

The Sherni The Superintendent And The Other Women

by Iqbal Masud

TWO feature films *Sherni* and *Ijaazat* and a TV serial *Udaan* light up different facets of "The Woman" on media.

I deliberately use the expression "The Woman" because for these filmmakers their image represents *The* woman in opposition to the media stereotype.

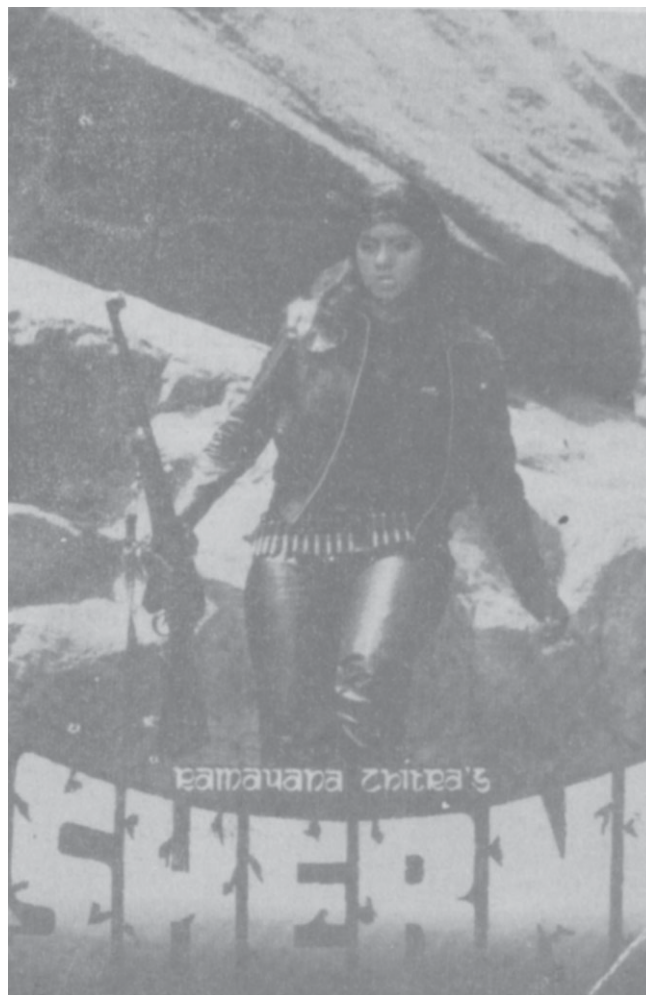
Sherni featuring Sridevi is straight out of the *Daku-Avenger* stable. But there is a difference, it's Sridevi who does the tricks, not her admirer Shatrughan Sinha, who is reduced to impotence as a police officer.

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Sridevi has started such a powerful trend that *India Today* carried a full length article about it. Dimple and Rekha are rushing along the trail blazed by Sridevi. The commercial cinema hails it as a breakthrough for women in cinema.

Sherni bears some analysis. Sridevi plays the role of the worm that turns into avenging angel already done by Sunny ;D,eoI, Madan Jain and others. The attractively nubile Sridevi is beaten into shape as an athletic rider, quick on the draw, a surefire killer. Sridevi does all this with a panache worthy of the great film *dakus* like Amitabh, Dharmendra, and Vinod Khanna. Rekha and Dimple too are said to be lashing themselves into shape.

The surrender to the male ethos is too obvious to be stressed. The romantic scenes between Sridevi and Shatru are kept to a minimum.



Is this a turnabout in the downgrading of women in films that began with Zeenat Aman—a glossy marionette—in *Qurbani* (1980) ? In the 'Si's women as idio-syncratic individuals, for instance, like Nargis, Meena Kumari, and Nutan—vanished. Only Smita and Shabana kept the flag aloft for a while. Now Smita is dead and Shabana is out of popular cinema.

Of course, *Sherni* isn't the reversal of a trend; in fact it's the total triumph of the male driven '80s cinema. Sridevi in *Sherni* is a sheep in wolf's clothing. In beating roan at his game Sridevi has become a slave to his ethos.

And yet it doesn't do to see things in black and white terms in popular cinema. There's one sequence where Sridevi judges, sentences and executes a father and son accused of bride burning. The whole sequence is played with such economy and an underlying note of conviction that it leaves you with a feeling not of escapist satisfaction but of Tightness about the integrity of the performance.

