

Pleading With Men To Take Women Off Their Parents' Hands

DULHABIKTAHAI and EKBAARCHALEAAO

WHAT is it that happens in a dowry transaction? Is the bridegroom bought or bribed? A commodity, once sold, is transferred to the custody and control of the buyer. A human being who is bought and sold becomes a slave and is at the mercy of the highest bidder. In our society today, however, a woman's parents bribe a man to take her off their hands, and keep her in his control. The transaction implies that in the eyes of both giver and taker, the woman is of less economic value than is a slave. A master would think twice before killing a purchased slave. But if one considers a woman so worthless that one has to be paid to accept her, there is nothing but "kindness of heart" to prevent one from getting rid of her.

These two films, purporting to deal with the question of dowry, are built on the assumptions that:

1. a woman must be married otherwise her life has no meaning, and she is better off dead than unmarried ;
2. a woman is a burden on her father and brothers who must get her married at any cost;
3. after marriage she will be maintained by her husband but he will gladly bear this burden only because he "loves" her. Clearly this love is that of a superior for an inferior, and replaces the love that her father had for her as his dependent child. If it were the love of an equal, it could as well serve as a reason for her to maintain him.

If a woman is such a worthless economic unit, and her own parents are in such a hurry to get rid of her, it is only logical that a man who accepts this burden, and his parents, should insist that since he is equipped to "keep" the woman in comfort he must be compensated in advance for the service he is doing her guardians.

How can these films logically oppose dowry, if they reinforce the assumptions on which it is built? The answer is—they do not logically oppose dowry, they illogically oppose it. After depicting women as idle, frivolous, emptyheaded, manhunting creatures



reversing reality—helpless husbands and belligerent brides

who any man in his senses would want to escape, the film maker suddenly makes an appeal to the pity and compassion of husbands and in-laws. He produces pious speeches, floods of tears, pretty woe begone faces, ageing mothers and dying fathers to convince men that they should cheerfully enter into a transaction which is admittedly a "bad" one in economic terms but which is "good" in moral terms. It is as if a businessman were to dissolve into tears and hope to persuade his rival voluntarily to incur losses, thus going against the logic of the profit and loss system which both of them operate by, and accept. One in a 100 rivals might be moved by such tears but 99 would naturally remain unmoved. Why should we expect better results if we operate in the marriage market by the logic of tears?

Of course, when all else fails, the Bombay film maker can produce one of two formulae—"romantic love" or a "change of heart"—to persuade his heroes into uneconomic transactions, and this is precisely what these two films do.

Dulha Bikta Hai (Bridegrooms are sold) depicts the plight of Deepak Valia, who has to "sell himself" so as to obtain enough money to marry off his two sisters. Deepak is an advertising man and also has an affair going, so his hands are full. His two sisters however, do nothing at all. They are never shown outside the four walls of the house (except when thrown out on the street by their in-laws) nor are they shown lifting a finger while living in their parents' house. Apart from being idle, they are also irritating. They giggle, squeal and act as a positive nuisance. They pretend to be uninterested in the matrimonial advertisements Deepak answers on their behalf but at night sneak out the photographs and make conversation full of sexual innuendo about the men

whose photograph they “choose.” Deepak, since he is their brother, tolerates them with amused and affectionate contempt, but the film provides no reason why a stranger should feel anything for them but unmixed contempt.

Apart from being thus “burdened” with two women, poor Deepak is haunted by the memory of yet another woman, his father’s sister Lakshmi who committed suicide because her brother was too poor to marry her off and she did not want to be a burden on him. Deepak does not think of trying to equip his sisters to stand on their own feet so that they need not be a burden on anyone. Instead, the film proceeds to demonstrate just how much of a burden they are. In his zeal to be protective, Deepak conceals their true financial condition from his mother and sisters, with the result that they blame him for callousness in not paying the dowries demanded. The outcome of this is that the audience feels even more hostile to these stupid women and more sympathetic to this noble, martyred man.

Deepak temporarily solves the problem by arranging exchange marriages for both girls, that is, he promises to wed two girls, Reeta and Seema, whose two brothers will then marry his sisters. The fathers of Reeta and Seema agree to dowryless alliances since it will be a fair exchange of burdens. Reeta and Seema are depicted as manhungry monsters and poor Deepak is at one point trapped between four women, including his girlfriend Shaila. He does not, of course, feel the need to take Shaila into confidence, preferring to cheat each of the women concerned into thinking that he is going to marry her. Interesting how the director manages to regale the audience with a titillatingly polygamous situation—Deepak in the arms of four different beauties in quick succession in the course of one song—while simultaneously protecting this hero from the charge of promiscuity, fraud or heartlessness towards the women, by depicting him as a pathetic victim, and lamenting over the fact that he has had to “sell himself.”

