

Mard—The Male As Fantasy Construct



WITH *Mard*, Bombay cinema moves into a new genre. In the average Hindi film, fantasy sequences used to be interspersed with scenes that attempted some kind of approximation to everyday reality. *Mard* is a limitless adolescent male fantasy.

The wish fulfilment it provides is not of a Utopian nature. In other words, it does not try to envision a better world, in which human beings would be enabled to bring out the best in them. It begins with the assumption that a *mard*, a man, is already the best type of human being possible. All his doings, desires, thoughts and feelings are always right. It fantasises a state of things in which this Tightness, which is so manifest to himself, would also be made manifest to the whole world. It is as if his mental world, his self view, is externalised to encompass the universe.

Just as he is named “Mard” (which means man, and is never normally used as a proper name) so also, the locale of the film is an undifferentiated “*Bharatvarsh*” The gender identity and the national identity merge and assume frightening proportions for all who do not identify themselves with the new composite. The film offers many definitions of a “man”: “A man is one who does not feel pain”; “A man is one who understands the pain of others”; “A man is one who does not attack the unarmed.” But the unspoken definition underlying the action is: “A man is one who always thinks he is right.”

Every sentence spoken by the hero is like an incantation and has a momentous effect. He hardly engages in any ordinary conversation. Every action of his is heroic. He hardly performs any everyday activities. He never undergoes a moment of self doubt, let alone self criticism. God is on his side: “No one can kill him. He is preserved by god.” Animals are on his side—not only his pet dog and horse but even a wild lion. Chance is on his side.

It follows that any one who is not on his side is doomed. He embodies the self congratulatory slogan: “*Jo hamse takrayega, chur chur ho jayega.*” Any relationship such a *mard* engages in, with the partial exception of the filial, has to be one of dominance. To love is to become vulnerable—which is anathema to him. So all his relationships are a mixture of attraction and repulsion and they express themselves in violence.

This is clearest in his attitude to white men. The film is

supposed to be set in British India although its atmosphere and events are all blatantly derived from contemporary India. *Mard* betrays a deepseated internalisation of the idea that white is superior—witness his constant identification of the colour black with evil and white with goodness in such sentences as “Your faces are white but your hearts are black, your blood is black.” He delights in wearing western clothes and aping western manners. His fascination with all things imported is clearest in his obsessive desire to possess and subjugate the white woman, not only in his own person but also by proxy. Thus, even his horse is shown rejecting Indian mares and eloping with a foreign mare who, magically, turns from an unattainable stone statue into a flesh and blood creature, all for love of him.

At the same time, this *mard* mouths anti British sentiment and wreaks revenge on Britishers in scene after scene of gory violence. It is sad that a country which is known for having fought for its freedom by nonviolent means based on the conviction that hatred should be directed against evil action, not against people, should today produce and applaud a film that is in direct contradiction to this past, and has distinctly fascist undertones. What the hero desires by way of nationalism is extermination of the men of any race that is not his own, and abduction of its women who, after due humiliation, will be converted into submissive wives.

In his courtship of Ruby, the Anglo Indian woman, *Mard*’s neurotic inability to love without humiliating the other, surfaces forcefully. He treats her with contempt—supposedly because of her elitist western ways, but as much directed against her supposedly unwomanly arrogance. By a show of brute force, he convinces her that he is master, and humiliates her by refusing her advances and making her run after him when he is on horseback. After this, he unaccountably decides to declare himself in “love” with her. Clearly, all that was wanted to render her acceptable was that she should acknowledge his mastery.

Mard relates even to deities in a very aggressive fashion. He storms into the temple of the goddess Sherawali, threatens to commit suicide and destroy her temple if she does not reunite him with his long lost mother, and bullies her into compliance.

