

## Progressive Pretensions— Conventional Frame Intact

### Akhir Kyon ?

This film tells the story of a woman who, after suffering awhile the indignities heaped upon her by her husband, breaks away, builds her own life, proves that she is a capable individual in her own right and, ultimately, remarries.

The story contains many potentially positive elements. For instance, Nisha is shown deciding to leave her husband's house rather than coexist with his mistress, even though this means leaving her baby behind. In today's situation when many women are emotionally blackmailed into suffering injustice for the sake of their children, this is significant. However, one could not help wondering whether the film maker chooses to make the baby a girl because *he* thinks that for her to leave a son would be too incredible.

Nisha's friendship with the gentle, nonpossessive Alok, endearingly acted by Rajesh Khanna, is depicted with an understanding, rare on the Hindi screen, that a man-woman relationship need not be primarily based on physical attraction. Alok is an interesting study of a man who recognises a woman's ability, rejoices in her success and puts his energy into furthering it, even though his own career is not half so brilliant. In the context of the average Hindi film, where the heroine is almost never allowed to remarry, the ending of this film which questions the assumption that a good woman can belong only to one man, is also significant.

It is unfortunate, however, that the potential of the film is drowned in a plethora of negative images and structural ambiguities. To begin with, the glamourised upper class setting distances Nisha's experience from that of most women.

Her experience is placed at a second remove by the dangerous implication that a woman must have extraordinary talent to justify her resisting oppression. Nisha's emergence as singer, TV star and novelist may fuel the woman viewer's fantasy but can hardly be an inspiration in dealing with the problems of everyday life.



Only a man can point the way

It is noteworthy that in the pursuit of her career, she completely discards her work at the women's refuge which had initially put her on the TV screen.

This teaches the very unwholesome lesson that work for women's rights may legitimately be considered synonymous with and subordinate to the building of one's career, if one happens to be a woman. That the film maker's conception of a better life for women is hardly a liberatory one is evident from his using flashes of Indira Gandhi and Mrs Thatcher as emblems of the Shakti that Nisha sings about.

Equally dangerous is the idea, repeated *ad nauseam*, that if a woman is not maltreated, she will never aspire to any sphere of activity except marriage and motherhood. Towards the end of the film, Nisha tells her first husband, Kabir, that the fire which inspires her writings would have expressed itself in a fountain of love, had he behaved himself. Therefore, each one of her novels is nothing but barely fictionalised autobiography.

The most casual glance at the lives of women's rights activists, past and present, and of women artists, shows that they have been no more or less wronged than many other women. Their activities and abilities cannot be explained by some dark secret lurking in their past any more than can those of a man.

Yet every such woman must have encountered the exasperating assumption that personal frustration rather than positive aspiration must have led her to her present sphere of work. This assumption also leads many critics and biographers to scan with a magnifying glass the often tranquil life of a woman writer, in the hope of discovering some man who maltreated or disappointed her.

The assumption that behind every successful woman looms a man of some sort is not only woven into the plot of the film but emerges visually too. Even at the peak of her success, when Nisha's speeches and those of others emphasise her triumphs and her strength, the camera presents a diametrically

opposed image, for instance, at the function where she is chosen to compere proceedings but sings a song reproaching Kabir and bursts into tears halfway. In every second scene, she dissolves into tears and collapses on the ground. On the rare occasions when one of the men sheds a tear, he suffers no such loss of dignity. He stands upright and brushes a hand across his eyes, turning his head away.

The question therefore arises: why must the camera dwell at such length on Nisha's private moments of agony? Clearly, this is unconsciously intended as a warning to the woman viewer. The overall impression left by Nisha's life is one of such anguish that only a masochist could desire to emulate her. Her continual wallowing in misery and self reproach at having left her child works to bring her across as a victim and a wronged woman right up to the end, even though the speeches say otherwise.

It is, therefore, quite in keeping with the film maker's conception that Nisha should be aided not only by a glamorous background and by genius but by, of course, a man. The moment one man proves unworthy, must another appear? This is not to deny that there are worthy men but to wonder whether one will appear so readily the moment a deserted woman needs him.

Alok is eligible, unmarried and willing to wait for ever with no impatience, even though Nisha has no good explanation for delaying her acceptance, except the most bleakly conventional one—what will people say?—which goes ill with the director's pretensions that she is a progressive writer.

When Nisha leaves Kabir, she declares: "I will walk without a crutch." Alok is not a crutch; he is more like a self propelled wheelchair. He literally, moulds her into a new woman. It is he who first puts her on the TV screen, comes to her rescue whenever she breaks down, rechristens her with her pen name, Asha Shri, saves her from suicide, literally puts the pen in her hand and tells her to become a writer, which she promptly does, and finally smears *sindur* all over her forehead to bring the "spring" back into her life.

Is marriage or coupling with a man the only possible symbol of fulfilment for a woman? By indicating that this is the case, the film maker condemns the majority of those women who are abandoned as Nisha is, to seek refuge in fantasy alone. No Alok is likely to appear to them, for the simple reason that very few Alocs exist.

More pertinently, why is it that even when Nisha works in the women's home, we see no sign of her relating at a personal level to any other woman? Why is her girlhood friend, Abba, whom she referred to as the only one she could call her own, made to disappear without a trace? Is it not because the film maker is determined to set supreme importance on the man woman relationship, and to reinforce the idea that life without it must be incomplete?

