

Qarib Qarib Singlle is a weak story with wasted talent

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IMMATURE: Irfan Khan and Parvathy in a scene from Qarib Qarib Singlle. The movie is a juvenile drama played out by two mature adults in their thirties, not teenagers.



By **Gautaman Bhaskaran**

Let me admit this. I am a huge fan of Irrfan Khan. And as much as I would hate to admit, the actor's presence on the screen invariably overwhelms me, and the film critic in me struggles to fight off this feeling of awe and admiration. As one movie critic wrote after seeing the just released Qarib Qarib Singlle by Tanuja Chandra, there is a tendency to praise any film which has Khan in it. Or, at least gloss over it.

In the case of Qarib Qarib Singlle, we have two very good performers: South Indian Actress Parvathy apart from Irrfan. I still remember her in Bangalore Days, where as a wheelchair-bound radio jockey she was extraordinary. I am sure she has far to go, and Qarib Qarib Singlle, which was her Bollywood debut, revealed that she could be impressive in any language.

In Chandra's latest outing, she is captivating as a young widow (whose single existence is frowned upon by her friends. She performs with exemplary conviction and stands shoulder to shoulder with one of the finest actors I have seen in this world, Mr Khan of course.

But regrettably, Chandra despite being armed with such wonderful artists, has a weak story on hand that is written by Kamna Chandra. We see Jaya (Parvathy), pushed by her friend and social pressure, stepping into a virtual dating site – where after a few vulgar responses, she finds Yogi (Irrfan), a chemical engineer, a foodie and a poet all rolled into one. The two meet in a coffee shop (yawn, where else), and Yogi's casualness and wit first unnerve Jaya, but later disarm her. She begins to warm up to him letting down her guard. It is at this point that I found the film veering off the track like a crazy car whose driver has lost complete control of the steering wheel.

I could never understand the logic behind Yogi's invitation to Jaya to go along with him to three different cities, Rishikesh, Jaipur and Gangtok to meet – of all people his former girlfriends. Now why would any man do that, and why would any woman accept such an offer – with both being near strangers to each other.

A perennial problem with Indian cinema is that it either gets its plot all wrong or its script all messed up. In some cases, both turn out to be unconvincing. In the case of Qarib Qarib Singlle, Chandra has been given a weak story, and I am not surprised that she could do precious little with the screenplay she wrote. But the tragedy of it all is that two exceptional actors agreed to play, and in the process got wasted.

Though we are allowed to peep into Parvathy's life, both professional and personal, there is very, very little we know about Yogi. Parvathy is a designer, a busy one at that, and she has a mother and a curiosity-personified younger brother, who is alarmed to see Yogi on his sister's laptop screen. We also see some of her friends and customers.

But who is this Yogi? What does he do for a living? Where does he get all the money he spends so lavishly on his journey with Parvathy to the three cities. He buys business class air tickets, and manages to miss his flight, but remains totally unconcerned. He buys seats on one of those fancy Palace-on-Wheels trains, but here again misses boarding it on a wayside station when he gets off to buy pakoras!

Finally, he cabs it, and catches up with Parvathy in Rishikesh if I am right, and the two embark on an inspection tour of his exes. She tags along, watching all those reunions, sometimes passionate, sometimes not so passionate. Really, I cannot think of any modern, educated woman doing this.

And in one final moment at Yogi-Parvathy's last stop in Gangtok, she takes off to meet her former boyfriend, whom she dated in college before getting married to her late husband, Manav. Yogi chases her, and sees her in a cable-car that has stopped at a station. He rushes out of the cable-car he is travelling by, and manages to squeeze himself into her car, and then asks her whether she would share his drinking water. She smiles and says yes. What a juvenile drama played out by two mature adults in their thirties, not teenagers.

Tell you, Qarib Qarib Singlle – to me – seemed like a half-hearted attempt to narrate a love story between two mature people, who displayed little maturity in a plot that appeared half-baked or hurriedly baked. And Khan's character was all skin and bones, the most disappointing part of the whole show.

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Aramm is a Tamil movie on present day problems

I was impressed to see actress Nayanthara as a no-nonsense District Collector in the just-opened Gopi Nainar's Aramm. The movie is all about her, and Aramm deals with a huge present-day problem, that of deep, unused bore-wells, which are bone-dry and left uncovered by callous contractors. The openings of these wells are at ground level, and that is what makes them so dangerous.

One fine morning, Nayanthara's Madhivadhini (an IAS officer) gets a phone call about a four-year-old village girl, Dhansika, having fallen into such a pit, about 90 feet deep. The officer rushes to the spot to be confronted by what looks like insurmountable problems: a broken-down fire engine blocking the only narrow road to the village, hysterical parents of the girl, angry villagers baying for the blood of the guilty, ruthless politicians and an insensitive media.

We have seen such journalists before. Remember the way some photographers behaved in the Paris underpass when Princess Diana was dying after a car crash. In Aramm too, we see several television crews shooting a volley of questions — distracting and wearing out the patience of Madhivadhini and the others desperately trying to rescue the girl.

What is most remarkable about Aramm is its ability to stay on track for those 10 or 12 hours when Dhansika lay trapped in the dark well — although I did at times feel the background score a little too disturbing. No costume change for Nayanthara, who was seen throughout the film (except for brief periods when she is answering to a charge sheet in a Chennai office) in the same sari. Subtle and subdued, she goes about taking one risky decision after another (in the end, Dhansika's brother is lowered into the well to get her out) most stoically, and I am sure the actress has certainly carved a fine niche for herself with this movie.

And who knows, Aramm may be just about the beginning of a series of Tamil films that will transform heroines into heroes. In short, Nayanthara has been given a chance to step into a man's shoes, and she has done this with style and substance.

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