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BHUMIKA AND AGNISNAN: SUBALTERN'S RESISTANCE TO PATRIARCHAL HIERARCHY

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ABSTRACT

This paper is a comparative study of two women characters in two much-watched Indian films *Bhumika* (Hindi) and *Agnisnan* (Assamese), where two gendered subalterns challenge patriarchal hierarchy and attempt to defy the authoritarian social institution that legitimizes the age-old domination. Shyam Benegal and Bhabendra Nath Saikia are two renowned film makers who draw the attention of the viewers and film critics with innovative techniques, extra-ordinary themes, unique film narrative and characterization. In their films instead of stereotypes, we have a number of new women who challenge dominant discourse by critiquing a counter discourse and ultimately not conforming to the societal norms, cause disruption to normative society. Usha in *Bhumika* and Menoka in *Agnisnan* cause threat to the patriarchal social order by simply rejecting the social norms and by protesting both in overt and covert ways. The paper exploits both primary and secondary data while preparing the study. Moreover, it is a deconstructive study of the texts of the two films.

Key words: Feminism, Film Studies, Hierarchy, Patriarchy, Resistance.

Introduction

Shyam Benegal (1934-) is known for newness of subject matter and narrative as well as for the innovation of treatment of the theme in his films. Benegal has created a new genre, which is called 'middle cinema' in India though he prefers to call them New or Alternate cinema. In *Bhumika* (1977) he posits a challenge to authoritarian institution called patriarchy, the male dominated society, and patriarchal hegemony. Usha, who is the victim of poverty and gender biased society, has to lose her elemental simplicity, turns to a sex object. The film is based on the life of a famous Marathi actress, Hansa Wadkar of 1940s. The story shows how Usha (Smita Patil) grows from a famed

adolescent performer to a conflicted renowned artist, and how the males who come on her way treat her only as a sex object, inflict mental torture and mutilate her self. Benegal poignantly portrays the injustice of the patriarchal society towards women. In this paper an attempt is made to study how both the film-makers portray women characters from different perspectives, and how they challenge patriarchal ideology.

Bhabendra Nath Saikia (1932-2003), a multifaceted genius, makes a number of riveting movies that draw the attention of not only the Indian audience but from abroad. His *Agnisnan* (1985), based on his novel *Antareep*, is a unique creation for portrayal of the characters, story, the

film narrative, technique, light and sound, picture, above all, for the bold depiction of a woman character, Menoka (Malaya Goswami). The story is about a woman and her husband, an arrogant wealthy- businessman who takes a second wife betraying her, and arrogantly ignores her profound pain. The film narrative centers round the reaction of his first wife, her shock, anger, and vehement protest. By presenting such a bold woman character, the film, indeed, interrogates patriarchal domination and normative societal hegemony. Most importantly, Saikia unravels exquisitely a woman's bold protest against the patriarchal domination and subjugation. The whole institution of patriarchy and deep rooted societal norms are terribly shaken by a single woman, named Menoka, Muhikanta's first wife.

Both the films can be studied as counter-discourse to the hegemonic discourse of patriarchy. Usha and Menoka pose momentous question to traditional stereo-types by challenging familial, social, gender, normative and sexual phallogocentrism.

Challenges to Patriarchal Hegemony:

From 1970s onwards feminist film theory has been developed. Many feminist film makers "appropriated ideas from avant-garde art cinema and applied them to discuss questions that were of concern to the women's movement" (Nichols 228). Feminist film theory was concerned with women representation and sexuality, and its relation to the dominance of the male power structure in a patriarchal society. Claire Johnson in 'Women's Cinema as Counter Cinema'(1973) says, "Women have been stereotyped in film since the days of the silent cinema". But both *Bhumika* and *Agnisnan* challenge such "narrow conventions" (Nichols 229).

