

Women Allowed Strength Only If Men Fail Them

Yeh Nazdeekiyan, Jeevan Dhara, Shradhanjali, Umrao Jaan

IT IS indeed unusual to find three simultaneously running films in which the main women characters refuse to suffer passively, but instead attempt to change the situation which causes their suffering. The women in all these films are strong, determined and effective. Their decisions visibly alter the circumstances in which they are placed. These women fight for the right to live with dignity. In that sense, the films are somewhat different from the ordinary run of Hindi films.

These films address themselves to the question: what is it which motivates a woman to take up paid employment? But in each film, almost before we are given a chance to see the woman immersed in her work, before we can see her in an active relationship with her work, workplace, co-workers, the director has already dinned into our heads that the motivation is entirely different from that of a man, that, in fact, whether a woman does or does not take up paid employment is entirely dependent on the behaviour of the men in her life. She would never choose to do so, if she had the option of being dependent.

To begin with *Yeh Nazdeekiyan*. Here are two women—Shabana the wife and Parveen the mistress of Marc Zuber. It is a relief to see women who have ability, confidence and a sense of self, who do not humiliate themselves by clinging to a man once he turns his favours on to another woman. Both of them face his volteface with dignity, walk out before he is quite prepared for their departure, and do not behave as if life has ended just because he has changed his mind.

But what is the relationship of these women to their professions? Shabana is supposed to be a talented singer and lyricist. Yet, though Marc suggests that she take up singing as a profession, she insists that she will sing for him and for him alone. Though both of them are constantly declaiming on the wonderful modernity of their relationship whereby they see themselves as belonging to each other but do not own each other, yet Shabana in no way differs from the *pativrata* of Hindi filmlore. She unashamedly declares that she got late for a meeting because she felt like baking a cake for her husband



A Grotesque Version of Durga Better Than Men At Men's Games

with her own hands. She waits patiently till midnight to eat with him, and greets him with an appropriate smile when he finally puts in an appearance.

Marc gives the fraudulent name of “multi-dimensional relationship” to this patient and consistent servicing done by Shabana. He feels that his relationship with Parveen has only one dimension, that of physical passion, while the relationship with Shabana has many dimensions. This explanation becomes his excuse for insulting and bullying Parveen, and finally going back to Shabana. But is it true that Parveen has only her body to offer? On the contrary, she is shown behaving like a traditional, devoted wife—serving him just as Shabana did, waiting up for him, even looking after his daughter with more care and affection than he does. What then does he miss?

The answer is given to us in a series of significant flashbacks. When he is struggling with plans for advertisement campaigns, Shabana comes up with the slogan he needs (it is in fact far more sensitive than any of the slogans he is shown to be otherwise coining), she plays chess with him when he is tense, and can even win a game or two because he is so preoccupied! She can sing him her songs and engage in witty repartee. When he indulges in flirtations, she loses her temper, throws the dishes at him and ends up in his arms on the kitchen floor so that he can pay her the compliment of telling her she is a bitch but he loves her because she has something in her which no other woman has. In other words, Shabana puts her intelligence at his command and appears to find fulfilment in so doing.

She represents a very powerful male fantasy—a woman who is not just sexually appealing, loyal and devoted but also intelligent and yet submissive! To possess a docile and stupid slave is less intoxicating than to have an intelligent slave who appears to prefer this slavery to freedom. What a tribute to the power of the man's manly charms! In return for which, he can afford to admit that she is the great woman behind him, the great man. And what is this particular man's claim to greatness?

He is the great advertising trickster—clever at using semi-nude women to sell any trash that he is paid to sell.

When Shabana discovers that her husband would rather go and sleep with his mistress on their wedding anniversary than listen to her songs, she decides that it is now time to sing for the world and earn her living thereby. She does this successfully and with seeming ease. But wait! Is she *really* happy? Happiness, that elusive commodity which film makers are ever dangling before women as purchasable only at the price of freedom! No. She returns to her lonely flat and sinks on the sofa in extreme depression. When she is singing in the studio, tears trickle down her cheeks. Indeed, all her songs are nothing but so many love letters to her faithless spouse. Under the veneer of strength, we are assured, is a miserable, lonely woman. She appears to be calm and in control, she refuses with dignity Marc's offer to give her money and to stage a comeback, she tells him she is going to look for her identity which she had lost when she submerged herself in him.

