

## 'Umrao Jaan': a pilgrimage into a courtesan's world

Film: Umrao Jaan; Cast: Shabana Azmi, Aishwarya Rai, Abhishek Bachchan, Puru Raj Kumar, Suniel Shetty; Director: J.P. Dutta; Rating: \*\*\*1/2

In one of the countless visuals of stunning resonance, Aishwarya, playing the doomed and poetic tawaif (courtesan) Umrao Jaan Adaa, travels through a burning field of crops. 'The crops have been reaped, now the fields are being burnt for good luck next year,' explains a co-passenger.

That one gloriously revealing moment captures the sublime pathos that coloured the life and times of 19th century Lucknow's famed courtesan, who in her words is a 'badnasibi ki misaal' (the classic example of misfortune).

We've seen Lucknow and Uttar Pradesh in several Hindi films ranging from Muzaffar Ali's 'Umrao Jaan' to Chandan Arora's 'Main Meri Patni Aur Woh'. But the city and its surrounding topography have never looked more vivid.

Perched between the world within a kotha (brothel) and the outer world of growing deceit and betrayal, the story of little Ameeran's journey from her quaint and happy family life to the Kotha is mapped in lucid, flamboyant and sometimes muted colours of utter enchantment.

J.P. Dutta, along with cinematographer Aynanka Bose, takes us on a pilgrimage through Umrao's inner and outer landscape creating perfect visuals to portray her predicament as a 'fallen woman' forever rising above her destiny.

What lifts this 'Umrao Jaan' far above the 1978 version is its sense of imminent historicity. While the original stopped just after the doomed woman returns to the comforting yet claustrophobic space of the kotha, Dutta's narrative moves forward, carving a socio-historical perspective for his protagonist in a Lucknow going through a bloody turmoil, as its cultural legitimacy is questioned and mocked by the British Raj.

The film's most memorable sequence is when the kotha's practical and yet emotional madame (Shabana Azmi) packs off her endangered girls and stays on in the brothel - a solitary figure standing over the looming architecture as a symbol of unaccompanied bravery.

Shabana's histrionics are awe-inspiring, comparable with her mother Shaukat's performance in the same role in Muzaffar Ali's film.

'Umrao Jaan' must not be allowed to be a victim of cynical readings. Its statement, comparing the woman's heart to a railway station, where any man can stop to while away time, has a resonance way beyond the time-zones Dutta creates within his lengthy but satisfying work of art.

The ambience of the kotha is superbly re-created by art director Bijon Dasgupta. But Vaibhavi Merchant's choreography lets down the courtesans' tale. It fails to evoke the sensuous grace that Rai is capable of. Too much of Javed Akhtar's evocative lyrics are expressed in hand movements.

There's a great deal of warmth in the crisscross of relationships that the screenplay creates. Umrao's rapport with her surrogate father in the brothel, played by Kulbhushan Kharbanda, is truly

special.

Aishwarya imbues a sense of luminosity into Umrao's all-giving nature. As Umrao, she's remarkably vulnerable and gentle, trying to safeguard her interests emotionally rather than instinctively.

Her two key romantic sequences with Abhishek Bachchan convey a feeling of bridled anxiety but are felled by their inordinate length. They needed to be curtailed and streamlined. The same applies to the plethora of mujras (dance sequences) - all gracefully performed by the resplendent Rai, but monotonous for their frequency and genre-specificity.

Anu Malik's music and Alka Yagnik's singing go a long way in evoking the poetic tragedy of a woman who craves to break free from her destiny.

'Umrao Jaan' is remarkable for recreating the rhythms of a charming though lost culture through the pacy movements of the tawaif's feet, though the choreography does restrict the Aishwarya's swan-like agility.

The film also gives space to lesser-known actors like Puru Raj Kumar, who is splendid as Umrao's roguish in-house suitor at the kotha, and Divya Dutta melts your heart in the one important sequence that the script allows her.

Abhishek Bachchan, as the tormented, torn and yet restrained Nawab, is a portrait of bridled intensity. That little smirk in the corner of his mouth or that almost-invisible twinkle in his eye - these nuances show how much Bachchan junior has evolved.

For creating an 'Umrao Jaan', who stays in our hearts, and for giving Aishwarya Rai yet another memorable role, J.P. Dutta must take a bow.

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