

# New Wave Or Old— When It Comes to Women They are All The Same

## AAKROSH

### Anger—The Man's Right !

This film is a step ahead of the average Hindi film in that it does not glamorize poverty into a saleable commodity or present the usual cosmetic version of injustice. It is a bold statement against the structures of corrupt power which control the lives of most of us, whether we realize it or not.

The hero of the film is a young lawyer (Naseerudin) employed by the state. He attempts to defend a tribal man who is accused of having murdered his wife. The film takes its title from the anger of this tribal named Lahaniya who refuses to speak a word in his own defence or to present his version of the story. Unable to get a single word out of Lahaniya, the lawyer tries other means of gathering evidence. He goes to the tribal village where Lahaniya's father, sister and other villagers maintain the same hostile silence. In the course of his quest, Naseerudin gradually uncovers layer upon layer of intrigue. He finds that all the respectable gentry of this small Maharashtra town are actually inhuman brutes who perpetrate and uphold a reign of terror over the landless tribals. This process of politicization of a non-exceptional middle-class youth is well depicted. Without much jargon or speech-making, he is brought face to face with the reality of oppressors versus oppressed and is forced to take sides against his own social circle—all the influential, rich men (doctor, contractor, MLA) who, he finds, are the rapists and murderers of Lahaniya's wife.

When he chooses to identify himself with the oppressed, he too becomes a target of vicious attacks. The film dares to show exactly how terror operates under the surface of "normalcy." Naseerudin as well as a newspaper editor are attacked and knifed, their houses vandalized. This repression which is rampant all over India today is well communicated to the viewer. Also, the hero is not made to indulge in fist fights—he is shown as terrorized by the attacks as any of us would be. This is important as a new role model for the viewer. Moral courage, not physical aggressiveness is emphasized—he continues to speak the truth in court, though he knows this may well cost him his life.

However, though the overwhelming power of the



*Glorifying violence on women in the name of "class struggle." Husband's passion after a good beating— any different from landlord rape ?*

oppressors over the tribals' very life and death is well brought out, the core of this oppression—the process by which the tribals are made to lose their land and become landless labourers—is not even touched upon. One is given to see the divide as very generally that between rich and poor rather than the specific dynamics of tribals being marginalized and rendered increasingly powerless. The ability to fight back is shown as restricted to the lawyer and to a middle class political activist, who, clad in jeans and kurta, looks totally external to the tribal village. The oppressed themselves seem to be in a dumb stupor—they listen with as much docility to the activist as they do to the judge in court. How is it that the film shows the oppressed as so utterly passive even though today, militant tribal movements are being waged in different parts of the country ?

Numerically, too, though in reality the oppressed everywhere outnumber those in power, yet on the screen the oppressors emerge visually as a majority—we are shown the contractor, several of his associates and hired goondas, the villainous MLA, doctor, lawyer and many of their friends in the club and watching a *tamasha* dance. But we are shown far fewer tribals—Lahaniya's old father, sister, baby son and about ten other men and women who stand together in a herd, their only resistance being an animal-like glowering posture assumed against Naseerudin though not against any of the real oppressors. Apart from Lahaniya and his father not a single tribal emerges as an individual personality whereas all the oppressors have distinctive traits and are characters in their own right.

But the greatest distress is felt when one sees how even a universally acclaimed progressive "revolutionary" distorts the reality of women's lives and glorifies violence on women in the name of "class struggle." When a woman's life struggle is looked at not from *her* viewpoint but from that of

Society with a capital S, it is inevitable that we end up seeing things through a man's eyes (because society as at present constituted is controlled and represented by men) and the woman ends up a corpse without being given a chance to speak.

The facts about Lahaniya's wife's death are given to us in a flashback. When she (Smita Patil) appears on the scene, the new forest contractor has just bribed her with a sari and a packet of biscuits. She is absolutely taken in and calls him a decent man whereupon Lahaniya turns his "aakrosh" on her, pours filthy abuse on her and slaps her face. What is the impact of this on the audience? Of course, we are supposed to feel that here is the man of the oppressed, burning with righteous indignation and rightly suspicious of the enemy. But how is it that the woman herself doesn't suspect the contractor's motives, doesn't feel any class hostility, even though sexual exploitation is integral to the context in which she lives? The only possible answer is that she is at best a fool, at worst a loose woman, and fully deserves to be beaten up.

