

TAAQAT— Pretence Of Progressivism

This is one of those films which make a show of modernism but while criticizing only the more blatant aspects of tradition, enforce and endorse prevalent prejudices. Much spoken about women's issues, such as dowry and rape, are raised without any attempt to explore them deeply.

The hero Vinod Khanna is a progressive thakur. He talks against the dowry system, helps catch a notorious dacoit, and is kind to his stepmother and her son. On the other hand, the stepmother, her brother and her son, in their greed for a fat dowry, are constantly plotting against the unblemished hero. Instead of exploring the social causes for dowry demands, the cause is presented as simply the greed of a bad woman. The stepmother says, almost smacking her lips: "I will take five lakhs." However, one was not quite convinced that one woman could be at the root of the dowry problem.

The progressive hero then goes off to hunt, and meets innocence incarnate in the form of Devi, the adopted daughter of a rest house chowkidar. She boldly intervenes to stop him from shooting rabbits. The hero falls in love, and one night, while the girl is sleeping, smears *sindoor* in her hair, and throws a sequinned veil over her, thus symbolically making her his bride. Why should a progressive man have done this? Should he not have proposed to her, asked her whether she wanted to leave the forest or not? The girl too, on discovering what has happened to her, suddenly becomes a docile woman, cries over her "good luck", and falls at the feet of the hero. How did an independent girl turn into a slave with a pinch of *sindoor*?

The stepmother is now made into a full-fledged vamp. Though forced to slave the whole day, the girl does not tell her husband, how she is being treated, simply because she does not want to spoil the "family peace." As soon as the husband leaves on an official tour, the mother-in-law is locked in a room, and the four brothers-in-law attempt rape. Here the woman is shown as courageous and capable of resistance. She shoots down two men, in the process upsetting candles and setting the house on fire. Running out of the house, she faints into the arms of the dacoit who her husband had earlier helped arrest, and who had sworn to kill her husband.

When the dacoit comes to know that Raakhee, his adopted sister, is married to his enemy, he drops the idea of killing her husband. In a brief flashback, we are shown the story of the dacoit's real sister, a dowry victim. In this episode too, the husband and father-in-law are portrayed as helpless standbys while the whole blame is shifted solely to the mother-in-law. By making two mothers-in-law responsible for two disasters, the film thus singles out women as the root cause of all evil.

The dacoit saves Devi and she joins his gang, directing all operations in her exalted position as the chief's "sister." After the gang surrenders, Devi snatches a gun from a policeman

and shoots the last one of her would be rapists. When she does this, her husband, instead of shooting at her hand, shoots her in the abdomen, and she blissfully dies in his arms. Why should she be shown cuddling up to this husband, who, on an earlier occasion, had been shown forcing her into cohabitation? On that occasion, Devi had been fast asleep when the husband started pawing her, and when she protested, sang a song which unambiguously stated that night is made for a wife to submit to her husband's desires, even if she is not in the mood to do so.

Another example of how the film strengthens prevalent prejudices while professing sympathy for women is the incident when Devi and her dacoit brother barge into a wedding where a young girl is being married off to an old man. To save the girl, they hand her father a bag of money and ask him to get her a younger husband. Fortunately, this idea of social reform does not seem to be making an impact as not many people are seeing the film.

— Anjali Deshpande

VIDHAATA— The Kingdom Of Men

This film offers us a peep into the kingdom of men in the bizarre setting of a Bombay crime thriller. With its near all-male starry cast, the film is on its way to becoming a super hit! The star image of Dilip Kumar had suffered a setback a year ago, when he went in for a bigamous marriage. It gets repaired in films like *Shakti* where he played the golden hearted cop, and this one, where he plays a golden hearted bad guy. This super-duper has allotted only one role of any significance to a woman — Padmini Kolhapure, whose talent and vivaciousness are reduced to the seductive innocence of a damsel in distress. The other women only exist as sexy things, lolling about in bikinis and cocktail outfits, at the service of men.

One of the great social myths perpetrated by capitalism—the rags to riches life story of the protagonist, is here enacted by the working class engine driver Shamsher Singh who is transformed into the urbane, slick chairman of a notorious smuggler gang. This great man is catapulted to these dizzy heights because of his great love for his "blood", that is, his son. Then the great son too makes a dramatic entry into high life. His wife dies in childbirth since it is convenient not having women around to mess up the big male story. Shamsher's son having been killed in an encounter with a dacoit, the orphaned baby boy is brought up by Sanjeev Kumar.

The young boy Kunaal happily enters the razzle-dazzle world of his grandfather, but then treads the thorny path to discovery of his grandfather's chairmanship of the smuggler gang. The discovery entails our being plunged into lavish settings of high technology disco clubs, militarism, and, of course, cute little things as backdrop. As these big men of the gang are having some fun at a disco party, we see in its science fiction setting a blown up sized pistol emerging from the wall, and the cabaret dancer Padmini plunges from its top onto the revolving stage. The pornographic song and dance sequence "*Oorie Baba*" follows, with its gruesome mix of sex and

violence. The film is replete with such obscene stuff. For instance, the now notorious song "*Saat Saheliyan khadi khadi*" is nothing but a series of vulgar digs at the wives of men of different professions. This male humour song and dance sequence is performed in aid of a religious festivity.

