

## FILMS

# What is A Female Perspective?

## -Some Impressions Of Third World Women's Section, Filmotsav '86

THE 1986 Filmotsav held in Hyderabad from January 10 to 24, had a special section from January 13 to 20, focusing on Third World Women's Cinema.

The programme proposed to "present a body of work which reflects.....the contribution made by third world women to the medium of cinema" and also to portray on the screen "a female perspective of the double oppression" of third world women. This proposal has two implications:

1. That women in film making, as in most other fields, have been neglected and their contribution devalued, so they should ask for and get special space for their work;

2. That anyone who is biologically female will have a "female perspective" of women's oppression, that is, biology determines mental perspective, therefore, when a woman makes a film, she will necessarily be more sensitive to women's predicament.

While the first proposition cannot be doubted, I was somewhat confused about the second. The inaugural film in this section, a documentary, *India Cabaret* directed by Mira Nair, helped me make up my mind.

This film, which is to be shown on television in the USA, purports to document the lives of four cabaret dancers who also work as prostitutes, in Bombay. When we saw men fighting to get into the packed theatre, some of us thought they had been misled by the title into expecting titillation. But, as it turned out, the film probably gave them more than their money's worth.

The film consists of a series of interviews interspersed with cabaret dance and striptease sequences, presented in tedious and nauseating detail. The camera focuses obsessively on each part of different women's exposed anatomy. Not content with this, it even follows the women backstage and into their bedrooms and kitchens, showing them in various stages of undress.

Such voyeurism cannot be justified on the pretext of "capturing reality." A camera is not a mirror. Its use involves selection. Cabaret dances are portrayed in just this way in the average Bombay film, the woman's body being



An Ran and her sister in "The Girl in Red"

presented as an object for consumption and contempt. One way to achieve a different perspective could have been to focus primarily on the male viewers while the dance was in progress. Another could have been to stay with the woman's face and the expression in her eyes rather than dwelling on her body.

Nor is this just an attempt to record the women's work life. If a documentary was being made on the work of chartered accountants, would there be long drawn out and repetitive shots of the accounts they were balancing? Similarly, when the film maker chooses to show a woman unhooking her bra backstage, this is a deliberate choice, not just an exercise in realism. Because the male customers are not shown undressing at home. Nor does the camera follow anyone, man or woman, into the lavatory which would be equally "realistic." Clearly, the former is presented because it titillates while the latter is omitted because it would be considered repulsive.

Like the visual images, the dialogue too panders to the male ego. All the women interviewed say they have a good income and have been able to provide for their old age by buying property and investing money. The film maker nowhere indicates that this is by no means typical of the lives of prostitutes in India, the majority of whom are miserably poor, disease ridden and exposed to police harassment. The male viewer is made to feel that by patronising these women, he is doing them a kindness.

At the same time, all the women are shown yearning for marriage and bemoaning their misfortune in not having found a "good" man to take care of them. Rekha, the most lively of the lot, is shown leaving the profession to marry one of her suitors, and declaring that she will be true to him and never remarry even if he leaves her. One could argue that if this is how the women feel, the director cannot but record it.

However, the woman who worked as interpreter between the director and the dancers told some members of the audience that significant scenes in the film were set

up and enacted. They did not actually take place. One of these was that of Rekha's leaving the profession and going off to get married. In fact, she was contemplating marriage but had not taken the final step. In other words, reality was more fluid and uncertain than the way it is depicted in the film.

Similarly, Rosy, another dancer, is shown returning to her village for her sister's wedding. She says that she regularly sends money home but the family ostracises her. According to the translator, when the team arrived in the village, they found that Rosy had lied to them, that she had broken off all contact with her family and had never even written them a letter, let alone sending money. Her family was perplexed by her sudden reappearance after years, with a filming team in tow. If the film maker was so committed to naturalism, should she not have presented this complex reality rather than presenting Rosy's falsehood as truth in the interests of a neat formula?

The fact of prevalent double standards of sexual morality is reduced to a tired cliché in the mouths of male customers interviewed. One of them, Vijay Pujara, openly glories in his promiscuity and, in the presence of his wife, says; "Why should she watch a cabaret? What do they have that she hasn't got? There is no difference, not even in size." This elicited roars of appreciative laughter from the men in the audience. Thus, the film insults every woman, including the housewife, assuring men that all women are basically sex objects and love to be so.

A brief separate interview with Pujara's wife provides the only meaningful moment in the film when she describes her routine and says that, shut up in the house, she can hardly even dream, because to fantasise, you need to have seen the world. Yet, this indication of discontent is not explored further and therefore, seems to be outbalanced by her expressions of contentment in her role of servitor.