Immediately after this, we are shown Lahaniya and her in the throes of a sexual embrace. The portrayal perpetuates the widely believed myth that women like to be dominated and physically manhandled by men, and derive a kind of erotic gratification from being physically and sexually assaulted with violence. This unnecessary scene was used to sell the film (it was prominently displayed on the hoardings). Since the woman appears only in these two scenes, the net impression we are left with is of a mindless body (no other form of communication is shown between Lahaniya and her) —which is precisely the false impression most upperclass men have of tribal women. Sex between husband and wife is depicted and glorified as a violent affair, and after this we have the rape scene. Here again, the whole thing is seen from Lahaniya's point of view. He comes home and is told that his wife has gone to the contractor's house. He rushes there in a rage, breaking sticks on the way and one anticipates another wife-beating in the name of revolution, when suddenly Smita is heard screaming from inside the house. Lahaniya tries to break in—his struggle is focused on, hers eclipsed—but is overpowered by goondas.

All the tribal women are shown as absolutely passive. Their dumbness is that of frightened domestic animals—this in the context of militant struggles today being waged by adivasi women against exploitation, economic and sexual. After Lahaniya's arrest, the contractor makes advances to Lahaniya's sister. This young woman is not allowed to say a single word throughout the film—she only stares through huge, fear-filled eyes and bursts into tears on occasion. *Yet, how is it that her silence appears only as stupid dumbness whereas Lahaniya's silence is tremendously impressive?* As one woman pointed out: "The man's silence is made more impressive than the woman's rape and murder!"

Not a single woman talks about her oppression or shows any opposition. The only woman who appears active is the one who is brought to court to give false witness against Lahaniya!

The film now reaches its climax. In emotional terms, the helplessness of Lahaniya and all the oppressed, including

Naseerudin and the activist, is communicated to the viewer as a deep despair. A narrative which gets across such an overwhelming depression rather than an urge to act, can only end by finding a scapegoat. Its combined sadism and masochism is inadequate to find a more fruitful outcome. So we come to the grand finale. Lahaniya's father dies and his hands are unchained so that he can perform the funeral rites. His sister is standing by, sobbing bitterly, with Lahaniya's son in her arms. Throughout the film, she and this child have been shown as inseparable—we never see any other woman sharing the task of his upbringing. But at this moment, another woman approaches and takes the boy from her arms.

Lahaniya encircles his father's pyre and then suddenly picks up an axe. Even at this point, after so much exposure to the relentless logic of woman-hating, one didn't quite anticipate what was coming, and had a vague idea that he might attack the policemen who were standing next to him. When the axe came down on the girl, the horror in her eyes was what every woman viewer must have felt. It was like a physical shock—the unexpected, uncalled-for quality of that violence. And then one realized why the son and heir had been carefully preserved—to carry on the glorious tradition of Lahaniya, while the woman has been favoured with that wonderful "alternative" familiar to us in practices like Sati and Jauhar—of being abused, beaten, tortured, raped, destroyed by her "lawful owners" rather than by "strangers." After the murder, the camera immediately shifts to Lahaniya's animal howls and struggles by which we are supposed to feel deeply stirred. One felt nothing but outrage and great anger — that anger which the director so successfully buried in the film — nowhere does he show an angry woman.

One would think that after this there could be no more, but worse is to come. Naseerudin puts the stamp of "progressiveness" and "justice" on woman slaughter by telling his senior that he is determined to defend Lahaniya in this case as well. What a wonderful example of cross-class solidarity! Technically innocent of his wife's murder, Lahaniya would certainly have killed her with as much self-righteousness as he does his sister. One has only to look through legal records to see how in case after case, men are acquitted or let off lightly for having killed sisters, wives, daughters, daughters-in-law whom they suspected of "infidelity." This film is another defence on behalf of all those men who conspire on a wider social level to murder women and then call the murder "morality."

It is significant that several women who saw the film responded by saying: "Yes, we are weak, the film depicts reality." Is women's helplessness the only reality existing? What about the reality of women's everyday battles, big and small, for survival? Do such films not express a death wish for women rather than inspire us to assert our right not only to life but to a life of dignity?

