

## Trishna

This film offers a promising prospect: a contemporary re-working of a literary classic in an exotic setting directed by an imaginative filmmaker and starring a radiant beauty. “Trishna” is inspired by the Thomas Hardy novel “Tess of the d’Urbervilles” and takes place in modern India; it was directed by Michael Winterbottom, an Englishman known for his extremely varied oeuvre, and stars Frieda Pinto, the Bombay-born model/actress who came to international attention as the heroine of “Slumdog Millionaire.” Great credentials, yup; great film, not so much.

Something of the core story of Hardy’s work is retained. An innocent young peasant girl, Trishna (Pinto) from the province of Rajasthan is taken up by a dashing young man Jay (Riz Ahmed) who is above her class, is bedded by him and loses a child, only to take up with him again in cosmopolitan Mumbai, where they almost make a life together, until she confesses she has lost their child. Ultimately, however, the man carries her off to an aristocratic setting where she is little more than a concubine, after which she exacts revenge on him and herself.

The parallels between film and novel are approximate, not exact. For example, the single male character in the movie is two figures conflated from the novel, and Trishna’s end (sorry to give it away, but it is Hardy, you know) differs radically from the novel. What the film does aim to convey is Hardy’s “naturalism,” his sense of protagonists locked into caste or custom who cannot overcome the dire demands of Fate.

The downward spiral of Trishna’s life, her tale of hopes dashed and a cruel destiny worked out, should, of course, be moving, touching as any genuine tragedy is. Sadly, here, the lead actress does not compel you to believe in this grim trajectory. Lovely she is, indeed (too lovely, perhaps), but she and her director do not, to this reviewer, evidence any development in her distress, no new maturity of action or awareness. Meanwhile, Ahmed, being two characters in one, must metamorphose way too abruptly from an amiable charmer with real feelings for Trishna to a rake who objectifies her big time.

Too bad for Winterbottom, who has already assayed Thomas Hardy before. He re-cast the writer’s “The Mayor of Casterbridge” into an American Western setting in “The Claim” (2000) and did a straightforward adaptation of “Jude” (from the novel “Jude the Obscure”) in 1996. It should be noted, in fact, that Winterbottom got a fine performance from an actress in the latter picture (the very talented Kate Winslet), something he wasn’t able to achieve this time around.

Winterbottom had another barrier to overcome to make “Trishna” work. While current-day India certainly has its castes and rigidities, this film makes the country today look both picturesque and lush, and often exciting (it is gloriously photographed by cinematographer Marcel Zyskind and contains a lively Indian music score). Coincidentally, this is the second Rajasthan-set film now in town—the other is “The Best Exotic Marigold Hotel.” Hard to make this colorful environment look naturalistic. (*This film is rated “R” and runs 117 min.*)

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