

Sexual Consciousness Of Urban Indian Middle Class Explored In 'Lust Stories' Anthology From Netflix

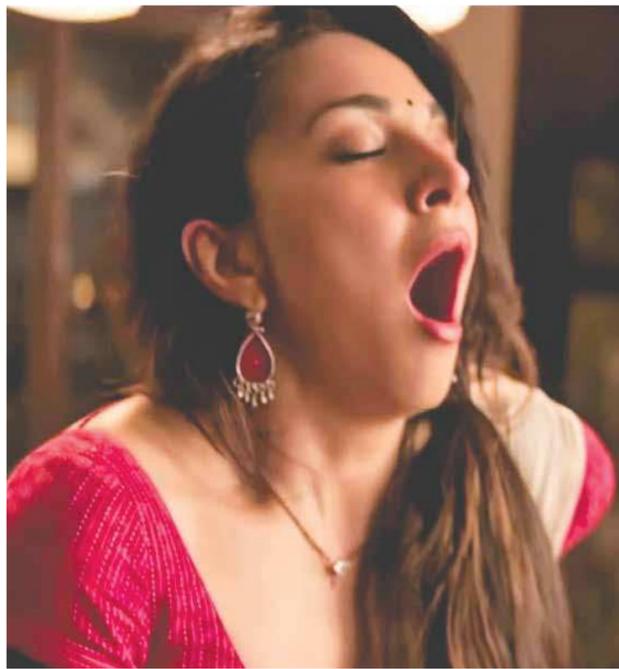
By Subhash K. Jha

*Film: "Lust Stories", an anthology for Netflix; Directors: Anurag Kashyap, Zoya Akhtar, Dibakar Banerjee and Karan Johar; Cast: Radhika Apte, Akash Thosar, Bhumi Pednekar, Neil Bhoopalam, Manisha Koirala, Jaideep Ahlawat, Sanjay Kapoor, Kiara Advani, Vicky Kaushal and Neha Dhupia; Rating: *****

Vibrators and self-pleasuring seem to have seeped into the cinematic consciousness of India. Barely had Swara Bhaskar finished her business in "Veere Di Wedding", that the pretty Kiara Advani playing a repressed wife shocks her in-laws by getting her own pleasure without the man.

The man of the house be damned. But oops, I am jumping the loaded gun. This orgasmic omnibus opens with the weakest story story of the lot. Anurag Kashyap's story ploughs through the sexual escapades of one of the most unlikeable female heroines I've seen in recent times. Radhika Apte plays the sexually active Kalindi, a college lecturer with the hots for her virgin student Akash Thosar.

Frankly, Kalinda leaves us the audience feeling soiled and used too. She is brash, brassy, over-sexed and filled with intellectual pretensions that border on delusional megalomania. The part is perfect for Apte who now owns



the space allotted to 'sexually savvy' and empowered women in our films. Kashyap gives Apte a free rein. She bullies her lovers (there are three of them, one of whom is invisible and another who much to the script's amusement, asks Apte if she would like to "fornicate"), has her way with everyone and thinks she is so cool engaging in Brechtian dialogues.

After hearing Apte's yak-yak on cerebral fornicating, it is a blessed relief to come to Zoya Akhtar's story where Bhumi Pednekar blossoms into an actress of

substance. Playing a house-help who is helping her unmarried single employer (Neil Bhoopalan) with his bucket-'lust', Bhumi hardly speaks.

Zoya tracks her unspoken movement through the apartment which she knows intimately, but can never own as her employer-lover's prospective bride descends on the '1 BKH' apartment with her folks, reminding her of her place in the domestic hierarchy. Pednekar shows us the complex dynamics of the household. If God lies in the details, this seg-

ment is a temple of titillation. It is a heartbreaking piece and probably Zoya's gentlest work to date.

Dibakar Banerjee does an Ingmar Bergman-Basu Bhattacharya portrait-from-a-fractured-marriage in the third story where lust is not a predominant impulse. Desolation is. And who better equipped than Manisha Koirala to project the hurt and wounded pride of a wife who has found comfort in her husband's best friend's arms?

