FILM REVIEW

The Electric Moon

by
Madhu Kishwar

To an audience addicted to soppy, sentimental, "permanently - and - thor-oughly - good - guys versus perma-nently - and- irredeemably - bad - guys" format of Indian cinema, this is bound to present itself as a disturbing film. At the Bangalore film festival the director Pradip Krishen and script-writer Arundhati Roy were flooded with a barrage of hostile questions: "How dare you present Indians in such a bad light?", "It will harm the national image," and so on. This is a film that flatters no one — in fact it is a thoroughly irreverent film. There are no heroes and no villains

— only ordinary human beings with all their vanities, failings and petty dishon-esties allowed a full play, as in real life. Compared to their first film made by Roy and Krishen together, *In Which Annie Gives Them Those Ones,* which seemed to me rather teenagerish in its self righteousness, this film has both a complex and a challenging vision. This film is like a breath of fresh air even for, avant garde alternative cinema which, despite its attempts to be realistic, sel-dom rises above goody goodism of the *Aakrosh-Nishant* syndrome that neatly divides the world between the evil, ex-ploiting rich and the angelic, exploited poor. Arundhati and Pradip Krishen have been courageous enough to show without embarassment that poverty is not a conducive ground for breeding angelic creatures, that relations between the dominant and dominated inevitably demean both. And the interaction be-tween the two does not usually allow for the heroism and dignity which radicals have often attributed to the poor. It is a no-holds-barred description of the mutually demeaning interaction between the people of the arrogantly dominant West and the grovelling Third World.

The film does not have much of a conventional "story" — but is an un-folding of characters through a series of encounters. In the forests of Central India there is an expensive jungle lodge called the Machan which caters exclu-sively to foreign tourists. *Desi* elite are simply not allowed even if they are willing to pay as much as the foreigners. The Machan is run by the impeccably westernised Raja Rau Bikram Singh, his sister Sukanya and their younger brother Ranveer Singh, played by Gerson D'Cunha, Leela Naidu and Roshan Seth respectively. Even their pet names, Bubbles for Bikram Singh, Socks for Sukanya and Chris and Eric for Ranveer's sons Akshay and Aditya are hilariously apt as symbols of an attempt of our brown sahibs to be more British than the British, while at the same time being unable to give up altogether their original identity as rep-resented in their given names serving as mementos of their pedigreed up-bringing which supposedly gives them an edge over other ordinary riff-raff also trying to emulate the white sahibs.

The two brothers and the sister be-long to an impoverished erstwhile royal family, now reduced to selling themselves, their past and their privacy to the foreigners who have come to India in search of the Oriental mystique — tigers, turbans, maharajas, snake charmers and the like and 'an-easy-to-digest dose of India's poverty.' What was once probably the erstwhile maharaja's es-tate, is now a "national park"—in other words — property forcibly taken over by the Government and "managed" in characteristic rapacious and red tapist style by *sarkari babus.*

Bubbles, Socks and Ranveer run the Machan, along the lines of a camp at the time of the Raj. Even the servants are made to appear as classic oriental creatures who play well-rehearsed roles in order to help fleece the foreign tourists through stage-managed tricks.

But the star tourist attraction is Bubbles himself — as an oriental Maharaja. In actual fact he has more in common with quirky British aristocrats after whom large sections of the dispos-sessed Indian royalty began to model themselves. Bubbles submits to the charade he has devised, even though he wants to maintain the pretence that he and his family are above the "vulgar" riff-raff. He even

Bubbles receives a group of American tourists

learns to play the part of a male stud to some of the western women who come to Machan and ex-pect a brief sexual affair with the real Maharaja thrown in as part of the tourist package deal.

In tune with its anti-hero tenor, the film does not use the supposedly minor characters as mere props. In fact, each one of the characters is delin-eated with unusual care for detail and each one is allowed to have a life of his or her own. The audi-ence is not allowed to identify with any of the characters — we are made to laugh at them all. Yet most of them have a sort of tragic dignity to them. For instance, Boltoo, the tracker, shows his debasement as part of the fraudu-lent tourist package even in his twisted up body movement. He is a petty thief, steals firewood as well as cold drinks meant for the guests. And he is suitably servile. Yet he manages to lend a sort of desperate dignity to his role in brief memorable scenes where he manages to be one up on those for whom he is no more than a "facility" they have paid for.

Gaj Singh, Boltoo and Johnston are trained to behave like puppets. One of the most tragically hilarious scenes is when over breakfast the guests are en-tertained to a gory account of the tiger coming for his kill: Boltoo's "rehearsal" has made his whole account sound a little stilted and melodramatic. Sukanya and Ranveer obligingly translate his narrative but have to remind him on the side, *"Boltoo, zyada banavati lag raha hai, thodakumkaro."(Bo\too,* it sounds too artificial. Tone it down a little). This is followed by a scathing critique of all those who sell India's misery and scars — done in a memorable scene with Johnston giving a well rehearsed narra-tion of how he survived the attack of a maneating tiger when he was 13, though he was left gruesomely scarred by the accident. The family makes him rou-tinely exhibit his scars while narrating the gory tale of how his father's body was mangled by the tiger in an attempt to save him.

