

cinema



* Ravi Krishna and Jackie Shroff turn out to be unlikely love rivals in *Aaranya Kaandam*.



* Salim Kumar and Zareena Wahab in *Adaminte Makan Abu*, a finely crafted tale about an impoverished elderly couple's efforts to perform Haj.

Two different celluloid journeys

The Tamil film *Aaranya Kaandam* and Malayalam National award-winner *Adaminte Makan Abu* impress in content and style, writes **Gautaman Bhaskaran**

There has been such a famine of good Indian films in recent months that when two comparatively interesting and out-of-the-ordinary works appeared, it seemed as enchanting as an oasis in a desert. Both were debut movies of their directors, and they may not have created a tempest in the tea-cup, but they pleased critics, at least to a fair extent.

When I walked into a nearby multiplex, Inox, in Chennai to watch Thiagarajan Kumararaja's *Aaranya Kaandam* (Jungle Chapter), I was quite frankly expecting to see one of those highly melodramatic, loud Tamil films with its stock of baddies being bashed up by the hero, and silently cheered by his sweetheart.

It turned out to be not exactly this. Yes, we had the baddies, in fact all of them were precisely that. But there was no hero, at least none with a halo. Not even a heroine in the sense we audiences in India perceive.

If at all there was a hero, it was Bollywood's once-upon-a-time heart-throb, Jackie Shroff. Yes, indeed, it was him, for the first time in a Tamil movie or so I am told. That gave *Aaranya Kaandam* its second debut point. And what a performance by Shroff as Singaperumal, replete with his "veshti" and looking every inch a Tamil, an uncouth, pan-chewing gangster at that, with a girl, Subbu — who could have well been his granddaughter — as his mistress.

He holds her as a virtual slave, forcing his unwilling body on her ever so often. When he fails, as he always does, he beats her up in sheer frustration, blaming her unattractive, sobbing face for his inability to perform.

Bengaluru model and actress Yasmin Ponappa plays Subbu, and what a Subbu she plays: compelling in the role of a tortured woman, secretly pairing with Singaperumal's meek, terrorised-into-submission Man Friday, Sappai (yet another impressive portrayal by Ravi Krishna), and finally shocking us with her volte-face.

Sappai is dubbed impotent by his master as well as his cronies, and hence trusted with the responsibility of looking after Subbu. But he falls in love with her, and as an act of defiance, they make love on Singaperumal's bed.

Though Subbu-Sappai's escape seems like a sub-plot in a story of inter and intra-underworld rivalries, it is the couple which helps inject that absolutely uncalled-for twist in narrative.

For Singaperumal, his inability to turn into a nocturnal stud makes him more ruthless during the day. He treats his second-in-command, Pasupathy (Sampath Raj, yet another fine piece of acting here), like dirt, denying him his freedom and his own fiefdom. Not just this, but Singaperumal also plans to have Pasupathy bumped off.

On the other hand, there is Gajendran and his men out to take away a bag of cocaine

that falls into the hands of a village bumpkin, Kalayan, essayed with wonderful wit by Somasundaram, and his son, Kodukapulli, the pint-sized Vasanth, who turns out to be a sarcastic, but intelligent counterpoint to his father's drunkenness and waywardness.

The cocaine chase by Singaperumal's men, Gajendran's ruffians and the father-son duo transforms the film into a blood splattering sport: Shroff trudges along with a blood stained shirt, while Pasupathy expertly cuts men's jugular with his knife, mouthing all along the choicest of expletives.

A nude scene of Shroff thrown in for meaningless effect, and gory violence iced with abusive language had Indian censors squirming. They wanted 52 cuts, but eventually let the film pass with fewer chops and an adult certificate that in any case is widely disregarded in India. It is certainly not a movie for children, for its highly stylised violence — a la Quentin Tarantino — gives credence to the feeling that problems may only be solved through the gun and the sword.

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In *Adaminte Makan Abu*/Abu, Son of Adam (Malayalam and winner of this year's National Award for Best Picture), first timer Salim Ahamed paints the sorrow and suffering of an elderly Muslim couple living in Kerala's Malabar, forsaken and forgotten

by their son in the Gulf and struggling to find money to fulfil their dream of going on Haj.

Rooted in realism, and photographed with feeling by Madhu Ambat (some of the shots are divinely beautiful, conveying a deep sense of loneliness and gloom), the film unfolds its plots through Abu's (Salim Kumar, who won the National Award for Best Actor this year) travails as he goes about collecting money for his and his wife, Aishumma's (Zarina Wahab) pilgrimage. He sells Unani medicines and "athar" (perfume) that nobody wants, and, finally, in desperation and terrible distress gives away his cow and an old tree.

And when the passports and the tickets are just a bus journey away in Kozhikode, the sawmill owner while handing over the money for the tree says that its wood turned out to be rotten and hence useless. He insists that Abu still take the money, since it is for a noble cause. But Abu refuses it, saying that it would not be "halal"; and hence could anger Allah. (I do not know whether such men live today, but Ahamed, who penned the story, says he was inspired to write a character like Abu based on his experiences as a travel agent.)

Adaminte Makan Abu while being a rare study in restraint often plays out like a placid stream. Except for the old couple's son, who is never shown and who turns out to be the cause of all the misery and disappointment, Ahamed portrays too idyllic a situation. The schoolteacher essayed by Nedumudi Venu, the manager at the travels (Mukesh), the sawmill owner and just about everybody else are goodness personified, with the result that there is very little drama in the movie. What is more, it is quite predictable. I certainly knew what was coming. But, yes, *Adaminte Makan Abu* did engage me with its fine directorial skills and marvellous performances, particularly by the lead pair. Isaac Thomas's background score does add up.

However, the essential fault with Indian cinema, or much of it, is its inability to strike a fine balance between drama and exaggeration, between sound and silence, between verbosity and understatement, between garrulousness and taciturnity. Often, we are left watching a bit too much of one.

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