

“The film...exists as our product, the product of the society that consumes it, as an orientation of consciousness, whose roots are unconscious...”<sup>1</sup>

Being the cheapest and most easily understood form of entertainment, popular cinema in India appeals largely to one's unconscious desires. People have been repeatedly told that this reflection of reality is a means to self-identification and wish fulfilment, and that it compensates for the deficiencies in real life. Critics have, more often than not, vehemently defended popular cinema as *the* entertainment for the masses.

“Our film industry is rather big; nonetheless it is underdeveloped like an undernourished giant. An aspect of its underdevelopment is its ideological poverty.” Nothing expresses better the current situation than these words of Gaston Roberge.<sup>2</sup> The trajectory of a film from its inception to reception by an audience, can elaborate the interrelations between ideological superstructure and its cinematic representations, particularly in relation to the mechanisms of sexism. And it becomes more than clear that popular films do not reflect notions of femininity but help determine them. This, at the cost of a bewitched audience, which goes back home feeling satisfied that “mother, wife and virgin lover define respectability” and “sexual deviancy must be punished.” The film thus directly plays on and perpetuates the socially established interpretation of sexual difference, which in turn controls images, erotic ways of looking and the spectacle.

Mainstream cinema in India has generally constructed women in their familial roles—in terms of their relationship with men—as wife, mother, daughter, or sister. These ideals, in turn, pervade and circumscribe the identities of individual women. In such a context,

## FILM REVIEW

# Halo Mother!

## An Apology for *Kya Kehna*

Director: Kundan Shah

Review: ○ Paromita Kar

films positing women breaking the boundaries of these well-defined domestic spaces sound liberating but warrant a closer look.

Cut to *Kya Kehna*. The film, dealing with the societal acceptance of an unwed mother, has been widely applauded as a bold one. Unlike Vandana of *Aradhana* (1969) who goes into hiding, or Pooja of the more recent *Arzoo* (1999) who takes the cover of marriage to someone else, Priya loudly declares her decision to give birth to her baby. As expected, she is ostracised by society, represented largely by her lover's mother.

But what exactly lies behind Priya's unconventionality? The age-old convention of glorified Motherhood<sup>3</sup>. After having thoroughly transgressed the strict code of bourgeois morality, Priya has no choice but to revert to a patriarchal remedy for survival. Otherwise *Kya Kehna* wouldn't have survived. The turning point in the film comes when an exhausted Priya hears cries of “*Ma, Ma!*” emanating from a portrait of child Krishna. At barely 18 years of age the woman sees herself as the divine Yashoda, a trick that touches the vast sentimental repertoire of an orthodox society and immediately clinches the deal for the audience. When a woman is also a Mother, all else becomes secondary. Henceforth, Priya is the perfect Woman, the paragon of maternal perfection and all-

pervading suffering.

The colonial encounter shaped the construction of Indian femininity in many ways. The ideal Hindu woman was constructed in a fervent bid to separate ‘our culture’ from ‘their culture’. Womanliness, thus hegemonized and homogenized, became an important aspect of the national culture<sup>4</sup>. Popular cinema, subject to the demands of market mechanism, continues to be an active instrument of this homogenization. Noted film critic, Ravi Vasudevan, observes that the cinema's circulation of images offers a framework of subjectivity, which along with other mechanisms of extended imagining, forms the basis for a modern nationalist perception.<sup>5</sup> Down the decades the industry has churned out fantasies where women's bodies and their sexuality have been defied (read restricted). Or objectified for the benefit of the male spectator.

The classical or normative Hindu understanding of conjugality enumerates the goals of marriage as *dharma* (duty), *praja* (progeny) and *rati* (pleasure)—in that order of importance,<sup>6</sup> and carnality is not meant to be an end in itself. So having had a sexual encounter before marriage, Priya has only one (sure) way out—to appeal for the respect that a Mother deserves. It is her last resort when her callous boyfriend refuses to marry her. Had she not conceived, premarital sex would

never have unfolded so large on the screen. The whole point in making such a 'bold' film is to say that women's sexuality can be allowed free expression only if it weaves its way, albeit with a little digression, to be locked up within certain well-defined spaces. Period.

