

# Busy Taming Women

## MEERA – When will women rewrite history ?

THIS film is about Meerabai, the great medieval woman-poet. History had made her a 'saint'; her poems are the songs of a rebel. Born in a royal Rajput family, she left her husband, her family and immersed herself in the only available alternative – religion.

The Bhakti movement in religion and literature was a rebellion against orthodox Brahminical Hinduism which advocated knowledge (Jnana) as the only way to attain salvation, thus barring the way to women and to lower castes who were kept in illiteracy and ignorance. In the Middle Ages, there was a wide ranging egalitarian movement which declared that all were equal in the eye of God and the only way to reach him was through the ecstasy of love and trust. The movement became a voice of the oppressed – Raidas, a chamar; Kabir, a weaver; Meera, a woman. The message of these poets was indeed a revolutionary one.

Meera pours out all the pain of being a woman, and the joy of self-expression outside the roles of daughter, wife, mother: "I am full of the madness of love. None can understand my pain... I forgot my 'honour', I wore anklets on my feet and danced..."

Since this film-maker was supposed to have conducted some research into Meera's life, one expected something slightly better. He presents a prettified, softened doll of a Meera, with a pink and white baby-face, coyly singing devotional songs to the clay image of Krishna, as does the average Hindi film heroine to the photograph of her beloved! In fact, Meera's attachment to Shri Krishna is thoroughly vulgarized in the film. Krishna in her poems is the glorious god of her imagination – he represents passion, joy, abandon. The film gives us a gaudily painted clay image in a small stuffy shrine.

Meera's fire is watered down to a little girl's milky religiosity and almost adolescent behaviour. She says, "Don't take Radha's name. She is my *saut* (co-wife)". And this religion does not prevent her from being a 'good' daughter either. After her father persuades her sister to save the family honour by committing suicide, she marries the sister's betrothed without a word of protest – also to protect the family honour. How different from the Meera who sang : "I have no father, no mother, no brothers and no kinsmen"!

The worst distortion of history is in the portrayal of Meera's relationship with her husband who is made into a romantic



*Gulzar's Meera - Rebellion Cosmetically Treated*

hero, full of love and sympathy for her. She too is prepared to be a dutiful daughter-in-law and calls him "My Rana". She is driven to rebel by her evil sister-in-law (of course the villain had to be a woman!). What happened to the famous lime in her bhajan: "Vish ka pyala Rana bhejya" where she accuses her husband of attempting to poison her ?

In spite of all this, and the jarring music, the film does have moments of strength, as when Meera walks away from her parents' house, telling her friend that she must now face life alone, or her trial in the rather exaggeratedly theatrical court scene when she asserts her right to choose her own way of life, not to have the Rana's children since she has other work to do, and rejects the society which sits in judgment over her. Another plus point was that Akbar was not shown as a 'foreign invader' as most Hindi films tend to show Muslim kings, but was fairly sympathetically presented.

However, the Bhakti movement was very inadequately touched on, as also Meera's life after she left her family. The peril of being a woman alone in a maledominated religious sphere, and of carving out a place in it for women, or how it was that her songs set women's imaginations on fire – all these are skimmed over. There is only one brief scene showing her surrounded by a group of women, all singing and dancing. By and large, she is projected as an exceptional, slightly eccentric woman. Instead of examining the social conditions that gave rise to such a revolutionary woman, her very protest is explained as originating from obedience – as a little girl, the film shows her asking her mother who her husband is. The mother impatiently points to the image of Sri Krishna, after which Meera considers herself married to him.

The film surrounds her with miracles and mysteries – her

face dazzles the eyes of her husband, a divine fire burns down the temple door to let her in and finally she just vanishes – supposedly absorbed into the image of Krishna. This mystification removes her from the sphere of ordinary women’s experience. The film does not dare hold up Meera’s a role-model for women : at best it can idealize her as a ‘saint’.

- *Anu, Mini*

### **SWAMI – “Not with a bang but a whimper”**

The first half of the film seems to hold hopeful possibilities. Mini is a college-going girl who is full of enthusiasm for Thomas Hardy’s novels. Her widowed mother is a typical orthodox, godfearing woman who is obsessed with the idea of finding her daughter a suitable match. Mini finds a friend, philosopher and guide in her maternal uncle who understands her ideas and is keen to educate her.

Vikram, who has long known Mini, comes home on leave from Calcutta. It is heartening to hear Mini discussing literature and the concept of freedom with him. He agrees with her but is dumbfounded when Mini very seriously comes up with the question: “If your wife were to fall in love with someone else, would you give her the freedom to go with her lover?” However, their friendship blossoms into love. Meanwhile, Mini’s mother has managed to get a guy lined up for her and pleads with her brother to at least go and see this boy, Ghanshyam. He relents, though he privately assures Mini that she will get what she wants.

