MANI Ratnam's *Bombay* has been hailed as a new departure in cinematic initiatives against communal violence; it has also been criticised for insidiously reinforcing communal prejudices. What is new about this film is not its message of communal harmony. If it leaves the audience feeling that communal vio-lence is always bad and harms every-one, so do many earlier films. Its real novelty lies in its approach to male-female relations and male-male relations as they intersect with intercommunal relations. I shall ex-amine this approach in the context of some other films that deal with Hindu-Muslim relations.

Many earlier films have depicted and deplored communal violence. *Bombay's* main claim to fame is that it dares to focus on a Hindu-Muslim marriage. This is supposed to be the ultimate anti-communal or secular gesture. The film uses the marriage as a metaphor - in the scenes of com-munal mayhem, the nuclear family is shown repeatedly getting severed. Their desperate clinging together is clearly a symbol of the nation trying to stay united. In one shot, a family planning poster with the *"Hum do, hamare do"* icon even appears as a backdrop. It is interesting that the film couple, unlike the family plan-ning one, has two sons, not a son and a daughter. If daughters are dispens-able, so are parents. An explosion conveniently gets rid of all the back-ward-looking, religiously inclined parents and the potential joint family, leaving the progressive, secular nuclear family to represent the future of India. This symbol is one of Mani Ratnam's favourites — he uses it to the same purpose in *Roja*. We are asked to believe that where the patriarchal institutions of politics, bureaucracy and police fail, the patriarchal institution of the family will

Marriage as a Metaphor

Bombay, Mammo, and the Conventions of Popular Cinema

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triumph — the wife will save her husband, the parents their children.

Hindi films have a long-standing tradition of highlighting friendship as the symbol of communal harmony. In any number of films, friends of different religions live closely integrated lives, establish joint house-holds and fictive kinship ties, make sacrifices for, and are ready to die for, one another. Thus, in *Muqaddar ka Sikandar,* the Muslim who is an orphan, adopts his Hindu friend's mother as his own, and the Hindu adopts his Muslim friend's sister as his own. The primary bonding in these films is that of male friendship. Male-female relations are of two kinds — that of brother and sister, symbolized by the *rakhi,* and that

between a man and a woman of the same community. Today, *Bombay* is supposed to have rendered all this *passe,* because it has taken the great leap forward to intercommunal marriage. My question is: in what way is marriage more radical than friendship? In our society, emotional bonding is often as deep or deeper between friends than it is between spouses. Furthermore, friendship is potentially a relationship between equals while marriage is inherently and structurally an institutionalization of unequal relations between the sexes. How is it possible to demonstrate an aspiration to equality between two groups through a symbol of blatant inequality? If the nuclear family in *Bombay* represents India, it is clear

who the heroic, intelligent and dominant spouse in this marriage is (the Hindu man) and who the weak, weepy, uneducated spouse (the Muslim woman).

Where friendship allows for and is indeed premised upon the retention of individual identities, marriage is premised on the loss of individual identities in a new entity. The ideology of marriage, especially in the context of the nuclear family and modern-day romance, demands that spouses be closer to one another than to anyone else, including their relatives and friends. Mani Ratnam's ideal of the nation, an ideal very popular today, demands the loss of individual identity and difference in national identity. But this authoritarian ideal is actually insidiously opposed to the ideal of democracy which is supposed to further the flourishing of individuality and difference. Sacrifice of individual identity, whether to the family or to the nation, is damaging to all parties, but more damaging to those who have less power. This is clearest in the family where men usually retain more mobility, autonomy, outside alliances and loyalties, while women even have to change their names, the hallmark of identity.

Bombay makes no attempt to mitigate this inequality. It selects those cinematic conventions which reinforce inequality, even when alternatives are available. Popular cinema is versatile in its conventions. Thus, it has several conventions of heterosexual romance. There is the kind of romance that is based in child-hood friendship. This would have been most suitable in *Bombay,* where the hero and heroine belong to the same village. They could have been shown growing up together and meeting again when the hero returns to the village. Instead, the director chooses the convention of

love at first sight. But he flouts one of the require-ments of this convention, which is that both hero and heroine be stunningly attractive; conversely, the childhood friendship convention does not require this, as here love is based on trust and understanding. The heroine in *Bombay* stands out in a crowd; the hero does not. The only way the director can make him stand out is by not showing a single Muslim male as even passably attractive. All the Muslim men are shown as old, ugly, fat or dirty and singularly unattractive, while most of the Muslim women are pretty and pleasant-looking. Even this device fails to make Arvind Swami look the kind of charmer anyone, let alone someone like Manisha Koirala, could fall for at first sight. The only explanation for her avid response to him is that no decent young man has ever paid her any attention before, an explanation which strains even the most willing suspension of disbelief.

Why does the director choose not to make Arvind someone Manisha likes and trusts from childhood, until the friendship blossoms into love,given

that Arvind's personality is completely appropriate for such a role? What kind of message does this send — that any Hindu male, just by pursuing a Muslim woman, can attract her to the point where she is ready to abandon a loving family for him? And what message does it send to Muslim parents in rural India who often with-draw their daughters from school at puberty and get them married for fear that they might run off with a man, especially a non-Muslim man? The film assures them that their worst fears are true. Manisha's father wants to educate her, but all she wants is to give up her education and run off with the first man she meets. I could not help shuddering at the risk she runs, going alone to Bombay to entrust herself to a man she has met only once, and who, for all she knows, may sell her into prostitution rather than marry her. After reaching Bombay, neither she nor her progressive journalist husband show the slightest interest in continuing her education or equipping her for employment. Instead, in an unintentionally telling scene, while Arvind busily types out his copy, the

kitchen-bound Manisha reveals her pregnancy, with the pressure cooker hissing in the background.

