

Male Fantasies Of Female Revenge

AMONG the spate of recent films on the theme of the female vigilante are *Mera Shikar*, *Gunahon ka Phaisla*, *Aag ke Sholay*, and an interesting variation, *Zakhmi Aurat*.

Like most Bombay films, these films are not so much feature films as propaganda. It is unfortunate that our cinema has not yet matured to the point of producing anything other than speeches and messages of greater or lesser crudity, which scarcely exercise the viewer's brain, let alone imagination.

However, the message conveyed by this set of films is somewhat different from that of the typical Bombay potboiler. These films set out to show that a woman is "as good as a man." Unfortunately, they try to do so by making women live up to the image of the macho superman. Like Bijli in *Mera Shikar*, this new kind of heroine fights to protect her family and community honour, and to take revenge on the villain — thus playing the role expected of the traditional male. She does this singlehanded, or aided, like the mythological heroes, by an army of animals. After Bijli wins her unreal victory, her father says all parents should now pray for daughters, since she has shown how brave women can be, and what a blessing a daughter can be. This is no doubt a message worth conveying but is unlikely to have the desired impact, because Bijli's exploits are so utterly out of this world that no parent can hope for a daughter to match them.

Fantasy has its uses—it can be inspirational. But films like this one seem to spring not from women's aspirational fantasies, but from a male fantasy of what equality for women will mean. It is evidence of a male centred vision that equality is conceived of as a woman acquiring the abilities required of a male in our society, including undesirable ones like the ability to fight, kill and torture. The one practical effect such films are likely to have is that they



Dimple in "Zakhmi Aurat"

will be used to debunk the whole idea of equality. Women will be accused of wanting to reverse roles, and castrate and kill men—even though these films are not of women's making.

Zakhmi Aurat stands out in this genre as a bolder and more intriguing variation on the theme. Although it rates very low if judged as a cinematic exercise, it is a surprisingly bold statement at the level of propaganda. The protagonist, police officer Kiran Dutt, is gang raped but her attackers are acquitted because her unsupported statement is seen as insufficient evidence. At first completely demoralised, she recovers and organises a team of women, some of whom have been themselves raped and others whose sisters or daughters have been raped. Using police records to identify rapists, they lure, drug and castrate these men, one by one.

The action operates at the level of fantasy rather than as a message to women to act in their own defence. The impracticality, not to say absurdity, of the action is perhaps what got it through the censors despite its threatening implications. Although something is to be said for the sheer audacity of the symbolism, a little more accuracy in detail would have substantially improved the film. The court scenes show an abysmal ignorance of judicial

procedure, and reduce legality to a farce. So also, not enough attention is paid to the development of figures who have a significant role to play—like Kiran's boyfriend. Played with annoying woodenness by Raj Babbar, this figure, which has potential as an understanding male friend who is neither mentor nor saviour, loses much of its appeal because the director is not interested enough to develop it.

Nevertheless, the film makes some important points. It shows that social sanction, not law, is the most powerful force in our society. Thus, when rape victims are traumatised with self hatred or driven to suicide, the film is quick to point out that this is not due to any impurity in them, or even due to physical trauma alone, but primarily due to society's contempt for the victim which she internalises. A victim who dares fight her case in court despite her family's fears, is discarded by her fiancé, but when a rapist's virility is questioned on his wedding day, his father proudly announces in public: "How can you question the manhood of a man who has faced rape charges in court?" The victims of castration are shown going through a trauma parallel to that of the rape victims—psychologically destroyed, they are embarrassed to report the crime, feel unworthy of marriage, ashamed and ruined, and suicidal.

While this depiction does stress the importance of social opinion and also gratifies the indignation most women feel at being the unilateral recipients of sexual humiliation, yet it falls into the trap of reinforcing our society's worst prejudices about manliness, and by implication, of womanliness. If it is a baseless prejudice (debunked by the film with admirable thoroughness) that a raped woman is a ruined woman, it is an equally pernicious prejudice that a nonvirile man is not a man or is a ruined man. **To combat the culture that glorifies rape, we need to make aggressive virility shameful.** Making nonvirility shameful does not serve the purpose at all.

One worthwhile reversal of stereotype in this film is that raped women are shown surviving and able to lead normal lives. (In most films, the raped woman either dies and is revenged by a virgin — as in *Mera Shikar*, or dies after taking her own revenge). *Zakhmi Aurat* stays closer to women's experience—both during and after the rape. However, it succumbs to the temptation of depicting the rapes and violence at unnecessary length, thus using them for an ugly kind of titillation.

What really carries the film through is Dimple Kapadia's performance—low key, moving and charming without being at all clinging or seductive. She brings a conviction to her role that is rare among Bombay heroines, and is not afraid to sacrifice prettiness for the expression of anguish and emotion.

When her boyfriend's mother, who had earlier rejected her as impure, comes up to her in the dock at the end of the film, and accepts her as a daughter-in-law, this seems like a tribute to the heroine's ability to change societal attitudes by her courage. For once, the *sindoor* appears more like a *tilak* applied to honour a warrior than like the badge of servility it usually is in Bombay films.

The mother-in-law interrupts the judge to perform this rite, and public acclaim drowns his undelivered verdict as the film ends. The law is once more made to seem irrelevant—the verdict of society, and of society's most important microcosm, the family, is what counts.

While it is true that social sanction is more important than law in determining a woman's self view and status, yet the total marginalising of legal process has dangerous undertones. In her courtroom speech, Kiran claims that the *Gita*, the *Koran*, and *Manusmriti* all uphold the eye for an eye notion of justice. At the first meeting of rape victims too, when suggesting castration as a punishment of rape, she offers the analogy of one who uses filthy language having his tongue cut off. There is a disturbing suggestion here that we would do well to get rid of our "ineffective" modern legal process, and revert to instantaneous and retributive forms of justice which involve physical violence and mutilation. This is the dominant theme in all the revenge films of the Bachchan genre, and we should not underestimate their contribution to the increasing legitimisation of violence in our polity today.

—Madhu Kislubar, Ruth Vanita

Readers' Eye

Not India Alone

Did you know that the practice of widows' hair being cut off was prevalent in some parts of 18th and 19th century England?

In *Ruth*, a novel by Elizabeth Gaskell, published in 1853, the heroine, an orphan, is seduced by a rich man who abandons her. Pregnant, she is rescued by a kindhearted brother and sister, who advise her to pose as a widow so as to escape social censure. Their maidservant, Sally, suspects the truth:

At night, after Ruth had gone up to her room,...She had let down her long waving glossy hair, and was standing absorbed in thought,, when...in walked Sally...holding in her hand two widow's caps of commonest make and coarsest texture....thus Sally spoke—

"Missus—or miss, as the case may be—I've my doubts as to you. I'm not going to have my master and Miss Faith put upon, or shame come near them. Widows wear's these sort o' caps, and has their hair cut off; and whether widows wears wedding-rings or not, they shall have their hair cut off—they shall. I'll have no half work in this house. I've lived with the family forty nine year come Michaelmas, and I'll not see it disgraced by any one's fine long curls. Sit down and let me snip off your hair, and let me see you sham decently in a widow's cap to-morrow, or I'll leave the house....Here', sit down with ye, and let me crop you."

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