Vikram too promises to stand by Mini. Her doubts are set at rest, but then her uncle suffers a sudden heart attack on the way back from Ghanshyam’s house. He calls Mini to his bedside and advises her to marry Ghanshyam for though Vikram can love, only Ghanshyam can make a success of marriage. Without further explanation, the uncle dies.

Mini marries Ghanshyam who is the eldest stepson in his family. It is a landowning joint family with the usual domestic antagonisms and petty quarrels. Mini is touched by his simplicity and kindness to her. She makes an attempt to break the ice but he does not touch her because he thinks she loves someone else, and dislikes him.

One day, Vikram unexpectedly appears. He finds that Mini is unhappy in her marriage and trapped in a set-up she hates. He also hears that she and her husband sleep separately. He pleads with Mini to come away with him. Her sister-in-law who is interested in Vikram, discovers the two talking through a window, and sounds the alarm. Follows the hue and cry – her mother-in-law accuses Mini of disgracing the family. This is the last straw for Mini, who is already sick of her mother-in-law’s daily taunts. She packs up leaving behind her jewellery – determined to take nothing that is not hers – and leaves the house with a big bang. One is almost convinced that a Nora has been born in India and that the bang will shake the pillars of the status quo. However, she is no longer sure of her love for Vikram – he only represents a means of escape for her.

As they reach the station, Mini begins to waver and

wonders whether she has done ‘right’ in just walking out with her lover. It is painfully disheartening that almost immediately after courageously making up her mind, she starts measuring her action by the yardstick of traditional concepts of ‘right’ and ‘wrong’.

Vikram reminds her that no one will now accept her in that house. The train arrives and Vikram advances to put his luggage in the compartment. Mini suddenly looks up to find her husband standing beside her. In a cool, calm tone he tells her to come home and says that a woman’s place is in her husband’s home. Mini bursts into tears and falls at his feet and that is the end. Two women sitting behind me exclaimed with reverence. “What a Devta!” The portrayal of Ghanshyam throughout is as the ‘ideal’ man – dutiful son and ‘forgiving’ husband who takes back an ‘erring’ wife.

The film takes a defeatist attitude towards the problem of loveless marriages where women are forced to marry under family and social pressures. A woman’s fate is sealed once she is married, says the film. Not for the Indian woman the fire of Hardy’s heroines whom she may read about but not emulate. Happy or unhappy, she must resign herself to her ‘fate’. She has no options – her place is indeed under her husband’s sandals.

- *Madhu Baveja*

### **JHOOTA KAHIN KA - Falling : into his arms or at his feet.**

The theme of the film is the love of motor mechanic Rishi Kapoor for the owner of a large industry, Neetu Singh. It is unusual to find a young woman heading a company, but the film reduces the heroine to a ‘poor little rich girl’. She hates her duties as an industrialist – she would rather sleep till noon than attend a Board Meeting. When she is forced to attend one by her ‘uncle’ (who later turns out to be Rishi Kapoor’s father) she spends her time doodling on a pad, caricaturing the director as a dog. She is shown as cute and kind-hearted (she readily gives her secretary leave) but also as inefficient. The fact that she refuses to take her responsibility seriously, leaving her deputy Rakesh Roshan to handle her affairs, tells her audience that she is not a hard, ambitious career girl, but home-loving, soft and willing to trust males even at the cost of her business. In any case, women are made to be wives and mothers – they’re not capable of managing business affairs – that’s a ‘man’s job’!

Neetu Singh is shown as an unfulfilled woman, “a bird trapped in a golden cage”, restlessly searching for Love (i.e. a MAN) which she finds in Rishi Kapoor. He is poor and she is rich – what does that matter ? As a male he is superior so the audience can easily accept his marrying her.

This kind of ‘socialism’ abounds in formula films. At first, the film seems to say that all ‘men’ are equal, so Rishi Kapoor has as much right to the hand, heart (and fortune?) of Neetu, as has Rakesh Roshan the company director. Yet the falseness of this is quite clear. Rishi Kapoor is no ordinary mechanic. His clothes, behaviour, and familiarity with five-star hotels show

that his class background is no different from Neetu's own. And of course he turns out to be not really a mechanic at all. As the audience well knows from the beginning. This kind of 'candy box socialism' helps the audience indulge in dreams, without challenging our unjust social hierarchy.

