

Critique

Latika Padgaonkar

*Alaav*



*Alaav (Hearth and Home): Dir: Prabhash Chandra*

There is no real storyline in *Alaav*. But there is a situation: the unremarkable daily lives of two characters. A retired man in his mid-sixties; and his old mother, probably in her mid-nineties – frail and fragile in body and mind. She can neither sit nor stand, can barely eat or speak, she needs to be fed, bathed and cleaned, and she has dementia.

The son, Bhaveen, caters to her every need, every day, all the time. But beneath these repetitive daily actions, the film poses a deeply troubling question: are we living too long? What can life possibly mean when body and mind have given up? The time when large

joint families ensured that there were enough members to support and care for each other has gone. We live alone now, within ourselves; our life span may have extended but have fulfilment and satisfaction kept abreast? *Alaav* is a reflection of our contradictory age: solitude in comfortable surroundings.

Bhaveen, a retired man whose large, artistically decorated house speaks of a man of good taste. The walls of all the rooms are covered with paintings and sculptures; he is a lover of literature and poetry and a singer too, spending what time he can, tanpura in hand,

singing ragas. In fact, these musical interludes seem to keep him going, giving him the calm he needs... He even teaches music to a young girl.



Interestingly, Prabhash Chandra has used a one-scene-one-shot technique. The camera is static and well poised for long periods; some action, some movement may happen or perhaps nothing may happen (all you may see is Bhaveen singing) – till the director cuts abruptly and we move into another room and peep through an unmoving camera once again.

Space and time have been kept tightly under control. Small portions of the house (which appears to be large), comprising a living room and its extension, a bedroom, a kitchen, and a bathroom is where the characters live and have their being. As for time, it ‘moves’ in a naturalistic way, every second ‘lived’ as in life.

Nor do we really know how the house works, who buys the groceries or medicines, who cooks or washes. But what we do see at close quarters is Bhaveen’s utter devotion to his mother: he props her up in bed, feeds her, changes her clothes, takes her to the bathroom on a wheelchair, cleans her, bathes her, washes her hair, removes her dentures, chats warmly with her when she can hardly hear or respond. He sleeps next to her, often stretching out his arm at night to ensure she is

there. A word or two is what she may utter in a day, often meaningless or out of context. He does all this without ever a sign of irritation. Just his daily routine, his duty, done with veneration. It keeps him going but exhausts him too.

He does, though have a young female student, and her presence is a boon. We see passion in his teaching, the way he links *svara* and rhythm to nature, we see how he gives notes emotional and spiritual depth. His sister also visits, gives him a helping hand.

That’s life. Repetitive, dull, unquestioning.

And then one day, the student announces that she has won a scholarship to study in France for two years. It’s the film’s first major moment. Bhaveen is stunned. He turns his head away, we barely see any change of expression on his face. Masking his dismay, trying to gather his confused thoughts, he becomes incoherent, yet he does manage to tell her that while she needs to move on, she should never forget the music she has learnt with him.



No too long after, Bhaveen gets another shock, no less disheartening. During a rather inane conversation with his sister, she tells him that is tired of living in a polluted Delhi. Her body can no longer take it, and she plans to move out.

That is when Bhaveen feels the terrifying weight of his loneliness, his restricted life and his utter lack of freedom. It's almost like a moment of decimation. Erupting in anger, sorrow and perhaps self-pity, he breaks down completely, screams his lungs out, possibly imagining his own future without the two pillars who will no longer keep him company. The director does not show us the emotion on Bhaveen's face. The shot is taken from the back, a heaving body and broken shrieks.



But the mother has to be looked after and life must go on. For how long can this slow pace continue? It's time now for Diwali now. Bhaveen lights diyas in the porch near the garden. Sounds and smells of the festival are all around. For the first time, he takes his

mother outside on a wheelchair, cheers her up. She recognizes the lights and the festival. Seems content.

And then, back to the bedroom. Now, with a difference. Bhaveen on the bed, his mother – absent. We try to guess what this image of Bhaveen means. He is alone, so we surmise that she has left the world. Alone, the bed beside him empty, his face taut, perhaps reminiscing on the life behind and the life ahead.

A truly heartrending portrayal of old age by the mother, and of the complex situation which a man of complex character handles with aplomb. Time can be frustratingly slow but in this case it mirrors the slowness of the existence of the characters, one who has lived her life and the other who now finds himself in a limbo.

An extraordinarily realistic tale of love and caring, shot in a minimalist style, probably the tale of an existence that many people face in the world today as life goes on, as age takes over but death lingers...

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