

**TRADITION OF DISSENT IN SUB-CONTINENTAL FILMS:
A READING OF MANISH JHA'S *MATRUBHOOMI*
-A NATION WITHOUT WOMEN AND SHOAI B MANSOOR'S *BOL***

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ABSTRACT

Cinema is one of the most revolutionary art forms today. Locally and globally film as an art form is being used to provoke, agitate, ask questions and generate new politicized communities. Experimental films in India and Pakistan have contested political, social and cultural status quo. Socially, culturally and politically marginalized groups across the globe have found adequate place in film narratives. The ulterior aim of the depiction of different categories of subalternity in films is to expand the idea of 'art for life's sake'.

*Indian film director Manish Jha's *Matrubhoomi- a Nation without Women* (2005) and Pakistani film director Shoaib Mansoor's *Bol* (2011) depict women issues of two different religions of two different countries. *Matrubhoomi* is a film based on the issue of female infanticide and female foeticide in a country like India and its effects on gender balance and the recurring social anarchy it creates. *Matrubhoomi's* female protagonist Kalki is the last surviving woman who reminding of Draupadi of the Mahabharata undergoes tremendous sexual oppression within family at the hands of male family members who operate as arch patriarchs for her. The film depicts the horrors of life without woman. The narrative of *Bol* is based in the heart of Lahore and is placed in a house full of daughters. It is the story of a girl who challenges the mindset that closes all doors of light on women of the house and considers them nothing more than a machine that produce children. The female protagonists of the two films, though they does not offer any feminist rebel against patriarchy, bares open patriarchal social structures of both Hindu and Muslim societies that they live in and demand a radical change so that women's position can become better if not equal.*

The paper makes an attempt to assess two films from two countries and see how they depict women characters in essentially patriarchal worlds of two different religious cultures. Film as visual text very effectively presents the predicament of women and helps the reader to understand it in broader political context.

Key words: *experimental film, culture, patriarchy, dissent, marginalization*

Text:

This is a paper that studies the tradition of dissent in the light of gender issues in films in India and Pakistan with special reference to Manish Jha's *Matrubhoomi- a Nation without*

Women and Shoaib Mansoor's *Bol*. It does not focus on the historiography of gender dissent in films in India and Pakistan, but how these two films help to establish the tradition of gender dissent in both the countries in contemporary time. The women characters are at the centre of both the films.

Though cinema is a fairly recent phenomenon as compared to literature and other fine arts, it is equally true that it is one of the most revolutionary art forms today. As film combines images and words it has certain correspondences and relationship with other forms of expression like novel, poetry and drama. We certainly do not "read" images in movie in the same way as we "read" images in a poem or story or novel (Silverman 1999: 1451-52).

Every art is a revelation of culture with specific reference to time and space. The best art is necessarily concerned with social issues. The dehumanization of art is not possible. The visual elements of cinema need no translation as they have a universal power of communication. During the last couple of years the film industries both in India and Pakistan have confronted, challenged, and explored various social issues especially concerning women through films. Social issue films have now become a site for contesting gender, race, and other ethnic issues concerning both Indian and Pakistani societies. In academia they can also become an excellent resource for teaching social issues.

Since its inception, both locally and globally, film as an art form has been used to provoke, agitate, ask questions and generate new politicized communities. Even in past the Hindu culture of India based strongly on cast-divide was the first to get attention when a strong mass medium like film was invented. In recent years both Indian and Pakistani film directors have explored very sensitive issues that have caught attention of film aficionados worldwide.

In the formative years the genre of film solely depended on literature. Along with popular films art films were also coming out. Satyajit Ray, Shyam Benegal, Kumar Sahani, Mani Kaul, Mrinal Sen, Arun Kaul, Girish Karnad in India and Shoaib Mansoor in Pakistan have presented stark realities of our world through their films. Keeping historical and social drama aside, these directors have focused on religion, caste, creed, colour, sexuality and other such very sensitive and boggling issues of our time that concern us and shape our life. Such films interrogate human existence and the very being of woman subject, irrespective of caste, creed and religion. They also interrogate the rationality of our so called rational culture. The social, cultural, political and geographical disparities are tackled through the characters caught in various controversies and plight. The human subject is now boldly discussed with special focus on subaltern communities like women, dalits, homosexuals and hijras (the transgenders).

