

A fairytale canvas of cliches

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MORE OF THE SAME: Rani Mukerji's comeback film Hichki has very little substance.



By Gautaman Bhaskaran

One of the black marks of Indian cinema is its inability to think out of the box. Often, it takes the easiest way out, the path of least resistance. In short, Indian films are controlled by a lethargic lot.

Siddharth P Malhotra's latest outing with a teacher suffering from Tourette Syndrome in Hichki falls within this ambit. It is boringly predictable and the plot is hardly novel. Yes, Hichki maybe an official adaptation of Peter Werner's 2008 English-language drama, Front of the Class. But writers Malhotra and Ankur Chaudhry could have improvised on the original plot, and created a work that would not have been so uncomfortably similar to Laurent Cantet's 2008 French drama, The Class — which won the Palm d'Or at Cannes, the first French title to win one after 1987 — and James Clavell's Sidney Poitier starrer, To Sir With Love, which opened in 1967. As far as I remember, Clavell's work was the first in a series which dramatised teacher-student conflict.

Hichki traces the life of Naina Mathur, who is afflicted with Tourette Syndrome, the involuntary twitches produce strange sounds from her. As a child, school after school refuses her admission, till one institution takes her in. Years later, Naina determined to be a teacher and not a banker as her estranged father would want her to be, finds a position in the same school, but is placed in charge of a class whose 14 girls and boys hail from slums and are desperately frustrated, having given up all hope of anything remotely called bright future.

We know what will follow, but of course, and the movie takes us along Naina's struggles to be accepted by her students as the only one in a sea of hostile humanity who can offer some kind of light in the darkness they find themselves in. More importantly, it is only Naina who is willing and even eager to fight for the children's rights with the school management, including a senior teacher, who is an epitome of sarcastic negativity that almost turns him into a villain.

Although most film critics have gone to town lauding Rani Mukerji's performance as Naina, I found nothing spectacular here. It is one of the easiest things to essay a character with some kind of physical disability. I do not think that it calls for any herculean effort, and Mukerji goes about her part making those sounds — which after a point begin to look boringly repetitive. So do some of the incidents of student misbehaviour, the vile hostility of the teacher (Neeraj Kabi) and his mulish opposition to his school admitting children from the lower strata of society — boys and girls he views as a blot on the institution's impeccable reputation. But an Indian law which impels every school to reserve a certain quota of seats for underprivileged children cannot be brushed aside.

Despite an array of cliches impeding the narration, Hichki did, nonetheless, manage to draw my attention to the huge societal prejudice based on class divide. We come face to face with the kind of cynicism and hatred which India's haves have against the have-nots — and the impregnable wall this raises in the process that makes it so damn hard for the poor to be even accepted in the race towards betterment, forget winning.

However, Hichki's writers have India's mainstream audiences in mind, viewers who would want to go home with a fairytale feeling. Naina gets her students out of the rut, out of the despair that they have drowned themselves in, out of the smoking-drinking-gambling past-times that they have befriended. Yes, indeed. But Hichki remains a they-lived-happily-ever-after story without a punch.

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Another air lift

Veteran British director and producer, Ridley Scott, is reported to be planning to make Amman Mission — a \$35 million military drama on

the evacuation of Chinese nationals from Kuwait, when it was invaded by Saddam Hussain's Iraq.

This reminds one of Raja Krishna Menon's 2016 Indian work, *Airlift*.

The Scott project to be developed by Hong Kong-based Media Quiz will be shot in Kuwait and China's Ningxia and Xinjiang, and will narrate the nail-biting story of how 4,885 Chinese men, women and children were evacuated from Kuwait in 48 hours.

Actually, the operation involving the Chinese is not as well known in India as the evacuation of Indians from Kuwait in 1990 when the nation was overrun by Saddam's forces. Made into *Airlift*, it had Akshay Kumar essaying a heroic businessman who rescues thousands of Indians stranded in Kuwait.

Airlift had all the ingredients of Bollywood — a dashing and debonair Kumar (with Nimrat Kaur as his wife), who plays the hero to the minutest perfection. There are pulse-pounding scenes in the film, one of which shows us how Kumar's Ranjit Katyal nearly gets shot by an Iraqi soldier, but is saved by the intervention of busloads of Indians that he is escorting out of Kuwait.

The other rescue mission made into a movie, *Take Off* by Mahesh Narayanan, was all about some nurses held captive in the Iraqi city of Tikrit by ISIS in 2014. Here it is a nurse, Sameera — portrayed with amazing credibility by Parvathy Menon — who leads the Malayali nurses to freedom with the help of an Indian Government officer, essayed by Fahadh Faasil, another outstanding performance.

Take Off is shorn of heroics, and is a down-to-earth account of another great escape.

I am sure Scott's Amman Mission would run closer to Menon's *Airlift*, the British helmer known for dramatic stories like *Blade Runner*, *Gladiator*, *Robin Hood*, *Black Hawk* and *Thelma and Louise*. Last year, he produced *Murder on the Orient Express*. My favourite in Scott's oeuvre remains *Thelma and Louise* — with Geena Davis and Susan Sarandon, two friends who take a road trip with unforeseen consequences. The final frame freezes their car, chased by the cops, as it plunges into a deep gorge, a shot I have seen in some other films.

Of course, I am not suggesting that Scott would have been inspired by *Airlift* (given the kind of fascination Bollywood holds in the West), but Kumar and Krishna Menon may be happy that they were probably the first to make movies on the Kuwait evacuation.

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