

## FILMS

# Prescribing Marriage As A Magic Cure

### INSAAF KATARAZU

The treatment of rape in this film is certainly better than in the run of Hindi films. Firstly and most importantly, the rapist is shown to be a typical man of average appearance and mentality. He is not a maniac like the hero of Red Rose or a professional goonda like the villains in Ghar. This is a significant explosion of the myth that rape is a crime committed by an occasional psychopath.

Secondly, the act of rape itself is shown as springing from the desire to dominate, crush and humiliate the woman. It comes across as an act of violence rather than an act of sex. The rapist beats, ties up, threatens with a knife and insults the woman. What he is shown to be enjoying is not the act of sexual intercourse but the *process* of terrorizing the woman, destroying her sense of self. He gloats over Zeenat's helpless situation: "Now you will kiss me." She screams "No, no." He answers "Yes, you will." The will to dominate, not the will to kiss, is clearly his motivating force. This psychic reality of a rapist was well portrayed and countered that other myth so often strengthened in films that the woman asks for and enjoys rape.

Apart from this, the woman's own fight-back is impressive. From Shakespeare's Lucrece to Bombay film-land's Noorie, male-dominated culture has told us that the only way we can prove our virtue after being raped is by committing suicide. However, Zeenat not only actively struggles with the rapist until he produces a knife, but after the rape, decides to go to court. In doing this, she defies the wishes of her fiancé whose devoted slave she had been till then. She declares that she will take on herself the burden of shame which will come with the case being publicized, so that women may begin speaking out when they are raped and rapists be punished.

The court of course sets the rapist free and after some years, he rapes her sister. Zeenat however is undefeated. Transformed into a Durga, she grabs a gun, rushes out and with admirable single mindedness, pursues and shoots him dead.



*In the dock for being raped!*

While this is more a fantasy fulfillment than a real solution, it is an important breakthrough for a film to show a woman avenging herself. Rape is seen throughout the film as a crime against the woman – *she* is the injured party and this is a new thing in films. We are used to seeing hero kill villain who has outraged or abducted "his" woman. But the battle is usually fought between men. The woman's owner – whether husband, boyfriend or father, is normally seen as the wronged one. Here, however the woman fights back, consistently and in many ways. In court too, she speaks with great energy. She accuses the legal system of having murdered justice and conspired in the rape of her sister by letting the rapist go free in the first instance.

This court scene is a highly symbolic moment when the so-called justice dispensing system is stood on its head and the woman not as victim but as someone with greater moral authority declares not just the individual rapist but the society and legal system which is weighted in his favour, guilty of deliberately perpetuating violence against women. The rape of her sister is a symbol of the repeated violence against one "sister" after another, which this society is not interested in preventing.

In terms of an emotional climax too, it was satisfying to see the rapist dying and the woman surviving. Significantly, the men in the audience who clapped as usual when the rapes took place, were absolutely silent when Zeenat shot the rapist. It was interesting to notice which images act as a wish-fulfilment to men and which as a powerful threat!

However, the director himself was obviously not untouched by this threat. It would be too dangerous to leave loose a woman who is not terrorized by violent men or the society and system which support them and whom the lawyer refers to sarcastically

as a potential leader of the world's women. So since the court could not tame her, the boyfriend is produced to do the job. This strong self-dependent woman is shown happily falling into the arms of a man whose philosophy was summed up in his vision of an ideal wedded life: "After marriage you must leave your job, cook and wait for me to come home, and produce 11 children – a whole football team." If she was going to end up producing this team, one wonders why she refused his offer of marriage immediately after the rape?

The development of Zeenat as a character was not always convincing. On the one hand, she was shown as a model posing half-naked for advertisements. This looked like the director was building up the old false stereotypes once more that women are raped only because they dress provocatively and invite rape. But in the court scene, the film repeatedly emphasized that her private life or the fact of her mixing freely with men, cannot be construed as inviting rape. The analysis came close to the feminist slogan: "Yes means yes and no means no, However we dress and wherever we go."