The film displays a definite uneasiness in its handling of the filial relationship. It cannot do away with the idea that parents are to be respected, even revered. Yet, how can it acknowledge

that anyone is in any way superior to the *mard*? It tries to compromise by using a number of devices. The first device is to separate Mard as a baby from his parents. He is adopted by a poor couple who call him Raju. This device conveniently allows him to retain his royal ancestry while claiming to be the representative of the poor. It also allows him to act the somewhat condescending protector vis-a-vis his adoptive parents who are aware that he is no ordinary child. When reunited with his real parents, extends the same patronage towards them.

The Raju Ruby couple is only another version of the Azad Singh Durga couple. Azad Singh, Mard's father, was not only the original manly man who, with his knife, carved the name "Mard" on his infant son's chest but was also a king. Dispossessed and imprisoned by the British, he handed over his son and heir to the custody of his wife. Though named Durga and acclaimed as a heroine by her husband, she is a completely passive woman who exists only as a wife and mother.— a far cry from the heroic mothers the Hindi screen has known, who tower above their sons in moral and spiritual stature (*Mother India*). When the adult Mard comes across her, she is being dragged along by Ruby's car and he intervenes to save her. She had long ago been struck dumb when he was lost as an infant so he now has literally to speak for her.

She thus becomes a convenient pretext for the first display of his manhood. After this incident, his admiring compatriots say: "From now on, we will call you Mard." Whereas this rescue is symbolic, Mard commenting: "We (Indians) consider every mother our own mother", and is undertaken although he does not yet know she is his mother, Durga only takes initiative to act as a wife and mother. When she disobeys orders to give water to her husband, it is because she recognises him. After this, when he is forced to whip her, she experiences it as pleasure because, after all, it is her husband who is beating her.

Mard's love-hate relationship with his father emerges through a series of misunderstandings engineered by the film maker to pit father and son against each other. They are made to come within an inch of killing each other. But, in the last scene, when they are reconciled, and Mard's horse runs away, he is made to ride on his father's back to his bride's house. Thus, he is finally triumphant over the whole world. The filial sentiment seems to exist only in Mard's case. Ruby shows not the slightest compunction in marrying her father's killer, or sorrow at his death.

If Mard's parents are something of an exception in that they are treated with more affection, all Indian men are treated with unmixed contempt and hatred. Mard acts alone and does not seem to have any comrades in his crusade. He prefers to rely on his dog and horse. Ironically, Mard glories in his own manhood but cannot appreciate manifestations of it in others, for instance, Ruby's bodyguard, who is only performing his duty in guarding her. His own mirror image is repulsive to him.

This viciousness is at its peak in his attitude to Anglo Indians and Indian Christians. Anti British sentiment is used as a pretext to justify hatred of the Christian minority characterised as "traitors." The men, like Harry, are destined to a gruesome end



In his grip—beloved or captive

at Mard's hands. The women (Harry's daughter, Ruby) are shown as sexually abandoned, reinforcing a stereotype repeatedly visible on the Hindi screen. Ruby calls Mard to her house, and displays herself to him half naked. Later, she offers her body to him, while fantasising a Christian wedding ceremony.

Significantly, the Anglo Indian woman is a target of contempt but the British woman is revered. Lady Helena is a version of the goddess Sherawali. If the latter sends a lion to reunite Mard with his mother, the former always appears in the nick of time to rescue Mard or his father from death at the hands of the British subordinate officers, and to denounce British oppression of Indians. She brings orders from some mysterious "high command" which is far more generous than the officers, bizarrely named Generals Dyer and Curzon. Clearly, we have not yet got over the Great White Mother syndrome, visible even during the early phases of the national movement, when all oppression was blamed on the visible oppressors in India while Queen Victoria was extolled and trusted by many Indians.

Just as he tramples over the present, Mard also rides rough shod over the past. The film is a good example of how we have learnt to disrespect our own history. It does not even make much of a pretence at recreating historical events as do films like *Razia Sultan*. History exists only to bolster the Mard's ego and can, therefore, be invented with impunity. The film maker uses the past as a pretext to indulge in a bizarre combination of well worn formulae and newfangled fantasies so as to gratify the fascination for violence while feeling self righteous because it is supposedly for a good cause.

—Ruth Vanita