

LAAPATAA LADIES: FEMINISM DONE RIGHT



Even with their separation, Kiran Rao and Aamir Khan are somewhat of a power couple in Indian cinema. Both are filmmakers who have led projects and movies addressing social issues across India, with some big productions, such as Dangal and Dhobi Ghat (both co-produced), under their belt. Yet, Laapataa ladies feels different.

This Netflix production is subtle, a Bollywood movie with the flair surgically removed, with a largely untested, unknown cast, setting place in a just a couple of fictional villages. However, it manages to balance out its light-hearted comedic nature, whilst also maintaining a very strong message about the perception of women in particular concerning marriage.

The film follows two new brides who each get lost on the train around the fictional station of Sehore. Both have different perceptions about their marriages, with one, Phool, desperately searching for her husband, and the other, Jaya, shedding her identity to hide from hers. As the film goes on, you see their motivations for why they do what they do, and still learn a lot, despite both in the end able to achieve their goals – Phool reunites with her loving husband and starts a new life, and Jaya starts her education in university studying agriculture, freed from the pressures of her impending unhappy marriage.

So far so good. This story has a happy ending, the humour has been light-hearted and whimsical at times, and commentates on the oppressive patriarchal values and beliefs of Indian society, largely portrayed by Jaya's husband. But the story was not just what made this movie great.

There are two characters for me who are the most important aspects of the film in my eyes. One is the police inspector Manohar. Not only was his partnership with his right-

hand man, Dubey-ji, produce some of the best comedy scenes in the movie, but he is also the character who ultimately decides the fate of Jaya. He is a morally nuanced character. On one hand he is just another corrupt police officer, who's motivation for arresting Jaya was a way for some extra cash. On the other, he becomes more sympathetic to Jaya's cause the more he learns about her, culminating in him granting her freedom. I like to think this character is an example that there still is good in a corrupt environment he lives in, and in a film about female empowerment he is able to subvert his earlier impressions to play a big part in the story.

The other character, and my personal favourite, was Manjoo Mai, who ran the tea-shop in the station. At first, you feel she doesn't have much to cheer about, a bitter, sarcastic woman, who refused to help Phool out at first. She repeatedly jabs at her naïve nature, deeming her as too trusting towards men and blindly content with societal roles. However, over time she is shown to teach Phool how to be independent, how to challenge societal norms and ideas, and she is revealed to be a caring, mentor figure to Phool, also going back on her word by housing Phool for a number of days. Her views are justified when the audience learns about her backstory, as she was a woman who was consistently mistreated and abused by her family, under the rhetoric of love but really out of patriarchal social norms. She had to stand up and defended herself, and fuelled jaded opinions about marriage. Even so, she still is happy for Phool when she is able to find her husband, showing she really did have the girl's best interests at heart.

This story's biggest strength is that the different perspectives that these stories tell. Whilst many of these characters are not perfect, they all have clear reasons for what they do, excluding Jaya's husband for example.

We see that whilst Phool does end up getting back with her husband, she learns to be a little more independent, rather than ditching her husband because of mainstream feminism or whatever. It is a clever move, because her husband actually cared and loved her, and also shows she can be strong and independent in a marriage with someone she loves. Jaya was able to achieve her dreams and putting her wit and intelligence to good use, to not only benefit herself but farmers across the country.

In the end both found satisfaction and peace with themselves, compared to when both were basically helpless at the start in different meanings – which puts the fitting title name “lost ladies”. I think this film shows how women can be empowered, whether they want to be in a marriage or not, and that sometimes it does not come from outside sources, but from realising their inner strength.