In fact, the slight emotional distance maintained between the audience and the heroine (one felt not the slightest desire to weep with her acted both as a negative – as moments like the song after the rape when the verbal message that woman is not a sex object was nearly lost behind the powerful images of her bared body in suggestive poses, and as a positive – in the sense that a rational appeal was made to one's mind. One was not drowned in sentimentality towards the particular woman and hence she tended to become a symbol of all women – one tended to see more clearly that violence against women is unjustifiable, regardless of who the woman is, what she does or does not do. She does not have to be a conventionally "good" woman to deserve justice.

This analysis is extended to expose the way in which big business exploits women to make profits but wants us to mask our wounds under smiles. After the rape, Zeenat is no longer "saleable" firstly, because she feels unable to respond with a flashing smile to the cameraman's "A little more sex please" and secondly, because as her employer puts it: "We sell our products by making women want to be like the model. But which woman would want to be like her now after her rape case has been splashed in all the papers? What was the need for her to go to court? If she had kept quiet about it, no harm would have been done. But now we can't have her; get rid of her..."

For the first time, one saw a film clearly showing how this society has no place for a woman who refuses to be a role model as a sex object. The film dares to present Zeenat as another kind of role model – a woman who dares risk reputation. Livelihood, security, by speaking out when society tells her to be silent, who lives when society tells her to die, who forces herself into visibility at the court when society tells her to retreat into invisible shame.

The court depiction of the rape trial made the two main points very forcefully – one, that it is impossible for a woman to

prove that she did not consent and meaningless to ask her to prove this, and two, that the court atmosphere reeks of anti-woman prejudice and the woman's sexual history is dragged out to unjustly defame her and justify the rapist. Though there are many contradictory statements in the film and its overall assumption is that woman's place is in the home as wife and mother, yet it is a step forward as a statement against violence against women.

- Ujala

## KASHISH

Upper caste men going abroad used to vow not to touch meat, wine and women – as if all three were consumption items of the same variety. This film is a vulgar version of the same moral lesson for men.

The hero goes to USA to study architecture but spends his days prancing around New York streets with an Indian woman doctor and his nights in discos, brothels and drug scenes with the daughter of his American boss. These two women are blamed for his irresponsible behaviour. While the white woman is made out to be too easily available and therefore "bad", the Indian woman is too "good", hence not available at all and shown as responsible for his frustration! His expectations are by their very nature impossible to satisfy – he wants a "good" and "bad" woman (both products of his disease fantasy) in one package deal. The women are blamed for not being able to give him what he wants.

While the white woman is shown undressing to sleep with him, he is busy dreaming of his Indian virgin bride. But how does she appear in his dream? She is capering about half-naked and singing an obscene song which sets the audience whistling and cat-calling. He has an affair with the white woman and then deserts her with the callous indifference which one might show when switching from western to *desi* food. As she walks away disappointed, the equation of woman with consumption item is clearly made – the camera moves from her face to a basket of half-eaten fruit. Prominent among them is a pink watermelon with a knife stuck into it. The violence of this image gets the message across effectively: use her or kill her, it's all the same.

Drunken and drugged, our hero now needs "help" badly. His friend who had first introduced him to the white woman, now prescribes the Indian woman as a more "wholesome diet." He pleads with her to offer her body to the hero. But when she does so, he chastely covers her up with her sari. Why? His property must remain intact till marriage, of course. The setting is America but this game is played with equal ease in all countries – women are divided from each other and differently used – as prostitute, as girlfriend, as virgin bride.

The first half of the film is occupied with this violence of men towards women. The second half revels in men's horrifying brutality to one another. The plot is arbitrarily twisted just to show men in violent confrontation – in scene after scene,

gruesome distortions are quite unnecessarily inflicted on the human body. One wounded man (the hero's friend) kicks another (the villain's henchman) to death while the villain mindlessly hounds the hero round all the garbage dumping grounds of New York City. As the image of filth and rubbish pour forth and the camera delights in showing human beings terrorized by huge machines or crushed like pieces of rubbish, one is reminded of the quip: "it's a man's world. Yes, and look what a mess they've made of it."

