

OLD POISON IN NEW BOTTLES

SAJAN BINA SUHAGAN

A WOMAN can be a *Suhagan* (wife), a widow, a daughter or daughter-in-law, a sister or sister-in-law but nothing in herself as an individual – that is the message of *Sajan Bina Suhagan*.

The film is a distorted version of *Little Women*, an early twentieth century American novel about four sisters who grow up to be *Good Wives*. The only positive feature of the film is that the family has three daughters and no son, but there are no regrets. The girls are all highly valued and petted children. Their mother is an utterly incompetent woman who bursts into tears at every crisis. When her husband realizes that he is going to die of heart disease, his first thought is “Asha will be left helpless without me.” However, as it turns out, he need not have worried. Asha’s first love, whom she had deserted in obedience to her dying father, turns up to take over a protector. “Leave the responsibility of Bulbul (youngest daughter) on me”, he tells a weeping Asha.

The musical refrain and theme of the film is : “Life is only worth living if one gives life to others”. The men all “give life” to other through their work – Asha’s former love is a surgeon who saves Bulbul’s life by operating on her, her husband was a highly responsible worker in a bank, her son-in-law is a lawyer and saves her by his eloquent arguments on her behalf when she is convicted of murder. The women’s way of “giving life” to others is truly strange. Asha’s husband tells her not to tell her children that he is dead, but to continue acting like a married woman : “I will remain alive in your *sindur*” (symbol of married woman), he says.

Asha goes through mental agonies before her mirror, because after her husband’s death, she had to continue wearing bright clothes, jewellery and above all applying *sindur* in her hair parting and a *bindi* on her forehead. Very cleverly, the film makes it appear that the great sacrifice made by this widow is in her continuing to be happy and normal. She is longing to give up all the beauty, colour and gaiety in her life, but makes the “sacrifice” of not doing so because, as she says, “Even though I am a widow, I am fulfilling the duty of a wife because for a wife her husband’s last wish is even greater than God.” She is praised for her “courage” in defying society and religion by obeying her husband. When people suspect that she is in love with someone else, she is furious: “I would rather take poison than fall so low.”



Wife! Worshipper! Waitress

Asha ruins her life by making one foolish promise after another to different men, and one foolish sacrifice after another. She promises her father to marry a stranger and desert her lover (though she does not seem to feel this much – she very dutifully transfers her love and loyalty to her husband while the lover remains unmarried for her sake) and promises her husband to conceal the fact of his death. Other men have to undo the consequences of Asha’s “sacrifices”. She is blackmailed by a man who knows that her husband is dead, and threatens to tell the world. In despair, she murders him. But, after all, he was only a wardboy – the poor in the film are shown as inhuman rogues – what is his life worth weighed against that of Asha’s cooing, piano-playing daughter who is so delicate that she might die if she were to hear of her father’s death?

The court, the law, the President himself, who pardons Asha after she has been sentenced to life imprisonment by a most unwilling judge, all extol her as a goddess, a woman who obeyed her husband mindlessly and was ready to commit murder. Suicide, anything, rather than disobey him. After all, as Bulbul says, doesn’t the President have a mother? It is in the interest of all men that their wives and mothers remain in their control and continue to sacrifice their lives for them. So

the film ends with Asha coming out of prison, dressed as a widow, and being told by the former lover, "Come home, Asha, the children are waiting for you."

The most interesting character in the film is Asha's oldest daughter Vasanthi, who practices Karate on the local goondas and whose proclaimed ambition is to prove that "a daughter can be as good as a son, even though daughters are not valued in our society." She is the only girl participant in a motor bike race but gives up her victory to save the life of a Harijan child, and is declared the "best citizen of Simla".

But of course, this young woman is too dangerous to be left on her own. It is no chance that she is the only one of the daughters who is to be safely married off by the end of the film. A boy who teased her, and later single handed rescued her from three goondas whom she could not handle despite Karate, wins her as a modernized "virgin bride" (she refuses to kiss him before marriage).

Her "modernity" is confined to trouser suits, for her attitudes are certainly neither modern nor scientific. When a friend requests Vasanthi to save her from a boy who troubles her daily, she replies knowingly, "Well dear, you are such an attractive *thing*, you know!" She encourages her mother to perform *Karva Chauth* (fasting for long life of one's husband), and when her sister is dying, she enters as devoutly into family prayers before the clay image of Sri Krishna, instead of looking for a doctor. (The Divine Healing does, of course, take place).

So Mr. Vasanthi, as she is called by her father, was only being childish when she tried to be as good as a boy. How indeed could she be so? In an economic crisis, all she can do is make a futile sacrifice – sell her hair for Rs. 200 which is not enough in any case. The film puts her well on the way to becoming as good a *Suhagan* as her mother. She will be passed from the hands of one man to another, as her mother was passed from father to husband to benevolent former lover to son-in-law (since there was no son!)

- Anu, Mini

HAMARA SANSAR

Hamara Sansar is misnamed. Such wildly improbable partings and re-unions, plots and counter-plots are no part of "our world". The theme song refers to the beginning of the world with two – man and woman. But is the man-woman relationship depicted the one we see around us?

