New show 'Bombay Begums' from 'Lipstick Under My Burkha' director misses the mark

CHENNAI:Indian director Alankrita Shrivastava made her name when "Lipstick Under My Burkha" premiered at the Tokyo International Film Festival in 2016, and was hailed for its bold look at what women desire.

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The director's latest work is a miniseries of six episodes, titled "Bombay Begums." It features opulent settings, fancy costumes and a culture that is largely upper class with its "money can buy all" attitude. At the top of it all is Rani Irani (played by Pooja Bhatt, who has not been seen on the screen for 19 years).

Rani is the CEO of a renowned bank who has risen from humble beginnings in a small town. Her deputy is Fatima (Shahana Goswami), who is undergoing her stressful fifth and final round of IVF. She, as well as her husband, Arijay Sinha (Vivek Gomber), are keen to start a family. Also working at the bank is Ayesha (Plabita Borthakur), who is learning the ropes, and has run away from Indore (a city in central India) to avoid marriage. Finally, at the bottom of this pyramid is Lakshmi Gondhale (Amruta Subhash), also known as Lily, a dancer and single mother who is yearning for a better life.

Shrivastava's women are all unhappy in one way or the other. While Rani has to fight keep her position in a setup ruled by men, and also to keep her two difficult stepchildren happy, Fatima finds her husband, who also works in the same bank, getting highly insecure at the way she climbs the corporate ladder. Ayesha, meanwhile, is confused about where she wants to go and who she wants to be her companion, while Lily's world is ripped apart when her young son is knocked down and injured by a car driven by Rani's stepson.

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Though the cinematography is impressive, panning across the bustling cityscape, juxtaposing the luxury of high living and the dark gloom of the lowly, the writing lacks cohesion, and the story has nothing much to offer after the first two episodes. Scenes of the bank and the board meetings are repetitive, and Shrivastava's attempts to push points of view are labored.

Much of the cast is slotted into a formulaic mode, the only exception being Lily, who is quite engaging, conveying deep remorse as she learns that even huge money cannot change her spoiled reputation. When this begins to strangle her son's future, she is devastated. The weakest character is Ayesha, who is caricatured as one whose aspirations (both personal and professional) are unrealistic, and the series' attempts to present the upper crust of society as morally debased is hardly convincing.