It is the same in Nandita's case in *Dil Kya Kare* (1999), where the one night of carnality is justified years later when the woman comes back feeling the emotions of Mother. For the suicide-bomber, Malli, in the much acclaimed *Terrorist* (1998), becoming a Mother is her first and foremost duty. But Pooja of *Arzoo* is of a different stock altogether; she breaks the code with aplomb (much to the pleasure of the spectator), but ends it with a deplorable whimper. She is portrayed as the most pathetic figure when she rebukes her comeback lover saying, "Paap tum karte ho aur anjaam aurat ko bhugatna parta hain!" (You men commit the carnal crime and the result has to be borne by us women!) The woman is not even allowed stand up for what she has done. Well, at least our Priya is different. So *Kya Kehna* happily receives much adulation as the bold narrative of an upright teenager. The actress has herself claimed that "the film portrays an Indian woman making her choices."<sup>7</sup>

However, these choices only reaffirm the existing social order, choices which spell an effete independence. Forgiveness oozes out easily also because of the offender's young age; had the woman been older she would obviously not have done such a thing, so the audience sincerely believes at heart. But let us think of another situation. What if the woman had been given a little more sense so as to have actively prevented conception? How would the film have dealt with such a situation? Sadly, there remains a vast uneasy silence in mainstream cinema when the question

of not prescribing motherhood for every act of sexual indulgence arises. And in any case, teenage pregnancies are nothing to feel elated about.

Such simplification of women's behaviour based on questionable cultural ideologies of honour and shame, purity and pollution, when magnified through a popular medium like cinema leads to enormous distortions that become almost impossible to challenge. The focus here, is not so much on honour and shame as individual emotions, but as principles of social organisation and relationships. As such it becomes imperative for both, men of a family to control women's sexuality and for women to do so themselves so that the 'honour' of the family is preserved. But the fact that so many rules exist for the regulation of female sexuality reinforces the idea of the same as wild, uncontrolled, insatiable and dangerous.<sup>8</sup>

In the darkness of the hall, the audience is led to believe that films, by creating these gorgeous, intelligent and bold women who dare to break the norms, 'glorify' womanhood to a certain extent. Women on screen are, at times, well endowed with fortitude, but that fortitude which only helps re-establish the same patriarchal order which they might seem to be attacking at the beginning. Consider, for example, the film, *Mamta* (1967), where the woman plays a *tawaif* (courtesan). Throughout the film a clear polarity is set-up between Panna as the *tawaif*, and her position as a Mother. In the film, Motherhood is again used as the divine ladder to cross over from a 'sinful' life to a glorious death. The film, couched in excessive pathos, is the ultimate in the deification of women and was received by all as one which tells the "saga of a woman's sacrifice and intense suffering to protect and rear her child in glowing epic terms."<sup>9</sup>

Deification is an insidious construct and the flip side of devaluation in a bipolar value scheme which rests on contrasting stereo-types of mother versus whore, wife versus vamp, and so on.<sup>10</sup>

Thus, questions of female sexuality and independence can be dealt with relative ease by being subordinated or silenced, before the intense emotional effect of Motherhood. As Chidananda Dasgupta puts it, "this glorification of the mother as the holy cow of Indian cinema slyly denies her fulfilment in any other role."<sup>11</sup> As long as we hunt for excuses and remedies for women's actions, all *Kya Kehnas* would remain watered down portrayal's of women's freedom to choose. □

#### NOTES:

- 1 Christian Metz, *Psychoanalysis and Cinema: The Imaginary Signifier*, London: MacMillan, 1985, p.93.
- 2 Gaston Roberge, *Another Cinema for Another Society*, Calcutta: Seagull Books, 1985, p.7.
- 3 Upper case used to stress on the idealized and unreal.
- 4 Many historians have dealt with this. See for example Partha Chatterjee's *The Nation and Its Fragments*, New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1995.
- 5 Ravi Vasudevan, 'Film Studies, New Cultural History and Experience of Modernity' in *Economic and Political Weekly*, November 4, 1995.
- 6 Patricia Uberoi, 'Dharma and Desire; Freedom and Destiny—Rescripting the man-woman Relationship in Popular Hindi Cinema' in Meenakshi Thapan, ed., *Embodiment: Essays on Gender and Identity*, New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1997, p.153.
- 7 An Interview, "Question & Answer", *India Today*, June 12, 2000, p.77.
- 8 This finds expression in works of psychoanalysis like Sudhir Kakar's *The Inner World: A Psychoanalytic Study of Childhood and Society in India*, New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1978.
- 9 Anon., "Mamta"—The Foreboding of a Turning Phase', *Star and Style*, April 15, 1966, p.47.
- 10 Patricia Uberoi, *op. cit.*, 1990, p.WS-42.
- 11 Chidananda Dasgupta, 'Indian Cinema's Mother Fixation', *Express Magazine*, March 2, 1986.