

FILM REVIEW

Heaven on earth?

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***Taare Zameen Par*. Story: Amole Gupte. Produced and directed by Aamir Khan.**

It would be hard to fault *Taare Zameen Par*'s intentions. It works remarkably well both as education and as art. It takes the familiar genre of story-telling in which the obvious disability of the protagonist is redeemed by a spectacular but hitherto unknown talent. The film spans a year in the life of eight-year-old Ishaan (Darshan Safary) whose dyslexia threatens to overwhelm his life. After repeated failing to perform, he is parceled off to a boarding school where he wilts under its strict discipline even while feeling abandoned by his parents. Deliverance comes in the form of a substitute art teacher, Ram Nikhumb (Aamir Khan), who helps the child rediscover himself through his gift for painting. What saves this film from becoming clichéd is that *TZP* deals with disability not merely as a problem but as an experience of life. The film makes a sincere attempt to see the world through Ishaan's eyes. His painful transformation from a spirited and unrepentant "problem child" to a defeated recluse is the most powerful part of the film.

In fact, there is a lot of sensitivity in the characterisation of all the children- whether it is the all-rounder older brother who, refreshingly, is shown as gentle, not vicious, or the polio-affected best friend who wears his "scholar" label lightly. The vignettes of school life capture the harms inflicted daily on children who do not fit in. Children are shown not merely as victims (which they are), but also as ready collaborators of sadistic teachers. The film is a powerful comment on the insensitivity of the school system in which quality is equated with ridding children of all their frailties and also their humanity; a pointed reminder that even schools for the rich need to be reformed.

The first half of the film involves the audience intensely, compelling us to identify, in Ishaan, the child that we all were once. His joys and pains are those which were experienced by all of us as children. Ironically, in the second half, when Ishaan's difficulty is given a name, we feel more distanced. This is an adult's vision of a child's troubled world. It too has some admirable parts but which work differently. The cultural function in the special school is moving, particularly because it breaks the Hindi film stereotype of the parents of disabled children, perpetually depressed and in tears. So is the depiction of the family coming to terms with Ishaan's condition. The scene of the father walking away wordlessly after seeing his

son read for the first time is particularly touching. The painting competition is hilarious. However, some of the staff room scenes involving Nikhumb and his colleagues should have been more nuanced. Similarly, scenes largely meant to educate people about dyslexia and the rights of disabled children could have been portrayed through the characters' experiences rather than as straight speeches.

Perhaps this part could have been strengthened by allowing more space for Nikhumb's character to develop. The scenes depicting his efforts at remedial teaching are well portrayed but to anyone who has worked with disabled children or those with learning difficulties, Nikhumb's success would appear to be remarkably devoid of frustration and effort. Similarly, his love for children could have been portrayed with more depth and complexity. One would have liked to see more of his struggles with his work and his personal life. His character does not do justice to the reality of professionals who work with disabled children. The disappointment, burnout and tedium, as much part of remedial education as emotional satisfaction, are missing from the film.

However, in addition to being a good story, *TZP* works very well as art. The animation used in the film is delightful. The sci-fi snippet of a planet "3" ramming into "9" (the mental image of Ishaan multiplying "3" into "9") is a classic. This is one film whose titles must not be missed. Another memorable sequence is of Ishaan wandering through South Mumbai, as everyday sights are rendered fascinating by his unique perspective and sense of shape and colour.

TZP is a delightful film with something for both adults and children to cherish. However, at the end one feels uplifted but strangely disturbed. Can disability be redeemed only by brilliance of another kind? Does success always have to be measured in terms of public accolades? Is it not this pressure to excel that makes the pain of having a different child more acute? Most of us, disabled or otherwise, survive on the strength of simpler achievements. One would like to hope that all of us take home a different message from this film - to have the courage not to sacrifice our children's dreams to the pursuit of success, as defined by a competitive and acquisitive world, and to enable our children to love themselves and find happiness in the life of their choosing.