

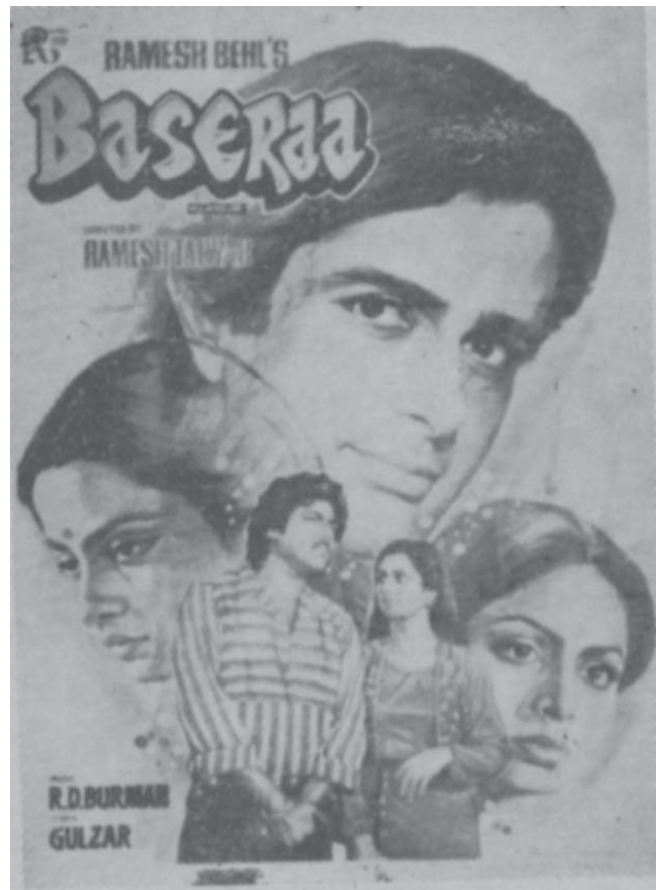
From One Wife + Many Affairs To Many Wives And More Affairs

“DOUBLE Trouble ? Dharam, Shatru and Vinod Mehra reveal how they handle two women at a time—” This is how Star & Style, a popular film magazine, advertizes its latest issue— 25 years after bigamy was outlawed in India.

Of late, there has been a trend towards legitimizing and openly glorifying men’s polygamous relationships— both on the screen and in magazines which discuss the private lives of film stars. The old “gossipy” tone of unearthing film stars’ secret romances is now used more when women stars are involved, while male stars marrying two or more wives, is seen as a sign of their “liberal” thinking and “modernity.”

This open defiance of law is an attempt to reverse the gains made by women’s struggle for our rights. It was a century-long struggle, beginning with the social reform movements and continued by women’s active participation in the national movement, which had launched a countrywide debate on such issues as child marriage, divorce, bigamy, particularly as they affected women. This culminated in major changes in marriage, divorce and succession laws, in independent India. The Hindu Marriage Act, 1956, made bigamy a punishable offence. Of course, in practice, those men who could afford it continued to have more than one wife—the law was as ineffective to prevent this as it is to stop child marriage or dowry today. Countless more men “kept” and discarded women without marrying them, visited brothels and had extramarital relationships, But all this had to be more or less clandestinely done. The law required that a pretence be maintained, and “respectable” society could not acknowledge it to be part of our “national heritage and culture.”

So, for years, films and the media extolled monogamous marriage. Women were shown reforming errant husbands by lifelong sacrifice and service. Obviously, men are now tired of hiding the double standard in polite society. They want to flaunt their “right” to polygamy. Perhaps this explains the spate of recent films emphasizing two simultaneous themes: 1. The permanence of *suhaag* in a woman’s life, this *suhaag* being embodied in one man her “lawful husband”, no matter how badly he behaves. 2. The varied “circumstances” which justify



Looming Large Over Our Lives

a man’s extramarital affairs and bigamous marriages.

