

Feeding Male Fantasy

SUHAAG—Pleasure in Women's Pain

The central theme of this film is no new one. It is about a woman who is abandoned for years, knocked about, used as hostage, nearly murdered and finally deserted in a car accident by her husband — and still wants his life to be saved at the risk of her own, because he represents her marital status (*Suhaag*). Her motto is: "No matter how the husband behaves, it is the wife's duty to anoint her forehead with the dust of his feet."

The film takes a peculiar pleasure in humiliating, torturing women and reducing them to objects of ridicule. Even when the man concerned is presented as a powerful semi-hero, semi-villain, the objective effect is to exult in the woman's suffering. She never utters a word of protest — just suffers. Her son's protest is only against one thing—that she was robbed of the status of being attached to a man: "Even though she was a *Suhagin* (married woman), she was forced to lead the life of a widow."

Parveen Babi, a medical student, is supposedly the 'new' intellectual woman. The film puts her too in her place. Under drugs, her behaviour confirms the rapist's and eve-teaser's firmly held belief that every girl who appears sober and sensible is a slut at heart, dying to fall into his arms. So under drugs, presumably all her hidden desires come out. As was predicted by the villain, Parveen's '*sharm*' was only a veneer of modesty, not self-respect at all. She throws herself on Shashi Kapoor, an absolute stranger and is literally ready to sleep with him on the road.

In her hostel room, she laments that she has no family to arrange her marriage. So it is made clear that the state of singleness is hateful and frustrating, that her education and work do not give her a sense of fulfilment and that all she wants is a man. The first time she visits Shashi's house, his mother tests the future daughter-in-law by making her press Shashi's clothes and cook for him.

So all women are really the same. The 'good' woman who preserves her chastity for her husband, is a whore at heart, while Rekha, the dancing girl, is 'virtuous' at heart because she uses herself as tempting bait to lure Amitabh from his



Clutching on to her chains (her mangalsutra) for dear life—The Eternal Suhagin, the Eternal Sufferer.

drinking habit. Since she has to be paired off with a hero, the film must present her to him as a suitable bride — so she too has kept her virginity intact while living in a brothel!

While the women are all divested of their independent work, and seated behind their husbands, as shown in the last scene, the men are engaged in violent power struggles with each other. The heroes have to be justified in this, so they are clad in the most discredited of uniforms — that of the police. 'Right' and 'wrong' are equated with 'legal' and 'illegal'. Amitabh acting in uniform, is always acting 'legally' though we never see him as part of an organized police force! The State defines the morality of a man and the man dictates the morality of a woman!

— Anu, Mini

AHSAAS—Displaying Our Bodies

This film is supposed to be a 'love story'. In our Bombay film industry a love story implies a thorough exposure of the female anatomy, vulgarly suggestive sex-play and pat a 'happy' ending.

Dina and Parvez, teenage undergraduates, encounter each other at a swimming pool, a setting ideally devised to present Dina in a skimpy wet bikini. Naturally, 'love' at first sight ensues and till the interval, the two do nothing but jump in and out of swimming pools and rivers. That Dina is presented both to the hero and to the audience as an attractive sex object is apparent from the efforts the producer has taken to exploit as many of her physical assets through the camera as the censors would permit. The hero confesses to being obsessed by Dina's body and sings that he is willing to give all the treasures of the world to possess her physically.

In the second half of the film, obstructions appear in the path of the lovers. Since their fathers are mortal enemies, the children decide to elope. However, though they were shown to be too young and innocent to understand what sexuality is, they now turn out to be embodiments of middle class values. They get 'properly' married in a temple before they let their desires get the better of them. While in hiding, Parvez looks on as Dina, happily oblivious of the family problems, knits busily for the coming baby.

Dina's aunt Simi had also been a victim of this family rivalry in her youth. She had been in love with Parvez's uncle but had lacked the courage to run away with him. He died in an accident so she lived all her life as a recluse, denying herself any pleasures. The film glorifies this 'virtuous' woman who has opted for self-imposed widowhood. The message is clear: a good woman is born to be loved and possessed by a man and one man only. She must dedicate her life to him or his memory, whichever the case may be. Since the practice of Sati has been banned by law, she should become a symbolic Sati. This aunt encourages Dina to elope.

The grand finale is staged when the two fathers come upon Dina writhing in labour pains. Parvez's father who would not hear of his son getting engaged to Dina, has to merely see her in labour to undergo a change of heart. It is not the woman as an individual who matters. It is only her state of motherhood which excuses and explains everything. She is again used — as a reproductive object.

The film like most others of its kind, equates the man's desire to possess the woman with 'love'. After marriage, Dina resigns herself to existing as a material possession of Parvez and hopes that when he tires of looking at the television, perhaps he will look at her.

Ahsaas takes a positively hostile stand to the independent woman. Simple Kapadia, who is a Europe returned friend of Parvez, embodies this tendency and is therefore portrayed as a vulgar, aggressive and frustrated woman lacking all sense of balance .

How long is the Bombay film industry going to continue this portrayal of woman as a sex object? How long is it going to continue scoffing at any show of intellectual independence by women? How long is it going to keep equating modernity among women with a show of leg and breast? Or, conversely, how long are we going to take all this lying down?

