor (Sanjay Mishra) goes to an impossible extent to get Anaarkali into the dungeons, so to say.

But as the adage goes, hell hath no fury like a woman scorned, Anaarkali has the last laugh that reduces the vice-chancellor to tears. He stands shamed in the presence of his wife, grown up daughter and the whole town.

Anaarkali of Aarah has one important message – a woman has the right to say no, and take this seriously.

However, Das, who also wrote the script here, goes overboard to get his point across. The vice-chancellor's character is so exaggerated that the movie begins to look like a circus. I really do not know whether any university official of such high ranking would make such an idiot of himself. This guy wears his uncontrolled sexual urge on his sleeve for the whole of Aarah to see!

This has always been my quarrel with Indian cinema, over-written roles that border on comic exaggeration – finally robbing the very essence of the film.

Anaarkali of Aarah has a profound point to make, but gets diluted in the author's over enthusiastic attempt to convey that a woman, even if she is a street walker, enjoys the undeniable privilege to say NO.

India certainly needs films of this kind, strong with their messages and high on acting skills. Anaarkali of Aarah offers both, but goes overboard with its scenes, scenes where subtlety would have been far more effective.

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Sadat Hasan Manto

Who does not know Sadat Hasan Manto. That fiery writer-playwright who took Indian and Pakistani societies by storm just before and after the subcontinent was partitioned in 1947. And Indian actress-director is all set to capture Manto's spirit in a biopic she is making – and she would be at the Cannes Film Festival in mid-May with a promo. As she once told me, the movie would be more a perspective on his radicalism than a biography. "I am not going to start with his birth and end..." she quipped.

The film could not be happening at a more appropriate time in India, when freedom of thought and expression is under every conceivable

threat, more so in cinema, which is being battered.

A clip of the movie, titled *In Defence of Freedom*, which I saw recently made compelling watch. Manto conveys the pain and anguish of those turbulent times when the Indian subcontinent was split. The writer-playwright – who was tried for obscenity thrice in British India and thrice after Independence in Pakistan – wrote that the Radcliffe Line was the biggest lie which was told to the two nations. It must have hit us all hard.

The short video – a ruthlessly honest call for freedom of speech and expression – shows Manto discussing the charges against him (obscenity, blasphemy and morality issues) in a class lecture. He makes light of these accusations, and adds that his writings mirror what is happening in society. And just because they are unpalatable, it does not mean that they do not exist. He reflects on the lives of prostitutes and the labour class to tell us of their struggles against the morally rigid upper classes in post-partition India and Pakistan.

Das could not have zeroed in on a better performer than Nawazuddin Siddiqui – who is seen as the frail, bespectacled but firebrand of a writer who raised a tempest in the literary and cultural citadels of India and Pakistan. And when Manto stands accused, it merely reflects the kind of malaise prevailing then, and the desperate bid to throttle truth and hide all that is hideously wrong in the two countries.

For Das, Cannes is nothing new – having been there several times, twice on the juries. One of them was on the main international jury. One film old as director – Firaq on the trauma of the days which followed the 2002 Gujarat riots – Das has also been an extraordinarily sensitive actor, with works like *Fire and Earth* to her credit. She has acted in Tamil and Malayalam movies as well, and has a wonderful way with languages.

Yes, one hopes that Manto will get a screening slot at Cannes, and what is more, that the film gets exhibition rights in India. Given the kind of restrictive climate which is muffling cinema (*Padmavati* is one recent example), let us all wish Nandita the best of times.

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