In films like *Suhaag*, the woman waits patiently through a lifetime for the errant and roguish husband to return to her. In *Saajan Bina Suhaagan* she obeys his dying wish and acts as a married woman even after his death, while longing to embrace widowhood and devote her life to mourning him. On the other hand, *Pati, Patni Aur Woh* tries to create a case for men’s “polygamous nature.” The film’s message is that men cannot help running after many women, even though they love their wives. Since men are just made that way, wives should learn to gracefully tolerate this—after all, men will be men. Of course, the virtuous wives are all monogamous by “nature”! However, when the men’s extra-marital affair assumes more serious dimensions, the “other woman” begins to take herself and the relationship more seriously than she ought to, then she is condemned and outlawed by the wife’s devotion, as in *Grihpravesh*. In this film, the wife invites her husband’s woman friend to the house. She decks up herself and the house so as to win back her husband. He suddenly realizes how foolish he is being to throw away such a useful and decorative wife, so throws away the other woman instead. Symbolically, they are parted on the street by a wedding procession, and the film suggests that if a husband strays, the wife must be neglecting her own and her home’s appearance and maintenance.

Other films kill off the “other woman” after she has been made use of. In *Mangalsutra*, she is made out to be an evil

influence even after her death and has to be exorcised by the devoted wife's suffering. In Maang Bhara Sajna much comedy is extracted from the situation wherein Jeetendra maintains separate households for wife and mistress and explains to them that he has to be away for a "day shift" and "night shift" respectively. When Rekha, the mistress, conceives, and wants him to marry her, he is forced to face the consequences of his actions. But at this point, Rekha conveniently dies in childbirth, and Maushumi the wife, adopts the baby and asks her husband to fill Rekha's *manj* with *sindoor*, thus conferring on her the status of second wife, at least after her death. Thus a new duty is added to the already long list of wifely virtues—she should rear her husband's illegitimate children, and should willingly allow him to have more wives.

Silsila is the latest and fairly sophisticated treatment of this theme. It is different from the others insofar as it shows the situation from the "other woman's" point of view, as well as the man's. But it goes out of its way to find excuses for the man's callous treatment of both wife and beloved. His desertion of Rekha, his fiancée, is shown to be for the "noblest" reasons — he decides to marry the pregnant girlfriend of his dead brother. Thus the film maker ensures that the audience's sympathy lies with Amitabh when he resumes his romance after his marriage, and even when he neglects and scorns his wife, Jaya. (After all, she has to pay for not having been a "virgin bride"). It is significant that at every crisis, it is Amitabh who decides what turn the affair is to take. He informs Rekha by letter of his marriage, thus not allowing her any say in the matter. After she too gets married, and they meet by accident, it is he who pursues her, ignoring her protests, and insists that the affair be resumed. It is he who decides that this stifling double life is unjust to them so they should break out of their marriages. He shouts at Rekha when she is hesitant about this. However, once she agrees, it is he who suddenly undergoes a "change of heart" while performing a religious ceremony. He puts a sudden stop to the affair by rescuing Rekha's half-dead husband from a burning aeroplane and dumping him into her arms. Not a word is exchanged— Rekha is not given a chance to open her mouth, there is no discussion. At this crisis, the film maker probably realized that his "moral" would be ruined if Rekha were allowed to say what she felt. Amitabh races to Jaya and exhorts her that "henceforth there will be only you and I, husband and wife. Only this is truth and everything else is a lie." Thus the man has the best of both worlds—a patient forgiving wife, as well as a romantic beloved who can be deserted, picked up and again discarded as and when it suits him.

The reality of the average marriage in our society is well portrayed in both Amitabh's and Rekha's marriages. It is shown to be dull, burdensome and destructive of people's real feelings, desires, creativity. But why is the audience encouraged to sympathize with Amitabh's neglect of and unfaithfulness to Jaya? In a context where more and more film stars marry actresses of potential and then forbid them to act, while themselves continuing their careers, and indulging in one affair

after another. This attempt to justify such a pattern of life acquires more significance. Also, why is Amitabh's weakness and hypocrisy condoned? His friend asks; "Are you prepared to defy society and go live in a jungle or on a mountain peak?" Though portrayed as a poet and a thinker, Amitabh ends up by accepting the most life-denying traditions of society in the interest of preserving two "dutiful" marriages for which he has only contempt. And how is it that when he suddenly decides that here romance ends and marital bliss begins, he manages to forget all the suffering he has caused to Rekha, the risks she has taken for his sake, and her patient understanding of all his vagaries? Rekha is appropriately silenced at this moment. As in Main Tuli Tere Aangan Ki, where again wife and mistress are maintained by the man till the mistress dies and her son is adopted by the wife, it is the women who pay for the man's egoistic vacillations. And yet the audience is encouraged to sympathize with the "poor man", to look at the mess he has created from his "point of view,"