### **ALBERT PINTO KO GUSSA KYONAATA HAI**

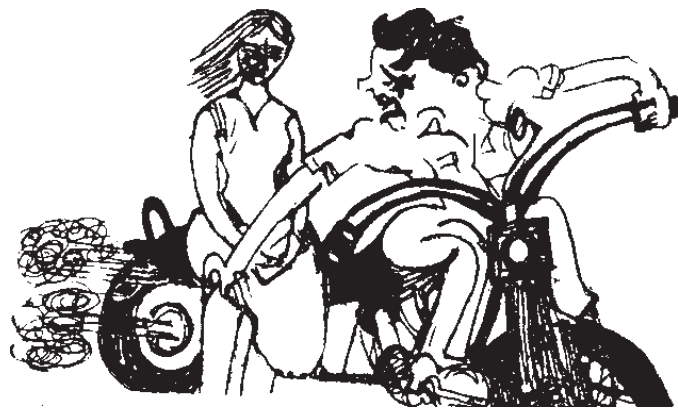
#### **Aur Stella Ke Gusse Ka Kya Hua?**

*(Why is Albert Pinto angry?)*

*And what happened to Stella's anger ?)*

Two men are trying out a new car. "How's she moving?" asks one. "Smooth as butter" answers the other. "Just like my wife" comes the response. Both laugh – the film is being inaugurated on a "light note" – and we know what to expect from Albert Pinto's anger.

May we begin by enquiring why Albert Pinto is angry? Let us list the reasons: 1. He is angry because his girlfriend Stella greets the mechanics at his garage with ordinary human warmth. 2. He is angry because Stella goes to a party without him. 3. He is angry because she wears a skirt instead of a sari. He expresses



this righteous anger thus: "How many times have I told you to wear a sari but no, why should you listen to me? No, no don't hold the skirt down, let it fly (they are on his motorbike), let everyone see my girlfriend's lovely legs. Constable, have a good look – let the skirt fly higher." 4. Pinto is angry when Stella's boss invites her to a film – an offer which she refuses. 5. He is angry when the boss presents her with a vase – this anger he expresses by smashing the vase. 6. And Albert Pinto is most angry because Stella fights back, tells him he is unreasonable. "You want to tell me when to laugh, when not to laugh, when to speak, when not to speak, when to sit, when to stand. You want to control every movement of mine," she tells him.

Despite most diligently racking our brains, we were unable to discover any other reasons for Pinto's anger, at least in the first two thirds of the film. But please don't make the mistake of

thinking this is just another film about a possessive hero taming a willful woman into submission. Oh no, this is a film with a great social purpose. It sets out to find solutions of the problems of "mankind". What are these problems?

First, there are the problems of working class men. So we are shown Bombay's textile workers on strike and Pinto's father as one of the militants. But what are their demands, what are their living and working conditions? We hear that they are demanding eight per cent bonus, we are given a glimpse into one or two houses which look fairly livable, and are shown some mechanics cheerfully singing a song while cleaning a car. Unfortunately, even newspapers carry this much information of working class life (which is so limited as to be distorted) into upper class drawing rooms. And it is precisely from those drawing rooms that the film glances at the working class not only "out there" but "down there" and prescribes a readymade solution in the one further than showing one strike.

Next there is the problem of minorities – Christians in this case – who are misunderstood by the majority community. We are shown two Christian working class families and one Christian capitalist. The message is clear: all communal hostility is based in class difference and will vanish through class struggle. But does the film attack communal hostility? On the contrary, the height of Pinto's new-found consciousness is when he is talking to a group of trade union delegates and discovers that one is a Goan Christian like himself. Both break into smiles and grasp one another's hands. Are we to understand that working class unity is best achieved only within one's own religious community? As for false stereotypes, they are strengthened – Christians are shown drinking wine, eating bread, yearning for the "good old British days" and longing to go to any western country.

