Every Human is an artist

Every human is an artist, a storyteller with a unique point of view.
When we see ourselves as artists, we no longer feel the need to impose our views on others or to defend what we believe.
We know that every artist has the right to create his/her own art, their own story.

—Don Miguel Ruiz

This is a great message from our very own contemporary Toltec Mexican shaman, Don Miguel Ruiz. So often, we get carried away with our own stories. Stories of how miserable, sick, pissed we are, what a rotten world this is, etc. Or, more violently, stories of our own religion, region, nationality, sexuality, that we try to impose on others—or else, I'll shoot you?
—Raj Ayyar

OTT Escapes From Bleak Corona Reality; The Irregulars, Mrs. Dalloway & …

Four bite-sized film reviews of OTT films that touched a chord or two in me,: First, The Irregulars—a really weird Holmes pastiche. Also reviewed Mrs. Dalloway, Searching for Sheela, A Beautiful Day in the Neighborhood.

Barun Chanda’s Murder in the Monastery: A Mini Review / Raj Ayyar

Yet it vanishes leaving a distraught abbot, tense monks running around, and two murders linked to the missing manuscript.
Chanda, unlike Dan Brown, manages a credible, minimalist diplomatic secularism—though the murderer is s hired goon of some Christian sect or other, Chanda does not point fingers at the Catholic church or Opus Dei, a la Brown in ‘The Da Vinci Code’.
I liked the erotic undercurrents in the novel overall—the steamy one-night stand between Miriam the fair-skinned Coorgi Catholic nun novice and Tenzing, the fully grown adolescent Buddhist monk novice, is deliberately understated and leaves the reader’s pornographic imagination to fill in the details.

The film ‘Manto’—A Review by Raj Ayyar



‘I am a walking, talking Bombay.’
‘Saadat Hasan Manto, RIP. He lies in that grave, wondering: Who is the greater storyteller? God or Manto?’
—Saadat Hasan Manto.

I enjoyed watching the biopic ‘Manto’, A great Indo-Pakistani genius comes alive in this film. A man whose life-world is torn apart by the brutal Partition, one whose life thereafter would always bear the scars of that trauma.

Manto’s intense, and yet funny Urdu storytelling elan comes to life, as does his quirky humor, his roving gaze that took in details of street life with merciless precision (always privileging the marginalized street person, sex worker or insane victim of the India-Pakistan partition), and stitched them into narratives.

It is a measure of Nandita Das’ skill as a director, that five Manto stories are woven into the fabric of the film, one each for his five most creative and tormented years—often, the film slips from a ‘realistic’ biographical description into the heart of a Manto story. Only later does the viewer come to realize that s/he is now out of the story, and back to Manto’s life.

Hats off to Nawazuddin Siddiqui for pulling off such a complex role with elan—he captures the humor and dark irony of Manto’s personal conversations, as also of his stories with a seemingly effortless ease.

Rasika Dugal has a sidekick role—as Manto’s wife Safia, she is reduced to the role of a codependent, mothering wife, who takes care of him in his darkest moments.

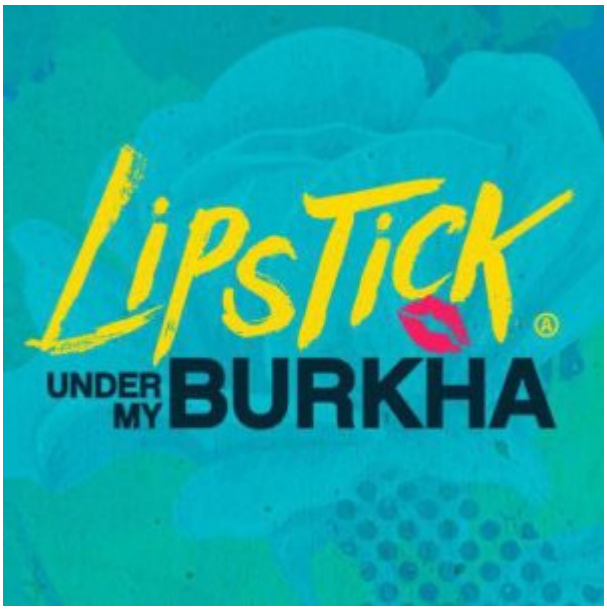
I loved Rajshri Deshpande as Ismat Chughtai—she looks a bit like the young Ismat and portrays her love-hate for Manto well (‘Manto my friend, Manto my enemy’).

The film reminded me of a forgotten Bollywood matinee idol—Shyam Chadha. He was Manto’s closest friend and might have broken the rule of the filmic triumvirate—Raj Kapoor, Dilip Kumar, and Dev Anand, had his life and career not ended tragically in an accident on the sets.

Tahir Bhasin is adequate to the role but lacks Shyam’s extreme

good looks, and his flashy personality.
The film relives two of Manto's best stories—'Thanda Gosht' (Cold Meat), and 'Toba Tek Singh'. The former about a man stabbed to death by a jealous sweetheart confessing that he had an extra-marital quickie with a corpse, and the latter the ultimate Indo-Pakistani story about the horrors of Partition, seen through the eyes of a madman.
One wishes that the film had spent more time re-creating 'Toba Tek Singh', and less on Manto's rehab and therapy. It does capture Manto's depressive alcoholism after his move from his beloved Bombay to Lahore, but those scenes could have been shortened without losing the overall effect.
—Raj Ayyar

Lipstick Under My Burkha—A Review by Raj Ayyar



I enjoyed watching Lipstick Under My Burkha this afternoon—the film is now in its once a day matinee phase, about to exit the big screen.

The film is a great commentary on the suppression of female sexual desire and sexualities in contemporary India. Pornography, phone sex and endless erotic fantasy are the substitutes.

The lead figure in a Hindi porn novel series—Rosie, becomes the fantasy persona of two of the women in lead roles—Ratna Pathak as the older sexy Buaji and Plabita Borthakur as Rehana Abidi, the young Muslim woman, who spends most of her spare time fantasizing about sex in the Rosie persona.

Both women are oppressed by their families; Rehana once her kleptomania is revealed, and Buaji for her erotic fantasies as an older woman. Past 40, women In India are not supposed to think of sex.
Her phone sex with a stud—a swimming life guard, plus her hidden porn stash, get her thrown out of her family and out into the streets. Bua's situation reveals the sanctimonious ageist sex prohibition (aside from a generalized sex phobia, homophobia, transphobia and more), rampant in India—older women and men are supposed to be sexless nurturers of the young and nothing more,

Konkona Sen Sharma is disappointingly reduced to sidekick status at best in this film—a shame, given her considerable acting talent (remember Konkona in Mr. & Mrs. Iyer?).
In the end, the major characters are manifestations of the porn novel Rosie character—porn is the real hero of Lipstick.

For me, the glaring melodramatic flaw in the film: the lifeguard who flirts with Bua Usha, and enjoys phone sex with her in her camouflaged Rosie persona, exposes her publicly in her neighborhood, and turns her family and most of her friends in that ghetto against her. Topping it off with a stream of ageist abuse. Given his studly narcissism and enjoyment of the phone sex, it is out of character for him to attempt such a wholesale destruction of one of his admirers.

No, this is Ekta Kapoor channeling thru the director of the film, back to the weepy, the overdone, the implausible melodramatic excesses of Ekta’s soaps. Tsk, tsk.
https://www.facebook.com/LipstickUnderMyBurkha/