This manipulation of audience response by creating improbable plots to excuse the man, is seen at its best in three recent films—Basesa, Khara Khota and Ek Hi Bhool,

Basesa sets out to create the most excusable circumstances for bigamy. In fact, it provides more than one reason for bigamy to appear "natural" and "normal." The wife's younger sister is presented as inevitable candidate for second wifery. On the marriage night and later too, she flirts outrageously with her brother-in-law, singing a song; "I have come in the dowry, I will live wherever my sister lives, I will definitely come one day, Shall I come now?" In fact, such a convenient package deal for the man is shown as almost endemic in the family situation— both sisters share the housework and childcare while well known sayings are used to drive home the point: "*Saali adhi gharwali hai*" (A sister-in-law is half a wife).

After Shashi's first wife goes mad, he marries Rekha only so that his son can be provided with a surrogate mother. A wife's place in the home is once more emphasized when a bride is to be chosen for this son. Shashi whisks off the prospective daughter-in-law to the market and tests her for wifely qualities, such as haggling to save her husband's money. Then he brings her home and announces "Look what I have brought from the market—an excellent maidservant. Take her straight to the kitchen." Thus, through joke, the position of the woman is made clear. Immediately after this, the daughter-in-law demonstrates her singing powers by going into the family shrine and singing a *bhajan*; "May I be like Radha of Brindaban, And may the world call me mad." However, this Radha is mad not with love but with wifely and motherly devotion: "May I flower and be fruitful." Her suitability as daughter-in-law is ultimately proved when she mothers Rekha's little son, during the period when he has to be kept in hiding. The final irony of course is that this "maidservant" is a medical student!

The predicament of the two sisters married to one man is sharply focused on the idea that happiness means being paired off with a man and misery means being deprived of this

privilege. The white dress widowhood and the red *sindoor* of the married we are used as contrasting symbols to stress this duality.

This symbolism is repeatedly used in recent films, to place women in categories according to their relationship with men. Of course, there is no parallel symbolism for men. While Rekha and Raakhee are shown to be very attached to one another—Raakhee goes mad because Rekha is widowed, and Rekha screams at the end: “I will die, I will die, I can’t live without my sister”—yet the film firmly sets the man-woman relationship high above any other relationship, however loving.

The plot is carefully arranged so that Rekha alone has to bear the burden of the second marriage. She is alone in the house when news comes that Raakhee is returning home, she has to take decisions and carry them out on her own, she suffers the guilt and shame while Shashi displays only helplessness or irritability. Rekha’s father too keeps repeating that she is not to blame, since it was he who insisted on the second marriage. Not for a moment does anyone suggest that the lord and master of the house may be somewhat responsible for the situation. Only when Rekha suggests that she will go to her father’s village does he break out angrily; “Why do you want to go like this, as if I am to blame? Have I brought you here by stealth? Are you not my wife?” Thus the “legitimacy” of his actions is endorsed. While Rekha bears all the emotional strain of the situation, Shashi tells her severely: “If you don’t control yourself, what will happen to the child?”

On the other hand, Raakhee’s choice of life in the lunatic asylum even though she is perfectly sane is not merely a self-sacrifice to ensure her sister’s happiness. It is significant that Rekha had said that if Raakhee were to relapse into madness, she, Rekha, would never be able to forgive herself and would have to live with a feeling of guilt for ever. In this context, if Raakhee had openly announced her decision not to live with Shashi any more but to live separately so that Rekha could be happy, this would have absolved Rekha of guilt but would perhaps have made Shashi feel guilty. Therefore when she chooses to pretend she is mad thus making herself a social outcast, it is so that Shashi may live with the self-satisfaction of having done his best as an ideal husband and father! Also, she is resigning herself to Shashi’s wishes—he is shown as feeling repulsed by his first wife and longing for the second wife. When, Raakhee dares to claim her conjugal rights in the mildest possible terms, he turns on her in a furious rage and she laments the fact that she has grown older in these 14 years - the assumption being that time stands still for men but women age and become undesirable, hence dispensable.