—Kanchana, Madhu, Ruth

## LADIES' TAILOR Male-defined modernity

The double role of older and younger brother gives Sanjeev Kumar the opportunity to indulge in modernized polygamy

with two sisters who fall in love with his two “faces.” The “comedy” arises out of their misery. The profession of ladies’ tailor gives him a chance to finger women and the director a chance to portray women as vain, gullible and giggly. The setting—Lucknow—provides a chance to mock at Muslims. And to prescribe the way to “modernity” for women. How can women escape the narrow confines of home, how can we progress and widen our horizons? By displaying our bodies for “modern” men of course! With one step, the heroine moves out of purdah onto a vulgarly decorated stage. She is shown revelling in the appreciation of the crowds, as if only clothes and roles “tailored” by men can win women appreciation! Since the younger sister gets Sanjeev, the older one is packed off to Mecca. However, as she boards the ship, a stranger who resembles Sanjeev appears and she promptly covers her face with the veil—so the audience is assured that both women end up safe and sound in the emotional purdah of marriage.

—Ann, Mini

## AGREEMENT A Vicious Attack on the Women’s Movement

The blurbs told us that this film “provides masterpiece entertainment for the whole family.” It purports to “see modern marriage through agreement.” But unfortunately, the blurbs do not add that we are in for an all-out attack on the women’s movement which is distorted beyond recognition.

To start with the women and their relationships with one another—there is the good, poor woman Chandra who nurses the child (obviously and necessarily a boy) of her lover’s sister with mother-like zeal. There is the seductress-vamp Rinky who is unmitigatedly evil according to the film maker Anil Ganguly. And there is Mala (Rekha) who is the “women’s libber.” What does the “liberation” of Mala and her friends consist of, according to the film maker? It is associated with “westernization.” Mala wears jeans and has short hair. She and her friends speak English even to the extent of addressing each other as “ladies”! Their “freedom” does not extend to their thinking or conversation which centres around the relative merits of different perfumes (Mala’s factory too manufactures cosmetics). These women are also shown to hate the idea of children and childbearing. Mala shouts at her pregnant stenographer and asks her to choose between a career and children. This is the most blatant example of male arguments against women (against women’s employment here) being presented as an attack on women by women themselves. Mala likewise scolds the child Chandra loves, and her gradual transformation into the “ideal Indian woman” is signaled by the growth of her hair by leaps and bounds and by her sudden bursts of affection towards the child. These women are shown in fear of either losing their men or busy chasing other men. Thus Mala reacts to both “bad” Rinky’s and “good” Chandra’s relations with her husband Shekhar in exactly the same manner—she hates the women. The entire “women’s liberation club” is shown mobbing Shekhar and his friends whenever they see them. This grabbing and snatching is extended to food as well. Thus in the name of “light entertainment,” women are shown as tearing one another apart at all levels.

The second ingredient of the film is the “modern

marriage.” Mala’s terms for marriage are: 1. Husband and wife will live separately in private though maintaining public appearances of being married. 2. The husband will be completely subservient to the wife. 3. He must serve her and entertain her guests. 4. He must not leave the house or take up a job without her permission. 5. He will be paid Rs 1,000 a month and have 12 hours off every week. 6. He will be liable to be thrown out with notice. 7. Finally, he must adopt her name. Shocked, her uncle enters into a conspiracy with our hero Shekhar to save the “izzat” of the family in the hope that Mala will ultimately be brought to the correct path.

The rest of the film uses the reversal of roles as a source of amusement. Shekhar serves the guests at the wedding, dressed as a waiter. The mockery of service continues when he feeds Mala, serving her, fanning her and eating only after she has finished. He explains that he has seen his mother, a *pativrata*, do this, and is determined to do the same, as a “*pativrata*” The attack on Mala continues savagely. She is shown as unable to repair a punctured tyre and forced to ask for Shekhar’s help (did she never have problems with her car before her marriage?) In the kitchen, practising for a cookery contest organized by her “women’s liberation club”, she manages to knock the grinding stone onto her foot and Shekhar has to come to the rescue, nurse her and help her to walk—the right way, presumably. The film maker seems unable to conceive of a sexual relationship between man and woman which does not express male dominance, and lead to reproduction. So Mala is made to lay down the condition that Shekhar is not to touch her. However, as she “reforms”, she begins to use all the traditional “wiles” to lure him into a sexual relationship. Shekhar nods his head with gleeful triumph when she moons around with open hair, singing plaintive songs and asking him to button her nightdress.

We are constantly made to see that Shekhar is placed in an absurd predicament, and in the process, the fact that in actuality, most married women are facing far worse working conditions and have done so for centuries, is conveniently forgotten. The situation of man serving woman is shown to be “unnatural” only because of the sex role reversal, not because it is unnatural for one human being to serve another in such a slavish way.

