

Aishwarya turns 33 this week

She rules the hearts of millions and is touted as one of the most beautiful actresses ever to grace Indian cinema. Aishwarya Rai, who turns 33 Wednesday, returns to the marquee after a long hiatus - playing a courtesan in 'Umrao Jaan' and an oomph girl in 'Dhoom 2'.

The actress, who is said to be dating Abhishek Bachchan, will reportedly announce her engagement on her birthday. According to insiders, Abhishek's ailing grandmother Teji Bachchan is eager to see him married, and the couple is said to be planning to tie the knot early next year.

But Aishwarya, who is apparently attending family dinners and get-togethers at the Bachchan household, is tight-lipped about her relationship.

She is currently busy promoting her two films. In Yash Raj Films' upcoming 'Dhoom 2', Aishwarya plays a hi-tech thief along with Hrithik Roshan, while in J.P. Dutta's 'Umrao Jaan', a screen adaptation of Mirza Mohammed Haadi Ruswa's Urdu novel 'Umrao Jaan Ada' and a tragic historical, she plays a courtesan.

'When Dutta narrated the script to me, I told him that if you get Aishwarya to play the role of Umrao Jaan only then make the film, else drop it. According to me, the character requires an enigmatic quality to it. This is what I feel Aishwarya's personality symbolises,' said well-known lyricist Javed Akhtar on the actress.

'Hers is a personality that is a kind of riddle. Even Dutta felt the same way and now after watching the finished product I feel that no one else could have made it.'

However, there is a notion among some that she is not a good actress and has hogged the limelight mainly for her looks, and her affairs with co-stars Salman Khan and Viveik Oberoi.

'Aishwarya is not known as a bankable actor. People think of her as wooden. She can't emote. Dutta is not only a good director; he is also a good technician. He knows how to extract work from his artist. We are confident that Aishwarya must have played the role convincingly,' New Delhi-based distributor Sanjay Mehta told IANS.

'Umrao Jaan' and 'Dhoom 2' will put to test her versatility. Critics believe that so far only Sanjay Leela Bhansali has been able to extract the best out of her in his hit 'Hum Dil De Chuke Sanam' and 'Devdas', India's official entry for the Oscars in 2003.

Her being crowned Miss World in 1994 made her entry into films smooth. She was flooded with offers but chose to start her acting career with Mani Ratnam's Tamil film 'Iruvar'.

Her performance was critically appreciated and she soon forayed into Bollywood with Rahul Rawail's 'Aur Pyar Ho Gaya' opposite Bobby Deol. The film not only fetched her a Filmfare award for best debut but she had top-notch directors making a beeline for her house.

She was soon signed up by one of the most talented filmmakers in the industry, Bhansali, for 'Hum Dil De Chuke Sanam'. In this love triangle, which also had Ajay Devgan, she was paired for the first time with Salman Khan.

Their onscreen chemistry was electrifying and the film was widely appreciated and fetched her Filmfare's best actress award.

She started receiving offers from some of the biggest names in the industry - Subhash Ghai, Yash Chopra and Mansoor Khan.

Chopra signed her up with Shah Rukh Khan and Amitabh Bachchan in 'Mohabattein'. The film didn't do well but the audience liked her pairing with Shah Rukh. Bhansali cast the two in his magnum opus 'Devdas' that went on to become a major hit.

Post-'Devdas' Aishwarya shifted her focus to Hollywood. Her first international venture was Gurinder Chadha's 'Bride and Prejudice'. The film was a flop but it didn't stop her from getting new projects.

Some of her prestigious international projects include - 'Provoked', 'The Last Legion' opposite Colin Firth and Sir Ben Kingsley and 'Chaos'.

While scaling new heights in Bollywood and international films, Aishwarya never crossed the line in terms of skin show on screen.

'I am not comfortable about kissing or nudity. I am clear about what I want. I'll work only with good directors who'll offer me two-dimensional roles. The director and the role are most important.

'Women in the industry have been exploited very often but there are some actors who believe that the short cut to stardom is through nudity or exposure. Such success is, in fact, very short-lived. I have never done a kissing scene nor do I have intentions to,' she is quoted as saying.

Since she set foot in filmdom, the India media has been sometimes nasty to her but she hasn't bothered much about what they thought or wrote about her.

'Someone asked me why I'm politically correct, even when people hit out so openly at me. But the truth is I've never been brought up to behave any other way. I can't say anything hurtful about anyone. I just don't believe in saying mean things. I won't feel good doing that. This is the way I am.

'I'm amazed how many people feel good hitting out at me. They're welcome to do it. Earlier, they had more leeway to deny their indiscretions in print. But now on television they look pretty ridiculous denying what they say,' she has said.

Apart from promoting a wide variety of disparate brands, Aishwarya has many firsts to her credit - she has the distinction of being the first Indian actor to be a member of the jury at the Cannes Film Festival and also appeared on Oprah Winfrey's talk show.

About her appearance on Winfrey's show, she told the media: 'I never thought I'd actually be meeting her -- and that too, on her show! I was extremely happy to be on her show. I admire her.'

She also appeared on another prestigious American talk show '60 Minutes'.

She has graced the covers of international magazines like TIME, which placed her on their list of the '100 Most Influential People in the World Today'. Aishwarya has also been termed as one of the

most beautiful women by TIME magazine.

Aishwarya, whose last Hindi release was 'Shabd' that sank without a trace at the box office, is hoping to hit the bull's eye with 'Umrao Jaan', 'Dhoom 2' and Mani Rathnam's 'Guru'. While 'Umrao Jaan' releases next Friday, 'Dhoom 2' is set for a Nov 24 release and 'Guru' in December.

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