

Pink batters male arrogance

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Amitabh Bachchan in Pink.



By Gautaman Bhaskaran

Indian cinema's tryst with reality is nothing new. It has been consistently mirroring the community, critiquing its ills. Indian films in the early years of the country's freedom from British shackles highlighted Nehruvian ideals, his concept of socialism and equality and the pressing need to eradicate illiteracy and poverty. Raj Kapoor did this with splendid ease. Movies by other directors — Sujata, Do Bigha Zameen and so on — turned out to be riveting social documents.

But somewhere along the line, Indian cinema, particularly that which popped out of the Bollywood stable, transformed itself into exaggerated illusions — romantic, melodramatic to the core, liberally peppered with some terrific songs (written by great poets). Tamil films followed with its brand of love stories, punctuated by high-strung theatrics (of the Sivaji Ganesh variety). The other cinemas of India were not far behind.

However and happily, Bollywood is now back to being what it once was. It has been producing what I call cinema of relevance, cinema that steps beyond entertainment to explore and analyse the burning issues of the day, to freely draw inspiration from the life around it and beyond.

A movie like Who Killed Jessica Lal damned the corruption in the Indian judicial system — which needed candle-light vigils and vociferous kinds of protests to get a politically well-connected man jailed for having shot dead Lal, who refused to serve him a drink at a private party, where she was helping the hostess as a celebrity bar-maid. The film also underlined in screaming red the frightening male arrogance in India.

Aniruddha Roy Chowdhury's just released *Pink* (produced by Shoojit Sircar, who has to his credit as director works like the marvellously novel *Vicky Donor* and the gripping highway adventure, *Piku*) is also essentially about male dominance. However, unlike *Who Killed Jessica Lal*, *Pink* is not inspired by any one story, but probably based on a series of happenings that have been disturbing our cities and towns and villages.

It is well known that being a woman and single in India immediately lend themselves to a whole lot of unpleasantness. Landlords do not want to rent out their flats to unattached women, who also fall prey to highly intrusive societal scrutiny. What is worse, they are seen as promiscuous by men and are harassed with unwelcome sexual invitations.

The three young women in *Pink* — Minal (essayed by Taapsee Pannu), Falak (Kirti Kulhari) and Andrea (Andrea Tariang) — share a flat in a posh South Delhi locality. They are ordinary middleclass working women who are there to earn a living and live by their own set of rules. They do not disturb the neighbourhood, and their landlord, a bumbling old man, has no quarrel with his tenants. In fact, he does not even dither when he is threatened by some hoodlums to show these women the door. On the contrary, he remains extremely supportive.

One night, when the three women go to a rock concert on the invitation of one of their male friends, the dinner and drinks that follow lead to disaster. Rajveer (Angad Bedi) — one of the men who is part of the group that night — tries to force Minal into bed. She resists and in a sheer instinct of survival, attacks Rajveer with a bottle and injures him. The three women then flee. Rajveer, who narrowly misses losing his sight, vows vengeance. And, with the help of his politically powerful uncle, files a First Information Report with the police where he charges the three women with soliciting and extortion.

The plot then veers to an interesting court-room drama, and an ageing lawyer, Deepak Sehgal (who has hung up his boots and lives a lonely life with his wife dying in a hospital bed), steps in to help the women after Minal gets picked by the police and thrown into a lockup. Sehgal has been a neighbour of the women, and knows that they are decent.

With an exceptional performance by Dhritiman Chatterjee (once a favourite of Satyajit Ray) as the judge, *Pink* has its moments of glory during the courtroom battle. While Pannu, Kulhari and Tariang turn in fine performances (controlled and wonderfully understated), I found the lawyer for Rajveer, Prashant Mehra's (Piyush Mishra) arguments bordering on clownishness. Was this necessary in a serious work like *Pink*?

Rather disappointing was Amitabh Bachchan. Arguably, his character was not well written and this left him like a zombie. Somewhere along the way, we are told that he is suffering from bipolar tendencies. A little more meat into his persona could have lifted *Pink* to a far higher level.

Nonetheless, the work is a punchy indictment of male chauvinism.

A Chinese sings a Tamil song

Often, it calls for unimaginable will to master the seemingly impossible. One has seen Christian missionaries from far away lands read and write and speak Indian languages with flawless ease and perfection. One has also seen foreign students learn Indian classical dances through rare sadhana, and it delighted me immensely to find a Chinese man, Qi Mi — who now works at Microsoft in Seattle, USA — rendering a song in Tamil composed by no less a legend than Ilaiyaraaja and originally sung by another great in music, S P Balasubrahmanyam. SPB or Balu, as the vocalist is endearingly addressed — and who is in the league of Mohammed Rafi and Kishore Kumar — sang *Kalyana Malai Kondadam Penne* in the 1989 K Balachander's hit movie, *Puthu Puthu Arthangal*.

It is this number rendered in celebration of marriage that Qi has sung with remarkable passion — something that could have emerged only from the kind of reverence he has for not only composer Ilaiyaraaja but also the Tamil language, its beauty and its grace. In fact, Qi's rendition was a tribute to Ilaiyaraaja's recent American tour.

After listening to Qi's song, SPB told me that Tamil "is not an easy language. It is very difficult especially for a foreigner. Qi's rendition is musically so perfect, and it is a pleasure to hear him speak in Tamil. And sing in Tamil. Some people may find fault with Qi's pronunciation. But people who have been born in Tamil Nadu and whose mother tongue is Tamil and who have been singing professionally in Tamil make lots of mistakes in pronunciation. So unfortunate."

It is no secret that Ilaiyaraaja is one of India's greatest composers, a maestro who has written thousands of lyrics for Indian cinema. In 1993, he was the first composer from the country to perform at the Royal Philharmonic Orchestra in London.

And SPB has been voicing Ilaiyaraaja's words with mesmeric melody. He hit international headlines in the 1980s with the Telugu movie, Shankarabharanam, a rendering that led to an increasing use of Carnatic music in the cinema made in the State. His recordings with the female playback singer, Janaki, were hugely popular in the 1970s and the 1980s.

It is quite possible that much like Rajinikanth, who got Tamil cinema into the Japanese psyche, Qi's haunting song can get the Chinese humming an Ilaiyaraaja number on the streets of Beijing or Shanghai. Yes, indeed. For, last year during the Cairo International Film Festival, there was one taxi driver who still remembered that evergreen Raj Kapoor song, Main Aawara Hoon. After all these years. Music has this immortality about it, a kind of magical force that can bind and strengthen relationships between two completely different kinds of people.

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