When Raakhee chooses a living death, she is fulfilling not her sister’s wish (Rekha is willing to make any sacrifice if only her sister can remain alive and happy) but clearly that of her husband who sees her as a nuisance and can only afford to spend a few piano tunes and half a tear on her, and of her son who early on in the film had remarked to his girlfriend; “It would have been better if she (his mother) had died.”

Would any woman be shown on the screen uttering such

a wish with regard to her husband or father, no matter how brutal or how ill he might be? On the contrary, she would be made to spend her life nursing him or trying to reform him! In *Suhaag*, the wife, half-killed by her brutal husband, is shown imploring her sons not to waste time trying to save her life, but instead to go save her *suhaag*, that is her husband’s life, which is far more important to her than her own survival. Of course, the sons readily obey!

Khara Khota improves on the situation by presenting the case of the man with three wives. Again, this is supposed to reflect the reality of the male actor’s life. In the film he throws his wife out of the house because he suspects her fidelity and therefore the legitimacy of his son. He then proceeds to have an affair with and marry his secretary whom he had dismissed. The exploitation of secretary by boss, so all-pervasive in our society, is reversed to show her as the “loose” woman who “seduces” him, and therefore deserves to die so that he can then proceed to marry for the third time.

The common assumption of all these films is that women are “prey” for men, and enjoy being so. Not only do women exist only to be picked up and discarded at pleasure, but they enjoy being pursued, harassed and exploited. So what is wrong if men enjoy hunting one woman after another?

Chashme Buddoor completes this equation of love and sex with a hunt of woman by man. The theme song of this “new wave” film is “Call it by any name, love is the same, though it assumes different forms.” The forms it assumes are various kinds of eve-teasing. The hero’s two friends whose only occupation is pursuing and sexually harassing any woman they see, are presented as likeable and good hearted scamps. Whenever they see a woman, they call out “*Shikar*” (prey), to each other and set off on the chase. This is supposed to be highly amusing. The film is a real shot in the arm for all eve-teasers who can recognize themselves on the screen and find justification for their actions. Surely this is linked to the new boldness which eve-teasers have now acquired—their stares, rubbings, pushings and pawings are no longer furtive, they do not look away in embarrassment if women stare back, they laugh and openly attempt to squeeze on to bus seats already occupied by women, they are brazen about their intentions. And they assume that women enjoy it, are only pretending to be angry. That is how women are shown on the screen, after all. In *Chashme Buddoor*, the hero promptly discards his girl friend when his two eve-teaser friends lie to him, saying that she is bad-charactered, and giving as evidence the fact that they have been her friends in the past and have even been invited to her house, where they have seen her bedroom and bathroom.

The hero is an intellectual—this does not prevent him from aiding his friends’ pursuit of girls while himself recoiling from a girl who may have been friendly with other men. He is “seriously involved” with his study of economics but that does not prevent him from expecting her to give up her job to marry him as soon as he gets a job. When she asks why, he says: “Because I am telling you to.” She answers: “Who are

you to tell me ? He : “I am your lord and master to be.” She (simpering) ; “You haven’t even asked me.”He: “ I am asking you now.” She: “I need time to think over such an important question.” He: “How much time?” She : “As much time as I need to finish this ice cream.” Just as in *Basera*, a woman’s choices are summarily dismissed—there is not even the hint of conflict between paid and unpaid career. Before she fell in love, the heroine’s devotion to music was such that to earn money for her lessons she went from house to house selling soap. But that was only to qualify her as a desirable wife. Therefore, the love of music too appropriately fades away before the overwhelming love of this “lord and master.”

But what if the wife refuses to put up with her husband’s “natural tendency” to polygamy ? In *Ek Hi Bhool*, Rekha divorces Jeetendra after he sleeps with her friend.

