

Movie Review: Polite Society

Orlando Callegari, Jr.

Have you ever had a great dinner and brought the leftovers to work for lunch the next day and ended up satisfied but also disappointed? It's good, sure, but not quite like that first night.

Polite Society (2023), written and directed by Nida Manzoor, is that meal. Reheated Tarantino.

The film follows two young Pakistani sisters in the UK, Ria and Lena Khan, as they cope with growing up and accepting the reality that can get in the way of dreaming big dreams. Also, **SPOILER ALERT** it's about a uterine hijacking scheme to grow an evil clone.

Ria and Lena are better friends than most sisters, supporting each other's greatest aspirations and most childish distractions. Ria pines for a career as a stunt woman while Lena struggles with her fading artistic ambitions. Their parents support these diversions but when the opportunity to marry one of them off to an eligible bachelor arises they pounce at the chance. Suddenly, a schism slices these sisters' bond in two.

Then things get nutty.

But not nutty enough.

Polite Society gets close without quite achieving what it sets out to do. It's the kind of movie that would have been terribly original ten years ago but now doesn't reach the zany heights it's clearly intended to. The script sets up misadventures without ever finding truly clever outcomes. The humor will make you smile but not laugh. The score is interesting but never impressive. Everything leaves the viewer wanting.

The film's *Kill Bill* flourishes also cause it to suffer in comparison. From the hard left turn at the midpoint to the chapter titles, this film is clearly inspired by the gore auteur himself. Unfortunately, Manzoor's movie loses in comparison every time.

In particular, the fight scenes have the potential to be truly dazzling but end up utterly dull due to subpar choreography and weak stunt performances. The clearest example of this comes at the close of the film when the siblings face off against a set of sari-wearing warriors. Back to back and besieged they prepare to defend themselves. But any audience members hoping to be dazzled by a mad flurry of fists and sarongs will be sadly disappointed. The scene ends after a handful of heavily edited blows land with a couple of thuds and moves on before the excitement has a chance to erupt.

Despite these shortcomings, stars Priya Kansara and Ritu Arya truly shine. Kansara's comic rage bubbles under the surface and breaks through whenever someone cuts into her dreamy vision of the world. Arya charms as the perfect deadpan foil to Kansara's manic pixie. Co-stars Ella Bruccoleri and Seraphina Beh are fantastic but not given the material show off their comic talents. The costumes and set design dazzle as well, although it's hard to get it wrong in this milieu. Has anyone put a Pakistani wedding to film that wasn't a delight for the eyes?

Manzoor swings for the fences. She strikes out many times but, this is clearly the work of a filmmaker to watch. With the right ingredients (bigger budget, script work) she could make something truly worth savoring.