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Mumbai Friday 28 April 2000 11:07 pm



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Split and siren

DELHI spared him. In Mumbai, you could have had Salman Rushdie for breakfast and rather indelicately vomited him at high table over dinner. No one would mind. This city has the culture of a bacteria — it turns milk into curd, and food into turd. I shall spare you all Mumbai bombast, for it is in this blasted metropolis that even as I walk on polluted clouds, I find my feet.

Here, we are all the underbelly, whether we have pierced navels or famished bellies, whether we crawl or fly. We have no skin, we have no wings. We are raw, like fruit waiting to be plucked, and in that insufferable wait, perchance hoping that, if nothing else, at least rotting should be our fate.

It hurts. When they tell you that the place you inhabit is a heap of gnarled souls, having no time to mourn their own demise. It hurts even more when you know it to be the truth. A truth from the other side of the glass wall, from where you watch unashamedly as blood spills. And you couldn't care whether it is from the innards of innocence or insidiousness.

Or perhaps you care, but are too afraid to voice your fears, lest they come home to you and become family. You have to care. If you know Kut Price (KP). I have met him, at Dharavi, at Kamathipura, and recently in Split Wide Open. I sat through the film and as I walked out into the light, I was grabbed by the utter blackness of being.

I did not have to ask if such things happened, I knew they did. But like all civilised people, I often cannot stomach the truth. The director has defined his endeavour as a fragmented paradoxical view of Mumbai, a sort of jazzy hyperbolic life that we lead in Mumbai versus what happens to the people

out there.

Sorry, Dev Benegal, the people out there are we, which is why I was so moved. Or, rather, shaken. The man who lusts after little girls is us, so is KP, Didi, Nandita Mehta. The last one is only the link between reality and portrayed reality. But, is there any difference? Split is not a dark film; it is a tragedy without the tears.

It is thirst that is quenched not by water alone, nor hunger by food. It is an interminable search for that which is coveted but rarely found. A gay priest sitting vicariously before the TV



set may appear debauched, but in fact has a deep need to connect with the real world. His boys remain indebted to him and as he sits with them under a tree, providing them with an arsenal for living, he himself is the shade from the harsh glare.

His monsoon death is just another way of dying – or are his sins being washed away? Do perversions constitute sin, or is it just that the wire gets twisted on its way to the socket? Is that which lights up a dark mind also one likely to endanger it? When Nandita Mehta, the talk show host, gets people to slink behind shadows and bare their secrets, are we being treated to a parody about television or about life?

The middle-aged stern-looking tough cookie whose son-in-law gets under her table and brings her to orgasm or the cook who satiates the sexual appetite of both master and mistress or the young girl who discovers that her husband is impotent on the wedding night and is forced to warm the bed of her father-in-law and become pregnant with his child, to keep it all in the family, are they anonymous creatures, looking for acceptance or are they searching for their lost identities?

And does the beautiful and poised Nandita know what she wants? A slice of somebody else's life or a denial of her own? When she lunges at KP, tears his shirt and watches his naked body with a clinical eye, saying with a touch of mockery. So this is how a Mumbai man from the slums looks like? Not bad! Passion itself becomes dispassionate.

For her, everything is lights, camera, action. KP is one more of her subjects (objects?), and with her intelligence, not surprisingly, she realises that hers is a flawed perspective of the world. Which is why she leaves. There is more than a touch of irony when she is replaced by Leela, the paedophile's daughter, who had once been on her show to purge herself of the anger and shame she felt over her father's behaviour.

Is it a victim looking for others to form a congregate of victimhood or has the unknown exhibitionist turned voyeur in the hope of finding fragments of self-esteem? Although sexually exploited by her father, she retains a deep affection for him. It is only when, on her return from abroad, she finds that he has kept another girl, that all the pent-up hatred comes to the fore.

But isn't there a touch of envy in her anger? Does she not fear that the little Didi, in having replaced her in her father's bed, could also, as a consequence, take her place as a daughter? Has the difference blurred in her mind? In a poignant moment, she even strips off her blouse and offers herself to her father, a desperate realisation dawns on her and us that as a grown-up woman she probably is of not much value to him.

For Didi, the innocent flower-seller, the older man and his goodies are the sirens. Dressed in new clothes, her hair in a fringe, lips coloured, and eyes lined, her search for a better life is complete and yet ended. She refuses to leave, saying that she likes it here, but as she bites into a dark stiff bar of Toblerone and mutters that all men are like that, we know that this is the beginning of cynicism for her.

And if KP wants to protect her and one day take her back to his village, it is to save himself from the ignominy of not having to believe that he has lost his innocence. It is not because he sells Evian to the rich and pipe water to the poor, but because he knows there is no escape. There are no life stories in this film, only vignettes from the torn pages of a diary.

Much like the city itself. Split Wide Open must necessarily qualify as a truly contemporary urban film and a pioneering effort. The point is not that it shocks us or mirrors reality but that it makes us want to run away and yet belong. It shows

us how familiar strangers are and how little we know about ourselves.

Farzana Versey refuses to sit on the fence for MID-DAY



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