

Critique

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*Mithun*



***Mithya* (Kannada, 98 mins) Dir. Sumanth Bhat**

Nothing ‘happens’ in the opening shots of *Mithun*. Yet the viewer is unnerved.

A young boy, Mithun (or Mithya, as he is fondly called) - 11 or 12 years old - is standing at the open door of a moving train, his hands holding the bars on either side, his back to the viewer. It’s a dangerous position, and you wonder if he is travelling alone or if someone is with him.

A while later, a middle-aged woman with a child in her arms comes along. She asks Mithun to come inside the compartment, but the boy stays on, standing precariously this time, his arms by his side.

By and by, we learn of the whys and wherefores of Mithun’s strange behaviour. *Mithun* the film is a remarkable character study of a boy on the cusp of adolescence, a deeply absorbing and moving tale of family relationships - entwined in love and rivalry, desires and uneasiness - and their impact on a child’s mind. Director Sumanth Bhat has extracted the most extraordinary performances from

its actors, above all from the young actor Athish S Shetty, who has gone into the very skin of Mithun’s character as if he were born to perform this role.

*Mithun* is a boy of few words. He is highly sensitive – as all his reactions to words and events around him demonstrate – and is being put to a severe test. As the story moves on, we see that this Marathi-speaking boy (accompanied by three-year-old Vandana) from Mumbai has been brought by his mausi (his mother’s sister) to her home in Karnataka’s Udupi region, where she lives with her husband Surya and their ten-year-old daughter Anu.

Mithun is treated lovingly in his modest new home. He is given a room and a bicycle, admitted to a Kannada medium school, and makes friends with a slightly older schoolboy, Kishan, but his mind is restless. Director Sumanth Bhat has used different behavioural techniques to exhibit this anxiety - few words, more action: throwing away his bucket of bathwater; tossing and turning in bed; sitting or lying

around and playing with his fingers; paying no attention in class; not responding to calls or questions from his aunt; washing his feet with dozens of mugs of water or bashing his bicycle. Occasionally, though, he is passingly happy when he takes Kishan's double seat on his bicycle to school or plays with him. But much of the time, he resides in his own inner world.

And that inner world is rooted in events of the past. The director uses indirect means to inform the viewer of what transpired in Mithya's life. Elders now discuss their family's history, their quarrels and disagreements in rooms with half-open doors or windows, and Mithya – who is listening outside (and we, the viewers, too) overhears their exchanges. For instance, the Principal of the school where Mithya is admitted tells his uncle, Surya: "Such a tragedy, losing both parents at such a young age," and Surya answers: "The child saw the mother hanging from a fan..."

Unfortunately, Mithya's father's family members (mainly his uncles) land in Udipi to take him away. He is theirs, they claim. The brawls, the allegations levelled by both families and the threats made are bad enough. What Mithya overhears Uncle saying is worse: "Mithya and Vandana are our kids now...but Mithya shouldn't know that his parents adopted Vandana from us."

There we have it. Vandana was brought into Mithya's family; she was not his sister. The news is too shocking for Mithya to process; his mind is confused. He cycles furiously down narrow pathways, his eyes and body language expressing frustration.

A few light moments occasionally lift the mood: the family on the beach eating ice cream, Mithya and Surya climbing to the top of a lighthouse nearby, and Mithya actually smiling broadly at the beautiful sight of the world from above.

But clearly, the arrival of Vandana had shaken matters, even though ambiguity remains about how his father died and why the mother killed herself.

And then, Uncle Surya is served legal notice, and Mithya is briefly sent to a shelter home for boys – tough and unsympathetic as shelter homes tend to be. But he gets out and is back home.

The viewer is still left bewildered. Where is this leading him? A short, intimate exchange between Mithya and Uncle Surya opens another door: "Why did my parents want Vandana?" asks Mithya. "All was well till she came...her arrival ruined everything." Surya is perplexed. How to explain? "I have always wanted a boy," he answers. "They wanted a girl. At that time, the arrangement (of giving Vandana to them) seemed to make sense."

Meanwhile, Anu has a fever and must be taken to the hospital. Mithun is left to take care of little Vandana. They play, and she is happy and bouncy. Mithya then takes her on his cycle to the little stream nearby. He swims, and she flaps around excitedly. All is well; it's a moment of bliss.

Now she wants to swim too. Mithya picks her up and holds her on the water's surface as she beats her arms and legs. Then, tired, she wants no more and calls out to her mother.

Her call seems to break Mithya... Suddenly, he drops her in the water and scrambles up the steep bank. The screen clouds as he stops and holds his breath. Vandana is screaming in the background. But this, for Mithya, is a moment of epiphany. He pauses, seems to think and feel all at once, then springs back into the water and brings out the yelping child, and as she hits him furiously on his back, he hugs her tightly and shouts, "I'm sorry...I'm sorry..." A moment poised between life and death. And life triumphs. Even the viewer feels humbled.

It is an exceptional film, with soft musical pieces introduced at appropriate moments, either when the director shifts focus or when the viewer stops to reflect. Mithun is a calibrated study of a young mind at a life-changing moment. Tense, yes, but the film is beautifully conceptualized, scripted, and edited. Above all else, it is Mithya's film, young Shetty's film.