



MOVIE REVIEW

Karan Razdan's *Girlfriend* A Caricature of Lesbian Love

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First, there were the titillating posters. Then came the pre-release comments on various news channels (comparing it with an earlier movie, *Murder*, thus underscoring the sensational angle), possibly to liven up the intervals between monotonous reports about ruling party antics and starvation deaths. Such mentions in the news about new movies and occasional documentaries shown about their “making” are potent advertising techniques being used of late. The title of the movie, *Girlfriend*, taboo that it is by and large, makes one unwholesomely curious. Karan Razdan presumably does not want it to be a regular family entertainment. He even humbly suggests that it's a “consciousness raising effort”. He “empathizes with lesbians ... understands them.”

Yet, his second directorial venture has done definite damage—to long lonely battles waged by thousands of mature Indians for securing the right (and sometimes, even a place to stay together) and freedom to survive and express their sexual preferences, and to hundreds of groups that uphold this freedom. For it is most unwise to assume that commercial cinema does little by way of moulding public taste, and, for that matter, of reinforcing dominant ideologies.

Girlfriend could well have been titled “Psycho 2004” or “The Dreadful

Dyke” or “Shaitan Sahela” (a new word we learn from the movie, the masculine of *saheli* if you please), and been shown in the theatres that dish out soft-porn on a regular basis. It portrays two single women against the backdrop of some exotic locale: one, an aspiring model, the other, a prizefighter, thereby constructing an appropriate task-roles continuum. The prizefighter has to be the “lesbo,” of course, as the audience is given to understand. She has this guilty passion for her villa-mate. While every care has been taken to depict this passion or love or whatever as unforgivably physical, the maternal feelings of Tanya (Isha Kopikkar) for Sapna (Amrita Arora) and her utter free-from-guilt demeanor surfaces more than once. That she is protective about Sapna, the delicate (read anorexic) innocent li'l girl who is helplessly dependent on Tanya is presumably intended to be metaphorical of a “normal” “heterosexual” relationship. Who is representing what in this couple is unmistakably clear, because in themselves they can hardly be called a couple, in the filmmaker's view. Only a man and a woman *should* be a couple. A woman and a woman, if they happen to stay together, constitute a relationship of jealousy, petty squabbles, and garments and shoes and nail polish exchange. *Not* companionship, that, no. Yes, Mr. Razdan, we've got your point. The closeness of the girls is underscored by subtle hints from the beginning as unusual, abnormal. Girls hugging, sleeping on the same bed, going out by themselves for enjoyment without a trace of male intervention (imposition?).

Such abnormal goings on give you an indication of the dangerous things to come.

Time for the dominant Tanya to exit temporarily by concocting an out of town visit, to give the poor delicate Sapna a chance at real love and happiness. With Tanya gone, the desolate Sapna is being looked after (at the former's instructions) by a “gay” friend. It is proudly mentioned in more instances than one that Sapna feels safe only with a gay. This friend with his outrageous caricatures entertains Sapna through a dull party they've gone to. He leaves her side for a moment, when... VOILA! The normal, macho, a-little-naughty-but-good-at-heart hero (Ashish Chowdhry) makes his grand entry into Sapna's life. Their initial courtship would've been idyllic indeed hadn't this shipping tycoon taken it into his head to “act” like a gay to make his lady love feel “safe”. Grotesque.

Then, time for confession of mischief, and as Miss Delicate reluctantly but graciously forgives, they launch into a big time song and dance routine to commemorate true, normal love at last. Everything goes on smoothly till the passionate boy-like Tanya comes back and is informed by an ecstatic Sapna that she is in love!

What follows is predictable and exasperating. Tanya's disbelief yields to indignation, to depression, to fury, and then to her insistent efforts to hamper the tender functioning of a true heterosexual affair. She first attacks Rahul, the good boy just-too-much-in-love hero (by sarcasm, awkward questions, and when nothing else works, with red chili powder and

choicest boxing strokes!), then tries to outdo him (by beating him in jogging, or rather in a kind of beach sprint) and even to seduce him in a bid to prove to Sapna that all men are disloyal. She also invades their privacy by forcing herself into their planned getaway. The audience absolutely hates her by now.