When his trickery is discovered, his sisters are tortured, are nearly burnt to death, and are thrown out of their husbands’ homes. Does this make Deepak and his mother give up their obsession to get the girls off their hands? Not a bit of it. The mother gives a speech saying that double the dowry demanded must be paid so that they can live with dignity in their in-laws’ homes. If payment of dowry demanded could save women from torture and insult, how is it that in the majority of reported cases so far, the woman’s death has been preceded by an endless flow of dowry, and promises of more dowry from parents to in-laws?

It is here that this film exposes itself. It is not a plea on behalf of women. It is a plea on behalf of parents of women to in-laws—to take the women off their hands at any cost. It depicts the plight of all those parents who first cripple their daughters, treat them as a burden, and then continue sending them back to their in-laws’ homes even after they know those homes have become virtual torture chambers.

In his effort to send his sisters back to in-laws who have been trying to murder them, Deepak finally marries another girl Pushpa,

and receives a dowry of five lakhs. Here the film takes another seemingly innocent but actually very significant turn. Pushpa happens to be in love with a poor man, but since she is forced to marry Deepak, she plans to kill him, and then commit suicide. On the wedding night she produces a revolver and gives a speech denouncing him as a heartless dowry seeker. By this time the audience cannot but sympathize with Deepak, since they know he is far from being heartless and is taking dowry only for his sisters’ sake. So the first determined action and anti dowry statement by a woman fall flat because of the context. A scuffle ensues, Pushpa dies, and our hapless hero is discovered with the bloodied revolver in his hands.

One cannot but admire the ingenuity of the film maker. He now treats us to the trial of a man who we know to be a dowry hunter but who we also know to be innocent, who makes a most noble speech from the dock asking for five lakhs to save his sisters, and who is saved at the last minute by his dead wife’s lover producing a suicide note written by her. One could dismiss this as another of the unbelievable and meaningless plots so much beloved by Bombay film makers, were it not created in today’s context of trials of wife murderers, who usually plead that the woman committed suicide, and often allege that she was “immoral” that is, she had an affair with another man.

The best, however, is yet to come. Deepak’s sisters’ husbands, who had been conniving, though not too actively, with their parents’ cruelties, now undergo a dramatic change of heart. Sobbing sisters are thereupon returned to the custody of repentant husbands (at which the audience could not help laughing), while greedy fathers-in-law are left gaping, and Deepak is united in dowryless wedlock with his true love.

Dulha Bikta Hal makes an important point when it suggests that the feudal form of patriarchy prevailing in many Indian families compels many sons mindlessly to obey their parents, and that a revolt by the younger generation against the older generation may be the need of the hour. However, if Deepak can be excused for taking dowry, because he needs to give it to his sisters, why can the two fathers-in-law not be excused on similar grounds? Both of them have marriageable daughters, and plead this as their reason for demanding dowry. The director chooses to depict Deepak as a hero and the fathers-in-law as villains, but their views and motives are not so different. The only difference between them is that Deepak is supposed to be kindhearted, though he does not display this quality vis a vis Reeta and Seema, while the fathers-in-law are blatantly cruel. So the film suggests that the only solution is for cruel in-laws to turn kind, and graciously accept an uneconomic proposition. Nowhere does it suggest that women need not die like Lakshmi, if they cannot find a Deepak. Even Shaila, a press reporter, is just as obsessed with the need for early marriage. The film opens with her pressing Deepak to marry her soon, since she cannot wait much longer. She too has an anxious brother who is longing to get her married as soon as possible. The moment she discovers Deepak is

marrying someone else, she rushes to accept the proposal of a man she does not love. Of course, the director sees to it that she does not actually marry the other man, because while Deepak as a widower is just as eligible as he was before, a widowed or divorced woman would not be such an attractive proposition.

Ek Baar Chale Aao is not as much about dowry as about revenge. Lakshmi is rejected by Deendayal just before the wedding ceremony, because her father cannot afford the dowry demanded. She commits suicide because she does not wish to live as a burden on her father. Her father dies of grief. Her brother Dharmadas later takes revenge on Deendayal when the latter's daughter Gulab falls in love with the former's son Kamal.

