

Could we cover our ears to keep from screaming?

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White Noise, a film by Vinta Nanda

Multiplexes have taken off in India's larger cities, spawning a breed of small-budget films in English and Hindi, targeted at urban, "yuppie" audiences. While this has created a space for new filmmakers without affiliations to the big studios and names that control much of the Mumbai film industry, the new genre is not free of the same pitfalls that afflict much of commercial cinema—uncritical films that capitalise on rehashing same old formulas: family dramas, titillation, mindless violence, revenge plots, and so on.

While this new breed does profess to address fresh, urban themes, the perspectives behind the films are still the same, although the characters wear a metropolitan, savvy gloss. At a time when filmmakers who had some critical predilections in the 1970s and early 1980s are entering semi-retirement (if there is such a thing in the film industry), very few new faces have stepped in to take their place.

White Noise is an unconvincing film about a scriptwriter and an editor of television series. Koel Purie plays the talented Gauri Khanna, who writes scripts for television, while Rahul Bose (and what is he doing in this film anyway?) plays Karan, an editor. Both have a past, and we share with them a moment of their shared present, which attempts to point to their future. The film marks the directorial debut of Vinta Nanda, who earlier made the television series *Tara*.

Gauri is in love with Pavan, a producer. The film begins with Gauri being fired by Pavan's wife. This is the event on which the life of the central character (Gauri) and the film turns. Gauri turns to drink, to forget. On a rainy night, she runs into Karan on the street. After a brief encounter, she falls asleep in her car. She does not want to go home— "there are ghosts in the house."

Karan is the editor for a TV serial currently under production. He likes the sound of "white noise," the sound of silence, the sound that covers all frequencies and so produces no sound. Haunted by his own past, (about which we learn in a quick summary at the climax of the film), he "seeks solace in 'White Noise.' It equalises the turbulence inside him." Karan's parents call him persistently, but he does not take their calls, or is cryptic. He especially does not want to speak to his father.

The production of a mediocre family drama called *Pavitra Arti* (sacred prayer) provides the setting for the film. Out of work, Gauri is called in by Manish, the producer of *Pavitra Aarti*, which just lost its sixth writer. Manish has hired Gauri to "breathe life"

into the series, but his motives are not totally professional either. Gauri has somehow picked up a reputation as a woman who has slept her way up. Manish wants to see if he can take advantage. Pallavi, Manish's domineering wife, controls the sets. She constantly tries to get Karan to take a more than professional interest in her.

Karan and Gauri's attraction for each other develops slowly, over trivial conversations involving The Doors, as he becomes the catalyst for her overcoming the traumas of childhood and getting over Pavan. Karan assures Gauri he is not "taking care of her," something the fiercely independent Gauri would not stand for.

Gauri turns to alcohol again and loses control when Pavan appears on television with his wife, denying anything but respect for Gauri's talents, regretting that "she wanted more" from him. Pavan and his wife proceed to put Gauri in her place, none too subtly, also alluding to the possibilities of a "fatal attraction" between Karan and Gauri. Again we see the easy demolition of a woman's reputation by a man, with his wife in tow.

Gauri, on the thin edge of hysteria, retreats to her house. Karan keeps trying to get through. A trite dialogue follows, about time, converting fiction to reality, lessons learned from experience, culminating in the question, "Tell me Gauri, when did it all begin?" Thus begins Gauri's catharsis: her mother did not want her, her grandmother left her to be brought up by the housemaids, she grew up wanting nothing but independence, feeling incomplete until Pavan loved her, made her love herself. In between, Karan asks her if she never wanted kids, a family—marriage is a farce, she responds. Why, we never learn. The story is told in less than 30 seconds after she has cried all night; it just confirms the rest of the storyline—lots of events thrown around poorly developed characters.

Karan's own past, which really does not arouse much curiosity, is resolved in the interim. He lost his father early in life, and his mother remarried. He withheld from his mother the legitimacy she sought for his stepfather. This he overcomes, when he says to Gauri as much as to himself, "Winners only move forward," his stepfather's words. Both of these are very unserious depictions of actual traumas people face.

They both go to Rishikesh (a religious town in Uttar Pradesh) for a pre-shoot visit. Gauri is happy. The flow of the river has cured her, the "white noise" inside her countered by the "white noise" of the river. For the first time, she feels free. Karan throws away his dead father's watch in the river. Winners must move forward.

Gauri goes on to make a film, about how she became herself.

