

Critique

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All We Imagine as Light
A New Voice of the Indian Independent Cinema



In a year where established filmmakers often missed the mark, the 2024 Cannes Film Festival found its redemption in the vibrant, heartfelt storytelling of Payal Kapadia's "All We Imagine as Light." This debut feature from the young Indian filmmaker not only reinvigorated the festival but also showcased the emergence of a new generation of Indian cinema that transcends cultural boundaries while remaining deeply rooted in its socio-political realities.

"All We Imagine as Light" premiered at a time when Cannes was desperate for a fresh narrative. The early screenings from veteran directors like Francis Ford Coppola, David Cronenberg, and Paul Schrader failed to impress, relying heavily on their

past reputations rather than presenting compelling contemporary work. However, the competition was revitalized by Kapadia's film, along with notable entries like Mohammad Rasoulof's "The Seed of the Sacred Fig" and Miguel Gomes' "Grand Tour."

Kapadia's film stands out not just for its storytelling but for its historical significance. Drawing comparisons to the works of Satyajit Ray, it has been celebrated for its humanity and depth. Critics from the Guardian, Indiewire, and Hollywood Reporter and many others have praised its narrative fluidity, sensuality, and the portrayal of women seeking love and happiness in a tumultuous world. In a sense one could say that Payal decoded the western

sensibilities and made them watch in awe the new cinematic expressions of the young Indians who have placed themselves in the universal context of changing global realities and expectations from their art and craft.

"All We Imagine as Light" follows the intertwined lives of Prabha and Anu, two nurses working in a Mumbai hospital. Prabha, played by Kani Kusruti, is a head nurse whose arranged marriage has left her in a state of suspended longing as her husband has virtually abandoned her for a new life in Germany. Anu, portrayed by Divya Prabha, navigates a covert relationship with her Muslim boyfriend, Shiaz (Hridhu Haroon), against the backdrop of societal expectations and religious prejudices.

Kapadia's film delves into the complexities of these women's lives with a poignant mix of realism and philosophical introspection. The narrative explores themes of love, loss, resilience, and the quest for personal freedom within the rigid confines of societal norms. The film's title reflects the ephemeral nature of their dreams and desires, likening them to light—intangible yet essential.

The central theme of longing is beautifully portrayed through Prabha's character, whose silent suffering and unfulfilled desires are depicted with a rare sensitivity. Her interactions with a young colleague, who attempts to rekindle her sense of joy, highlight the subtle tensions and the silent scream for liberation that many women in similar circumstances experience. Anu's rebellious nature, on the other hand, adds a dynamic contrast, representing the younger generation's defiance against traditional constraints.

Kapadia's directorial approach is both elegant and immersive. Her use of documentary elements alongside a poetic narrative structure provides a rich, textured depiction of Mumbai. Cinematographer Ranabir Das captures the city in all its monsoon-soaked glory, contrasting the bustling daytime with the serene, almost mystical nights. The film's visual style is marked by a naturalistic yet dreamlike quality. Long takes, careful framing, and a nuanced color palette evoke a sense of intimacy and immediacy. The use of light and shadow plays a crucial role in

conveying the emotional states of the characters. For instance, the dimly lit hospital corridors reflect the emotional entrapment of Prabha, while the vibrant hues of the marketplace scenes capture the chaotic yet lively essence of Anu's world.

The film's soundscape is equally evocative. The constant patter of rain and a jazz-infused score underscore the emotional currents running through the narrative. Kapadia's careful attention to the subtleties of her characters' interactions adds layers of depth to the story, making every glance and gesture significant. The ambient sounds of Mumbai—honking cars, distant temple bells, street vendors—enhance the authenticity and draw the audience into the heart of the city.

"All We Imagine as Light" is not just a personal story; it is also a reflection on broader socio-political issues. The eviction of Parvati, a hospital cook, highlights the rampant urban insensitiveness and displacements affecting Mumbai's residents. This subplot, though minor, adds a significant layer of social commentary to the film, showcasing Kapadia's ability to weave personal and political narratives seamlessly.

