

THIRTY years ago Kamala Das wrote a short story called *Rugminikkoru Pavakkutty* (a doll for *Rugmini*). Eight or nine years ago Kerala film maker K P Kumaran turned it into a film. Today suddenly the film “*Rugmini*” is controversial after being telecast on Doordarshan at a family viewing hour in the month of May. Originally granted an A certification, it was re-submitted, presumably with cuts, and obtained a U certification.

The controversy erupted because its telecast outraged enough viewers for them to write in to DD’s Thiruvananthapuram kendra protesting at the telecast. The director of the kendra says he received almost a thousand letters of protest. DD responded in its weekly feedback programme *Prathikaranam* by saying that it had failed to anticipate that viewers would react in this way and for that it was sorry. That incensed not only the film maker, but the chairperson of the Kerala State Women’s Commission Sugathakumar who had requested Doordarshan in the first place to telecast this film.

The liberal consensus is that *Rugmini* is a sensitively made film on the theme of child prostitution and cannot be faulted on grounds of obscenity or suggestiveness. Also that films like this need to be shown to highlight problems plaguing our society.

It certainly is an unusual film, not in these but in treatment. It derives its title from the name of its protagonist, a young girl, daughter of a former prostitute, whose mother takes her and leaves her in the brothel that she once lived in. She does this after her drunken lout of a husband rapes the girl.

Rugmini is not a child but a girl woman, innocent of what a brothel is and what goes on there. Her mother, shown in the beginning of the film as

FILM REVIEW

Rugmini

Director: K P Kumaran

Script Writers: K P Kumaran and Kamala Das

Review: Sevanti Ninan

loving, and disturbed by her husband’s leering after his step daughter, leaves her in the brothel without giving the girl any inkling about what she is in for. What unfolds thereafter is a curiously ambivalent treatment of brothel life. The girls live in a large, pleasant old house, have large rooms to themselves, chatter and play hopscotch in sylvan Kerala surroundings, and are taken out to the beach and to the temple by the madam.

At the same time the girls dress up and wait for customers whom you almost never see, hint at being tired of living there, and talk of hating men.

One can only surmise that cuts made in order to obtain a U certification have removed those glimpses of sordidness which would have lent credence to the revulsion they express.

The casting is sure-handed. *Rugmini*’s non-glamorised, bewildered face lends poignancy to the film. Yet most of the time she is shown chatting, listening to the experiences of others, or enjoying the grounds of the lovely old house. There are only two encounters with men over what seems like a considerable period of time, both with the police inspector who takes a fancy to her, and except for some fond



A still shot from *Rugmini*

overtures neither result in his violating her. By the end of the film it appears that she is still a virgin. If there is anything in the film to suggest otherwise, it eluded this reviewer who saw the film twice.

The other girls too have none of the coarseness of prostitutes. In fact one of them who was apparently left at the brothel's doorstep as a baby, wrapped in silk, is an exquisitely lovely girl, beautifully and tastefully dressed. She, like one of the others, complains that she can't bear the place any more, but nothing is ever shown to suggest why her life is so unbearable.

Another aspect of the film which lacks conviction is the pregnancy and abortion of one of the girls which results in her death. Seetha's pregnancy is depicted through an occasional clutching of the stomach. Later it becomes retching, then a fleeting moaning and groaning, and then without adequate build-up she dies.

If the State Women's Commission wanted to pick films that would create consciousness about the misery of children trapped in prostitution, this was not a hard-hitting enough film to pick. It is sanitised in its approach; certainly the brothel as it is depicted here, often seems more like a hostel.

Those indignant at Doordarshan's apology have hailed this as a film which is far from offensive in its treatment of prostitution. They are right; but that does not mitigate the harshness of theme. All said and done this is a film on a child raped by her father, and pushed by her mother into prostitution. Its central theme is the bodily exploitation of women. It is not a subject for Sunday afternoon family television viewing.

It is however one of the many societal problems that state television should be tackling in a meaningful way. □

Instruments

It was the Renaissance,

then the Age of Reason.

Papal names included Innocent, gentle Leo,

though some were more urbane.

There were more female than male witches

because women were more lightheaded and sensual

than men, concluded men

like Dominican Inquisitor Jakob Sprenger in 1487.

Besides, he added, women had always been

favourite of Satan.

The Archbishop of Trier had 120 burned at Pfalz

for making the cold weather

last devilishly long in 1596.

And God was often graciously pleased to reveal the

truth,

If not at first, at any rate at the last, thumbscrew.

Hoping to be pardoned, suspects accused each other

(our ears burn when others speak of us).

Even Bacon stated that the secrets of nature

could be teased and tortured out of her.

By God, if wommen hadde writen stories,

They wolde han writen of men moor wickednesse

Than al the mark of Adam may redresse.

It was the Renaissance,

then the Age of Reason.

Brian Pastoor