But all this only builds up to the climax—those ten seconds which undo an hour of our seeing Shabana as strong and independent. Because that hour of the strong Shabana is a very new idea. Can a woman live without the security offered by a man, we begin to wonder. And we begin to tentatively think that perhaps she can. But then, Marc appears and sweeps her onto the dance floor. He murmurs into her ear some more inanities about the multi-dimensional quality of their relationship. And he pays her the ultimate compliment of telling her she has become an inseparable part of him, his work, his existence. This means that her submerging her identity in his was not fruitless! It was worth it! Love (as loss of a woman's self) has triumphed!

So Marc has literally the last word. Shabana doesn't speak—she just clings to his neck in an abandoned posture of complete surrender. The camera focuses on her glowing face and rapturous smile. We last saw her smile like that only when Marc was courting her, proposing marriage. This is where the visual impact of a film conveys a message and moral far stronger than any of the words used earlier. The beautiful heroine struggles but she seems to find no joy in the struggle. Then suddenly she smiles, her eyes fill with joyful tears, she glows. Can we, the audience who are so used to seeing beautiful, glowing heroines, resist the spell cast by that glow? Can we really think she or any woman would prefer independence which seems to be so grim an affair?

Similarly too, Parveen gives up her modelling career and her flat, against the advice of her girl friend, just to live with Marc, without even the dubious security of being a wedded wife. Her glow too comes only from being able to attract Marc. So what is a fantasy for men turns out to be a moral for women: happiness for a woman consists only in being held in a man's strong arms. Unfortunately, the thought lingers in our minds that being so busy and absorbed in his work he may not always be able to take out the time for this. So we should be all the more grateful if he manages it occasionally!

Yeh Nazdeekiyan has the surface 'modernity' of a western

lifestyle. We don't get into the complexities of in-laws, family, community, everyday problems of managing on a limited income in a world of rising prices and shortages. The characters seem to exist in a luxurious vacuum with each other, driving around in expensive cars and living in houses that are straight out of a Hollywood film.

In Jeevan Dhara, the same moral is more "pragmatically" driven home to the earning woman. When the film starts, Rekha emerges as a woman who can inspire any one of us. She earns the respect of her colleagues and her boss, she resists with rare dignity and quickwittedness any attempt at sexual harassment, whether by an officer or by men in the bus. She earns to support herself and a large family consisting of a mother, a blind brother, a widowed sister, another alcoholic rogue of a brother, his wife and their three children. More important, she is very sensitive to all their needs and problems. She acts as an emotional support to all of them. Though the other women are shown as passive, gullible and often stupid, the relationship between them is, on the whole, pleasant and mutually supportive. We are spared the stereotyped fights between mother and daughter-in-law or sisters-in-law.

But subtly, oh very subtly, it is suggested that Rekha is not quite as womanly as she ought to be or wants to be. Is she not "aggressive" and a bit "unfeminine" in the way she berates her drunken brother and her father who has deserted his family to become a *sanyasi*? We have divided sympathies—we feel she is in the right, and yet things are not quite right. What could improve the state of affairs? If other members of the family were to start earning, would Rekha feel less burdened, could she be more creative and free? But there is no suggestion that the sister-in-law, sister or mother could take up a paid job. Instead, we hear that the father who had taken *sanyas* is now returning home. And here the director shows us what he thinks is the only way the situation could possibly improve. Our self-dependent heroine is made to rush off to office and hand in her resignation letter, with tears of joy in her eyes. Without even finding out whether her father intends to support the family or has the means to do so, she declares: "Now I will live as a daughter"—implying of course, that a daughter by definition does not earn. However, fortunately, the father turns out to be a shameless mendicant and she has the good sense to throw him out of the house.

But then the drunken brother turns over a new leaf and lands a job as a waiter in a restaurant. Again, Rekha does not pause a moment to confirm whether this is a secure job or just another of his tricks. Off she races with the ever-ready resignation letter: "Now I will live as a sister." Better poverty and servility on a man's earnings than comfort and independence on a woman's!

In this film too, the glow comes to the heroine's face either when she is singing songs to her beloved dreaming of a vulgarly extravagant wedding for herself, or when she is handing in her resignation letter. In the present situation of widespread unemployment, is there a conscious intention in showing a woman glow when she leaves a job rather than

when she finds one? Rekha's brother is supposed to redeem his dignity by getting a job. But Rekha is constantly longing for the dignity and respectability which she thinks will come with a non-earning status as daughter, sister or wife. It is made out to be a great tragedy when this privilege is denied to her. She is shown returning to office with tears in her eyes, and telling the bus conductor that a woman who has a widowed mother, sister-in-law and orphaned children to look after, cannot marry but has to earn.

