

Oscar-nominated 'Minari' depicts immigrant family's American dream



CHENNAI: Minari is a kind of vegetable that grows in the East Asian wilds and is treasured for its medicinal properties and detoxifying effect. In the film directed by Lee Isaac Chung, "Minari" takes on a mysteriously providential sign, indicating that good things can come from the soil.



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We watch how the movie's protagonist Jacob Yi (Steven Yeun) insists on a livelihood from his land. While "Minari" was unfairly given a thumbs down in this year's Golden Globes and disqualified in the Best Picture (drama) race, it flourished in the Oscars with a nomination in several categories: Best Picture, Best Original Screenplay, Best Director, Best Actor, and Best Supporting Actress.

Yeun plays a Korean immigrant in America, a place he believes to be a “garden of Eden.”

Set in the 1980s, the story tells of how the US is not quite the land of honey and milk he thought it would be. Jacob and his wife Monica (Han Ye-hi) move from the stability of California, where she struggled in her job at a chicken hatchery, to the beautiful, expansive Arkansas. Jacob and his family, including his daughter Anne (Noel Cho) and son David (Alan Kim), may be stuck in a trailer for a home, but the 500 acres of land that come with it are sheer joy for the man, who plans to grow Korean vegetables for his cousins who miss their home cuisine.

Monica is less exuberant, given the fact that life in her new home is a lot harder than what it was in California. David is strained by a cardiac problem and the nearest hospital is an hour's drive away, worrying his mother. But Jacob relentlessly pushes ahead with his dream, and even invites Monica's elderly mother Soon-ja (Korean screen legend Youn Yuh-jung) to take care of the children while the couple are away at work.

Chung peppers his work with delightful incidents, although there is understandable tension and disappointment when Jacob finds it hard to strike water for his land. But with the kids' grandmother playing a pacifist, calming frayed nerves and acting as a bridge between Korea and the US by introducing some traditional Asian values, the small family ploughs on.

Chung weaves into the script his own experiences growing up in an Arkansas farm in the 1980s, and gives it a pleasurably languid feel. Lachlan Milne's camera captures the soothing radiance of the green environment with the glowing rays of the sun beating down. Emile Mosseri's score adds to this calming effect with a score that has a lovely old-world charm. Yeun's intelligent piece of acting, and Han's performance as a worrying mother with Kim adding the mischievous element, ensures that “Minari” is a must-watch for all who believe that cinema must be more than just a restless string of images and drama.