There was scarcely a phrase or scene in the film which caused any discomfiture to the men in the audience, who were easily able to identify with the male customers of the cabaret. Even humour and irony were so structured as to flatter them. For instance, Rekha recounts a joke about three women who go to heaven. Questioned by god, the first says she loved one man but married another and remained faithful to him. She is sent through the silver gates. The second, who loved only one man, the one she married, is sent through the golden gates. The third, a cabaret dancer, says she made every man happy, whereupon she is given the key to god's bedchamber and is thus the only one to merge with the deity. This story may be seen as the women's attempt to assert the superiority of their status over that of the so called virtuous women. But it came across in the film as a straightforward glorification of men as godlike beings. The male audience

reacted with hoots of glee.

I was also extremely uncomfortable with the film's underlying assumption that there is something peculiarly "Indian" about the pressures to which women, prostitutes or housewives, are subjected. The title suggests this and so do the interviews with various men. To take just one example, Pujara's father says that in Hindu society, a single woman has no worth and will not be offered a glass of water. The film makes no comment on this statement. A Western audience would not be in a position to realise that this is an absurd overstatement because many single women have received much more respect in Hindu society, past and present, than many married women receive.

Many women were critical of *India Cabaret*. But another film which came in for no criticism because it did not undress the woman but kept her fully covered in the glorious tradition of the "chaste" woman, but which strengthened as many harmful stereotypes, was *Sparsh* directed by Sai Paranjpye. It has all the ingredients of a Bombay formula romance—a beautiful, virtuous, patient, motherly heroine simply longing to devote herself to the service of a man, songs and fantasy sequences portraying her as a forlorn princess awaiting her prince charming, a crusading hero frustrated by a backward society but determined to rave and rant in tastefully decorated drawing rooms, middle class people living in unbelievably opulent surroundings, and marriage as the final solution for all concerned. The only departure from the formula is that the woman is a widow and the man is blind—presumably, both are supposed to be disabilities which offset each other.

On the other hand, the majority of films screened demonstrated that many women directors are deeply concerned with women's struggles, both personal and collective, and seek to portray these, with different degrees of depth and skill.

I found *Phaniyamma*, directed by Prema Karanth and *Smriti Chitre* directed by Vijaya Mehta, both based on the memoirs of nineteenth century women reformers, enlightening and moving. They critiqued the society of the times while appreciating its strengths. I learnt a lot about the ways of life in those societies which our history textbooks fail to teach us.

Similarly, one got an opportunity to glimpse third world societies about which we in India know so little—much less than we do about Western societies. *Girl In Red* directed by Lu Xiaoya of China, about the struggle of An Ran, a bright and lively teenager whose unconventional behaviour makes her the victim of much repressed hostility at school, although it could have profited from editing, was successful in counter pointing the varied ways in which women lose out—from An Ran, labelled "arrogant"

because she questions authority, to her friend who is forced to drop out of school and take a job, to her mother, embittered by the sacrifice of her professional life to marriage and motherhood, to her sister, who wants to marry a widower against her parents' wishes.

*Oriana* directed by Fine Torres of Venezuela, showed women as survivors through a girl's attempt to understand the life of her beloved aunt who spent her life on the family estate as a seeming recluse but actually managed, with the help of a redoubtable maidservant, to carve out an autonomous existence for herself by defying the norms of a highly repressive family structure.

*Leila And The Wolves* directed by H. Srour, a



Palestinian immigrant in Europe, is a technically experimental film, and was highly acclaimed by most participants. The protagonist, a Palestinian student in London, is involved in a debate with her boyfriend who refuses to acknowledge the historical role of Arabic women in people's movements. The film is structured into this polemic.

It uses the device of Leila, clad in a white gown (at her boyfriend's behest) walking through history and pointing out women's participation to him. Women's underground work in various movements, their struggles with men at home, the way they are used in battles without being allowed to take decisions, was very well portrayed,

However, Leila looked out of place floating around in history and functioned as a distracting presence. Further, the women who participated in the movements are shown doing so because the struggle affected them as intensely as it did the men. Why, then, should Leila gear her struggle to proving something to a man, which the women in history did not set out to do?

Except for one brief moment towards the end, when an Arabic woman who has lost her sons breaks down on hearing the glorification of "a heroic mother" on the radio, only to realise that this is "the enemy's station", the film shows no awareness that when two countries are at war,

women on both sides suffer in similar ways. The somewhat one sided view of the Palestinian question, without enough exploration of its politics or history, could serve further to fuel the anti Jewish sentiments already so prevalent in Christian countries.