Rekha in this film is a woman with pride. She cannot stand any insult to her dignity—beats up a colleague who tries to harass her and resents her husband’s treating her as a sex object. However the film maker constantly tries to point out that she is being unnecessarily quarrelsome and suspicious. For example, on one occasion, Jeetendra goes on tour, resists all the “temptations” of prostitutes and on his return, buys gifts for Rekha and takes her out to dinner. That night, however, when he discovers that she is menstruating, he explodes : “I refused all kinds of dishes—Chinese, continental, thinking that I would eat only home food! Why are you telling me this (about menses) only now? Why didn’t you tell me earlier when I took you out, bought you a sari and fed you chicken? Oh no, you didn’t tell me then!” However, Rekha’s resentment of her status as permanent prostitute, only takes the form of tantrums and weeping—her anger is not allowed to find coherent expression. On another occasion, he describes neighbouring women as “layers of cream” and “doe-eyed beauties.” Again, Rekha’s indignation is shown as mere “hysterical jealousy.” She turns him out of the bedroom, whereupon he starts blowing kisses to the toddler next door ! In today’s context of numerous child-rapes (see Reports section) this scene reinforces the idea that any female is fair prey for men. When Rekha comes out to see what he is doing, he pretends to be flirting with the child’s grandmother, giving as his reason : “Old wine is more tasty than new.”

Finally, he sleeps with Rekha’s widowed friend so Rekha divorces him. The rest of the film is devoted to “proving” how wrong she was in doing this. Her grandmother insists that for such a small “mistake” she should not leave a husband. Her father disowns her saying she has brought disgrace on the family by her shamelessness. Her woman friend advises her to rethink and go back to him. The film showers sympathy on the poor husband, who is so good at heart, so devoted to her, so lonely and uncared for (poor man has to eat hotel food while Rekha is cooking meals next door !) and is driven to take to drink because of her obstinacy!

However, he still retains the “right” to slap her when she tells him in anger that he is not the father of her child ! Rekha’s poor son (“deprived” of a role model by being separated from

his father !) of course becomes Jeetendra’s ally, insults Rekha in exactly similar ways; runs off to Jeetendra on all possible occasions, to be showered with gifts, and pathetically asks where his father is. The film most unrealistically insists on the tremendous blood-bond between the father and his heir—they wear similar clothes, use the same language and have the same mannerisms. In actuality, children pick up gestures and language from those they live with, not from mysterious blood ties—but then what have films to do with such mundane facts!

Though everyone in the film does their best to make Rekha feel miserable and guilty, she shows admirable strength, and resistance. However, when her male colleagues spread false rumours against her character, it is only Jeetendra who believes that “if she had been raped, she would not be alive today.” This proof of his faith in her as a *sati savitri* is enough — Rekha decks herself up, *sindoor* and all, and rushes off to his house—only to find him going through a second marriage. When she tries to stop the marriage, she is sternly repulsed and told that the new wife has promised not to quarrel with Jeetendra, never to suspect him and to forgive all his “mistakes,”

As Rekha tears the divorce papers and flings them into the sacred wedding fire, the message to women is clear—if you try to claim your legal right to divorce your husband, you will bitterly regret it. She also begs his forgiveness and promises never to quarrel with him, that is, she renounces completely her rebellious self. And then hey presto ! the second wife turns out to be a man in disguise—all these tortures were inflicted on her only to teach her a lesson. The “*bhool*” turns out to be not that of the unfaithful husband but that of the wife who resents his behaviour.

From eve-teasing to seduction to polygamous affairs to rape to bigamy and trigamy—it is only a difference of degree. The essence is the same—all these films reassure men that they are good at heart, that women have no right to question them, and that sexually, they are right to indulge their polygamous impulses since manly virtue has nothing to do with being faithful to one woman, while womanly virtue consists in, and only in, being eternally monogamous. On the other hand, women are threatened that we had better not show our resentment, because that is “unnatural”, and will only make us miserable by depriving us of a husband. It is significant that such encouragement to treating women as objects (whether as objects of prey or as useful objects in kitchen and bedroom) comes at a time when women all over the country are beginning to organize against sexual harassment, wife-beating, rape and legal discrimination. Perhaps these mischievous attempts to disarm us and encourage violence against us are inevitable when we begin to fight back.

—Madhu, Ruth

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