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LIFE+STYLE



Provoked By Sona Charaipotra

You have to hand it to Aishwarya Rai—she is a stunner. But that doesn't always work to her advantage. Take her role as Kiranjit Ahluwalia, the real-life, Brit-Asian banner for abused women,



in Rai's second English-language crossover, *Provoked* (in theaters May 11). It could be considered Rai's most un-glam turn to date: virtually no make-up hiding her still-flawless complexion, traditional Punjabi clothes and effectively broken English. But then there are her coveted blue-green eyes, her best feature, both physically and in the sense of craft. Capable of delivering vast emotion, much of Rai's performance here is mined via their subtle intensity. And yet, Rai's super-charged star presence trumps her understated delivery, repeatedly requiring viewers to work on their suspension of disbelief.



Still, it's this same undeniable charisma that elevates this film from what should be a standard woman-in-jeopardy Lifetime TV flick, albeit one with ethnic flavor for good measure. But not by much. I'm all for girl power, but the film is over the top in hammering home its anti-abuse agenda. Based on the

autobiography "Circle of Light," the drama tells the true-life tale of Kiranjit, an unassuming Punjabi bride imported to the United Kingdom in an arranged marriage to dashing Deepak (Naveen Andrews), a Brit-Indian with a penchant for alcohol and

adultery who soon demonstrates a brutish dark side in repeated mental, physical and sexual abuse against his wife. Especially haunting is an image of Deepak holding a hot iron above Kiranjit's face, threatening to disfigure the very beauty that draws him to her.

Provoked is the second “pro-woman” drama by director Jagmohan Mundhra, whose acclaimed *Bhawandar*, starring Nandita Das, focused on a gang-rape case in Rajasthan, India, that garnered national attention. But Mundhra's extensive canon also includes titles like *Perfumed Garden* and *Monsoon*, which are also known as *Tales of the Kama Sutra 1* and *2*. Perhaps it's this soft-core background that informs the relatively flat storytelling here.

In the opening scene, a beleaguered Kiranjit, driven to an almost comatose madness, sets her sleeping husband's bed on fire. When he dies, she's tried for murder and sentenced to life in prison because her kind but borderline-indifferent barrister is unable to use the traditional definition of provocation as a



defense. It's only in prison that Kiranjit is able to tell her real story—with surprisingly kind fellow inmates like the fiery Veronica Scott (magnificently underplayed by Miranda Richardson). She also shares it with Radha Dalal (an uncharacteristically one-note Das), a women's rights worker who takes up Kiranjit's cause with her activist group Southhall Black Sisters, who fight to get an appeal on the case, which eventually sets a new definition of “provocation” in the British legal system. But while the film's non-linear narrative starts with an effective inciting incident, what comes off as abrupt, often back-to-back, use of violent flashbacks clearly engineered to be tearjerkers, gets tedious quickly. We got it the first 10 times. Then there's the too facile, neatly wrapped up courtroom element. There is room for lively, meaningful storytelling here, but with a flat script and heavy agenda, it isn't achieved.

The story may be true, but that's not enough to make it interesting.