The film's feminist perspective is unmistakable. Kapadia portrays her female characters with a rare sensitivity, allowing them to exist in a space free from overt judgment. The generational divide between Prabha and Anu represents different facets of womanhood and the varied responses to societal pressures. Prabha's adherence to tradition and Anu's rebellion both stem from a shared desire for autonomy and respect.

The socio-political landscape of contemporary India is subtly interwoven into the narrative. The tension between modernity and tradition, the clash of religious identities, and the struggle for gender equality are all present, providing a rich backdrop to the personal stories. Anu's relationship with Shiaz is particularly poignant in this context, highlighting the religious divide and the prejudices that still pervade Indian society.

The performances in "All We Imagine as Light" demands special mention. Kani Kusruti, as Prabha, delivers a hauntingly restrained performance. Her portrayal of a woman trapped in an emotionally

barren marriage, yet holding onto the remnants of hope, is both powerful and heart-wrenching. Kusruti's ability to convey deep emotions with minimal dialogue is a testament to her skill as an actress. Divya Prabha's Anu is a vibrant contrast to Prabha's subdued presence. Her energetic performance captures the restless spirit of a young woman caught between love and societal expectations. Hridhu Haroon as Shiaz brings a gentle strength to his role, providing a nuanced depiction of a man torn between his love for Anu and the societal boundaries that confine them. The supporting cast, including the hospital staff and Prabha's estranged husband, add depth to the narrative. Each character, no matter how minor, is well-developed and integral to the story, contributing to the film's overall richness.

Kapadia's use of visual and narrative symbolism adds another layer of complexity to the film. The recurring motif of light, both in the literal and metaphorical sense, underscores the central theme of hope and longing. The interplay of light and darkness throughout the film mirrors the characters' internal struggles and their quest for freedom.

Water, particularly the monsoon rains, serves as a symbol of both cleansing and entrapment. The incessant rain becomes a backdrop for Prabha's emotional turmoil and Anu's moments of joy, reflecting the dual nature of their experiences. The film's title itself is a metaphor for the intangible dreams and desires that drive the characters, yet remain just out of reach.

The critical response to "All We Imagine as Light" has been overwhelmingly positive. Western critics have drawn parallels to the works of Wong Kar Wai and Abbas Kiarostami, noting Kapadia's ability to balance the needs of the body and mind in her storytelling. The film's philosophical undertones of stoicism and its exploration of the illusion versus reality theme have resonated deeply with audiences.

The film's success at Cannes and the accolades it has garnered mark a significant moment for Indian cinema. It signals the arrival of a new wave of filmmakers who are not afraid to tackle complex, often uncomfortable truths about their society. Kapadia's film, with its international production partnerships, also highlights the importance of global cooperation in bringing diverse stories to a wider audience with high degree of technological competence.

"All We Imagine as Light" is a remarkable debut that reaffirms the power of cinema to reflect and influence societal change. Payal Kapadia's nuanced storytelling, combined with her adept handling of cinematic techniques, has created a film that is both deeply personal and universally resonant. As it continues to garner attention and accolades, it sets a high bar for the future of Indian and global independent cinema.

Kapadia's work not only pays homage to the greats of Indian cinema but also carves out a new path, one that is inclusive, reflective, and profoundly human. In a festival dominated by the shadows of past glories, "All We Imagine as Light" shines brightly, illuminating the potential of a new generation of filmmakers.

The film's ability to connect with audiences on an emotional level, while also provoking critical thought, underscores its significance in the current cinematic landscape. It is a testament to the enduring power of storytelling and the importance of diverse voices in the arts.

"All We Imagine as Light" is more than just a film; it challenges perceptions, inspires change, and celebrates the indomitable spirit of humanity. Payal Kapadia has not only made an impressive entry into the world of cinema but has also paved the way for future filmmakers to explore and express their unique perspectives.