

## Lipstick as a liberator at Tokyo Film Festival

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Scene from Lipstick Under My Burka.



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**By Gautaman Bhaskaran**

Of the two Indian movies at the ongoing Tokyo International Film Festival, Alankrita Shrivastava's *Lipstick Waale Sapne* or *Lipstick Under My Burka* was a lot more plucky than the Madhavan-starrer *Final Round* (or *Saala Khadoos* in Hindi or *Irudhi Suttru* in Tamil). Also, *Lipstick Waale Sapne* has not yet been screened in India, and Tokyo was its premiere show. And the work appealed to me for its freshness of treatment and its novel way of elaborating some of India's burning social issues.

*Lipstick Waale Sapne* is a story of four women, two Hindus and two Muslims, who live in Bhopal. They are unfulfilled and unhappy, but with the gutsy ability to dream and desire.

Beautiful Rehana (essayed by Plabita Borthakur) hails from a family of tailors, goes to college and is enamoured of all things feminine. She cannot of course buy them, but she can steal, and shoplifts with a devil-may-care confidence hidden beneath a veneer of disarming innocence. It begins with a tube of lipstick, goes on to clothes and finally boots – and all these help her win her place among snooty students at her college and, well, a boyfriend. That he turns out to be a cad is another thing. But Rehana learns the hard way that freedom from her suffocatingly conservative family, ruled by a father stingy on compassion, cannot be had that easily. Even the guy she meets in college and with whom she gets intimate walks away when she lands in trouble.

In fact, Shrivastava's male characters are uni-dimensional. There seems to be very little goodness in them. Take the photographer boyfriend of Leela (Aahana Kumra), who on the day of her engagement with a rich guy, does not flinch while taking advantage of a short power outage to have a quickie with her. And she is all game for this, having been in love with him, but forced into a marriage with a guy she does not care for. But the photographer turns out to be a slob.

Shrivastava's lines up two more men, also utterly unfeeling towards the women they know. Shirin (portrayed with nuanced ease by Konkana Sen Sharma) has three little sons and a

husband, who has just come back from Saudi Arabia. He treats his wife with unimaginable coldness, even forcing Shirin to go through a series of induced abortions. What is even worse, he blows a fuse when she finds out about his mistress, and stops Shirin from working as a salesgirl.

It is clear that Shrivastava's protagonists are a mighty suffering lot – having to be associated with men whose sole motive appears to be curtailing the women's freedom.

The fourth woman in the tale is a 55-year-old widow, Usha (played with superb finesse by Ratna Pathak Shah) – a darling of the "mohalla". Addressed reverentially as "Bhuvaji" (aunt), she whiles away her time reading pulp fiction, and when she meets a hunky swimming coach, she fantasises through mobile telephone conversations with him, pretending to be one of the characters in the novels she reads. Usha turns into Rosy and clings on to the hope that she would find romance by the pool. But one fine day, when truth is out in the open, she finds herself on the streets, having been mercilessly forced out of her house and abandoned by her neighbours – who perhaps owed their very home and hearth to her. The coach, who was instrumental in letting the cat out of the bag, slinks away.

Shrivastava tells me during a long interview in Tokyo on the sidelines of the Festival that the plot of *Lipstick Waale Sapne* stemmed from her own urge to explore a feeling she has been harbouring – a certain hesitancy in expressing what she wants to. "As a woman I have felt that I cannot say all that I want to. I do not know what exactly holds me back, and this is what I have tried to analyse in my film, although the picture's milieu is very different from the one I grew up in."

"Above all, it is a very personal movie," Shrivastava adds. "I have really laid myself bare by writing this story. Although the setting is quite different, I feel that in terms of fulfilment, *Lipstick Waale Sapne* is very me. It is about my own struggles, and of course those of many other women – who presume that they have all the freedom in the world, but actually they do not."

*Lipstick Waale Sapne*, contends Shrivastava, is also an attempt to help her understand her own constraints, despite coming from a "liberal and chilled out family...Why is it that I feel so restrained".

It is quite possible that her cloistered girls-only boarding school experience early in her life and, later, her girls only college in Delhi may have something to do with her introverted state of mind. But she quickly adds: "However, I would think that this girls-only existence gave me a certain perspective in life where I could think and assimilate my ideas without the distraction of boys...It gave you the freedom from wanting to be validated by men. I grew up not thinking how the guys were sizing me up. This was liberating."

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