

KHANDHAR-Locked In Men's Minds



Consigned to the ruins

AT ONE level, Mrinal Sen's *Khandhar* is far removed from the gross sex and violence of the commercial film. We are not here commenting on its quality as art cinema, which has won for it many awards abroad, but are appraising its value framework.

Khandhar is a monument to men's ability to interpret the world to suit their needs and to create female images that fit this interpretation. Thus, there has always been in male mythology a golden girl up on the hill, locked into the fortress. Judith Fetterley, in *The Resisting Reader*, tells us how important this image making process is. "To be contained immobile inside a white palace is to be effectively locked out, just as to be outside the palace looking up and creating the imaginative structures which define it is to be in control and hence, in any meaningful sense of the word, inside."

The golden girl of *Khandhar* is Jamini, fair-skinned, upper caste, effectively contrasted with dark Gouri, the caretaker's daughter. Jamini, stuck in a crumbling ruin with a paralytic mother, dependent for money, clothes (novels, also ?) on a married sister and her husband in far away Muzaffarpur, captures the imagination of two of the men holidaying in that backwater. She is first sighted by Subhash the photographer in the dark of night, high up in her room behind the barred window. The next day, he questions his host about her. Arun, the third man, is also intrigued by her. He calls her the graveyard flower, *shamshan champa*.

Deepu, the host, tells her story. She is his cousin. When she was a child, her parents had settled her marriage with another cousin, Niranjana, but he fooled Jamini's mother and got married elsewhere. Old, sick, terrified for her daughter's future, the mother has lost her hold on reality. Every man other than Deepu appears to be Niranjana. So when Subhash comes to visit, her agonised pleas prompt him into a heroic gesture—he poses as Niranjana and agrees to take Jamini away.

Later, meeting Jamini, he is embarrassed by her thanks, for

Jamini cannot see why Subhash should have said what he did. In spite of his disclaimer that he was carried away by the emotion of the moment, Jamini seems to think otherwise. We see hope glowing on her face. Hoping for another day or two, she continues to run into Subhash at the pond near the temple.

Subhash is busy capturing images and as he is leaving, he is able to capture an image of Jamini, defeated, tearstreaked, leaning against the crumbling wall. Subhash's supposedly finer sensibility cannot prevent him from intruding his lens into Jamini's grief. The three women, Jamini, her mother and Gowri, are drawn to each other in a silent web woven of the realisation of their helplessness in the face of men's power. Jamini, in her last outburst, says to her mother: "God has taken your arms, legs and eyes. Why did he not still your tongue as well?" Overcome by her hasty words, she droops over her mother, begging for forgiveness, for understanding. Gowri, coming into the room to return the dishes borrowed for the men's use, hears her weeping, and unlike Subhash, retreats from Jamini's moment of agony.

To suit his purpose, the director has shown Jamini as far more isolated than she would be in reality. There are obviously other people in the village nearby. A priest comes and goes, so does a peasant who tills the family land, there must be a postman who delivers the money orders from her sister, there must be a source for the novels Jamini reads, and so on.

Jamini herself could have been an energetic youngster who enjoys roaming wild in those picture-sque surroundings but we are shown a pensive girl who broods in long silences. The director, the audience, is convinced that Jamini's must be a joyless existence, that her life too must crumble into ruins. The symbolic flickering and ultimate dying out of the lamp, as Subhash contemplates Jamini's future, tells us only too clearly that the life of a single woman, a life without a man, is a pathetic, miserable existence—in the eyes of men.

—Prabha Krishnan, Sujata Madhok