And when the same Johnston resigns from his job as bearer, declaring pompously to his impoverished "royal" employers that he has decided to "freelance", one doesn't know whether it's a slap on the face of his employers for having exploited his story, knowing fully well that their exhibiting his scars is one of the Third World grotesqueries that has instant tourist appeal — or amounts to spitting on his own face for having acquired sufficient confidence in selling his own scars all on his own. The film is made in English with a touch of Hindi thrown in. But it is re-markable the way scriptwriter Roy makes every kind of English appear mirthful by no more than making each type speak typically. There is the English English of Phoebe and her husband lan which stays immaculate even while they are hurling abuses at each other. There is American English, French Engh'sh and the English of brown sahibs, Ranveer, Socks and Bikram Singh, whose faithful copy of the Queen's English surprises even the British. But even within Indian Engh'sh, Arundhati Roy is able to bring out char-acteristic regional and class nuances. There is the Punjabi English of Veekay, Madhya Pradeshi bureaucratese of Goswami and the inimitable Chrischun English of Johnston among many oth-ers. Here is a sample from Johnston's account of his encounter with the tiger, "Tiger bite, Madam. Before I became Chrischun. In that time I am only 13 years. My father was woodcut-ting in jungle, when one maneater tiger came—His eyes like Devil eyes, yellow yellow — And he's catch me here with his mouth——I am shouted but he's pullt me away——I can smell his inside mouth. Very very bad smell, Madam like that—— rotten meat you know?— (Johnston turns around and lifts up his shirt to reveal a deep gouge running down his back and continues his spiel.) Sixty five estetches..Then my father came to look me. Then the maneater left me and killed my father, madam—Then I become Chrischun and Carpet Sahib send me to Mission school — Now I am residing here for bearer. You can see," and passes on to them a yel-lowed press clipping wrapped in a polythene packet — as proof of the veracity of his story.

Leela Naidu as Socks

The mutual interaction of these various language types is as hilarious as the reactions of the tourists who are being defrauded and ridiculed by those whom they consider no more than hirelings. While the Indians who try to fleece the gullible western tourists are ruthlessly ridiculed, the latter are not spared either for their pursuit of the stagemanaged, sterilised slice of real India and their distaste at seeing "too much plastic" around. They like the mud huts, but not to live in — only for taking pictures. They expect every one of their whims to be indulged in since they are paying for the "facilities" which include, in the view of some of them, sexual services on demand by whoever they fancy. Everything, in their view, ought to be

available for a fee and the promise of a handsome tip. Emma's puzzlement at Boltoo's wife declining her offer of 15 US dollars for the ethnic silver jewellery she is wearing is put in perspective with a one line retort by Boltoo's wife, "Ask her to fuck off." Behind that angry retort is exasperation at Emma's assumption that everything has or ought to have a price tag. Arundhati Roy angrily recounts that similar scenes were repeated in actual life while they were shooting the film in Panchmarhi. One day when some of the western caste members were desperate for some beer or liquor, the celebrated Indian writer Dom Moraes, who hap-pened to be camping near the shooting location, offered to drive them to the wine shop in a nearby town. For this act of hospitality Moraes was taken to be a chauffer and offered a 10 rupee tip! The English actress doing the role of Phoebe is supposed to have forced the director and scriptwriter to change her lines and alter her role because she felt she knew better how the English behave and therefore had the right to alter the script to suit her notion of how she wanted herself depicted.

Despite the problems inherent in an Indian director handling an international cast, the film has superb acting. The most masterly portrayal of all is by Naseeruddin Shah as Rambhuj Gos wami. He is the epitome of the ace Indian bureaucrat who has oiled his way through the corridors of power to get to where he is now — the Director of the National Park — a position of power and influ-ence with lots of trees to sell. He is cleverly corrupt and uses the myriad rules and regulations with classic aplomb with full awareness of the power to ha-rass, intimidate and tyrannise and to extract bribes that those rules bestow upon him. He can afford to be arrogant because the might of the government of India is on his side. The royal trio start off by making fun of his plebian ways — "He probably eats with his fingers and

A hard hitting scene : Ranveer (Roshan Seth) at the police station for the mandatory registration of foreign tourists

speaks English with a terrible Indian accent." But within no time he puts them in their place. The various encounters between the erstwhile royalty and this oily bureaucrat of low middle class ori-gins and his correct but frighteningly bureaucratic use of the English language, makes for one of the most memorable portrayals in Indian cinema.

Despite the biting satire against all those who indulge in buying and selling of culture, each character (except perhaps Goswami) is allowed moments when he or she looks pitiable. As. for instance when Socks sheds her hoity toity memsahib posturing on hearing the sound of bed creaks from her brother's tent. She looks at her sad and haggard face in the mirror, giving us the first subtle hint of her incestuous love for her brother. However, in the end when Socks and Bubbles are shown coming close in a kiss, Arundhati man-ages a remarkable understatement bringing out the pathos of a situation that could have easily been titillating. The world has closed in on this erstwhile royalty. They, as representatives of a dying species, have no one to turn to but each other. The brother and the sister coming close sexually thus high-lights their isolation from the real world, rather than being a "hot and sexy" scene.

Soon after, when the film ends with Bubbles dressed up like a fancy dress Maharaja, with a plane load of snake charmers, folk artists, kathakali danc-ers and other exotic specimens — all being carried for display to the Festival of India being held in Denmark — one is left feeling sorry and sad for the very same characters who were objects of satirical mirth through the film.

Its just as well the film was made for BBC Channel Four. The Indian Censorboard is unlikely to have cleared this film because this is, if anything, likely to damage India's already measly tourist trade.

The film has not one character or situation one can dwell on affectionately, not because everyone is evil in an exaggerated fashion. Quite the contrary. This is no Swiftian satire. The film avoids overstatement. Yet the film's all out cynicism leaves one deeply disturbed for if this vision of the world goes a bit further, it could easily become misanthropic.