On the surface Kavita Chowdhary's TV serial *Vdaan* is the opposite of *Sherni*. *Sherni* is the outlaw; IPS officer Kalyani (Kavita) is the outlaw's hunter. But below the surface *Sherni* and Kalyani are twins.

Vdaan is an ambitious serial. Its maker Kavita Chowdhari is

an NSD graduate (better known as “Lali-taji” to millions). She has written and directed the serial —no mean feat. The episodes which have so far been broadcast show a technical grasp of the medium. I talked to Kavita about the serial. There seems to be an autobiographical or at least biographical element in the film. Certainly the serial exhibits a high degree of involvement. Kavita’s own performance is absolutely integrated, even moving. In a male dominated field it’s good to see a woman charge ahead so confidently.

Now to an analysis of the serial. I shall isolate and discuss some of the elements. First, there is a feudal background—the fall from family grace because Kalyani’s father refused to toe the line. Second, there’s the climbing back to “respectability.” I think this is a vital element of the serial. Kalyani has never accepted



“Ijaazat”—hard to say which is the “other woman”

the “ordinariness” of her situation. For two reasons. The memory of a higher station held dies hard. Second, being an “ordinary citizen” in India invites penalties. I found the scenes where Kalyani waits interminably for official or ministerial audiences absolutely right. The boredom, the contempt for the un-worthy, the million, million supplicants at the same door—it’s all caught perfectly. A vital element emerges at this point. How does one escape the “ordinariness” trap? By collective action! That concept never swam into Kalyani’s ken. Kalyani’s mind goes in a different direction—if you can’t beat them, join them—the elite, the powerful. In a remarkable scene Kalyani sees a trim woman IAS officer swish past her into the office followed by flunkies. That’s a key scene. Kalyani decides to do a Kiran Bedi—in fact the whole role is a tribute to Bedi.

Udaan contains many other elements—discrimination against women officers, the initial difficulty of women in breaking into male preserves. But all this is icing on the cake. The real issue is power. Kalyani wants power for herself, her family—not for her sex or class. No doubt she will do the *noblesse oblige* by them later.

Vdaan is still rolling. Perhaps it may reveal facets unrevealed so far. But at the moment Kalyani has a strong resemblance to

Sherni. Both women have felt the lash of power. Both have donned the uniforms of the oppressors. Will their femininity relieve or change the character of power? Neither Sherni nor Kalyani shows the capacity or the willingness for such a mission. Their ultimate accolade is “They are as good as men.”

Gulzar’s *Ijaazat* too bears close examination. This is a man’s view of the ’70s-’80s “liberated” women. Gulzar has always been a glamouriser—a romanticiser, a softener. For that reason his work has always seemed to me to be marked by a kind of nerveless evasion.

In *Ijaazat* the hero, Naseeruddin Shah, is loved by two women—Rekha and Anuradha Patel. It is hard to say who is the “other woman.” Naseer had lived with Patel though engaged in boyhood to Rekha. When Naseer’s uncle “enforces” the engagement, our hero succumbs. The flighty Maya is on one of her unpredictable absences. The Naseer-Rekha marriage is disrupted by the invisible memory of Maya and her visible intrusions into their life. Maya rejoins Naseer, is killed in an accident. Some years later Naseer and Rekha meet at a station. The flashback begins...

For me, the point of interest is in the way Gulzar conjures up the ’70s-’80s “liberated” young woman. He has got hold of all the “codes” of such a woman—unhappy childhood, disturbed persona, Film Institute grooming, a talent for poetry. But Gulzar hasn’t breathed soul into Maya. He has created a “Maya” all right—all trendy charm, contrived elusiveness, manufactured “poetry.” Maya says things like “*Mujhe ek lambi sans udhaar dena*” over the phone to Naseer.

Gulzar, of course, punishes Naseer for his wayward-ness—he loses both Maya and Rekha. But this is a facile waving of the “justice to woman’s individuality” flag. The thrust of the film is different. The film makes Naseer the *hommefatale*—two women are driven out of their minds because of him. Underneath the light “poetic” surface of the film, male egoism and religious traditionalism turn into megalomania. A strong term? No. Consider the end of the film. Rekha, now married to Shashi Kapoor, touches Naseer’s feet. The two men look at each other in an inescapably male coded dialogue: “Sorry, old chap, but she’s mine now.” “That’s OK friend, good luck.”

Perhaps one should applaud Sherni and Kalyani for escaping the stoic condescension of men. □

