

Girls Will Be Girls [15]

2024 India/France/USA/Norway 118 mins

UK released **20 September 2024**

Director **Shuchi Talati**

Screenplay **Shuchi Talati**

Cinematography **Jih-E Peng**

Music **Sneha Khanwalkar; Pierre Oberkampf**

Cast **Preeti Panigrahi (Mira); Kesav Binoy Kiron (Sri);
Kani Kusruti (Anila, Mira's mother)**

In recent decades, the coming-of-age film genre has evolved significantly. What began as a focus on boisterous high-school comedies in the 1990s gave way to a more nuanced blend of romantic comedies and dramedies in the early 2000s. Filmmakers like Jannicke Systad Jacobsen, with *Turn Me On*, *Goddammit!*, and *Lisa Aschan*, with *She Monkeys*, marked the transition with a notable shift away from conventional masculine norms, instead offering a more intimate exploration of female adolescence and the rites of passage associated with it. Debuting director Shuchi Talati continues in this vein in *Girls Will Be Girls*. Set in a scenic Himalayan hill town in Northern India in the pre-social-media age, Talati's film delves into the complexities of female adolescence and gender identity set against the backdrop of traditional conventions.

16-year-old Mira (Preeti Panigrahi) becomes the first female head prefect at an elite, yet traditional, boarding school. Mira embodies the archetype of the academic overachiever. Her receipt of consistent A grades elicits scorn from her peers, and her elevation to head prefect brings additional responsibilities along with increased disdain, although she does not become entirely ostracised. Her mother (Kani Kusruti), an alumna of the same school, serves as the primary driving force behind Mira's academic pursuits. The mum's strict emphasis on academic achievement is rooted in her desire for Mira to have a different future from the life of a stay-at-home wife, reliant solely on her husband's income and whims.

However, Mira's academic pursuits start getting derailed as she experiences the waves of first love. The catalyst for this shift is a new student from Hong

Kong, fitting the archetype of the “international student” in the coming-of-age genre. Talati handles the portrayal of Mira's first love with an initial awkwardness, but it evolves into a sensitive exploration of burgeoning sexual awareness. Contrary to typical expectations, Mira's relationship is not concealed; her mother is fully aware and welcomes the boyfriend into their household.

A pivotal aspect of the film is its portrayal of the inter-generational dynamic between Mira and her mum, framed by the patriarchal society. The mother's involvement in Mira's romantic life is not portrayed as malicious, but rather as a reflection of her own repressed youth. Mira's burgeoning romance thus becomes a conduit for her mother's arrested coming of age. This parallel plotline turns into a reflection on the unfulfilled desires, societal constraints and gender norms faced by the preceding generations. *Girls Will Be Girls* offers a two-generational perspective on coming of age, effectively bridging the divide between past and present, tradition and modernity. As the plot weaves together the motifs of adolescence, gender norms, societal expectations, South Asian identity and female sexuality, Talati's direction is sensitive while avoiding the pitfalls of naivety and sentimentalism. The movie's portrayal of the protagonist's romantic and sexual awakening is handled without faux idealism, especially with the threat of male violence still present.

Girls Will Be Girls is an honest exploration of female adolescence, the mother-daughter dynamic under the prevailing patriarchy, predefined societal constructs that shape women's lives, and the effort to attain agency under those circumstances.

Martin Kudláč, *Cineuropa*, 21 January 2024 (abridged).

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