

# Rihaee

*Rihaee* is a well meaning attempt to expose double standards of morality, but in trying to discard one formula, it constructs another, equally replete with stereotypes.

Set partly in the Bombay *chawls* where migrant male labourers live, and partly in the Gujarat village where their wives eke out a hard existence, the film shows how the men consider it their right not only to visit prostitutes regularly but also to ogle the women they come across in their worklife. They thrive, however, on the sentimental vision of their wives as devoted, longsuffering angels awaiting them at home.

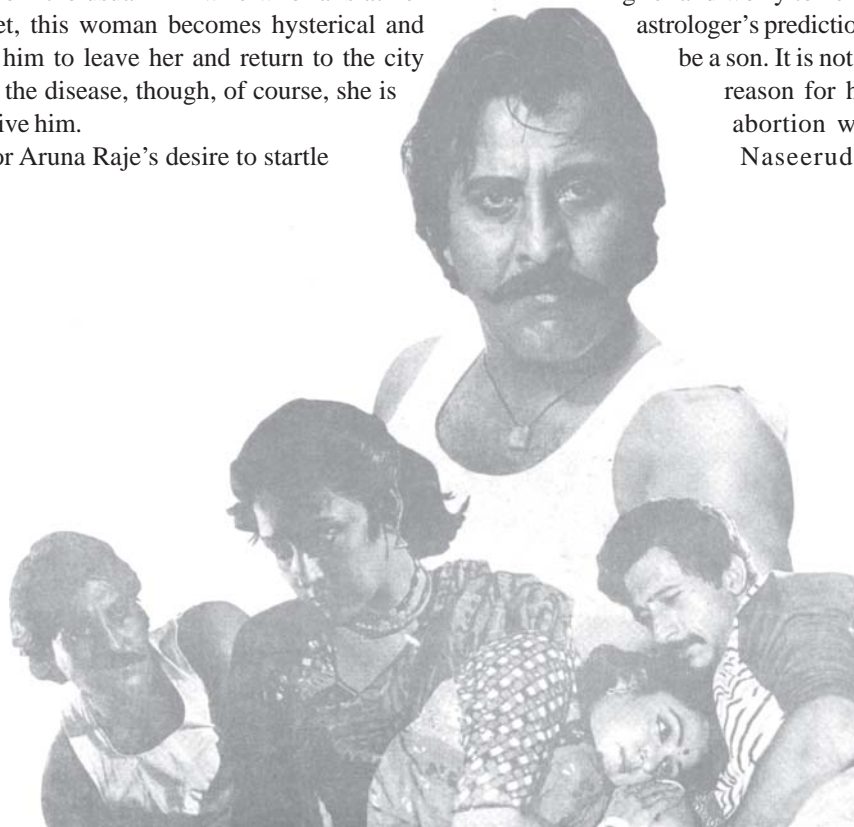
In a moving flashback, we are shown how an elderly man (played by Mohan Agashe) brutalises his young wife for having an extramarital affair and drives her to suicide, after which he marries another young beauty (Neena Gupta). In another realistic sequence, we are shown how the women have to suffer the consequences of the men's self indulgence, when a man dying of syphilis returns home to be nursed by his wife who is already weighed down by work and financial stress. In a startling departure from the usual film wife who falls at her erring husband's feet, this woman becomes hysterical and berates him, asking him to leave her and return to the city where he contracted the disease, though, of course, she is finally forced to receive him.

However, director Aruna Raje's desire to startle

the viewer by turning the tables on the men leads her to a mode of exaggeration that fails to convince or to evoke sympathy. The women of the village are electrified by the return of a flashy young man (Naseeruddin Shah) from the middle east and promptly proceed to fall into his arms with monotonous and clockwork predictability.