This film too pits the older generation against the younger. It also succeeds in so blurring the issues that it becomes near impossible to make out who is right and who wrong as between the two fathers. Dharmadas' cruelty to Gulab and humiliation of Deendayal is mitigated by the recurring flashbacks which show how Deendayal had humiliated Lakshmi, Dharmadas and their father.

The one message that does clearly come through is that women must be married, and if they are rejected there is no alternative for them but suicide. Padma commits suicide, and Gulab, when persuaded to divorce Kamal, is on the verge of swallowing poison on the night of her second marriage. Though depicted as a lively, college going girl, she never shows any interest in anything but marriage. She tells a suitor in college that his efforts are futile because she is already tied to the *aanchal* of another man. When thrown out of her in-laws' house, she sits in her father's house, doing nothing. She refers to herself as a living corpse. She thus fully justifies Dharmadas' gloating prediction that now Deendayal will weep himself to death because his daughter will "sit on his chest" for the rest of his life. Deendayal seems to share this view since he is in such a tearing hurry to get her off his hands that he arranges her second marriage to a man who is a known drunkard, womanizer and scoundrel.

This film does not resort to a dramatic change of heart for the bridegroom, Kamal. It goes to much greater lengths to establish his innocence. Though deeply in love with Gulab, he is tricked by his father's most unbelievable ploys into believing that she is unfaithful, and does not think it necessary to ask for her version of the story. On the wedding night, he is made to drink drugged coffee and there upon lured into sleeping with another woman. Can a drug absolve him of guilt? The director apparently thinks not, so he introduces yet another device to prove his innocence. As the other woman Priya, dances in front of Kamal, the camera constantly replaces her face with that of Gulab, so that the viewer one moment sees Gulab in a revealing nightgown and the next moment Priya in exactly the same nightgown. Since the "love" between the young couple has been shown to consist of little more than songs, dances, and physical allure, one can understand why he should find it so difficult to distinguish between one pretty face and body and another. At the end of the film, however,

his vision clears and he rushes off to joint suicide with Gulab.

One would not object to such a depiction of bridegrooms and brothers, if these films purported to be telling exceptional stories, because even such improbable contortions of plot and such nobly misled heroes might conceivably exist on this earth. However, when these films are advertised as conveying a social message, and when their theme songs and speeches generalize about dowry on the basis of these extraordinary stories and characters, there is a danger that the viewers may begin to sympathize with dowry givers—who, poor things, are burdened by daughters, and with dowry takers—who, poor things, are also burdened by daughters, and even with bride torturer—who, after all, have their reasons (they were cheated in *Dulha Bikta Hai*, and were taking revenge in *Ek Baar Chale Aao*). Amidst all these conflicting sympathies, the viewer may also begin to see the women in the same way as do the dowry givers and takers. Women may be lively and loveable like Gulab and Shaila, or boldly manhunting and empty headed like Reeta and Seema, or secretly manhunting and emptyheaded like Deepak's sisters. Yet they all have one thing in common. They are a burden, and must be gotten rid of, otherwise their fathers and brothers will die of misery and despair.

Pleas to masters to be kind to their slaves may work in a few exceptional cases but cannot be a solution on a mass scale to the problem of maltreatment of slaves. It is only when slaves refuse to be slaves any longer that masters will cease their tyranny. These film makers, in spite of their sincere concern for maltreated brides, seem unable to relinquish the idea of women as slaves. Therefore the most they can think of asking is that men should be kinder masters.

—Ruth Vanita

AVTAAR—Social Mythology

The fabric of *Avtaar* is an unusual blend of various threads of fact with fiction and reality with mythology. It is uncanny the way these threads are woven together in this modern "family social." Perhaps that explains its mass appeal. This new kind of Bombay commercial film departs from the formula in that it picks up a theme of social relevance—the neglect of old people, in this case and blends it with fantasy, thereby creating a modern social mythology.