— *Jyoti Sanghera*

RATNADEEP— Wait for him, Worship him

Shakuntala is a woman who has waited seven years for her husband to return to her. Meanwhile he has died, and an impostor who is his double, turns up. She welcomes him as her husband, and though they do not sleep together, keeps him fascinated by her glamorous costumes. As soon as he is unmasked, however, she will not permit him to touch her. Just

because he is not her legal husband, the infatuation ceases to mean anything. As he is leaving, she collapses and dies. The man dares not even touch her ashes because that would offend her 'purity'.

Shakuntala's longing and loneliness are glamorized through her dreams. Her relationship of service and submission to her husband is also romanticized and the camera dwells on each new sari as if for a sari advertisement. There is no attempt at all to explore the woman's conflict or dilemma. The Ratnadeep is a lamp for husband-worship passed on from mother-in-law to daughter-in-law just as the keys of the family treasury are passed from father to son. Feudal values are never questioned; rather they are given a new lease of life.

And the conflict centres round the man—his guilt, his nobility as ideal husband, master, son. Other marital relationships in the film are used to reinforce the traditional one of inequality. The man who cooks and cares for his wife is called 'feminine' and the relationship is shown to be a farce. The relationship of two servants is used just for vulgar comic relief.

So the film assures us that "men must work and women must weep" — what is only an adventure for the man means death for the woman.

— *Tripurari Sharma*

PREMVIVAH— 'Falling in love' for convenience

Is this film as light-hearted as it pretends to be or is it a very well-planned attack on the woman who chooses not to marry? When the film opens, 35-year-old Asha Parekh has rejected several suitors. Her younger sister Bindiya wishes to marry a young executive who is going abroad and she is determined to get 'Didi' out of her way first. So she and her fiancée set off on a mindless hunt for a man — any customer will do, be he a widower advertising in the paper, a travelling salesman or a person they see on television.

Bindiya finally locates a psychiatrist to 'cure' her sister — any woman who is prepared to stay unmarried *must* be mentally diseased and Bindiya says her only wish is that Didi should become 'normal'. The film-maker's idea of the science of psychiatry is just another version of the "How to win friends and influence people" philosophy. Asha is advised to socialize, throw parties and thus arrange in the most 'modern' way to 'fall in love' so that a '*premvivah*' can follow! Of course, under this treatment, her resistance breaks down and she promptly falls in love with her doctor! He, meanwhile, has fallen for Bindiya who most callously arranges a series of dates between him and her sister so that she can get them out of the golden path that leads to heaven — that is, marriage to Mithun and following him to London.

The part of the film most humiliating to women is intended to be comic. This is the spectacle of Asha desperately pursuing

Utpal Dutt even when she knows he is not interested in her. The song accompanying her efforts is significant: ‘The withering flowers will bloom, the ruined life will be saved.’

Finally, as a gesture of his great love for Bindiya, Utpal makes a sacrifice of his happiness and marries Asha. Bindiya thanks him ecstatically for having done such a noble deed as to marry a 35-year-old woman and the film concludes with a joke at Utpal’s expense — how has he, a sensible bachelor, allowed himself to be made such an ‘ass’ of? The film would like to tell the woman viewer: “You are mad if you try living without a man”, but cannot resist a contemptuous ‘aside’: “He’d be a fool to marry you, anyway!”

The cinema is indeed a very powerful medium to force one set idea of ‘normality’ down our throats. And today, as more women are finding the roles of wife and mother insufficient for self-fulfilment, not only films but all the mass media are more and more vigorously trying to convince us that any way of life outside a properly *mangal-sutraed* marriage is unwomanly and ‘abnormal’. A woman not tied to one man for life is bound to be miserable so she must dress up, go out and ‘catch’ a man—strange idea this of a ‘love-match’!

—Anu, Mini

KAALA PATTHAR—Women Workers Invisible

This film attempts to acquaint its viewers with the miserable living and working conditions of coal mine workers. But this shameful reality is seen not through the eyes of the workers but of a former ship captain, an engineer and an escaped convict. Each one of these three heroes is conveniently paired off with a woman.

However, two of these women—the doctor and the journalist, have been presented in newer roles. They are there not just as girlfriends but as efficient professional women committed to their work and living by their ideals. They refuse

to sell their professional and human integrity for a comfortable life style.

Compared to the average Hindi film, this film is closer to harsh reality and is also less obnoxious in the moral values it upholds. Even though ‘heroic’ violence and mindless one-upmanship between males are as usual romanticized, yet there is a certain emphasis on the need for social justice, humane behaviour and the true courage which defies those in power and puts others before oneself.

But when it comes to women, we have the same old distortion of reality. Wherever did the thousands of women coal mine workers go? They seem to have been invisible to the film makers—they are certainly non-existent in the film. The only women we see are half-naked dancers decorating the countryside and entertaining tired male workers, or widows weeping when a mine accident takes place. We get one brief glimpse of women at work in a picturesque row, with baskets on their heads, singing a song! They are mentioned only to evoke pathos as the “wives and children” of mine workers.

In fact, the life and struggles of mine workers are from beginning to end viewed through the vulgarly ‘romantic’ coloured glasses of middle class city dwellers. The wedding of a mine worker’s daughter is celebrated with middle class gold and glitter, the trade unionists just have to follow the orders of “Engineer Saheb” to get their demands fulfilled and when the mine disaster occurs, almost all the workers are saved through the miraculous might of our three heroes and the mercy of *Wahe Guru!*

The film is an attempt to portray reality but its distortions are cruel—to show the heavily over-worked and miserably underpaid women mine workers as decked-up dancing dolls is not only to display one’s own callousness but to insult those women and their labour.

—Anu, Mini