The government may have exempted this film from entertainment tax because of its propaganda against drinking and for family planning. Like most government propaganda on these themes, it is shabby and ineffective. But it is certainly effective propaganda of another kind. Today, when paid employment of women is undergoing a sharp decline, when millions of poor women, especially in rural areas, are being pushed out of the pitiful paid jobs they formerly held, this film justifies what the national economy is accomplishing. The only women somehow holding their own in the employment market, entering new professions and trying to stick to their jobs in spite of blatant discrimination against them, are the urban, middle class, educated women. But as unemployment grows even among the educated middle class, men feel threatened by the presence of this handful of women, and begin to resent them. To further exacerbate this resentment, this government-patronized melodrama tries to convince women that we would be much happier if we gave up our paid jobs and joyfully served men without wages. It tries to scare every woman aspiring for a career by depicting the earning woman as an unfortunate, frustrated hag who has had to commit emotional suicide and kill all her womanly desires in order to remain an earning person.

We are often told that "women are women's own worst enemies." This film is a good example of how this process works. Here is a film director who deliberately projects a strong, economically independent woman in such a nasty way that any woman looking at her and her fate, could well be startled and frightened away from the very idea of strength and economic independence in women.

Shradhanjali is another film which has been sold with the image of a strong heroine. The poster shows her standing, hand on hip, and pouring water over the villain. Raakhee enters the world of business and high finance after she has proved herself as the ideal sister, daughter, wife, daughter-in-law and above all, sister-in-law who aborts her child so that she can devote herself to the particularly nasty young brother of her dead husband. There is not even a pretence that Raakhee chooses her vocation. She does it only as a *shradhanjali*—an offering of devotion to the memory of her husband, an attempt to fulfil his ambitions so that his soul may rest in peace. Again, when Deepak is shown declaring his intention to build a huge business empire and distribute gold coins to the poor, his eyes shine and his voice throbs. But when Raakhee manages to fulfil his dream, she shows no exhilaration, only long suffering

devotion to his memory and his brother. Notwithstanding this clever attempt to divest her of independent aspiration, Raakhee emerges as a far more interesting and attractive personality once she starts asserting herself in the male-controlled world of business. Inevitably, she can succeed only by proving that she is even better than a man at men's games. She is equipped with the whole kit—shrewdness, unscrupulous ability to twist the opponent's arm, bring about economic ruin for an enemy by manipulating the market. Finally, she even excels in what has hitherto remained a male monopoly—manipulating the underworld and settling old scores by a combination of fraud, bribery, strong arm tactics and sheer guts in the use of violence. It is a grotesque filmi version of the Durga image—but the other face of Durga is Parvati, the devoted wife, the true Sati. As in *Jeevan Dhara*, the heroine's strength is presented as so distorted and dehumanized that it could well have the effect of repulsing women from the idea of strong women.

Finally, we have *Umrao Jaan*, the film that has won four national awards. The heroines of the other three films were imagined versions of earning women. But *Umrao* was a woman who actually lived—an independent, talented woman. At a time when the majority of women were debarred from formal education, forbidden to read, write or practise the arts, it was the courtesans who kept alive artistic traditions of dancing, singing, music, painting and poetry writing. Many of them were highly learned women. *Umrao Jaan* was one of those women, study of whose life would give us important insights into our history—the buried history of women artists who were denied the recognition and fame that their male counterparts received, who were socially ostracized yet earned a measure of independence of which the wives and daughters of wealthy men were deprived.

However, none of the strength, self-sufficiency or artistry of such a woman is visible in the film *Umrao Jaan*. She turns out to be just such another decorative doll as are most Hindi film heroines. In spite of being exploited and betrayed, she continues to desperately look for a man to give her protection, and spends her life shedding tears for the love of a baby-faced, worthless fellow who deserted her to marry the woman chosen for him by his mother.

She earns the praise of all and sundry, but the camera seems unable to focus on anything beyond her eyes glistening with tears even as she is dancing, singing her ghazals and winning acclaim. After all, what satisfaction can a woman get from art, from fame or from economic self-sufficiency if she has not one man to cling to? Like *Shabana's* lyrics, all her poetry too is addressed to her faithless beloved. We see her happy and smiling only when she is clinging to him and wandering around in the fields singing love songs to him.