In the last one third of the film, Pinto who upto this point had been shown as a most self-righteous and conceited young man, suddenly wakes up to his father's and unemployed brother's situation. He is also insulted by some rich clients who he had thought were his friends. However it is significant that this exposure does not lead him to violent outbursts of temper like those against Stella. Instead, he turns sad and thoughtful and then overnight lo and behold! We have a readymade young revolutionary! He displays his new awareness by joining the textile workers' protest march and bursting into a tirade when the cinema projects a false picture of the strike. Is this how individual unrest gets linked to collect struggle?

Then of course, there are also the problems of women – remember, they're the ones that occur way down in every party manifesto? Stella's problem is that Pinto cannot accept her as she is – an independent, self respecting, intelligent woman. The director steps in with a solution. Stella's boss tries to molest her and she walks out of the job – no strike is possible on this issue, we presume? Unemployed and depressed, she does not know

where to turn. Her father tells her the salary is needed to run the house and virtually advises her to give into the boss' demands. Now she is suitably broken and helpless – the strength which was such a threat to Pinto is shaken.

In despair, she goes into the church to pray. Interestingly, god had refused to answer Pinto's mother's prayers for her younger son who had taken to thieving (because only socialism can solve *his* problems) but god is kinder to Stella. As she kneels in the pew, our bright young revolutionary turns up, kneels beside her and proposes – that one and only solution – marriage. What now? This legitimately angry woman – angry at her exploitation by father, boyfriend, boss – slowly, very slowly turns to our hero and gives him – a cheap, Bombay film smile! She has lost an eight-hour, paid job but found a full-time, unpaid one! What greater happiness could be imagined for any of us women?

Alas for Pinto's sister – she cannot be similarly blessed. She has a deformed leg and in the film's scheme of things, this is a problem without a solution. Because if wifedom is the answer for all women, no man, not even a "progressive" would put up with a lame wife. So she must remain a salesgirl. However, the director assures us that there are compensations – if no man will marry her, no man will molest her either. When one customer tries to harass her, she does not fight back but deliberately displays her lameness which leaves the man flabbergasted. We feel the director needs to brush up on his information – does he know that blind, deaf, dumb and deformed women are as often victims of molestation, even of rape, as are so called "normal" women?

As for Pinto's mother, surely she has no problems since she has already attained the beatific state of marriage? Well, she is worried about her husband and sons. Like most women, she is also "backward" and tries to dissuade her husband from joining the strike, therefore she needs some education from progressive men! Of course, she toils with housework all day long but then that can hardly be called a problem – Stella is only too happy to embark on such a career, isn't she?

We were really impressed by how well this film fits into a time-honoured, universal tradition. From Rama banishing Sita to Manu pronouncing life-long dependence for women, to the Bible prescribing silence, chastity and service for us to modern film with their dose of romance and marriage as a cure for all women's ills – from all these it is but a small step to "progressive" Pinto's waving his magic wand of "security" and looking up the princes for life. However, we wonder whether this need be done in the name of socialism and revolution? Need this film be shown at civil liberties conferences and acclaimed as a new-wave work of art?

Pinto, speaking on behalf of the "Christian community" (by which he means just the men within it) talks of "our women" – he seems to be under the mistaken impression that the revolution

too will be made by men who will then solve the problems of "their women."

- Ujala

#### **OH BEWAFAA**

This film contains a very definite message for all women: Be submissive, forgiving, gentle and you will be ultimately taken care of, no matter how much you get kicked, humiliated, attacked, even murdered at first. If you survive the process, the man is yours. If you dare to hit back, to show your anger, your unwomanly behaviour will be your undoing and you will pay for it, may even have to die for it.

There is the "womany" Mina who fights desperately to keep her man with the traditional feminine means – cooking, tears, her body. She begs him to stay despite his humiliating her time and again. Even after he throws her off a cliff, she pleads with the judge to return her husband to her, saying that she fell off by accident, she was not pushed.

The other woman Radha is sold by her uncle to a fat, rich man who rapes her. She escapes but is dragged back by her uncle and again raped. Her mother and she scream ineffectively. Can't two women physically overpower a weedy, drunken man who is weaker than they are? That would be "unwomany." A woman can only scream for help, she can't help herself.

