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Film review

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FILM REVIEWS

Should we make light of the kidney trade?

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***Loud Speaker*. Producers: New Generation Cinema, director: Jeyaraj; language: Malayalam.**

I must confess that I am a Mamooty fan and felt that my review would be biased in favour of this film. Unfortunately even the presence of Mamooty did not help me enjoy this movie. The script writer seemed confused, as he did not know what message he wanted to convey. It was difficult for the viewer to understand whether the focus was the unethical methods by which kidneys were being procured, or the fact that unrelated donors could also be extremely kind-hearted and generous.

There was enough meat in the theme to have made my two hours worthwhile. And this movie boasted some of the stalwarts of the Malayalam film world - Nedumudi Venu, Innocent, Sukumari, Sabitha Jayaraj, and KPAC Lalitha. Unfortunately, the talent of every single one of them was wasted. The comedy was pathetic. The music was pedestrian. The editing was juvenile. I am no movie critic, but I can definitely say when I have been taken for ride (a bad one at that).

The movie revolves around Mike Philipose (Mamooty), a simpleton from the village, agreeing to donate his kidney to Menon (Shashi Kumar), an astrophysicist returned from abroad. Called "loud speaker" because of his booming voice, Philipose agrees to "donate" his kidney for the money that he is promised, so that he can retain his father's ancestral property. The movie shows potential kidney donors being recruited by middlemen. It is quite obvious that these middlemen are not very discriminating and will take all comers. This aspect of the movie is not focused upon and I consider that a missed opportunity. Instead it is shown in a lighter vein which definitely leaves a bad taste in the mouth. The issue of kidney donation by unrelated donors (without middlemen) for money is an issue that is worthy of an international debate and maybe the celluloid world could have led the way, if this movie had been handled appropriately.

At the end of this film, the unrelated donor refuses to accept money as he has befriended the recipient. The recipient on his part makes sure that he compensates in kind by paying off the donor's loans and making sure he does not lose his ancestral property. All this, I guess, is supposed to warm the cockles of the viewer's heart and jerk out a tear or two. In my case, I shed more than a tear, because I had wasted two precious hours of my life on this movie.

An innocent view of a troubled world

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***My Name is Khan*. Dharma Productions, 2010. Director: Karan Johar. Screenplay: Shibani Bathija. Hindi: 2 hrs 40 min.**

Rizwan Khan (Shahrukh Khan) is a person with Asperger's syndrome, a neurological disorder within the range of autism spectrum disorders.

His condition is portrayed through his response to his environment. Loud noises make him nervous, the colour yellow freaks him out, new places and people make him very uncomfortable, and he doesn't make eye contact when he speaks. His interactions with others are devoid of feeling. His emotions are not dead; it is just that he does not know how to express his feelings. But he has a sharp mind. He is also as innocent as a newborn baby.

People with an autism spectrum disorder have a reduced ability to communicate and interact with others. Asperger's syndrome differs from other autism spectrum disorders by its relative preservation of linguistic and cognitive development.

Also, those with Asperger's syndrome typically make more of an effort than those with other autisms to make friends and engage in activities with others.

Rizwan is Muslim. He has been brought up by a strong and loving mother (Zarina Wahab) who teaches him the most important lesson in life, one that not only shapes his character but also shapes the story: that the only difference between people is that of "good and bad"; the rest doesn't matter. This theme continues as a leitmotif throughout the story against many divisions - the "normal" and the "autistic", American and Asian, black and white, Muslims and non-Muslims, terrorists and victims, and love and hatred.

When his mother dies, Rizwan moves to America to live with his unsympathetic younger brother (Jimmy Shergill) and his wife, where he tries to adapt himself to the new and busy environment. As the story unfolds, he falls in love with Mandira (Kajol), a single mother who is Hindu. They get married and start living together along with Mandira's son from her first marriage. Mandira and her son, Sam, take Rizwan's last name, Khan.

But after September 9, 2001, Americans changed the way they looked at Muslims. Sam becomes the victim of an anti-Muslim attack. Shocked after hearing the reason for her son's murder, Mandira blames it on Rizwan and his religion. In a fit of anger she yells at him to go away from her and come back only after telling the American president, "My name is Khan and I am not a terrorist."

So he sets off to do exactly this and embarks on a journey through America. His mission is to meet the president with the message that all Muslims are not terrorists. Along the way, the film shows him change the Americans' outlook towards Muslims. He eventually gets to meet the president and pass on his message. Unfortunately this message is repeated so many times that the awe factor is taken out of the film's climax.

Karan Johar presents a view of religion through the eyes of a person with Asperger's, a seemingly emotionless state. This is an interesting way of discussing a subject fraught with emotions and controversies in the current scenario. The movie also conveys a message of optimism and hope for those affected by autism or Asperger's syndrome.

Several episodes deal with ethical issues in relation to people with special needs. For example, Rizwan's behaviour - and his name -- set off a security alert in the airport and he is strip searched by security officers. They find an "autism alert" card in his bag but choose to ignore his medical condition because of their racial profiling.

The movie also explores the misinterpretation of Islam - by its own followers as much as by paranoid westerners in a post-9/11 America.

As the credits roll at the end of the film, a voice over repeats the movie's simple but hard-hitting message to the world: Entire communities cannot be punished for the crimes of a few. Let us hope that this film makes at least a small change to this troubled world.