Why has this film been awarded, rewarded and exempted from tax in some states? Because its director, who is a known "progressive" intellectual, has made a very commendable effort to further boost democratic values in this great day and age of democracy. There was a time when only kings, feudal lords

and men from aristocratic families could have *mujras* performed for them. But in today's era of democracy and equality, there is entertainment suited to every pocket—from the cabaret strip tease in five star hotels to similar performances in fast mushrooming wayside restaurants.

But progressive film directors are not satisfied with this. They want to make available aristocratic entertainment to the “common man”, the “man in the street.” Films like *Pakeezah* and *Umrao Jaan* are the outcome of this noble effort. Instead of a talented woman artist, what we are shown is a cheap filmi dancer. The film does not move from scene to scene but from one seductive dress to another seductive dress, from one seductive pose to another seductive pose. This gives the director a ready-made box office hit, instead of a flop like his first film *Gaman* which was an attempt at realistic portrayal of poverty.

In between, the director wakes up to the need for a historical touch. So, sandwiched between two *mujras*, a few British soldiers are made to race around on horse-back while some refugee families evacuate their town. There we have the historic 1857 revolt in an even worse style than *Junoon!* As in *Junoon*, the only people allowed to exist in the film are the aristocrats. The poorer people are absolutely invisible. Such a portrayal strengthens the popular misconception that the decadent life of an idle, luxuriant nobility was the hallmark of our great Indian civilization which the British destroyed.

The *Umrao* of history had to resort to prostitution to earn a living. But in this film a distorted image of that long-dead woman has been sold to every man for the price of a film ticket. And another progressive film maker has made rich profits by displaying women's bodies in glossy packaging.

All in all, these new wave films which seem to present woman in a new role as earner, completely fail to explore the hitherto unexplored areas of a woman's life. How does a woman relate to her profession, her skills, her creativity, what place do these have in her life? How does she struggle to retain a link with them, pressurized as she is by housework, child-care, familial restrictions and social prejudices? What does it do to a woman's

personality to have her own income? How does this control over money affect her life and her ability to take decisions?

Ignoring all these dimensions, these films tell us, firstly, that women go out to earn a living only when they are widows (*Shradhanjali*), abandoned wives (*Yeh Nazdeekiyan*), orphaned or kidnapped girls forced into prostitution (*Umrao Jaan*), or frustrated spinsters whose family circumstances unfortunately prevent them from marrying (*Jeevan Dhara*). They need to earn money only when disaster strikes them. Secondly, though they may excel in their chosen fields, may win fame, be even more successful than men at men's own games, none of this will bring them happiness or fulfilment. Because every woman, however talented or gifted, has only one aim—to win the heart of one man and cling to him for the rest of her life. Once this aim is frustrated, nothing else has any meaning for a woman, nothing can give her joy.

On the other hand, a man does find pleasure in his relationships with women, but his work, his profession are expressions of his creative urge, his identity as a man. If he does not take up paid employment, he is no longer a man. Whereas if a woman works for money, she is no longer a woman. Therefore a woman will resort to a paid job, a profession or an art only when misfortune strikes her, never from choice. If she has the choice, she would much prefer to lay all her creativity at the feet of a man, use her hands to bake cakes for him, her voice to sing to him, her mind to sympathize with his woes, her body to please him. She would rather lose herself in him than explore her own self. That is what men would like us to believe!

By this logic, we should console ourselves with the thought that not only *Umrao Jaan* but all the talented and creative women the world has known, have contributed to the arts and sciences not because of any desire to do so, but only because they were frustrated in the search for a man, or were hit by the disaster of having to earn a living!

Such films are propaganda to persuade us into “willingly” and “freely” killing our creativity and accepting instead a life of dependence and souldestroying, unpaid, domestic drudgery.

—*Madhu, Ruth*

bride seeing and a kilo of cold cream

her
face
he gathered in a fleeting disgusted
glance
glowing silk and heavy jewellery
couldn't
carry him over the flaws of her face
until

her family promised
a Premier
an Allwyn
and a trip abroad
“handsome dowry for a handsome
man”
then
he said she could improve
with a kilo of cold cream

and a beauty parlour
where she could be bleached fair
without
any facial hair
the deal was struck
now
he hurries out in the Premier
while
she still visits crowded
beauty parlours,
to
be bleached fair
without any facial hair.

—*Lakshmi Iyer*