*Nobody's Wife* directed by Maria Luisa Bemberg of Argentina takes off where films like *Arth* and *Subah* end. Having left her doublecrossing husband, the protagonist confronts the reality that singleness is not all bliss for a woman in a society where marriage is the norm. Yet, the film conveys the joys and rewards of independence without romanticising them. Having tried and rejected casual affairs as unsatisfying, she comes to realise, unexpectedly, that her friendship with her housemate, a gay man, is, in fact, the most fulfilling one in her and in his life. The film ends with the suggestion that relationships that are neither sexual nor familial can also give an individual the caring, commitment and intimacy that everyone seeks. Bemberg had to struggle for four years to get this film past the censors because it was perceived as a threat to family life.

A film that came in for a lot of sharp criticism was *Brutal* directed by M.D. Abaya of Philippines. The organiser apologised for its inclusion, saying she had not been able to preview it, and would have excluded it, if she had previewed it.

*Brutal* belongs to the mainstream commercial cinema and has no pretensions to being an art film. It does show many scenes of violence at unnecessary and sickening length. Yet, I felt that the film said something important in a powerful way. It showed how each woman is trapped in her own particular kind of repression and is unable to reach out wholeheartedly to another woman.

Monica, a teenager, is forced by her parents to marry her rapist, Tato. Violently maltreated and gang raped by her husband and his friends, she ends up murdering them and then collapses into silence. Monica's mother, herself in an oppressive marriage, loves her daughter but is unable to offer her unconditional support. Monica's close friend, Cynthia, a part time call girl, labelled "bad" by society, experiences a mixture of love and hatred towards Monica. So deep is Cynthia's self hatred and concomitant hatred of all women, that she half knowingly betrays Monica into the clutches of Tato. Clara, a journalist, who starts out to write up Monica's case as a scoop, comes to realise that she may be aiding a news hungry media to exploit the woman victim, and gradually changes her attitude.

The director is handling very explosive material — the dominant form of male sexuality as it expresses itself in our society to subjugate and demean women. The film has its logical conclusion in the penultimate scene when Monica feels supported enough by the other three women

to finally break her silence, and is able to reach out to Cynthia, saying: "If I have a daughter, I'll name her Cynthia." However, the director seems to shrink from her own statement and therefore an artificial ending is imposed with Clara's agreeing to marry her understanding boyfriend—obviously so as to reassure viewers that all marriages are not oppressive.

This film was condemned outright by almost all women activists present, who agreed that such films should be excluded next time, because it did not have a "feminist" or "women's" perspective. I felt that such imposition of our own norms of a pro women perspective is not justifiable, because even amongst women activists, the definition of this perspective varies widely.

Second, we need to examine our own reactions a little more critically. For instance, *Sparsh*, because it does not show violence or sex, was not objected to. But, while *Brutal* does expose the repressive institutions of society and the way they divide women, *Sparsh* glorifies them. *Sparsh* is a male oriented film, peopled almost entirely by men. The heroine is a male fantasy of an ideal woman. In *Brutal*, the director struggles to show the complex nature of women's relations to each other and how these are distorted by the primacy given in society to the man-woman relation.

Why do we not react as vociferously against romantic songs in *Sparsh* which reinforce damaging stereotypes of one kind, as we do against scenes of violence and sex in *Brutal* which reinforce another kind of stereotype? Is it perhaps partly because we have been taught that a good woman must not be exposed to the latter while the former are less degrading?

This is not to say that the way the violent scenes in *Brutal* were shot was acceptable to me. It is merely to question the perspective from which some of us condemn a film and seek to exclude it.

Overall, I was left with the feeling that no generalisation about films made by women is either possible or desirable. I would certainly disagree with Sai Paranjpye who said at the symposium that a woman director would treat rape, dowry or other women's issues with greater understanding. For example, I did not find *Bombay, Our City*, a documentary on pavement dwellers in Bombay, although made by a man, in any way less evocative of women's specific struggles and strengths than *Shelter*, made on the same subject by a woman. Similarly, *Small Happiness*, on the changing lives of Chinese women and *Mothers In A Foreign Motherland*, on Asian women in Denmark, although made by Western women and screened in the Documedia section, were no less moving than *Chircales The Brickmakers* made by two Columbians and screened in the third world women's section.

I feel there is a need to clarify the issues. If we are asking for space at festivals for women film makers, because as women, they may not get equal opportunities in the field, then we should not exclude any film made by a woman, even if some of us or most of us feel it does not have a feminist or pro women perspective. We should let all films made by women be screened, discussed and debated. There is no way we can ever define a feminist perspective in a way acceptable to all feminists, nor is there any necessity to try and do so. Our aim should be more freedom for women to express themselves and to comment on, criticise and discuss each other's work.

—Ruth Vanita