The axiom that all women secretly long for men is confirmed when Rishi gives a lift to four girls. While three of them flirt with him, the fourth who is the least 'attractive' remains sternly disapproving. But ultimately it is she who gives Rishi her phone number. The message: men are irresistible; women who seem to be disinterested in them are really the most willing to fall into their arms.

The vamp or 'bad' woman as usual comes to a bad end. She is pushed out of the window by the villain. The moral: a secretary should not cast eyes at her 'betters'!

The essence of the film can be summed up in the cabaret scene. Helen is shown lying panting at the feet of Dara Singh who embodies the male 'virtues' of arrogance and strength. The message is : women are feeble, passive creatures, completely at the mercy of their senses and emotions. They long for male domination and protection. The makers of *Jhoota Kahin Ka* would call this Love.

-Ranjana Sen Gupta

#### **KARTAVYA – Prescribing us our duties ?**

The story is ostensibly about wild life preservation – this appears only as a backdrop to karate fights, Robin Hood and Tarzan acts of poachers and smugglers. The fights are so shamelessly sham and repetitive as a strain the credulity of a ten-year-old.

The heroine, Rekha is a glamorous 'modern' girl, a professional, a vamp skilled in dance and song plus a modest Indian girl who turns out to be the long lost childhood betrothed of the Ram avtar hero, Dharmendra. Her first appearance is wrapped in a bath towel, the second as a photographer of wild life up a tree making a show of her legs. A sight of Dharmendra, the new Game Warden, and she pursues him, finally divesting herself of the sari, and donning a handy complete set of clothes of a *bajaran*. Follows a scene with Dharmendra's mother who arrives unannounced and finds Rekha a sweetly domesticated young woman, looking after his house.

Next, Dharmendra is ambushed and badly hurt by the poachers. He asks her to medicate the wound on his back. Immediately follow fully armorous scenes and suddenly an expertly bandaged Dharmendra and she are being very permissive indeed. After some time, she leaves the film altogether except for unnecessary dances. Having proved utterly superfluous to the story.

Her sole role is to 'entertain' via the flesh. It is not explained how she educated herself or became a photographer. Does she live on the trade of her flesh ? Is that the film maker's concept of 'emancipation'?

The film is named after Duty. The Game Warden does his

duty by appealing to the poachers and villains to do their duty by giving themselves up to the government, Vinoba Bhave style, so that 'Justice' can be carried out. 'Justice' however is done by chance arrow heads and bullets which finish off the evildoers before any law of heaven or earth can reach them!

There are no statutory warnings on films as there are on cigarette packets and wine bottles, nor are there any laws against titillations of prurience in a susceptible audience. Small wonder that the 'modern' girl goes through subtle indignities at home (she does not match up to the screen image of a 'good' woman) and is daily manhandled on our streets.

- Leela Shukla

#### **NOORIE – The Rapist : Villain or Hero ?**

This film should be close to reality – it deals – with what happens in India almost every day – the rape of a poor village girl by a landlord. But it does not view this reality through the eyes of the girl. Noorie is the most desired object in the village. Her fiancé asks admiringly, "Do you know that you have made it difficult for all the men in the village to live peacefully?" To which she replies, "If you like me, that's enough for me."

She is shown dreaming of her wedding night, of being decked out in finery for the eyes of one man, of 'belonging' only to him. Thus do the film-makers manipulate our dreams, desires, aspirations and direct them towards men, rather than towards an independent existence.

Noorie's dreams are rudely interrupted by the rapist and after the rape, she is 'spoilt', 'defiled' – no longer worthy of her fiancé's 'love'. So she does what is expected of her – throws herself into the river. After all, what had made her so desirable? Her physical beauty which has been 'besmirched', and her 'acchhai' (goodness) praised by her lover, which consisted in never having been touched by another man. A woman's virtue is defined as her physical chastity.

And what is a man's virtue? To defend and protect his property from other men – to be bold, revengeful, violent if necessary in this defence. Noorie was only the desired object. She could do little to defend herself. After her death, the men fight it out. One bloody battle follows another, in which 'villainous' landlord and 'heroic' lover are equally brutal and merciless.

If "might is right" in the male game of power, the landlord will win. He has money, weapons, men to obey his orders. He manages to destroy Noorie's father and fiancé. But appropriately, in this animal show of muscle, an animal wins out. Noorie's faithful dog, Khairu tracks down the landlord and tears him to pieces. And Khairu at least is not motivated by a desire to possess Noorie for himself. Only the memory of how she suffered incites him to take revenge.

This film is named after a woman but caters to the male view of himself as a powerful, virile aggressor. And it does this successfully – at the horrifying climax, when the landlord after a gruesome struggle with Noorie, manages to rape her, there was a burst of clapping from some men in the audience.

- Anu, Mini