

The Lunchbox (2013)

(Dabba original title)

Rated PG. Running time: 1 hour 44 min.

Our Advisories: Violence 0; Language 1; Sex/Nudity 1.

Our star rating (1-5): 5

*Pleasant words are like a honeycomb, sweetness to the soul
and health to the body.*

Proverbs 16:24

*And ought not this woman, a daughter of Abraham whom Satan
bound for eighteen long years, be set free from this bondage
on the sabbath day?"*

Luke 13:16

Indian director Ritesh Batra's debut film is an engrossing parable of loneliness and encouragement that is very subversive of the male dominant culture so prominent there despite Gandhi's work, and which still lingers in the West. The Lunchbox is not as colorful as such films as The Best Marigold Hotel because Ms. Batra is dealing with the India seldom seen by the British expatriots of the 2011 hit movie.

Ila (Nimrat Kaur), the mother of a little daughter (Yashvi Puneet Nagar) and the wife of Rajeev (Nakul Vaid), lives in a small apartment in Mumbai. To renew the interest of her neglectful husband in her, Ila is following the advice of upstairs neighbor Mrs. Deshpande (Bharati Achrekar), who not only calls down to her but also uses a basket on a rope to lower the necessary spices or missing vegetables Ila needs—or to raise up pills and other items that the younger woman picks up for her when she goes out shopping. Part of the fun of the

film is that we hear just her voice, never catching a glimpse of her. The many scenes of the preparation and eating of food make this a worthy addition to the list of food films.

A commuter train-ride away in a government office the glum accountant Saajan Fernandes (Irrfan Khan) deals with records while hardly ever talking with anyone. A widower, he is one of those lonely people who is his own worse enemy, chiding and shooing away the young children who play street cricket in front of the door of his home. During the day scarcely saying a word to the coworker right next to him, at night he smokes a cigarette on his apartment's rear balcony and gazes longingly at a family across the way which he can see through a window enjoying their meal together. This sense of loneliness is increased when the little girl at the table, spotting him watching them, gets up and closes the shutter.

The day that Ila prepares the first delectable meal in a campaign to woo back her husband, is the day in which a dabbawallah makes an unheard of mistake by delivering her lunchbox to the wrong man. The dabbawallahs, I have learned, are employed by the thousands to deliver lunchboxes to husbands at their workstations. We see them by the hundreds picking up the tall round containers, stashing them in long racks carried on their heads or lashed to their bikes and scooters, then carrying them aboard trains to reach the work places. At last arriving at the offices and worksites, they deposit them on the recipients' desk always in time for lunch. (I presume that there is a stigma or some other reason why the men just do not carry the lunchboxes with them when they leave home in the mornings.)

When Saajan opens the small canisters containing the various courses and ingredients, he is pleasantly surprised. It is not the usual plain fare that the nearby restaurant cooks up for him. He eats everything, licking the little pans clean. That evening when her dabbawallah returns the lunchbox, Ila is surprised to see that everything has been eaten. She tells

Auntie that containers appear to have been licked clean. Over the next few days she continues, under her neighbor's guidance, to prepare special meals. And yet Rajeev continues to ignore her when he returns home. Then when, prodded by her about the lunch, he mentions how much he enjoyed the cauliflower, she realizes that her cauliflowerless meals have been going to the wrong man. There is a touch of humor when in the city Saajan compliments the cook at his restaurant on the recent high quality of the lunchbox meals: the cook, surprised to hear this from such a grumpy customer, tells his assistant that they will stay with the winning combination of the cauliflower dish for future meals—and later Rajeev complains that Ila is overdoing it by repeating the cauliflower dish so often.

Soon Ila and Saajan are exchanging notes back and forth, beginning with very brief formal ones, and then writing longer and more intimate ones. Ila especially throws herself into preparing her meals and notes after she smells the perfume of another woman on two of Rajeev's shirts she is washing. We can see where a run of the mill filmmaker is going with this, but writer/director Ritesh Batra refuses to take us there, her story pursuing a very different route similar to that of the writer of Proverb above, impressing upon us how kind words can encourage us to act upon our dreams and desires. You will recall that "courage" is the root of encouragement, and it is this which Ila writes to Saajan is what she lacks, causing her to remain silent about her husband's infidelity.

A subplot, also enjoyable, involves Saajan and an eager young office worker Aslam Shaikh (Nawazuddin Siddiqui). Because Saajan is planning to retire, his boss sends Aslam to be his replacement. The dour older man, scarcely acknowledging the young man's presence, keeps putting off his requests for training sessions. But as Ila's meals and notes affect Saajan, he begins to treat Aslam better. Like himself, Aslam is an outsider, being an orphan in a culture that places a premium

on family. Despite his lack, the young man has been able to attract a lovely woman as his live-in lover (over the initial objections of her father, who at last consents to a marriage). Learning that the Aslan had worked in a kitchen in Saudi Arabia, Saajan even begins to share Ila's meals with him. The two become friends, with Saajan being the only guest on the groom's family side at the wedding.

I love films that immerse us in an unfamiliar culture, making us aware of our universal need for love and affirmation. The outcome is not what we expect, nor, I suspect what most of us would wish for, but its conclusion makes it an even better film than the usual romantic approach delivers. It is intriguing that three faiths are represented by the major characters— Ila is a Hindu, Saajan is a Christian, and Aslam a Muslim. Also, though not in the forefront, there is a feminist element contained in still another subplot, the plight of Ila's mother (Lillete Dubey), kept close to home because she must care for her once domineering but now comatose husband. She is worried at not having enough money to pay for medicine, as well as by what will happen to her when he dies. The plight of a poor widow in India is as dire as it was in New Testament times.

Ila herself, musing over the marginal role she plays in her husband's life, had asked, "What do we live for?" She discovers, thanks to Saajan's notes, that it should be more than just for the sake of an uncaring adulterous husband. In a small way Saajan performs for Ila a role similar to that of Jesus when he dealt with Mary and Martha and various other women who came away from their encounters filled with more of a sense of their self worth. Independently Ila and her correspondent arrive at the conclusion "Sometimes the wrong train will get you to the right station." Neither arrives at their intended station in life, but there is little doubt left in the viewer's mind that the future will be much brighter for each of them than when we first met them. You will probably be

pondering the implications of their observation long after you have left the theater.

Note: The full review includes a set of discussion questions and can be found in the May 2014 issue of VP, available at The Store.

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Pictures

http://www.imdb.com/title/tt2350496/?ref_=nv_sr_1