Rajesh Khanna stages a comeback into stardom as the protagonist, the Avtaar or reincarnation of god. This is however a modern god who incorporates all the virtues of male valour, rough and tough skilled labour, financial wizardry, and above all, benevolent caretakership of his family. Avtaar knows no class and caste barriers in his upward social mobility. To begin with this hardworking mechanic manages to woo the daughter of a tycoon who is a customer of his garage. Radha promptly flings aside everything, and severs all previous ties so as to marry her True Love. Thereafter, it is domestic bliss all the way as she lives life through her Avtaar. This self effacing devotee of her husband is, like many mythological heroines, the reincarnation of a goddess

who is created solely to serve her True Love. Her name too is significant.

Radha, as ideal Sita-wife, bears the requisite two sons. But these sons, far from being the support of their parents, actually rip them off. The stereotypes of disco dancing, consumerist younger generation versus hardworking, penny scraping older generation is resorted to in a rather vulgar way. Yet the theme is relevant to nearly every family today experiencing increasing commercialization in all spheres of life and of all ties. India's post independence road to "progress" is lined with the thorns of social upheaval, disruption and degradation.

Old age, once a symbol of wisdom to be revered, is slowly coming to be treated as scrap to be cast aside. *Avtaar* makes a strong statement that sons are no security for old age. Outraged by the way his sons cheat him and his wife, and throw them out of the house, Avtaar donates the larger portion of his wealth to the opening of old age homes in every city, where the worth of old people is recognized, where they can take part in productive labour, and where a life of dignity can be led.

However, the film moves into fantasy when our Avtaar heroically resists being scrapped in middle age, and simply leaps to the heights of wealth and status. By inventing an economical carburettor he manages to spin so much money that we suddenly see him gracing the high life of a corporate sector big boss. Are technological inventions by poor labourers really rewarded with so much money? Why is it that so many talented scientists in our country have been driven to commit suicide? Is it not the big sharks in every, sphere who swallow the products made by the small fry? But never mind these uncomfortable realities. Myth

number one of the capitalist system is portrayed and perpetrated : if you lift yourself by the bootstraps, you can make it to the top. Myth number two is. similarly portrayed : transition from one class background to another is smooth and painless.

Of course women also have their place in this class transition. So much is possible for Mr Success because he has a modern Sita to nourish him all the way, without complaint, without questioning. She scarcely seems to have any personality of her own, apart from her function of smiling, cajoling, and soothing his frayed nerves, The only want she ever expresses is directed by her irrational *mamta* or maternal love, when she yearns to take back her erring sons into her motherly fold. Such social mythologies not only gloss over the ugly realities of our highly inegalitarian and unjust social order but ultimately are at the service of the status quo which they assure us, will surely punish the wicked and reward the good.

—Nina Kapoor

LOVERS—Nothing Changes But The Clothes

This film consists of a series of shots of the lovers running up and down the beach and pausing between races for embraces. There is however some change that from one flashy outfit to another from minute to minute. The rest of the melodrama is boringly predictable. The film purports to stand for "national integration" because it shows a Hindu boy marrying a Christian girl. Significantly, the director has chosen the most innocuous of all inter religious couplings. Would he have dared show a Hindu-Muslim marriage or even a Christian boy marrying a Hindu girl? One was gratified to see the film running to empty houses.

R.V.

Without Comment

We are often asked whether we write about the problems of men who are troubled by their wives. Recently we received a letter from such a husband, Jitender Kashyap of Faridabad. We are reproducing it here, translated from Hindi.

"I have read your magazine **Manushi** and liked it, so I am sending a story for publication in it. The story is like this. There is a boy who is earning Rs 500 a month. His parents pressurize him to marry a girl who is a writer. The boy agrees, thinking that marriage will procure him a partner in his joys and sorrows. However his happiness does not last long because the girl, who is a writer, spends all her time reading books and writing stories. When he comes home in the evening, she, instead of offering him a cup of tea, asks whether he has brought the envelopes and books she had asked him to bring. If he has forgotten, he has to eat dinner at the railway canteen which is near their house because she sulks and refuses to cook or to eat. This is their daily routine.

The poor boy is so harassed by these domestic problems that he cannot work properly in the factory and gets reprimanded there as well. Also his wife keeps up a correspondence with the magazines where she sends work for publication. So many letters come for her that the boy's co workers at the factory all make fun of him. He is so embarrassed that he tells her to get the letters at the address of a relative rather than at their own address. But then the relative's sons tease and laugh at the boy. Now this boy warns everyone he knows never to marry a writer's wife. If the husband is a writer then it is all right for him to marry a woman writer otherwise not. The writer of this letter is himself the boy in this story."