The themes are similar to those of *Sajan Bina Suhagan*. Nutan is again shown as the "ideal" wife, mother and daughter-in-law. She sells her bangles rather than tell her husband that his mother has stolen the money; when he slaps her for no fault of hers, she does not show the slightest indignation; when he apologises, she says, "What does it matter? After all, you did not raise your hand against a stranger, but against your own wife", and proceeds to feed him with her own hands. She is, of course deeply religious, and values her *suhag* (status as a married woman) above everything else. She nearly kills an

old man who is delaying the loan she needs when her husband is ill. The reason : After so many years, this *Abhagan* (unfortunate woman) has become a *Suhagan* (married woman)". The first thing friend does when the lost husband is found, is to put *sindur* and *bindi* on Nutan's forehead.

This self-degradation of hers is highly praised in a song : "Oh woman, we are your worshippers, we need you at every moment of our lives... You bear all agonies with a smile... Your decency is your ornament... You forgive all errors, you are the image of mercy..." While this song is being sung by a male voice, there are flashback showing Nutan at various moments of "sacrifice" and "service". The most grotesque of these is when, tormented by her in-laws, she faints in the kitchen and blood streams from her pain". Her unnecessary suffering is praised as "natural", right and proper for a woman. If women are suffering, all is well with "our world", because women were made to suffer.

While the "good" woman thinks it perfectly natural to be slapped by her husband, the "bad" woman is much more violently kept in her place. Nutan's sister-in-law and mother-in-law are "set right" when the idiotic and docile son-in-law suddenly picks up a whip and beats them into submission. It was horrifying to see wife-beating being thus idealized on the screen and to hear the men in the audience applaud vigorously. The girl cries, "I will cook, I'll sweep, I'll wash dishes", to each stroke of the whip and meekly follows her "master" to the bedroom too. After the husband takes her into his favour, she is shown as ill-treating her old mother who had been so fond of her.

Moral : women always turn against each other. All they need is a man to keep them in their place.

The conclusion of the film : the joint family, headed by a male, triumphs over all. The young brother-in-law who was willing at the beginning of the film to "marry any woman, be she fat or thin, dark or fair", has hooked a rich man's daughter. All the *Suhagans* are safely under the thumbs of their respective husbands.

One wonders who the pronoun "Our" refers to in the title "Our world". It's certainly a man's world in *Hamara Sansar*.

- Anu, Mini

SWARAG NARAK

THE film proclaims that it has a message for married couples and introduces the stereotyped "westernized", disco-swinging, drinking, womanizing husband, to show the male contribution to marital misery. But let no-one be deceived – the message which rings loud and clear is aimed at women : the whole fabric of society, however rotten, rests on your back. You are the force behind every man, be he good or evil. So chin up and bear your burden. Ask not what society can give you, ask what you must give to society.

Society, of course, is that all-powerful male voice which declares, "Woman's place is in the four walls of her husband's house." This is ironically said by the debauched husband,

Vinod Mehra, and the dutiful wife Shabana, replies, "Yes, woman's place is in the house, not in the *bazaar*." She continues, "In Indian society, woman is a mother, a sister, a wife, but not a prostitute." Therefore, Modern Woman is equal to Westernized Woman in equal to Christian is equal to Prostitute!

And any woman who steps out of the house is, by implication, in the *bazaar* to sell herself! Thus, the jealous wife Moushumi, screams at her husband's colleague Tanuja, whose only crime is that she teaches in a co-educational college, "If you are so hungry for men why don't you go and sit in the *bazaar*? There, you'll get not one, but hundreds."

There is the usual blatant communalism. Leena, the "modern" girl, is a frock-clad Christian who speaks broken Hindi with an English accent. She emerges dancing from a gigantic wine-bottle like a drink for the male. Shots of the cross alternate with the cabaret. When, at the end of the film, Vinod decides to repent and fly to the arms of his forgiving wife, he slaps Leena's face and tells her, "I paid for everything you gave me." The audience was delighted at this display of "virtue". Another moment which drew spontaneous applause was when the "good" husband Jeetendra slapped the jealous Moushumi. Her retort, "Yes, this is your last resort in facing me", was lost in exclamations from the audience, "Give her another." Obviously, violence on women strikes a chord somewhere!

The film murders the intelligent working woman for the simple reason that "This is the way of the world and we cannot change it." She voices this sentiment before committing suicide, and Tripathi endorses it, "We should learn to adjust in life."

Moushumi, who refuses to "adjust", who will not giggle at the suicide of an unhappy wife, and is vaguely conscious of women's oppression: "It's the duty of one woman to help another woman and save her from men", is ultimately proved to be a suspicious and nagging wife. The easiest way to dismiss the revolt of women is to call it all the "hysteria of irrational women" and show them divided against each other. "Beware", says the film to all rebellious young girls, "Stay away from all ideas of change." In fact, even education is dangerous! Jeetendra shouts at the nagging Moushumi, "This is what your education has taught you."