A comment on the performances: Koel Purie was brought in at the last minute, Tabu having dropped out. She is Vinta Nanda's third choice, the first being Karisma Kapoor who, unfortunately, "decided to get married." This is Purie's second film, the first being the Rahul Bose-directed *Everybody Says I'm Fine*, where she portrays a girl abused by her father. Her performance is largely unimpressive. The rather affected portrayal of a person suffering inner turmoil, someone who seems to be on the verge of losing an identity she recently gained (and only vicariously—"I could love myself because he loved me"), is quite disappointing.

Sometimes one detects the hint of an accent in delivery, other times not. One can only hope that with time, a certain restraint, maturity and acting ability might be seen. And it's not all down to her, a weak script and hurried and fragmented development of the character is equally responsible for the audience feeling no real emotion or solidarity with Gauri when she finally speaks, when she finally achieves catharsis, when she decides she is happy.

Through the movie, we continue to wonder what Rahul Bose is doing in this film. He says, "Very frankly...I didn't find the role extraordinarily challenging. I certainly knew how to play it." If there is no challenge, why do the role then? An effective actor, he finds little scope in this film and his performance would be deemed mediocre bar the mitigating circumstances—poorly developed character, a one-dimensional calmness, some clichéd lines to draw out Gauri—and what we perhaps know and hope he is capable of. Since Gauri's climactic moment is itself so weak, we could not expect much from the catalyst who brings it about.

Further, Bose states the film is "fiercely feminist," Koel Purie's Gauri is "the female protagonist on the edge, completely out there. Koel's character is vulnerable, psychotic, self-destructive, alcoholic and *yet* [emphasis added] creative." So this is what fiercely feminist characters are supposed to be like.

This is Vinta Nanda's directorial debut, which helps explain perhaps the visual, technical, even the acting weaknesses of the film. However, we might still attempt to understand her perspective. The story mirrors a relationship similar to Gauri and Pavan's in her own life. She says, "I had to make this film to rid myself of the demons that threatened to destroy me after the crisis in my life. 'White Noise' was born out of desperation.... The girl's anguish and despair is all my own...but by the time I came to actually filming I was healed.... Now I'm a totally new person." Fair enough, and credit to her for addressing a context so painfully close to her.

Other comments about the film and the general environment she perceives, however, are more revealing. "In the present mood women in our cinema are being looked at more *practically* [emphasis added]. The truth about us women is very different from the way we see them in our movies. For years men have projected women the way they want. Now I want to project men the way I see them."

However, she goes on to say, "Rahul plays the perfect man. You know I can't write flawless women characters. I only see perfection in my male protagonists. I had to be honest about Gauri's imperfections. Like me she's trying hard to survive. Women in my film will always be portrayed honestly." The

contradiction is too blatant to ignore.

The professed gender-centric moorings of the film seem to be somewhat after the fact. Gauri presents her ideas of the new woman, one "who is ready to ask for what she wants," followed up by a minor insight (minor because it goes nowhere) that the "Hindu Undivided Family" does not allow inheritance for the woman. What Gauri thinks should be the implications of this for a series that she is trying to make more female-centered centric is a question Nanda avoids conveniently, getting Manish to cut out what Gauri may want to say.

Further, the portrayal of Gauri as anguished, unstable, psychotic, and Karan as the calm, supportive, sensible man, while poorly done in itself, is uncomfortably close to the a rather puerile presentation of Woman/Man as Nature vs. Culture—Woman being more subject to her passions, unreliable and emotionally unstable; Man is rational, controlling the world with application of his mind, and thus rightfully in charge of humanity's destiny, and so on. Nanda adds, "Basically Koel is like a storm while Rahul is a deep still ocean." The analogy could not be more apt, or more disturbing. Especially with so much "feminist" talk being thrown around.

Throughout the film, Gauri needs a male figure—Pavan to love her so she could love herself, Karan to, well, counsel her maybe. One would like to request the filmmaker at least to do some reading on feminism. In this portrayal, the political never becomes personal, and is constantly contradicted by the latter. Even the other women characters in the film fall easily into mainstream stereotypes—Pallavi (wife of the series' producer) is the wanton "slut," Pavan's wife is the nice, obedient woman who seems to have no issues with her husband being unfaithful. It is all too much, really.

A certain vision, a certain politics, a degree of self-awareness, and a certain idea of the possibilities of creation, or at least the complexities of the given theme—is that much to ask of those professing to be creative, further, those claiming the right to portray roles and stories all too real in society? Are we putting too much responsibility on the shoulders of producers of art, those producing mass/popular entertainment, to ask that? One surely hopes not.

Note: All quotes from the film. Other quotes by Vinta Nanda and Rahul Bose from interviews conducted by Subhash K. Jha, Indo-Asian News Service; for complete interviews please see:

<http://in.movies.yahoo.com/050312/43/2k4om.html>

<http://in.movies.yahoo.com/050307/43/2k0r0.html>



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