However, the film takes a more bizarre turn when Kunaal's nascent socialism starts sprouting. He falls in love with the slum dweller dancing girl, gallantly rescues her from other bad men and later even rejects his grandfather's fabulous wealth for her sake. The grand finale has the entire lot of male justice, vengeance and love thrown in in ample measure. Truly, a heavy soup to gulp down.

— Nina Kapoor

BHEEGI PALKEIN—A Convincing Portrayal

Here at last is a film which, in its character portrayals, its presentation and its ending, makes a break with the stereotypical images of women that dominate Hindi cinema.

Shanti and Ishwar go to school together and later marry. Ishwar belongs to a rich brahmin landlord family, while Shanti is the daughter of a lower caste poor schoolteacher. Ishwar's mother and greedy sister-in-law disapprove of the marriage so Ishwar has to break away from his family, have a registered court wedding, postpone his plans of appearing for the IAS exam, and instead take up a less well paid job.

At first, Shanti and Ishwar appear to be mature individuals, capable of establishing a relationship based on companionship and equality. They are perhaps not unlike many young, educated couples of today who do not have arranged marriages. Yet what happens subsequently is perhaps not a typical either. Ishwar's maturity does not extend beyond taking a stand on his choice of a wife. Shanti is still expected to play the stereotypical role of a housewife whose sole function is to cater to her husband's wishes and who must not step out of the house independently. However, Ishwar's income is insufficient to maintain him in the lifestyle to which he is accustomed. He squanders money on items they cannot immediately afford, declaring with typical male logic: "I earn the money so I will spend it as I want." Unable to persuade him to be less extravagant, Shanti decides to take up a job in a bank. Conflict follows, since Ishwar sees Shanti's taking up a job as an attempt to enter the male domain. His emotional insecurity manifests itself in irrational bouts of suspicion, jealous anger and sarcasm, while Shanti tries to ignore his nagging, and to treat him as a mature adult.

Many of the episodes that follow, such as Ishwar's motor bike accident and petulance at being left alone all day when recuperating, constitute standard filmi fare. What makes them different in this film, apart from their low key treatment, is that they are not presented as a set of predestined external circumstances which lead to the deterioration in the relationship between Ishwar and Shanti. Rather, they are used only to highlight the already precarious nature of that relationship.

Shanti, brilliantly played by Smita Patil, is shown as a

woman who silently tolerates Ishwar's jibes and sarcasms, not in the spirit of a self sacrificing Sati-Savitri, but because she recognizes her husband's immaturity and does not wish to retaliate in kind, and who, despite everything, loves him and hopes that some time his better sense will prevail.

However, Ishwar's last act of betrayal, when he returns to his mother's house without informing Shanti, constitutes for her the final break in the relationship. Before leaving, she sends Ishwar all her savings to enable him to subsist until he is well enough to work. Ishwar returns to an empty house. His recognition that Shanti alone has been his true friend and companion comes too late.

However, the film does not end there. Ishwar and Shanti meet once more in late middle age. Ishwar is now a successful government official who goes to inspect the school where Shanti is working. She recognizes him but makes no attempt to revive the past. It is he who approaches her, asking her to return to him, but by then, she has moved too far away from him. As she tells him, through her work she has found fulfilment and a purpose in life. Yet she leaves the final decision to him, asking him to decide not as a husband but as a friend. Perhaps for the first time in his life, Ishwar ignores his own needs and desires, and sees her as a person in her own right, not merely as a wife. He returns home alone.

The chief strength of the film lies in the characterization of Shanti, in which, to my mind, it comes closer than does any recent Hindi film to a realistic portrayal of an educated, working woman living in a city. Like many others, Shanti is "modern" in that she marries a man of her choice, and is capable of competently doing a full time job outside the house. At the same time she is "traditional" in her continued belief in religious customs and rituals, and in the quality of her attachment to husband and child. This characterization successfully challenges and breaks out of the Bombay film caricatures of modern working women as promiscuous, immoral and flirtatious, and as causing the break up of marriages by their neglect of husbands and children.

The film also helps throw light on some of the factors which lead to the break up of many of today's so-called "love" marriages, that is, the double standards, insecurities and petty jealousies which most young men, despite their education and claims to modernity, cannot overcome, and which many educated, self respecting women are not prepared to tolerate any longer. Male possessiveness emerges as the hidden, dark side of male "love." Increasingly, women are beginning to recognize this and to break away from it.

However, the film does not present a completely negative picture of men. At the end of the film Ishwar emerges as a man who is capable, even if belatedly, of setting aside his own selfish interests. In his final choice, he seeks to relate to Shanti as a friend, at last recognizing her right and ability to exist as an independent human being. The moment of this recognition is also the moment of his own growth and liberation.

—Bina Agarwal