

cinema



✱ Prateik Babbar's washerman character Munna is the most fleshed out in *Dhobi Ghat*.

Stories between the clothes line

Dhobi Ghat, produced by Aamir Khan and directed by his wife Kiran Rao, is a loosely structured film that often appears to have emerged from the dark room of a photographer, writes **Gautaman Bhaskaran**

Aamir Khan may not be exactly a happy man today with the film, *Peepli (Live)* from his production house, failing to make it to the Oscars' short list in the Best Foreign Picture category.

In an earlier column, I had voiced my apprehension about the movie's chances of being nominated for a possible win.

Honestly, it was just not Indian enough, and the Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences

firmly believes that a work must capture a country's essence and flavour to be nominated.

Peepli (Live) while purporting to talk about farmers suicide gets into a loop line of television channel ratings and one-upmanship, something that happens all the time, all over the world.

However, Khan's will be happy that his latest, *Dhobi Ghat* (*Mumbai Diaries* in English), produced by him and wife, Kiran Rao, and helmed by her, has attracted mostly rave reviews.

I wish I could share this view.

It is a loosely structured film that often appears to have emerged from the dark room of a photographer. In fact, it is about a camera-toting investment banker from America, Shai (Monica Dogra), whose luxuries afford her a year-long sabbatical in India.

She uses the time to party, get into a one-night stand with a drunk, recently divorced-with-a-child brooding painter, Khan's Arun, and befriend a dhobi (washerwoman), Munna (Prateik). She

catches him in his many moods, even compiling a portfolio for his ambition to become a movie star.

Rao does manage to subtly highlight the class distinction: there is one remarkable scene where Shai's Woman Friday, Agnes, serves her and Munna tea. Agnes, determined to show the dhobi his place, gets tea in a glass for him and in a cup for her memsahib.

Shai gives Agnes an incredulous look, and picks the glass herself. Munna of course understands the enormity of the barrier, and never

crosses the line. Shai does not encourage him either.

While Shai and Munna paint Mumbai red, tucking in pav-bhaji and getting soaked in the city's pouring rain, Arun is besotted by a video left behind by a former tenant, unhappily married Yasmin (Kriti Malhotra), whose long and arduous video messages to her brother gets a trifle too tedious after a point.

It is difficult to understand Arun's interest in the video images of her: can they really inspire him to paint a portrait of her?

Rao's script makes a second point of contact between Arun and Shai. Munna washes clothes for both, and is often jealous of what he perceives to be relationship between the two.

But Rao's theme of love-versus-class (beaten to death in Indian cinema) has really nothing new to offer. Also, it is not taken to any satisfying conclusion. While we know that Munna is deeply in love with Shai, what does she want from him? This question is left dangling and so is Arun's story that often appears like one long stroke of the brush. In a short film of about 90 minutes, we have to suffer his endless tryst with the abstract canvas!

Admittedly, there are a couple of pluses. Khan is good as the wonderfully brooding artist. But the person who walks away with all the glory is Prateik, whose performance seems career-clinching. It is his character that has been fully realised and actually fleshed out convincingly. The rest seem rather caricatured, even clichéd.

Hopefully Prateik, after whose birth his mother, the brilliant actress, Smita Patil, died, is set to go far, provided directors and scripts help him to do so.

In the end, *Dhobi Ghat* turns out to be a string of shots that reveals Mumbai in its various hues, and walking in and out of these frames are the four main characters, who have really not much of a story to narrate.

Khan must realise that at the end of the day however strong your PR is, the product you are trying to promote must be qualitatively substantial. For *3 Idiots*, he indulged in the most astonishing PR stunts to promote the movie. The film turned out to be very disappointing with a script that was nothing short of stupid.

In the case of *Dhobi Ghat*, Rao told several interviewers how reluctant she was to rope in her husband to play Arun. To me all this appears merely as publicity gimmicks. Who really cares whether you cast your husband or boyfriend to play a part? Once you are part of a cinematic drama, you are just a character in the movie.

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