The only exception is the heroine Takkoo Bai who righteously frowns on the frivolity of the other women and disdains Naseeruddin's advances, declaring that she is "different" from other women. But when he forces his way into her house, she too suddenly and somewhat inexplicably succumbs. The film attempts to romanticise her behaviour by highlighting her devotion to her husband, and showing her as racked by guilt which the otherwise insensitive Naseeruddin seeks to assuage with a highly out-of-character comment on how the sexual urge is natural and pure so she should not consider herself defiled.

Takkoo has three daughters whose existence is a source of grief and worry to her, and is overjoyed by an astrologer's prediction that her next child will be a son. It is not clear whether this is the reason for her refusing to have an abortion when she conceives by Naseeruddin. The reason she



states is that the child is her flesh and blood and no woman can ever desire an abortion - another generalisation as untenable as that implied by the film that all husbands and wives away from each other must necessarily grab anyone else they can get, and, conversely, that if husbands and wives are living together, they will never engage in extramarital encounters.

It is precisely this logic that the village women are shown using when the all-male *panchayat* berates Takkoo as a shameless woman and orders her to leave the village. As unitedly as they had chased Naseeruddin (who, incidentally, is shown happily marrying the highest dowry bidder) the women now rise to Takkoo's defence. An elderly woman gives the assembled men a long drawn out speech on women's rights and on the injustice of double standards for men and women. She does not attack the standard itself but only argues that if "erring" men are forgiven by their wives, so should "erring" women be forgiven by their husbands. The implication is that men visiting prostitutes can be condoned if the men are "lonely" but in return the men should be a little less self righteous.

*The panchayat* breaks up in disarray as all the women threaten to leave the village if Takkoo is expelled. While the viewer is somewhat prepared for the elderly woman's emergence as a women's rights campaigner, by some earlier sequences where she was shown reflecting on the injustice done to women, there was absolutely no preparation for the other women's defence of Takkoo. Throughout the film, they were shown as hostile to her for her uppitty ways and gloating over her downfall. They had even visited her in a group to persuade her to abort. The sudden change of heart may be wish fulfilment but since the mode of the film is realism, not fantasy, it seems incongruous.

The self respecting Takkoo now decides to leave the village. Her husband who is depicted (like her) as a cut above the rest in terms of sensitivity, is uncertain how to react. The women's arguments have made an impression on him as he too does visit prostitutes in Bombay. Just then, some angry men, humiliated by their defeat in public at the hands of the women, appear at Takkoo's house in order to throw her out forcibly. They are led by the wifebeater Agashe whose young wife, also pregnant by Naseeruddin, had a dangerous abortion rather than risk his wrath. Takkoo's husband now demonstrates what the film seeks to project as true manliness. He protects her by telling the men not to interfere in his private life, and beating up his friend Agashe when he persists. Takkoo's husband states that a true man is

not one who is capable of beating his wife but one who can face reality. Thus, he decides to accept Takkoo's child as his own.

The main problem with *Rihaee* is that it does not explore, it states; it does not question, it answers. And the answers are so simplistic and overstated that they leave one cold. The answer to women's sexual repression is not simply to sleep with any available man for a couple of nights and then produce yet another baby and go back to an oppressed existence. Nor is the answer to unfair distribution of power between husbands and wives a mutual forgiveness of one another's lapses. These may be expedients but the film presents them more or less as solutions to very complex problems.

Another shortcoming is its attempt to generalise about human nature and behaviour. One has only to contrast it with a powerful short story like Premchand's "The Child" to see what is lacking here. Premchand's hero, an orthodox Brahman cook, surprises his employer by the depth of his love for his wife and his joyful acceptance of her son as his own. But the surprise felt by the reader there is because the writer does not attempt logically to explain the hero's behaviour, although the latter does offer his own logic. Rather, the writer illumines the surprising possibilities of a human being who can do the impossible. Aruna Raje, on the other hand, tries to explain the improbable logically and succeeds not in surprising but in shocking.

And, if women were in a position to unite as spontaneously and strongly as they are shown doing in this film, they could surely use that unity to more far reaching ends than getting husbands to forgive their "errors."

-Anu

