

Pestonjee

by
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Pestonjee has been generally viewed and reviewed as a film on the Parsi community. However, it is also an interesting attempt by a woman director (Vijaya Rao) to study the male psyche. Although male film directors (and novelists) very frequently focus on a woman protagonist, the converse is comparatively rare.

The film is about ways of seeing. Thus, though Feroze's (played by Naseerudin Shah) is the central consciousness in the film, it is named for his dearest friend Pestonjee, known as Pesi (played by Anupam Kher). This titling after the one seen rather than the one seeing suggests how the imaginative life we live, which may be the life of another, can overshadow the life that is apparently our own.

Feroze is a retiring, shy, sensitive person, with a hyperactive moral conscience. His friendship with Pesi, a highly energetic, fun loving gogetter, thrives on opposition, with each trying to shape the other in his own image - Feroze reproaching Pesi for his extravagant lifestyle and Pesi trying to draw Feroze out of his shell. But the tussle loses its good humour after Pesi's marriage. The marriage is a failure as Pesi and Jeroo (played by Shabana

Azmi) are completely incompatible. Jeroo is temperamentally far more similar to Feroze who is her silent and devoted admirer.

The portrait of Jeroo, as she develops from a naive, romantic but not very intelligent girl into a cantankerous, hysterical wife (and, later, widow) is a brilliant study of a woman destroyed by the compulsions of an unsuitable marriage. The way her gift for piano playing, and ultimately even her desire to play, are eroded by the stresses of domesticity and bondage to an uncaring husband, represents a drama enacted in the lives of many women.

One of the film's strengths is that the characters are presented as likable, even lovable, without idealising them. The frontal portrayal of their weaknesses and eccentricities moves towards a compassionate rather than a judgmental vision. This links up with the question of point of view. The characters' limited perceptions of one another are true and yet less than the whole truth. Thus, Feroze, who had mentally labelled Pesi's mistress a calculating vamp, because of her promiscuous past and loud manner, is compelled to acknowledge, after Pesi's death, that her love for him was both genuine and generous. In the portrayal of this woman, the film adopts the device of first feeding into a stereotype that is deeply lodged in the consciousness both of Feroze and of the viewers, and then gradually undermining it to expose its inadequacy.

The theme of the relationship between viewer and viewed is constantly suggested by the way the camera is used, for example, through the recurrent image of the staircase - with one character climbing or descending while another watches from above or below. The telephone is similarly used as a metaphor for distance as much as communication - when Feroze dials Pesi's number and replaces the receiver without speaking or remains silent when Pesi rings him up.

However, the film maker is unable to resist the temptation of spelling out a "moral of the story" - Pesi's adjuring of Feroze not to live vicariously through others while simultaneously passing judgment on them, but rather to live his own life fully and without fear. This tends to fall flat as a concluding *sententia*, primarily because Pesi himself lacks the depth that could lend it conviction. The film does somewhat less than justice to Feroze when it unfavourably contrasts his life of perpetual waiting with Pesi's self absorbed callousness to the damage he inflicts on others. The film maker also holds back from a full exploration of the intensity and complexity of Feroze's emotions for Pesi - these are suggested but evaded.

The local colour is overdone at certain points and acts as a distraction. But some pieces of magnificent acting, especially by Naseerudin and Shabana, make the film well worth a viewing. •

