

LAYING NEW TRAPS FOR WOMEN

KHUBSOORAT – Signs of Crisis ?

This is a very significant film because it has been viewed by a mass audience and has also won the appreciation of the more critical cinema-goer. It represents a deliberate attempt to build the myth of progressiveness so that the viewers tend to contrast it favourably with the average Bombay film.

The message is presented in such a subtle, sophisticated manner that it sinks in more readily. That is why the film is dangerous.

The central character Rekha is a young woman bubbling with life. Unlike the majority of Hindi film heroines who epitomize passivity and silent submissiveness, Rekha comes across as a real character. However, the film is a subtle exercise in taming her into conformity. Rekha's sister meekly submits to the repressive rule of her mother-in-law which Rekha rightly compares to the state of emergency in India. Each member of the family is a victim of this authoritarianism therefore they all participate in the theatrical parody created by Rekha wherein they hail the virtues of rebellion and indiscipline. Heartening to see a woman initiating such developments and the male members following her lead !

When the old lady discovers this rebellious chaos, she is furious. The film now rushes towards a "logical" conclusion. The father-in-law has a heart attack when the sons are away. Rekha takes over and saves his life. The old lady is convinced of Rekha's ability to sacrifice and serve, and accepts her as a bride for her younger son. The last scene presents the erstwhile carefree Rekha who had been contemptuous of women decked up in heavy saris and jewellery, now herself demurely clad in a brocade sari, with vermilion on her forehead and flowers and ornaments adorning her person.

The essential theme hidden under the refined technique, humour and sophistication is clear: it is not unusual for young women who are exposed to modern education and changing values to show signs of rebellious non-conformity. But these tendencies must not be encouraged to grow. The test of "womanliness" is suitability to be a wife and daughter-in-law.

Today, a crisis is taking place in each middle class family – a crisis triggered off by the fact that more and more women are going in for higher education. Women are becoming increasingly aware of themselves as individuals and are



Apna juta apna sar-women made to play a losing game

asserting their rights. This film wants the woman to adjust herself to the demands of the family system but also advises a relaxation in the authoritarianism prevailing within the family. However, as in every such compromise, the woman must give up much more than half !

— *Jyoti, Sanjeevni*

AAPKE DEEWANE – The Family Destroys All

There is a strong unacknowledged current of male homosexual emotion in this film. The major intense relationship is that between two men. Romantic motifs are used to highlight this love and attraction – song, dance, poetry written to each other, vows of eternal fidelity and selling of previous possessions to buy birthday gifts for each other.

The plot is manipulated to provide occasion for one to dress as a woman and be discovered in the embrace of the other. This use of "disguise" to present a homosexual relationship is found in all written literatures from the earliest times.

However, the film is not willing to acknowledge homosexual emotion as legitimate. There is a constant attempt to fit all relationships into the only acceptable framework – that of the patriarchal family. Thus the two older men's lifelong friendship is disrupted because each is determined to give his "name" to their adopted daughter. Exactly the same conflict erupts between the two younger men – who is to "possess", "own", and give his name to the woman, in this case, by marrying her?

This property desire to own the woman negates the possibility of human understanding between men and women

because she is reduced to an attractive prize. The men vie with each other in “sacrificing” her, “presenting” her to each other as a birthday gift ! Their need to dominate and assert ownership rights also destroys the positive relationships between men. Of course, relationships and love between women are non-existent in the film since women are not seen as person at all. They are there only to perform a function and are shown as silly, frivolous, unable to make up their minds. Human needs for affection and closeness are overwhelmed in the clash of male egos – the woman being the worst victim of this clash.

The film simmers with the strain of trying to fit every relationship into a socially defined straitjacket which will give men power and control – father-daughter, father-son, husband-wife. There are signs of unsureness as to what the “male” should be. On the one hand is the emotion for each other which the film dares not call by its name and therefore presents in a watered down, sentimental form. On the other hand, is the cult of aggressive and glamorous masculinity – glittering costumes, leather boots, men posturing and dancing together – unfortunately more to exhibit power than to express joy.