The director builds a bewildering wall around the triangular

relationship. The three-way conversation is fraught with unspoken accusations and unexplored hurt. It all boils up to a simmer of discontent that just stops short of brimming over. Doing scenes from a crumbling marriage is a new domain for Banerjee. He does it with much empathy.

I found the fourth story to be the hardest to define. Clearly, Karan Johar enjoys the orgasmic beat much more than the other three directors. His story is an unabashed ode to the Big O, though a little broad and tactless in the way it makes the self-pleasuring vibrator seem like a tool of sexual liberation.

Kiara Advani is strikingly beautiful and wholly likable as the repressed wife, while Vicky Kaushal as her nerdy self-righteous 'sanskaari' husband is outstanding in making his annoying character endearing. But much of Karan's pontification on a women's desires and men's character is laboured in their bumper-sticker wisdom. Full credit to Karan and all the other three directors of "Lust Stories" for opening that door into the Indian middle-class' sexual consciousness where there lurks a lust for self-fulfilment, seldom explored, scarcely realised. For exploring what goes on behind those doors of middle-class bedrooms, this omnibus deserves an ovation.

Standing, of course.

'Raazi' Writer To Work On Manekshaw Biopic



NEW DELHI: "Raazi" writer Bhavani Iyer is excited to work with filmmaker Meghna Gulzar again on the biopic on Field Marshal Sam Manekshaw. She says the project comes with a promise of pushing "every limit of storytelling".

"I am working again with my dear friend and creative soulmate Meghna Gulzar on our next film

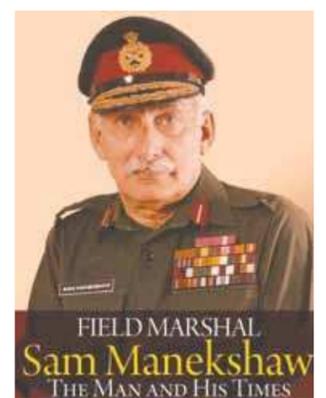
that is based on the life of Field Marshal Sam Manekshaw," Iyer told IANS. "It is a delightful and phenomenal subject that promises to push me to every limit of my storytelling boundaries and then some," she added.

Field Marshal Sam Manekshaw was the army chief during the 1971 India-Pakistan war.

Talking more on her upcoming

projects, Iyer said: "I have written a spy thriller for Nikkhil Advani that is deeply political and tells a remarkable story of the geo-politics of our subcontinent.

"I am writing a show for Netflix with Shah Rukh Khan's Red Chillies Entertainment based on the book 'The Bard of Blood'. There's another show for Amazon that's beginning. There are



a few other interesting things in the pipeline that I am very excited about."

Iyer started her career with advertising and then moved to journalism. She forayed into Bollywood as a screenwriter with Sanjay Leela Bhansali's "Black" and collaborated on the screenplays for Bhansali's "Guzaarish", Vikramaditya Motwane's "Lootera" and the Indian adaptation of "24".

Iyer believes the audience is "deeply instinctive and reacts to the conviction of a narrative".

"I would like to think that people fall in love with a character, whether the character is male or female is only incidental. The protagonist in my first movie 'Black' was a woman too. It was Michelle McNally's story and it was loved just as much.

"That said, yes, I do think that the playing field is getting a little more level when it comes to movies driven by women, whether it is actors or directors or writers."

She pointed out that for a long time, "a woman-centric film or a film driven by a team of women in our industry was always meant to be a niche, atypical, artistic fare". "But there are so many women artistes - writers, directors, actors and producers and in so many other roles of filmmaking -- that one is able to subvert age-old gender roles, on-screen or behind the scenes. With the kind of acceptance and love that 'Raazi' has received, I feel deeply heartened that we don't need to give in to 'masala' or keep second guessing what the audience wants or pander to what has been accepted as standard templates one needs to follow.

"All you need to do is tell a story honestly and to the best of your ability," added the writer, who is elated about her novel "Anon" getting published.

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