As far as women issues are concerned Indian films have successfully projected and analyzed different issues concerning Indian women. Films like *Astitva* discusses the character of a woman neglected by husband; *Astha* portrays a woman who becomes a victim of financial crisis; *Bavandar* presents the plight of a Rajasthani woman who was raped for her agitation against child-marriage; *Water* reveals the condition of Indian widowhood, and *Fire* is concerned with the very sensitive issue of lesbianism.

There are films like *Provoked* and *Bhumika* made on autobiographies written by Indian women. *Matrubhoomi*-the film under discussion- tackles a very realistic issue of female

infanticide in patriarchal Hindu culture and its gory effect in future; while the Pakistani film *Bol* exposes many layers of gender oppression in patriarchal Pakistani Muslim society.

All these films assess the battle between the reformist and the conformist communities existing in respective cultures and make a plea for reformism. As these films are essentially concerned with human emotions, they cross the border of language, geography, and time. As the music of any language crosses the linguistic border and travels across the world, such films contesting traditional mindset, showing conflict to establish human values, assessing psycho-physical domains of human beings and interrogating the objectification of human self can also become a film of every sensitive human being.

As per one report there were about 63 million 'missing' women and 2 million go "missing" every year in India due to gender discrimination in the form of female infanticide and abortion (Gowen 2018). Even in twenty first century India still faces the problem of female infanticide even in so called wealthy and progressive states like Gujarat, Punjab and Haryana. In fact, Manish Jha, the writer and director of *Matrubhoomi*, read an article about a village where men were facing serious problems getting married because of unavailability of girls in their own community. As per the Census of India of 2011 Haryana has the lowest sex ratio amongst states and Daman and Diu has the lowest among all the states and territories. This is really shocking and alarming. According to the census Kerala has the highest sex ratio. Jha's *Matrubhoomi* tackles a very delicate issue of female infanticide and presents a futuristic scenario of the womanless world.

In *Matrubhoomi*, Jha imagines an Indian village where due to continuous killing of female newborn babies, women population has been entirely wiped out. This is a futuristic Indian village where sex ratio reaches at absolute zero. The film boldly imagines, though it may look unrealistic to many, the femaleless world where in the absence of women the male members of society are transformed into animals and fall prey to a number of sado-masochistic behavior and have become sexual perverts. Jha in the film concentrates on how men become sex-starved beasts without women and how all moral, religious codes become worthless.

The film opens with a scene in a village of present India where every newborn girl child is ritually drowned in a cauldron of milk. A woman is seen going through labour pain. Helped by two village women she successfully gives birth to a female child while her husband and other male relatives wait outside. The men are seen tense but they are not the least worried about the woman giving birth to a baby, but they want to know the sex of the child. As the baby is a girl child, it is considered to be a bad omen. The very next scene shows the father drowning the crying baby in a pot of milk. This reminds us the age-old tradition of killing new born girl child in some parts of India in past. Years later in the same village there is no woman left and only men survive. The survived men use alternative sources like pornography, homosexuality, bestiality and other deviant modes to satisfy their sexual frustration and needs.

The narrative of the film revolves around Ramsharan (Sudhir Pandey), a rich landlord and widower, and his five sons-Suraj (Sushant Sing), Brijesh (Sanjay Kumar), Lokesh (Shrivastava Naydu), Shailesh (Deepak Kumar Bandhu) and Rakesh (Pankaj Jha). All excluding the youngest son Suraj are desperate for marriage as they have already crossed the

marriageable age but they cannot find a girl anywhere around. In a conversation with the priest Jagannath (Piyush Mishra) the father is ready to have any girl of twelve or thirteen years of age for his sons. But the priest replies: "Forget a girl of twelve or thirteen, even an eighty year old woman is not available". The men here need only a body of woman of any age for sexual gratification. This statement reveals the fact that suppressed sexuality sees woman only in the physical form and as commodity. Four brothers of Suraj, the father, and the priest collectively represent chauvinism and the pervert mentality of men who live in womanless world.

The narrative of the film presents a horrific masculine world where no woman exists. What do these men in a womanless world do? They enjoy the company of women at mental level in various ways. They watch dance acts performed by a man in the form of woman, they slip into transvestism, enter into gay relationship as an alternative sexual performance.