After the rape, she falls into the hands of the gentle seducer Vikram. He offers her sympathy, his house to stay in and a promise of marriage, even though she confesses that she can never be his Sita as she is "defiled" and can't pass the fire ordeal. She adores him, cooks for him, makes tea for his guests, sleeps with him. On the wedding day, she waits all night singing moony songs by the flower-bedecked bed, while he has walked out on her.

She undergoes an abortion and then vows vengeance on him. She becomes a famous model, makes money, entraps a rich woman-hater, and uses her money and influence to hound Vikram from job to job. She humiliates him in every way and finally forces him to leave his wife for her. The wife has to be disposed of – she must be killed. Though Vikram throws Mina off the cliff with utter callousness, the film deals sympathetically with him and throws all the blame on Radha. Radha owns up to the police because she knows Vikram would also suffer the death sentence with her, and she would thus be revenged on him. But poor Mina is lectured into saving her husband by lying in court while the "unwomany", hard Radha meets the end society thinks she deserves. She dies in the courtroom because she did not repent. Patriarchal society cannot tolerate her anger, and her daring to act upon it. She has to pay with her life while Mina who submits to every outrage is allowed to live. The warning is explicit : all women who dare to fight against their male oppressor will suffer ultimate annihilation.

- Meena Srinivasan

## AANCHAL

The film opens with a direct focus on Rakhi's *mehndi*-painted feet, ornamented hands, slim waist – here she is, the incarnate sex object!

There are four main women characters. We can start with Rakhi the *badibahu* who is the typical “good woman” – a passive slave to her husband Kishan and her brother-in-law Shambhu. She has no children and feels that she is a curse. She not only suffers, but hates herself. In confusion she begs a child to call her “mother” only to be ridiculed by peeping onlookers. Ultimately, to overcome her shame and fill her empty heart she turns to Shambhu as his surrogate mother. Shambhu too, having lost his mother in early childhood, takes to her, but society cannot accept that maternal love is a cultivated trait – a conscious attitude and not an instinct.

Society cannot stand her defiance of norms – how can a woman relate so well to a man who is not her husband, father, brother or son? The only explanation can be that he is her lover. People talk and Kishan divorces *badibahu*. She goes to commit suicide but Kishan realizes his mistake and begs her forgiveness whereupon she says : “You are my *bhagwan*, your head should never bow to me”!

Let us look at the other women – the two widows. Dressed in simple white saris, without ornaments, they are a force to be reckoned with! They create a psychological space for themselves by uniting and fighting back. They demand that the land due to them be given to them. Rakhi cannot imagine that a woman can live independently without a man, so she begs her husband the sarpanch, not to hand over the land to these women but to hand

over these women to their two brothers-in-law ! The widows cannot stand this. They cannot stay without each other's sisterly love – if they separate, they will be exploited by the men in their in-laws' place, either unitedly fight society. When hungry, they steal vegetables – this is their mode of revolt. Instead of understanding their plight, Rakhi calls them thieves. In rebellion, they call her “*banjh*” – childless woman. How sad that they too don't understand Rakhi – their sister who is treated as a pariah for not fulfilling the mother role. A “real woman” in this society is one who is not only a slave to the man but also reproduced and perpetuates the male dominating race!

The other heroine Tulsi is full of life. When her brother tries to boss her she says “I work for my stay.” When molested, she gives the men a good thrashing. She is not afraid to love a man and tell him so. When she is told that Shambhu is just having a good time with her and is attached to *badibahu* only, she rebels and agrees to marry Kishan. But when she realizes her mistake, she is not afraid to acknowledge it and tells Shambhu : “*Maaf kar do na*” but her expression says : “OK, I made a mistake, but we are all human, we are not infallible.”

To me, the two heroines are the two widows – who collectively fight this male-dominated society and demonstrate that women can live without men. They carve out a psychological space in this society and it is not surprising that society fears them, has to take note of what they say. They are dangerous, they are militant, so they are made out to be freaks in the film – but in actuality they are the real women! They are true to themselves, they do not bow to social pressures!

- Usha Desai

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