The imagery of underground caverns, sudden eruptions, snakes, bats, reflects the unresolved inner conflicts, the attempt to bury one’s real desires and accept what society declares it “right” and “natural”. It is in the cave that the final decision is made and the dilemma resolved in a most artificial and painful way – one of the two marries the girl. The message is clear – woman must belong to one man – at what human cost ? The film ends with the woman in tears and the two men in a farewell embrace.

— Anu, Mini

NAUKAR – Guidebook for Husbands

A young widower decides to remarry so as to provide his little girl with a mother. He is offered a choice between two sisters who belong to a “good” family but is skeptical of this race of modern, educated women who, he thinks, are prone to the “vices” of independence and selfishness. He devises a plan to gauge their suitability as wives and mothers – he disguises himself and works as a servant in their home.

The silly frivolity of the educated girls is contrasted with the conventional quietness of their maidservant Jaya Bhaduri. This girl puts up with all the ill-treatment she receives, and showers Sanjeev’s daughter with “instinctive” material affection. Sanjeev is drawn to her but as soon as the child declares that she wants Jaya as a mother, he explodes! So far he has been presented as a “progressive” person, freely eating and mixing with his servant Mahmood, but now he outright refuses to marry Jaya – it is impossible because she is a menial!

How does the film resolve this dilemma ? Even during the 60s, several films dealing with the situation of inter-class relationships, eventually made the biased person realise that it is the person, not the background which matters. But here Jaya is “promoted” to a higher class. She is discovered to be the daughter of a rich man and only after this does Sanjeev

propose to her. Though she knows that she had been earlier rejected, she accepts with alacrity.

This film defines woman as an unavoidable necessity for rearing children and keeping house. A wife and mother has to be selected with great care. An educated woman is avoidable because she is likely to question and is therefore dangerous. It is also significant how the tyrant in the home is shown to be a woman – here, as in *Khubsoorat*, the old woman being a cruel termagant. At the end of the film, the henpecked husband sets her right with the obnoxious and oft-used sentence: “I should have taken up the rod in the beginning.” The film pronounces most unabashedly: “A wife is a gloried *Naukar* (servant) and a husband should never forget this.”

— Jyoti Sanghera

SPARSH – Glamorizing Social Injustice

If this was a mere love story it could have passed off as an attempt to break away from the stereotyped vulgar romance of the Bombay film variety. But since it has pretensions of dealing with social problems, particularly with the problems of one of the most oppressed and brutally neglected sections of our society – the blind, (who are in India usually the poor), and these pretensions have been given recognition by way of the national award, we are forced to raise certain unpleasant questions.

Why does a film dealing with the life and problems of children and adults in a blind school have to be made in such a glamorous, posh setting ? Does reality jar too much on the delicate sensibilities of the upper middle class ? Why, instead of themselves going to the scene of oppression, do they prefer to bring a cosmetic version of it to their drawing rooms? The all-pervading opulence of the blind school shown in the film was throughout an irritant, not only because it is so far removed from the life situation of the blind, but also because it is remote from the reality of most people’s lives. Hardly any of the most prestigious public schools in this country can boast of such luxury – Persian carpets on the walls, teachers who dine in Chinese restaurants and distribute toffees at the drop of a hat. Also noticeable was the fact that all the students and teachers were male, especially considering that the director of the film is a woman.

In such a context, the headmaster’s theatrically angry questions about the paucity of books in Braille and of other resources sounded absurd. Elite film makers in this country may wish to conduct new experiments in the man-woman relationship on the screen. But surely they can do without a vulgar drawing room version of social injustice as a backdrop. The blind and the poor are certainly better off without such hypocritical concern being wasted on them. Even if the film failed to bring the audiences in touch with the problems and life situation of the blind, it certainly offered good testimony to the superficial inanity of this country’s self-styled “progressive” upper middle class elite and its intellectual pretensions.

— Madhu