Moushumi is a good example of a woman who has drunk deep of male chauvinist ideology. She thinks no woman can resist a man, however much of a fool he may be. So she suspects every woman who exchanges a word with her husband, of intending to seduce him.

The female characters are either "mature and traditional" or "stupid and modern". The two heroes are innocent children who should be cared for and guided by the women. The "bad" man has only been misled by 'westernized' women who were after his money – all he needs is a "good" traditional woman to cure him. The "good" man married to the foolish "modern" woman, is like a child driven to self-destruction until she is forced to realize that she has made home a hell for him, and

must mend her way.

The woman who is not a good wife, Shabana says, "is not fit to be called a woman," and will come to a violent end for which she will have only herself to blame. In a fit of temper, Moushumi sets herself on fire. The film would have us believe that the thousands of young women in this country who kill themselves are the makers of their own misery in marriage.

But if a man commits suicide, his wife is responsible. Thus Moushumi realizes that she has nearly driven Jeetendra to suicide. The film distorts reality by trying to show that men and women are *equally* victims of oppression in marriage.

It is woman's duty to make home a heaven for man and her fault if he strays. Tripathi lectures Moushumi: "If the man comes tired after the day's work, and the wife bombards him with questions, "Where were you? Who was with you?" or complains, "There is no money for flour, for rice, the children's fees have to be paid" and so on... naturally he will start staying away from home." The same Tripathi tells the milkman, "Why do you ask the mistress for money? She is mistress only of the walls of the house, not mistress of money." This when he is unemployed and his wife the only earning member!

Yet this bullied woman is shown as supremely happy. For a woman's heaven is in the arms of her husband! Even when Vinod is dancing with Leena, Shabana watches tearfully. His dancing figure is projected into the *bindi* on her forehead, as she dreams of the day when this good-for nothing husband will make love to her.

The divorced or single woman is doomed, Shabana says, "like a *Kati Patang* (kite without a string) ... If all women start leaving their husbands, what will become of the world?"

"What indeed?" one was tempted to cry, "That day too will dawn."

- Shashi Joshi

JUNOON

SHYAM Bengal's *Junoon* is a combination of bad history and bad romance. It attempts to view the 1857 Revolt from within the four walls of a *Haveli* and glosses over the social ferment from which the uprising erupted. Even if history is used as a backdrop, need it be so distorted? The loss of battles is made out to be due to the effeminacy of the Indian nobility; the hero Javed is constantly being reproached for his "womanliness" (this when one of the greatest leaders of the Revolt was a woman). This is nothing but a strengthening of false notions of history. Was the British victory a matter of strong men versus weak men? Are nations defeated because a few individuals lack certain personal qualities?

In keeping with this view of history, the hero is a stereotyped male, who brooks no resistance against his powerful physical drive, which is dignified with the name of "love". He sees the heroine Ruth Labadoor in her garden, dressed up like a pretty doll in frilly dress and pink ribbons. Before he has exchanged a single word with her, he unilaterally declares the warfare of "love". Her feelings do not matter to

him... When she is in his power, he does not ask her to marry him; he merely states his intention to marry her.

Javed's violent wish to rape (he self-righteously points out how he has retrained it) is dramatized in scenes where he peers through windows at the sleeping girl, while lovesongs are played in the background, **Here, one did not object to the hero's behaviour, but to the film's glorifying it as the most intense and high love.** This view of love is antiwomen, for the hero's brutal treatment of his wife is excused in its name. He is supposed to be "helpless" in the grip of his passion, therefore he is justified in using his wife's body while dreaming of the other woman. He shows far more tenderness to his horses and pigeons than to his wife.

The most disgusting part of the film was the way Javed's wife (Shabana) was presented, as a stereotyped "brainless" and "bitchy" woman. Her insecurity, helplessness and misery were all made to appear ridiculous. The audience guffawed every time she sulked or exploded into abuse. Even her anger is directed against the other woman, not against the man who is tormenting them both.

And of course all the blame is ultimately put on the wife who could not "hold" her husband. She asks him, "What can that girl give you that I cannot?" The unanswerable taunt is

flung at her, "A son, which you could not give me in all these years." So that is what the much-glorified passion for Ruth amounts to – a desire for her body as a child-bearing machine which is in better working order than the one he owns.

Ruth is presented as equally mindless – a cooing doll, soft and stupid like the pigeons she is so fond of. She is always leaning helplessly on someone or the other, her only independent assertion being : "Mama, I don't want to marry Javed." Her mother, who stands out in the film as a woman to be reckoned with, replies, "You need never marry him, Ruth." But finally she is forced to gamble with her daughter's life. "If Delhi is yours, Ruth too shall be yours," she tells Javed.

The final irony is that Ruth too starts giving in for no better reason than because Javed wants her to. This is an age-old chauvinist theory – a woman when pursued relentlessly, is bound to give in to her pursuer. Every woman wants to be pursued, dominated, conquered by a man!

Javed's one convincing character trait – his cowardice in not going to war – is also dissolved towards the end and he dies a heroic death, while Ruth remains unwed, presumably because she was not privileged to give him what he wanted – her body and his son.

- Anu, Mini