It will be argued that this is the way things happen — many women do prefer to be housewives than to study or work outside the house. But other things also happen. A third romance convention in popular cinema is that of the urban working couple. A good example is Akbar's romance in *Amar Akbar Anthony*. He falls in love with a Muslim girl who is a doctor. He goes to meet her in the hospital where she is shown as a competent professional, not wearing a *burkah*. The relationship is clearly balanced in her favour — he is her humble admirer. When she attends his *quawali* performance, accompanied by her orthodox guardian, she has to wear a *burkah*. The treatment of the *burkah* - clad woman in *Bombay* and in *Amar Akbar Anthony* is significantly different. In the former, the spell-bound Manisha deceives her parents to keep a solitary tryst with Arvind. As he sings a plaintive song, she floats towards him and her *burkah* flies off in the wind. The metaphor is blatant — the progressive inter-communal marriage liberates the woman from the veil. Never mind if all this leads to is the pressure cooker and pregnancy. Conversely, in *Amar Akbar Anthony,* Akbar in his song challenges his beloved to lift the veil. Before the outraged eyes of her guardian and the whole audience, she rises in a dignified manner, lifts her veil with her own hand and walks up on stage to hand him a rose which he falls on his knees to receive. Why is the depiction in *Bombay*

considered more progressive? Is there really something inherently liberatory about marrying someone from another community even if he treats you just as a sex object, a wife and a mother? The violent sexual fantasies that accompany the wedding night in *Bombay* are followed by Arvind's complacent demand that Manisha produce a third child. No role other than that of housewife is ever envisaged for her. While he heroically reports on riots and intervenes to end the violence, all she does is weep and obstruct his endeavours rather than aid them. A perfect illustration of the adage "Men must work and women must weep".

I would argue that the friendship metaphor for intercommunal harmony is far more powerful and potentially helpful than the marriage metaphor. For one thing, many more people are going to encounter members of other communities as colleagues, neighbours, classmates, than are going to encounter them in the context of romance. Many more people have acquaintances and poten-tial friends from other communities than have intercommunal romances. Further, romance and marriage are not innately

liberating for either men or women insofar as the roles in these relationships are generally more gender-typed (the man pursues, the woman flees or succumbs; he proposes, she accepts or refuses). On the other hand, friendship, insofar as it requires going beyond the bounds of the family and creating a relation-ship which is not fully institutionalized, is imaginatively more demanding and potentially liberatory.

Thirdly, in a riot situation, if one tries to protect one's own spouse and children, there is nothing particularly wonderful about that. One is only safeguarding what is one's own. What is required - and what many members of all communities have heroically demonstrated - is the willingness to shelter people not related to one, people with whom one has ties of friendship. Fictive kinship of the kind traditionally practised in India and represented in popular cinema (where all elderly people, of whatever community, are addressed and treated as parents or aunts and uncles, and those of one's own generation as siblings) is much more important as a potential safeguard in communally violent situations than is actual kinship achieved through inter communal marriage. The depiction of the way the hero and heroine's fathers (the mothers are silent and weepy presences) overcome their inherited hostilities and prejudices to call each other "brother" and put them-selves at risk to safeguard each others' lives, is much more moving than the melodramatic behaviour of the hero and heroine themselves. Unlike Arvind who grandly disowns all religion in favour of the nation-state

("I am not a Hindu or a Muslim but an Indian"), his father, who begins as a blindly orthodox Hindu, grows towards a more truly "Indian" and human (rather than national) secularism when he tries to save the Quran from the flames. Unfortu-nately, the director prefers Arvind's brand of secularism so the old rustic parents and their ways of living together are all sacrificed to the fire from which the brave new world of the urban Indian family emerges as the only available option.

Popular films have so far shown fictive kinship as primarily mediated through male bonding. However, Shyam Benegal's film *Mammo* is truly pathbreaking in its depiction of kinship, both literal and meta-phorical, through women. Sisterhood, not brotherhood, is the dominant symbol in this film. This representa-tion has the advantage of highlight-ing those silent halves of the popula-tion who have little say in deciding political destiny at national or local level and who, when their relations are not mediated by men, rarely settle conflicts of interest through murderous violence. While women in *Bombay* can only dance together or weep together, the two Muslim sisters in *Mammo,* one an Indian, the other a Pakistani, forge the painful bonds of real love between them-selves, their grandson and others like their Hindu maidservant. This film is far more daring than *Bombay* in that it confronts the basic question (which haunts everyone who thinks about Hindu-Muslim relations but is no-where mentioned in *Bombay)* of the artificial sundering of human relations that took place with the partition. Where *Bombay* reinforces a number of stereotypical notions about differences between Hindus and Muslims, *Mammo* shows that there is very little difference between a Pakistani and an Indian woman, or a Hindu and a Muslim schoolboy or a Hindu and a Muslim abused wife. Nor is there much difference between two callous government bureaucracies.

Bombay and *Roja* romanticise the heroic endeavours of the police; *Mammo* presents a more recognizable picture of the police bullying the hapless widow who wants to stay on in India with her sister. They extort bribes from her only to go back on their word later. The film ends on an upbeat note when the feisty old woman outwits the State machinery, to remain with those she loves. *Mammo* is a heartwarming film, moving and funny. Benegal outdoes himself and Farida Jalal puts in a magnificent performance. Unfortunately, it was screened by Doordarshan late one night without adequate advance publicity so many people missed it. Nor has it received the kind of attention from reviewers that *Bombay* did. Still, it is in quiet efforts like *Mammo* and through the courage of ordinary people like its protagonist that hope for the future lies, not in the noisy heroics and self-conscious controversiality of films like *Bombay.* ❒