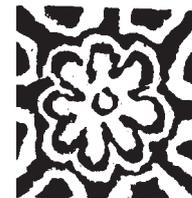
Most disappointing of all, why can neither Nisha nor

anyone else in the film conceive of anything but an early marriage for her daughter? One hoped that the daughter, shown as an intelligent little girl, would reunite with her mother and be inspired by her struggle. Instead, Nisha, in true Hindi film heroine style, begs Kabir to keep the girl in ignorance of her mother's identity. Clearly, she thinks her presence would blight the girl's married life. Is this why she never sought legal custody or visitation rights?

There is no suggestion that the daughter's marriage to a stranger is in any way different from Nisha's to Kabir, or that she is at any less risk than Nisha was, but the film maker shows no perturbation at this. The suggestion is that the unfortunate Nishas are few and far between—a suggestion altogether unsupported by empirical reality.

Equally unrealistic is the repentance and wallowing in misery of Kabir and his second wife, Indu. Kabir's reform seems inexplicable but, to all appearances, he is more at peace with Indu than he was with Nisha. If so, why are he and Indu so miserable? The only explanation: "A woman can never build her home on the ruins of another woman's home." Not only is the formula untrue but it also reinforces all the existing prejudices against divorce and remarriage. Is remarriage only legitimate if one has been abandoned? Has one no right to leave a spouse one does not love, even if he or she is not maltreating one? I had the uncomfortable feeling that the film maker was cashing in on the audience's knowledge that in real life, Smita Patil who acts Nisha's role, has in fact chosen to marry a man who already has a wife.

All in all, *Akhir Kyon*, while depicting the life of a divorced woman, works to glorify the institution of marriage. It seems we will have to wait a long time for a joyful or even a dignified image of single womanhood on the Hindi screen.



#### TV FILM **Janam**

Doordarshan seems to have selected this film for its first television premiere on the consideration that such a tedious exercise in self gratification would have been a resounding failure at the box office but could be fed to TV viewers who have no other choice except to switch it off, which many of them sensibly did.

The theme of illegitimacy has great potential for exposing the hypocrisy built into our society's romanticisation of motherhood and childhood. But *Janam* only reinforces that

romanticisation through the story of a spoilt boy who is determined to “restore” his mother’s “self respect” by making his father marry her. He does not seem to know that such a marriage would have no legal value since his father is already married and has two “legitimate” children.

Nor does it occur to “him that there might be more self respect in refusing to marry such a selfish coward as is his father. The prejudices that were relatively subterranean in director Mahesh Bhatt’s earlier film, *Arth*, surface with a vengeance in *Janam*. As in *Arth*, in *Akhir Kyon* -and in most other films of the new wave, not to mention ordinary commercial cinema^ a woman acts independently and makes a career only when forced to do so. Kabul’s girlfriend, Rohini, who seems to be made of sterner stuff than he is, is reduced to the status of his mother as soon as she becomes his wife.

His first words to her after their marriage are : “My orders will prevail in this house”, whereupon she effusively thanks him for marrying her. He, however, gives her no thanks for supporting him or for serving him hand and foot. Instead, he finds it “unbearably humiliating” to live on his wife’s earnings. He takes it out in temper tantrums which she<sup>1</sup> bears with the meekness of the true film heroine.

When his film which, like Nisha’s *nbyels*, is a mere rehash of his own life, turns out a hit, Rohini collapses weeping on his shoulder, as does his mother. Rohini’s first words are : “I will give up my job. Why should I have a job now that my husband is so successful ? I will hand in my resignation letter

today.” These are also the last words she is allowed to speak in the film.

This ethic of servility is linked in the film to the gospel of success. Success, defined as instant money and fame, is the panacea for all ills and the cement of all relationships. Rahul’s mother, who was earlier furious at his having “stripped” her in his autobio-graphical exercise, is reconciled to him just because the film is successful. His father, who had filed a defamation case against him, undergoes an even more sudden transformation, and publicly owns him as his son, referring to his mother as “my wife.” She reacts with—you guessed it—tears of joy.

The theme song, badly written and badly set to music, is supposed to express Rahul’s aspirations as a budding genius. “Life, I have seen you dyed in the hues of flowers and the light of the stars, I will bring you to my house, I have resolved to do this.” Thus, the creative joy of the artist in interaction with the universe is reduced to a consumer item to be purchased with success and brought into his private residence where a slavish wife waits for her lord and master.

The only character who seems to be capable of a gesture that is both unselfish and nonservile is Rahul’s loyal friend, Asghar, who gives the couple shelter and sells his restaurant to finance Rahul’s film. However, the ending realistically relegates him to the wings, while the family—father and son, husband and wife— is rampant on the stage.

—Ruth Vanita

## My Husband And I

*When I take a long time*

*I am slow.*

*When he takes a long time*

*He is thorough.*

*When I don’t do something,*

*I am lazy.*

*When he doesn’t do something*

*He is too busy.*

*When I do something without  
being told*

*I am trying to be smart*

*When he does the same*

*That is initiative.*

*When I help somebody*

*I am polishing.*

*When he helps somebody*

*He is cooperating.*

*When I do good, he never  
remembers,*

*When I do wrong, he never forgets.*

—Leena