In the scene in which Tanya seduces Rahul, there is a liberal exposure of Isha Kopikkar's body (much healthier than Amrita Arora's), curves, legs and all, with the quintessential *matkas* and *jhatkas*, and all that's 'feminine'. It also shows her at her dignified best when she talks about her father and a pitifully unhappy childhood. She casually (too casually?) shrugs it off showing that the past is not going to affect her except in the way that she chooses. Really?

Tanya has been depicted as an unabashed man hater, yet within her, there's an urge to be 'like men', for that is about the only way one can defeat and get over them. This is revealed by her style of dressing, walking, riding a motorcycle, her wistful longing to just "undo it" and urinate "anywhere" like a man. There's an identity battle going on, but not on her own terms.

She gives expression to that whole mindset in the climax, while confronting Rahul, "Yes...I'm a lesbian, a man trapped in a woman's' body!" And with that, she confirms to a lot of insensitive, misunderstanding, prejudiced people that this is *all* a lesbian stands for. The ludicrous definition goes down really well judging by the amount of murmured approval in the theatre. The reason for her being queer has been articulated earlier in the movie, when Tanya tries to stop Sapna from going to stay with her prospective mother-in-law (an effusive Vinita Malik), recounting the tale of a childhood horror. In that shot, looking vulnerable for once, Tanya confirms our worst guess: child sexual abuse. This revolting and sad "justification" for her behaviour again confirms the most ludicrous and ill-informed stereotypes about gay women.



The physical acts between the two girls are not so badly shot, offering a proportionate display of eroticism and guiltless joy—a pity that it is one-sided, though. It also is metaphoric of the age-old norm of the man being the active partner in bed. In this case Sapna isn't even passive, she merely is sleepy, or very, very drunk. Her dilemma, her insecurity, her guilt at having done something 'one night', her bewilderment...everything is very real and understandable. She is merely a conforming social actor. Rahul is the model boyfriend, model son, model moneyed industrialist...and Monsieur Le Directeur's mouthpiece. His sneering at Sapna and Tanya's friendship, his desperate bid to save Sapna from her *boyfriend, husband, sahela* (as he describes Tanya) who's now his rival wins him a lot of sympathy. At the end of course, there's a happy couple – Rahul and Sapna, content and confined within the values of heterosexual marriage, family, duty, piety.

And what happened to our poor Tanya? Taken a tumble from a skyscraper, dead. It could not have been otherwise—not with Karan Razdan. Every strand of the tale is painstakingly woven to one final, logical design, lest the social and moral fabric be torn or tainted, and lest women begin to feel that it is quite all right to enjoy life on one's own, to jog on the beach (very

significantly it's Tanya who is shown jogging, *not* Sapna), to work hard to earn one's bread and butter and pearls and paintbrushes (even if economic independence comes through no more meaningful economic activity than kick boxing). Given that cinema, although situated within an ideological structure, has the option of either strengthening it or questioning it, this film is quite tame. Considering that it influences and moulds public opinion and behaviour, and creates and recreates ideas that will sell, *Girlfriend* is a most irresponsible and arrant creation. The actors and actresses were quite suited to their roles, however, and were quite convincing.

Let me add somewhat shamefacedly at the end, in the sequence where Isha Kopikkar announces with a psychopathic tilt of her head.. "Yes, I'm a lesbian!"...I could not but feel an odd stab of pleasure. I could not help feeling that this was a historic moment for commercial Hindi cinema, and could not help reflecting on how great a movie this could have been. The context of Tanya's words is all wrong, of course. But the brazen acknowledgement of the invisible, albeit categorical, is, or isn't it, *something*?

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