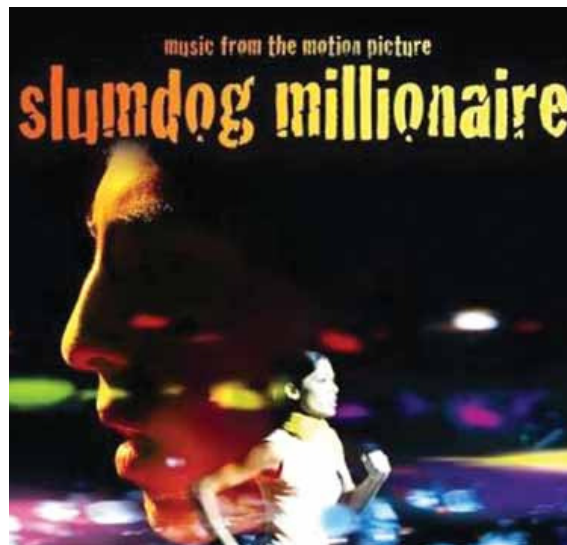


cinema



* A still from *Trishna*.



A twisted view

Films often tend to portray a Western perception of India, an impression that may be very different from the ground reality. **By Gautaman Bhaskaran**



Cinema so often looks at India with a twisted view.

Once, Roland Joffe visualised what was then Calcutta with such an essentially Western perception in his *City of Joy* that the metropolis, where I grew up and worked in my first newspaper, appeared slanted.

Danny Boyle's recent *Slumdog Millionaire* made a star out of a virtual nobody, Frieda Pinto, while merrily celebrating India's poverty. "It was so cheap that I walked out of the cinema in 15 minutes," said renowned Greek helmer Theo Angelopoulos. Boyle's India was degrading to the core, sad, shameful and nauseating.

But the Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences loved Boyle's film, and nominated it for 10 Oscars. It won eight, including that for the Best Picture and the Best Director! *Slumdog Millionaire* walked away with all these accolades, because the movie fitted in perfectly well with the West's notion of what India should be.

There are others like British director Michael Winterbottom, whose latest *Trishna* (premiered at Toronto), conveys in no uncertain terms how little the man knows about India, with its mindboggling variety (language, religion culture, food). This was amply proved by the way he has written the *Trishna* script.

Adapted from Thomas Hardy's *Tess of the d'Urbervilles*, Winterbottom transposes *Trishna* from the 1891 English countryside to a contemporary small town in Rajasthan. To imagine that the Indian woman, even in some of the country's remote regions, will be as

docile as Tess was, is a misnomer. The Indian woman, particularly one who is educated, as *Trishna* (played by Frieda Pinto) is, is not fettered by some of the social conditions that Tess faced.

In an altered version of the Hardy fiction, Winterbottom introduces us to the wealthy son, Jay (Riz Ahmed), of a blind hotelier (Roshan Seth), who comes to India from Britain to explore business possibilities. During one of his travels, he meets Trishna, who works as a maid in a hotel. When her father's jeep, that helps her family earn its living, is damaged in an accident, Jay offers Trishna a job in one of his father's luxury hotels.

Jay combines in him the two men in Hardy's literary work, Alec and Angel, and unlike the original, Winterbottom's hero is largely noble — a fact which surprised me about Trishna's extreme step in the end.

What is more, she had chances, and enough, to have freed herself from what Winterbottom purports to be a slavery of sorts, sexual certainly, accentuated by the wide economic disparity between Jay and Trishna. Even if one were to consider Trishna's advantage in a relationship with Jay — that will help her impoverished family better their living prospects — she had, as would any Indian woman today, avenues other than the one she so tragically chooses.

Equally unbelievable is the way Winterbottom projects the relationship between Trishna and her parents and siblings. In a state like Rajasthan where virginity is invariably equated with family honour, Trishna's folks appear as calm as a British

household would when it finds its unmarried daughter pregnant.

Winterbottom shows Trishna going through an abortion (after a sexual encounter with Jay, not quite rape as in the novel) at a clinic with her parents in calm attendance. The only sign of familial displeasure is seen in the father (who refuses to talk to Trishna after the incident). There is not even a trace of sorrow or anger in her mother!

So, like many foreigners Winterbottom appears to have been foxed by Indian society. But, what is absolutely inexcusable is the way *RA. One* has been written by Anubhav Sinha, also the film's director. It purports to be a science fiction work that talks about a game designer, Shekhar (Shah Rukh Khan), who makes a motion-sensor-based game in which the villain is more powerful than the hero. A peculiar twist enables the villain to escape the virtual world into the real, and he begins hunting down Lucifer, the only one to have ever defeated him.

The movie got the boxoffice jingling all right: an advertisement blitzkrieg and a clever marketing ploy was unleashed on the unsuspecting masses by releasing *RA. One* in both 2D and 3D versions, attracting repeat viewings. One watching it in, say, 2D was tempted to look at the other form as well or vice-versa. And before anyone could decide whether it was good or bad, the producers were in splits!

Also, the film was touted as one for children, but with such explicit sexual innuendoes that appeared vulgar even for an adult. Here was an intelligent actor like Khan willing to stoop so low: the animated guy in

the movie gropes the protesting leading lady (Kareena Kapoor) and then the villain, and ever so often touches himself. Then there are jokes about condoms that the animated avatar cracks with the lady in the presence of her young son, who later does the same with her!

If the movie is layered with such perversion, what comes off as even worse is the South Indian bashing. Imagine showing Shekhar, a Tamilian, eating noodles mixed in curd and in such an uncouth manner. And, he pronounces keys as kiss! This is the guy who lives in London. To top it all, Khan talks Tamil or what sounds vaguely like it.

I thought such degraded sense of humour had long gone out of the window — with perhaps *Padosan* and comedian Mehmood. But Khan and Sinha seem to have resurrected it with a vengeance.

Must someone like Khan let himself into such an atrociously bawdy film (with the father engaged in crotch grabbing movements with his little son watching)? One had thought that Indian movie writers and helmers would stop with the unadulterated idiocy of innumerable blockbusters. But *RA. One* takes the cake and rolls on.

If Winterbottom's *Trishna* wallows in naivety, Sinha-Khan's *RA. One* is steeped in vulgarity and ridicule. I would pardon Winterbottom, not Sinha and Khan for dumping such garbage on us. And calling it a film!

(Gautaman Bhaskaran has been writing on Indian and world cinema for over three decades, and may be contacted at gautamanbhaskaran@yahoo.in)