

FILM

Videsh

Abhijit Ghosh-Dastidar

Deepa Mehta's "Videsh —Abroad/Heaven on Earth" (English / Punjabi / Hindi, Colour, 115 mins.) is an adaptation of an ancient tale, dramatized in Girish Karnad's "Naga Mandala". Women clap and sing, to drum beats as an imminent wedding is celebrated. Bells ring at a Shiva Temple, and a tea shop has water boiling at dawn. Besides a roadside tap, a man washes clothes. Chand's (Preity Zinta) family sleeps on an open terrace of their two-storey house, next to an old fort in Ludhiana. As Chand brushes her teeth, the entire family wakes up, chanting religious verses adoring the family guru and mumbling the names of Sikh saints. The scenes cut to the interiors of an aeroplane toilet, where Chand freshens up. At Toronto airport, Chand is received by Rocky (Vansh Bhardwaj), her fiance, now seen by her for the first time; and Rocky's family. They are all Sikhs. Rocky sports a chipped beard and chipped hair, but puts on a turban on occasions. Rocky's father (Rajinder Singh Cheema) carries a beard and turban.

At Rocky's home, rituals of feet cleansing, small bites of 'prasad' food offerings and cash gifts greet Chand. Rocky's mother (Balinder Johal) is traditional and speaks only Punjabi. It is a joint family. The creaking of beds can be heard in all the other rooms, as Rocky's sister, Aman (Ramanjit Kaur) and her unemployed husband, Baldev make love. Rocky runs a restaurant business. Holding a sword, Rocky marries Chand as per Sikh rites, to the accompaniment of kirtans sung by blue turbaned musicians. The wedding lunch is enjoyed sitting cross legged on the floor. Rocky feeds a spoon of gravy to Chand. On the wedding night, Rocky tells Chand to sleep, as he would be doing "nothing" that night. Chand is curious to know whether there was any fault on her side. She wants to speak to her mother on the telephone. The couple go on a honeymoon, driving over snow covered roads. Chand is excited at a barrage water fall, presented in black and white. At the hotel room, Rocky tells Chand to undress. Chand wants to know whether Rocky has any hobbies like cricket or reading novels and plays. Soon Rocky's mother arrives at the hotel, as she had a dream of Rocky in a car accident. The honeymoon is disrupted, with an angry slap.

Rocky's family helps Chand to get a job in a garments laundry factory. The manager informs Chand that her salary was being sent to her husband. Chand fails to get a telephone call to India. At home, Chand prepares 'Chapattis'. Rocky's mother scolds Chand for not preparing good quality 'Chapattis'. There is a scuffle, and Rocky's mother falls. Rocky mercilessly thrashes Chand, and the family watches helplessly. Black and White depicts Chand crying in bed. Next day Chand asks for forgiveness from her mother-in-law. Rocky's indifference and his beating Chand, continue, Rocky's niece, Loveleen is friendly towards Chand. One day, Rocky's nephew, Kabir, flushes the grandfather's dentures down the toilet. At the factory, Chand strikes a friendship with colleague, Roza, from Jamaica, who was once ill-treated by a friend. Roza on learning of Chand's plight, advises powdered tree roots, mixed in a beverage, to be offered to Chand's husband. Instant love is assured. The roots mixed in milk makes Rocky unconscious. Rocky almost throttles Chand, for he suspects poisoning. In the day time, Chand's in-laws

spend time at work place or shopping malls, as the house is hired to day time lodgers. On another day, the roots mixed in milk, turn red. While Chand is ironing clothes, Rocky smashes plates, and pours the red milk in the open backyard garden, where a big snake emerges. Wielding a cricket bat, Rocky injures the snake. Closing doors and windows Rocky leaves for night shifts.

The snake enters Chand's bedroom, as Chand is dreaming of her mother. The snake's reflection is seen on a mirror, but in Chand's bed, it is Rocky with a cut on the back. Rocky, transformed to a snake is gentle, and embraces Chand. Next day when Chand enquires of Rocky, on his back injury, Rocky feels she has gone mad. Chand's health deteriorates, and she stays at home, without going to work. There is a black and white portrayal, of Chand speaking to her brother in Ludhiana, on phone. The brother advises Chand not to return to India. The snake and snake-transformed Rocky return at day time. When a lodger enquires, Chand says her husband is at home. At a super market, Rocky shops with Chand and his niece. For dinner, Chand prepares chapattis for everyone. Rocky gets angry when Chand asks for money to purchase a jacket. Immigration papers for Rocky's brother Gurpreet are prepared. When the lodger enquires of Rocky's health, as he was at home with his wife, Rocky's suspicions are raised. Rocky informs his family members of someone else in Chand's bedroom. Chand is beaten up severely. Snake transferred Rocky picks up Chand with injuries on her face.

To prove her innocence, Chand has to swear on a cobra. As the family gathers in the garden, frightened Chand puts her hands inside a hole. The snake is pulled out, and Chand wraps it around her neck. She confesses she has touched only two living beings—her husband and the snake. Family members watch the hooded snake, and accept back Chand. The snake/husband returns to Chand's bedroom, and Rocky knocks to enquire she was conversing with whom. The portrayals of alienation and domestic violence are character driven, presented in medium shots, mostly hand held, emphasizing the foreground. Realism in "Videsh" collapses, as diverted to enchanting of a cobra. The visuals, photographed by Gilles Nyuttgens are never drab, but the plot line is banal. Michael Danna's music is often pushed aside by the mumbling of religious verses and invocation to the 'gurus'. Preity Zinta's acting is extremely restrained, and embodies the challenges of the struggle against violence, from a brutal and indifferent husband. Most of the clashes are indoors, without widening ellipses. The snake myth does not raise Deepa Mehta's script to any heightened sense of human existence. The black and white sequences, thrown in, make the increasingly claustrophobic portraits of a particular world, carefully distanced. □□□