

George Clooney's Suburbicon tells us all that is wrong with America

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From left, Matt Damon as Gardner and Noah Jupe as Nicky in George Clooney's latest film that debuted at the Venice Film Festival.



By Gautaman Bhaskaran

Time and again, the Hollywood icon, George Clooney, has been on the Lido – where the Venice Film Festival takes place every Autumn, year after year. This time, the star came with his directorial creation called Suburbicon. It was shown last week.

It was a loaded movie, very political, though it was not a Donald Trump basher as audiences and critics would have expected. At a media conference soon after Suburbicon was screened to a critical applause, Clooney averred that "this is a film about our coming to terms constantly with the idea that we have never fully addressed our issues with race...It not about Trump".

Maybe, but the actor's views about Trump are no secret. I remember he declared, most categorically, in a press conference at the Cannes Film Festival in 2016: "There's not going to be a President Donald Trump". George must have been deeply disappointed when Trump triumphed at the polls, and walked into the White House.

And at the Venice press meeting, he appeared to have given vent to his pent-up feelings when he said in reply to a final question whether he would like to be the next President: "Oh, that sounds like fun... I'd like anybody to be the next President – and right away please".

And whether Clooney would admit it or not, I found Suburbicon indirectly inspired by Trump. The movie set in the 1950s talks about a black family which moves into an idyllic, almost perfect, suburb, and is violently attacked by an angry white mob. This part of the plot is based on a well-known 1957 incident which happened in Levittown, which, in turn, conjures the recent race riots in Charlottesville. Trump has also been talking about building fences.

Clooney's Suburbicon is a comedy, a black comedy set in 1959 – much before the Selma freedom march and the Civil Rights Act, which gave a whole lot of privileges to American Africans. Clooney's story unfolds in a small town of 60,000 people and is a paradise in every way. Till of course a black family settles there, and the locals turn nasty.

Suburbicon – which reminded me so much of brothers Ethan and Joel Coen's 1996 Fargo (where a husband hires killers to bump off his wife so that he can claim insurance money) – has Matt Damon playing Gardner Lodge. Everything looks hunky dory till one night when two hoodlums barge into Lodge's house and kill his wife, Nancy (Julianne Moore, who also essays Nancy's sister, Maggie).

But the truth turns out to be something quite different. Lodge has been having an affair with Maggie – unmarried and who lives there – and the two plan the murder and to scoot with the insurance money. But like so many criminals, Lodge makes mistakes and walks into an inglorious end, leaving behind his little son, Nicky.

As this tragedy unfolds, we watch yet another happening bang across the road where Lodge lives. The whole town is attacking the Negro family which has just arrived there, and in a way Clooney is trying to tell us all that is wrong with America.

The plot by itself may not be very original. But what seemed really striking was the way the movie ends with Nicky and the son of the black family starting a game of baseball!

(This reminded me so much about Roman Polanski's 2011 Carnage in which the parents of two schoolboys quarrel after their sons get into a fight. The parents keep arguing and bickering even as we see the boys patch up and begin playing again.)

We see here Clooney's optimistic streak – when we find the two boys come together after a frightening night of tragic events. "I may be angry," Clooney added at the press conference. "But then I have a lot of faith in the American youth."

Cops who smile

One of the sights that I have always cherished at the Venice Film Festival is the amazing friendliness of policemen and policewomen. Even at the Cannes Film Festival last May with heightened security concerns – France has been badly hit by terrorism – cops seemed quite at

ease, frisking the 5,000 journalists who trooped into the various cinemas day in and day out in a city whose population swells manifold during the annual 12-day event.

Admittedly, Italy has been lucky enough not to have faced the kind of attacks which France or some other European nation has in recent years. But, then, security is a worry even in Italy, and with thousands descending on the Lido, a beautifully quaint island, off mainland Venice, which hosts the Festival, the security forces cannot afford to take chances.

Yet, the ease with which they handle people at the ongoing 74th edition of the Festival is just unbelievable. The men in uniform carrying all kinds of weapons seen at the many check-points leading to the Festival venues are, believe it or not, extraordinarily friendly. And so are the local Venetians, many of whom – even the very elderly – get off their bicycles as a mark of respect or perhaps part of the security drill or whatever to greet the cops and exchange pleasantries. The atmosphere is just cool, even warm. And every time I pass through a barricade, guarded by policemen, they would flash a smile, if not a utter a word of greeting. One night as I made my way to my hotel after the last movie, there was one cop who wished me good night and said "sleep well Sir". Yes he said that and in English!

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