

Critique

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All We Imagine as Light or a Magic?



All We Imagine as Light (2024) by Payal Kapadia

All We Imagine as Light won the Grand Prix at the Cannes International Film Festival. The film won accolades from all over the world, and fortunately, the film was released in India as well. Fortunately, it is quite difficult to release the award winning films in Indian cities and big and small towns. Multiplexes prefer to release films with popular content, and nowadays, especially films with special effects like VFX techniques. Films like *Pushpa*, *RRR*, and *Bahubali* display their technical prowess, are popular with the masses, and run in packed houses. While films with real but quiet content, delicately told in meaningful cinematic language, languish in the wilderness. One can understand the economy of multiplexes. The

owners run the cinema halls to earn profit. And if the audience just doesn't turn up to watch such films, why should the owner bear the huge loss? In such a situation, even if the award-winning films have the luck, they are released in some little-known theatre in a remote corner of a city at odd hours like 10.50 P.M. or 8.10 A. M, posing a problem for the few cine lovers who are eager to watch these films.

Fortunately, *All We Imagine...* got a good release in comparatively many places and at a time convenient for those who did not want to miss it. The curiosity and the popularity that the Cannes Festival has instilled in the Indian masses during recent years, and of course, the award at Cannes was

the cause (Thanks to Red Carpet! According to the Indian masses, Cannes is all about the Red Carpet). More people were interested in this award-winning film.

But, when I went to the comparatively nearby multiplex after a thorough online research for the show time, ten persons were in the hall, including me. Luckily ten. Ten is the minimum requirement to run the show.

A hazy dawn in the ever busy bustling Mumbai wholesale markets- fish markets, flower bazaars, goods being loaded and unloaded, various voices adding to the busy atmosphere of the bazaars. The day has already begun to break in Mumbai. People run to get to their workplaces, commuting on local trains and buses, becoming a part of the crowd without complaint, for it has been the routine for generations. Visuals of the hustling and bustling Mumbai, supported by comments of working women of Mumbai through voice-over, set the tone of the film's first half. To some of them, Mumbai is a city of dreams; according to others, you never realize how time flies in Mumbai. Here, you have to live in Mumbai's conditions, but there is no alternative for Mumbai, for here you get bread, whereas you will have to starve in your native place. Some say they do not feel at home, though they have lived together for years. Well, Mumbaikar is well acquainted with this life in Mumbai. The film depicts the stark reality. The pace suites quite aptly. One cannot resist appreciating it.

The first half unfolds the life of three migrant working women and the issues they have to face. Prabha is an experienced and dedicated nurse who is married. However, immediately after the marriage, her husband went to Germany to work in a factory, so

Prabha has hardly experienced married life. Yet she hopes against hope that her husband will return. She guards her marital status fiercely. Anu, the young nurse, also works in the same hospital and shares an apartment with Prabha. Contrary to the serious Prabha, Anu, the young nurse, is fun-loving. Her parents keep sending her photographs of eligible bachelors to choose from, but she is in love with a Muslim boy, though she keeps it a secret from Prabha, who is like her elder sister. Both have migrated from Kerala. The number of skillful, dedicated Keralite nurses in Mumbai is remarkable. Parvati is a middle-aged widow of a migrant textile mill worker who works as a helper in the hospital canteen. She will soon be homeless as the builder is asking and threatening to vacate the place. She has been staying here for more than two decades. The mill workers, though originally migrants, coming from various regions of Maharashtra and India, have shaped Mumbai as India's industrial capital. They made the city their own home. So emotionally, Parvati, though originally from the Konkan area of Maharashtra, does belong to Mumbai. She had never thought of leaving Mumbai but now is left helpless and devastated by the builder's threats.



What do Prabha and Anu feel about Mumbai? Do they feel alien here? Anu enjoys

living in Mumbai and is happy in Shiyaz's company. Prabha has not complained about being an alien in Mumbai. She advises Dr Manoj to learn to speak Hindi so that he can communicate with people and will not feel alien in Mumbai. She says it is not that difficult to learn Hindi. She is comfortable with life here, except that she awaits her husband. Even if she had not migrated to Mumbai, she would have waited for her husband while living in Kerala. The three women share their joys and sorrows among themselves, discuss their problems, and suggest solutions.



Obviously, they are in Mumbai because they can earn a living here. Parvati, apparently a strong-willed woman, gives in easily and decides to move to her native village in Konkan without making an effort to look for another dwelling in Mumbai where she earns her living. It is unbecoming of a person like Parvati. Here ends the first half.

In the second part, Parvati is on her way to her village. Prabha and Anu accompany her as her guests. Now, the texture of the outside world changes, and the pace of life slackens. The hustling and bustling of Mumbai is replaced by a lush green village, with a clear blue sea providing the backdrop for a relaxed life. Parvati does not hurry to find a new job as she had hoped.

But what about the issues facing Prabha and Anu? A two- or three-day holiday is not going to solve them. But now the writer-director wields a magic wand. She transforms the realistic story straight into a fairy tale.



Anu's Muslim lover comes to the village to be with his beloved. The meek lover asks Anu to wear a burka while visiting his house in his Muslim locality where both would be alone and when she is on her way wearing a Burka, he calls hurriedly to cancel the visit for his uncle and aunt's plan to be out to attend a wedding is cancelled. Now, the lover courageously rushes to Parvati's village to meet Anu. Both start meeting in the woods passionately, making love. Shiyaz, also a Keralite, is an outsider in this Maharashtrian village in Konkan. But he finds a romantic rendezvous in seaside rock carvings, perhaps hidden from even the villagers so far. The simple materialistic Anu appreciates the art, forgetting her character and entering the Khajuraho era smoothly. This solves the issue of their interreligious union. They don't have to bother about their parents. Prabha and Parvati have approved of their union. So why

worry about what will happen when they return to Mumbai`s routine to Anu`s nagging parents or Shiyaz`s neighbours in the Muslim locality?



Prabha`s fairy tale is much more fantastic. One fine morning, a stranger who had drowned in the water is saved by the village fishermen. He is feared to be dead, but hearing the uproar, Prabha, the skilled and dedicated nurse, hastens to the spot, hurries clear of the crowd surrounding the stranger and gives him first aid to save his life. She takes care of the man till he gets well at a local old woman`s nearby hut. The patient happens to be a Malayali. The older woman takes them to be a couple visiting the village. Prabha tries to clear her misunderstanding, but what a fairy tale! The patient happens to be her husband, who had gone to Germany long back and, instead of keeping in touch with her on a cell phone, had sent her a cooker as a present

without mentioning the sender`s name. There is no clue as to whether Prabha had recognised him. But he has and starts apologising for neglecting her... A man in Germany who drowned in the sea is saved on the west coast of India. How, why... don`t ask. You, as Indians, are well accustomed to the `lost and found `formula of popular cinema. Besides, as children, you have read dozens of fairy tales and met the mermaid suddenly coming out of the sea to meet her human lover.

It is a fantastic patchwork of fairy tales on a realistic story.

Finally, a realistic, wise character, Prabha rejects her husband and liberates herself. Had she been a real person and not a character in a story written by the writer, she would have wondered why this strange happening that just does not go with the texture of my simple life had to be inserted to solve my problem.

Resorting to exotica to lure the Western audience is often criticised, and rightfully. Unfortunately, *All We Imagine* ... cleverly adopts the same trick. Once awarded, Indian fans hungry for awards quickly fell prey to the trick.

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