At work too it is the same story. Mala takes over on a martial note—that is the impression we get from the music. But soon she is in trouble. Though it is she who discovers that someone is stealing bottles from her factory and selling inferior stuff in them, thus discrediting her products, and it is she who decides to shift the packaging unit to her house, it requires quite an effort on the viewer’s part to keep this in mind till the end, because by then we have been treated to so many little and big fist fights, to save Mala’s factory and Mala herself, that we are convinced she is a fool who desperately needs protection, which of course can only come from some man or the other!

Problems of unemployment and poverty are shown as primarily affecting men—Shekhar and his friends. The message is clear—Mala has made the mistake of thinking she is the owner of property—whether in the form of a factory or a man. Luckily, however, she is made to “see the light” and

realizes how Shekhar has “protected” her and her factory. In the end, she gratefully accepts that lifelong servitude which is the price of “protection”, touches his feet and changes her name.

It is interesting that the women’s movement is treated as such a serious threat to the patriarchal family, that even when we have hardly been able to raise our voices unitedly and coherently we are attacked, denounced, ridiculed in such a vicious way. What is dangerous, however, is that the film will reach wide audiences and create or strengthen prejudices about the women’s movement.

— *Kumkum Roy*

## **ROOHI** **Man-created “Woman”**

Two bosom friends fall in love with the same woman. Vijay loves her because she is a copy of his painting. The impression created is that if a man wants, he can even create a woman out of his imagination. Gullible Sajjo believes : “Blessed be the Lord who created me according to his will !” Since for Prakash, Vijay his friend is his first love, to whom he relates as a subject whereas Sajjo was only an object he wanted to possess, he dies to save and preserve her as Vijay’s property. What strikes one most is the love of Prakash and Vijay. The love for Sajjo is based on a fantasy in the man’s mind— she speaks very little throughout and just looks like a doll.

Many films are based on the glorious love of two male friends but I don’t know of one Indian film depicting love between two women. They always show animosity between women— these are the subtle ways in which women are made to feel isolated and men kept united to see that the world belongs to men.

— *Usha Desai*

## **LOVE STORY** **Sugar-Coated Anti-Woman Pill**

This is one of six current films made by stars of yesterday to promote their sons as stars of tomorrow. This particular film is being sold as the “hit of 1981” and when I saw it, I realized why it is selling so well.

As I watched, I found myself being half-carried away by the very strong fantasy/dream of a happy, youthful fairyland in which the film tries to envelop the viewer. Unfortunately every fairytale has a moral — usually an anti-women one. Perhaps that is why we need to understand what it is in the filmi fairytale which appeals to us.

The chocolate with which the director coats his bitter pill seems to me to have the following ingredients: The hero as Fairy Prince who has youth, cuteness, fine clothes, a fond father who provides him mobility (motorbike, glider, Kashmir trips), and above all complete idleness. No work and all play in an atmosphere of blue skies, still water, hills, trees, flowers, is certainly an enchanting vision for most of us who are forced to live surrounded by ugliness, doing unsatisfying work.

The Romance begins when the heroine runs away from her oppressive, over-protective father who wants to get her married,

and the hero from his father who wants him to become an engineer whereas he wants to be a pilot. The two runaways meet on the road, the girl has just as much energy and spirit as the boy, together they outwit organized authority in the shape of policemen, pursuing parents and dacoits. They do this not with the usual filmi violence but by showing up the forces of law and order for the fools they are. All this appeals to us with the formulae of *Youth in Revolt* and *Youth in Love*—they live in snowclad mountains in their summer clothes, and survive on fresh air, stream water and songs.

When they decide to settle down, a dream house appears



**The end of every Love Story —the woman at the man’s feet**

in a valley of flowers and they set up as a very “modernized” unwed couple with both names Pinky-Bunty on the door. Of course this “settling down” is the beginning of the end. Pinky who had started off as a fiery young woman wielding a gun and driving a motorbike with ease, develops a tendency to burst into tears every two minutes after she “falls in love.” She starts washing clothes and cooking while Bunty sallies forth to devastate the Kashmir forests—proof of his “manly labour.”

When she leaves the dream house to bring him his lunch, he flies into a temper and relents only when she humbly apologises. He then tells her in a song : “Why should the world see you ? Let my eyes alone see you, Stay hidden in my heart, Do not step outside at all” ! (*Dil mein chhipkar rehna,*

*bahar na kadam rakhna.*) And Pinky, who resented her father's protectiveness and who went out camping with a mixed group, accepts this purdah existence with pleasure!