But luckily the village priest discovers a singing girl, disguised in the clothes of man, in a faraway village and follows her to her home and talks to her father. The discovered village girl is Kalki (Tulip Joshi). As Ramsharan is informed about this great discovery, he immediately sends a marriage proposal for his eldest son, but he literally buys the girl paying the sum of five lakhs for all male members of the family including himself. The character of Kalki reminds us of Draupadi of the Mahabharata who too was tied to five husbands against her will.

The narrative of the film shows that after marriage Kalki quickly becomes a sexual object and a laborer. She daily suffers sexual abuse at the hands of father-in-law and her four brothers-in-law. Only the youngest son Suraj treats her like a human being and Kalki, too, in return, shows her kindness and love towards him. As she starts coming closer to the youngest son, all men of the family together kill Suraj. After this incident Kalki somehow escapes the hell with the help of a low caste servant boy and turns to her father for help, but the father hungry for dowry does not help her at all. For her offence of escape now Kalki is dragged to the cowshed by her husbands and shackled in chains like an animal. The low caste servant boy is killed by the four brothers but the revenge is taken on Kalki and she is repeatedly raped. Eventually when Kalki becomes pregnant, one low caste person also claims for paternity. This creates a very chaotic situation in village and caste war is triggered off and every man in village gets killed. The film ends on a violent but hopeful note showing Kalki giving birth to a female child and a little smile on her face—a smile of hope after much suffering.

Manish Jha in *Matrubhoomi* explores the undiscovered and untouched territory of female body. It is female body that suffers the cultural assault the most in various ways. Jha in the film refashions the prototype of Draupadi of the Mahabharata. In the film female body also becomes a site of assault from the lower caste people to release their casteist frustration and aggression. There is no doubt that the film in order to create social awareness for women issue imagines an unrealistic setting, but the film never looks unauthentic in its perception of reality. The director has not aimed a populist and entertaining film. But he certainly aims to spread the message in mankind. The director uses the method of sympathizing females by abusing females. The narrative is blessed with beautiful cinematography and thundering music. Jha shot the whole movie realistically in a village of Madhya Pradesh with rural landscapes, higher caste havelis,

and low caste huts. It is certainly one of the best films ever made in Bollywood on women issues during the last couple of years.

Bol (2011) is an Urdu-language film from the director of much acclaimed film *Khuda Kay Liye* (2007). Since partition the apolitical, cultural side of Pakistan has remained a mystery for many Indians. After Independence, Lahore lost its filmmaking talents and industry to Bollywood. But in *Khuda Kay Liye* director Shoaib Mansoor tackled the global issue of terrorism in the most impartial way and attracted the attention of film critics and culture scholars. In *Bol* Mansoor shifts his focus to domestic issue of Pakistani community in particular and the humanity in general. The word 'Bol' is both a noun and a verb. As a noun it means 'word', 'statement'. In case of the film one can say that it is a feminist word or statement. As a verb 'Bol' is imperative in tone and it urges you to speak -the 'unspeakable'. In case of the film it invokes the person to speak and be vocal on women and other issues related to other marginal groups like the hijra or the transgender and religiously dominated communities in Pakistan.

The narrative of the film unveils in the flashback mode as Zainab (Humaima Khan), the protagonist of the narrative of the film, finally addresses the people of Pakistan on media and tells her life stories, a few hours before being sentenced to death. The death sentence has been announced for her crime of patricide. The dramatic beginning of the film does not turn the entire film into populist drama but makes a plea for some serious actions to be taken to save the lives of millions of girls like Zainab in the conservative and deeply religious society of Pakistan.

Born in a conservative Muslim family of Lahore, Zainab is the eldest amongst fourteen daughters- but out of them only seven daughters and a son survive- of Hakim Saab (Manzar Zehbai). Naturally the daughters are born in hope of a son but the father's quest for a male child is thwarted when a son is born but with transgender traits and brings shame to his own sexuality. As the son Saifee (Amr Kashmiri) grows up in the company of sisters, the father hardly tolerates his presence in his house. One day Hakim Saab himself smothers his own effeminate son to save his prestige.