When they feel the need for sex, they decide to get married. We have almost forgotten by this time that Pinky ran away because she didn't want to get married. We have not forgotten that she is under the legal marriage age—in fact, we are repeatedly told that she is 16 and we are expected to delight in the prospective child marriage! So the film ends with Pinky married and Bunty agreeing to become an engineer. Much is made of the handcuff symbol which links the two together—it is an appropriate image of the film's message that imprisonment is inevitable no matter how you try to run away from it.

The dreams induced by this kind of romance are more dangerous than the outright contempt for women expressed



**Their Dream Homes—Our Prisons**

in a film like *Rocky*. Though Bunty refrains from shouting aggressively "*Rocky mera naam*" the message is the same—he is the hero, the superman, and the girl is what he calls her in the song: "This girl looks mad to me, she seems to be a Japanese doll, she moves with a key, she stops with a key, she laughs with a key, she cries with a key" (*chabi se chalti hai...*) (and much more in the same complimentary strain).

We are encouraged to identify our rebellious feelings with those of the young people, but are made to end up thinking these are foolish feelings, we must grow out of them, men must work and women must weep so that the world of Pinky's and Bunty's parents (which is shown as a world of corruption, cruelty and violent possessiveness towards women) can remain intact.

—Lila

## **THEATRE : Aur Tota Bola**

**MEN** stand around chatting in a group. A woman, the wife of one of them, comes up. She tries to catch their attention with a feeble: "*Suno ji...*" (Please listen). When her husband notices her, he roars: "Get out, you... You would fart in public, would you?" She scurries away amidst embarrassed but pleased chuckles from the onlookers. This barbaric scene is being performed on the stage of the prestigious Tata theatre in Bombay and a sophisticated audience is relishing it.

Satyadev Dubey's theatre group has been performing this play for almost a year now. The group is supposedly committed to "progressive" theatre and the play itself is, one presumes, a self-conscious, serious attempt at art. But what one sees in the play is enough to make one an anti-art crusader. Can this

be art?

The handout which accompanies the play tells us that it is a skillful weaving of two themes. The first and dominant theme deals entirely with sexual politics. It features the worship of a long, cucumber-shaped god by the women of a village for them to beget children. This is a cruel inversion of the worship of the earthen pot (or womb) as the symbol of fertility. Here the phallus-shaped gourd is worshipped. The upper class is equated with impotence and the lower class with virility and strength. This is carried to an absurd limit so that the class struggle between the landed Gowda and the landless Basanna becomes a struggle to impregnate Gowda's wife Gowdti. The conflict between the two men is fought out over the body of a woman—a common male fantasy.

The second theme is the uprising of the landless peasants against the bully Gowda who rules the village with his *bandook* (gun), his obscene wit and his henchmen. But the play's vocabulary is almost entirely sexual in character and is viciously aimed at women. The play achieves its real effect not in talking about economic exploitation but in degrading women and depicting them at the mercy of male power conflicts. Satyadev Dubey, the much talked-about director who features often in Bombay arty chat, is aware of the implications of all the symbols used in the play—from gourd-shaped gods to *bandooks*.

The central woman character Gowdti is shown as obsessed with the desire to have a child. Even the pathos of her confiding in her maidservant is robbed of dignity because as the two women hold on to each other and boo-hoo on the stage, the audience titters. Women are often shown with brooms and mops as if this is their true vocation. They are shown bitching, quarrelling, and scurrying away pathetically when shouted at. Gowda is always spouting obscenities like: "...weren't you old enough to know? Didn't you take it in your hand and play with it then?..." His rival Basanna the peasant rebel (Satyadev Dubey himself) is no better. Mocking Gowda's inability to impregnate his wife, he says: "I could sow an entire field." The disputed field in the play is Gowdti.

I see no justification for such a crude, futile and obscene play. As far as the depiction of "exploitation" goes, I can only say that women in the play are certainly not shown as victims of economic exploitation. They are made into objects of sexual ridicule from beginning to end—from the time when the male chorus and the pandit verbally masturbate by describing each detail of female anatomy to the time when Gowdti has to trick a man into giving her a child.

After seeing the play, one is forced to think, how long? How long must we see such arid fantasizing on stage? How long must we put up with the reputation of Mr Dubey and others like him (artists all)? How long must we see his final patronizing gesture of dragging away Swati Tipnis (Gowdti) by her hand after the applause?

The need for an alternative women's theatre is evident. The colonization of our minds by male notions of "art" must stop. Our voices must grow together and become strong. We shall have to sing of our own glory.

—Sharada Dubey