The director very skillfully uses autobiographical narrative of Zainab to present the deeper structures of religion and its influence on an individual's life, and if the individual is a woman the consequences are more violent and vicious. As the entire house is thwarted and the lives of all members of family are threatened by the father through religious and different means, the eldest daughter Zainab very forcefully counters her father with her arguments and presents a critique of religion and condition of women in it. When all attempts fail and the father crosses all boundaries of toleration, one day Zainab commits the crime of patricide and kills her own father for which she is sentenced to death. But before she is hanged she leaves a few questions in the minds of the viewers through media, the most important one being "khila nahi sakte to paida kyu karte ho?" (If you cannot feed, why do you give birth?) questions the very religious foundation of child birth in Islam.

Shoaib Mansoor's *Bol* is necessarily a feminist film that reveals life with all its complexities. The film as seen above primarily objects to the idea of reproducing human beings into this world without taking any financial or nurturing responsibilities of them. Secondly, it highlights the regressive attitude of patriarchal Pakistani society that does not grant permission to a woman to choose her life-partner, refuses her the ownership of

her own body and uses woman's body as a machine of reproduction. The regressive voice of the father or the male member of the family also refuses education to women and choice of career.

The narrative of the film very ironically reveals the complexities in the life of father. The biggest weakness of Hakim that all his offspring were only girls, turns out to be Hakim's strength when in dire need of money he is made to impregnate a courtesan with a girl child by the owner of a brothel. Later a girl child is born to a courtesan and the Hakim is rewarded by the brothel owner. But the Hakim cannot tolerate her own girl becoming a courtesan in future and he steals the child and eventually tries to kill her but the child is saved by the family members and in hot dispute the Hakim is killed by his own daughter.

Many viewers may find that the film begins and ends dramatically as a woman facing a death sentence is granted permission to call for a press conference, straight from the very spot where she is to be hanged, in a country like Pakistan, but one of the motives of fine art is to present reality in abrupt manner to achieve heightened ends.

The comparative study of the films in terms of theme would throw light on the intricate issue of sexuality and responses to it in two different societies. We notice that for the male characters of the movies sexuality does not die until their death. . Through stressing sexuality man exercises power. Sexuality becomes a means of exercising power for man. Kalki's father—in-law exploits her first on the day of marriage and thereby exhibits his patriarchal power. On the other hand for Hakim of *Bol* sexuality is a means to achieve a male child in family. Such sexuality institutionalizes male dominance and female sexual submission.

Both the films depict physical exploitation of woman body in patriarchy and show different possible responses of women towards exploitation. The narrative of *Bol* destabilizes the traditional image of Pakistani woman. Zainab, the female protagonist of the film, not only 'speaks' but also 'acts'. In *Matrubhoomi*, Kalki expresses her dissent through body movements. She has her own desires and wishes. This dissent is the acceptance of self for Kalki. Her love for Suraj, the youngest son of the family, is revealed through her body movements when other brothers come to sleep with him. The camera captures her body movements so sharply and shows her abhorrence of male members of the family including her husband.

The use of camera in films plays a very important role in putting the argument with all seriousness. As compared to *Bol*, in *Matrubhoomi*, the use of excellent camera work reveals the seriousness of issue without the use of any dialogues. The camera moves, speaks and replaces dialogues. The bed remains the same. The door is the same. It opens and closes the same way. Kalki, the harassed woman, remains the same. Only men change every day. Hardly, the colour of her saree changes. They come, satisfy their sexual quench, and then leave. *Bol* has the same story of woman's sexual exploitation but it lacks the picturesqueness of the event.

Both the films clearly show that patriarchal society has some material ends to meet and to achieve the ideals of patriarchy it uses women, physically and emotionally. Kalki's father sells his own daughter. When he gets a chance he materializes it. Even in such a critical condition of womanless world, Kalki's father blesses her with hundred boys. While on the other hand, Hakim of *Bol* when caught in financial crisis goes to the brothel keeper

and enters into sexual relationship for the birth of a girl child. These two opposite attitudes of the male characters of the films towards women show how patriarchy operates for its own benefits in different contexts.

In conclusion, it can be said that these films cannot be watched while eating popcorn in theatre. The critique of patriarchy is so acute that they silence our speech while watching them, but they also inspire us to speak at the end. These films evoke high degree of tension in viewers and may not be easily comprehensible. But there is a ray of hope at the end of both the films. They end on positive note. *Matrubhoomi* ends with a birth of a baby girl in the family and *Bol* offers all women of the home a new hope in future and possibility of different life.

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