With such endeavours Bhabendra Nath Saikia in *Agnisnan* and Shyam Benegal in *Bhumika* deploy visual narratives to challenge the mainstream cinema which emphasizes on scopophilic pleasure, which has an intimate link to sexual attraction, male gaze and hierarchal gender roles. Most importantly, women-centric erotic scenes are absent in *Bhumika* and *Agnisnan*. Jill Nelmes says in *Introduction to Film Studies*, "The

importance of the creation of a female subject and the development of a new language is central to early feminist film theory, which argued that spoken, written and visual languages all placed women in a subordinate position and these tools in different ways reflect the dominant patriarchal ideology of Indian society" (222). Saikia specially raised voice through the character of Menoka who smashes it, denies it, and challenges it in a esoteric way by bearing a foetus which is not from her husband, a challenge which is beyond imagination of the authoritarian patriarchal society. In *Agnisnan* Menoka says to Madan (Arun Hazarika), "Eleven years have passed not only over my body. My body becomes old. I will show him who is old, who is new." In the beginning of the film, Menoka is a traditional Indian wife, but later on facing injustice and being deceived by her husband, the father of her children, she turns to a strong woman, vocal and daring enough to protest against the whole patriarchal power structure to subvert it. She takes care of her four children, her in-laws, she has to satisfy her husband. She is a mother, a nurse of the whole family and sexual partner of her husband till Muhikanta's second wife comes. Along with all these, the film presents Menoka's sleepless nights against the euphoric celebration of the occasion of marriage by her insensitive husband. At the cost of Menoka's pain and agony, Muhikanta dives deep in worldly pleasure. But Menoka cannot accept all this and rebels. She stops pitying herself, then, takes decision to avenge her husband. Her esoteric disobedience makes her husband puzzled. She even does not hesitate to mate with a man, Madan, only to beget a child from him. Thus, the docile and dependent wife ultimately turns to a fearless individual.

Concerning *Bhumika*, objectification of women is intensely fused with the veneer of the narrative of *Bhumika*. *Bhumika* tells the story of a Bollywood actress Usha, who is the grand-daughter of a famous female singer belonging to the Devadasi community in Goa. Usha learns classical music in her childhood. From her very childhood she is not treated as a human being, but is constructed as a woman as Simon de Bevoire says in the *Second Sex*. Her father is abusive and alcoholic. In *Agnisnan*,

Menoka's husband is just like Usha's father. Difference is, Usha's father is poor, Menoka's husband is a rich and powerful man who is full of vanity because of his wealth.

Usha's mother encourages her to be on a friendly terms with a much older male, Keshav Dalvi (Amol Palekar). After her father's death she decides to marry Keshov, her mother objects her decision, but she is determined to marry Keshov.

Bhumika deals with a journey of Usha's search for identity and fulfillment in an esoteric world where woman means sex, or sensual love, a mere commodity. Usha grows up in a near destitute family of performers. But Usha's mother (Sulabha Deshpande) constantly reminds her that she is a woman and her duty is to learn household activities because marriage is the only destiny of a woman. She will have to be a house-wife. It is also interesting that before marriage Keshov was flirting with Shanta, Usha's mother, as well as pursues Usha. Her mother continues to restrict her life. Usha's childhood freedom is curailed. In a bold bid for freedom Usha marries Keshov Delvi. While she dreams to become a full time wife and mother, Keshov forces her to act in more and more cinemas because he wants money. Keshav is greedy and self deserving. He bullies and beats Usha and uses every trick in the book to keep her subjugated so she can keep earning money for him. Ironically, to earn money he being her 'manager' arranges starring roles with Rajan of whom he is jealous enough. While we never see any love for Usha in him, in the end there is some measure of redemption as Usha feels an intimacy with Rajan (Ananta Nag), her co-star. Her frequent fights with Keshav Dalvi always take her to Rajan's door. Rajan, her hanky heart-throb has commitment phobia. Circumstances lead her to live in a hotel away from her daughter and mother. She gets involved with Sunil Verma (Nasheeruddin Shah), a narcissistic writer-director. Sunil Berma also deceives Usha. She has been left by Sunil Berma as he leaves other women come to his life. Usha's tie with wealthy Vinayak Kale (Omresh Puri) again poses another circumference of imprisonment. Usha stops working in the film and plays the role of a housewife all day long, but her dream world is shattered when she realizes that just

like the paraplegic wife of Vinayak Kale trapped in bed, so she is trapped in his household and not allowed to leave its premise. She feels as if she is a prisoner, a caged bird. She has to seek Keshov's help to escape from that hellish environment. Exchanging one kind of prison for another, she ultimately realizes the futility of depending on male for happiness and comfort. Ultimately she fails in her search for an identity and fulfillment, and consequently denies to go to any one of her earlier partners. While Rajan rings her up she does not speak and the receiver falls down. She can resist seeking help from all of them and decides to live alone. The end is quite perplexing leaving lots of questions to the viewers.

Both Menoka and Usha lead unhappy conjugal life. In the opening scenes we find Menoka a busy housewife and her husband a drunkard and irresponsible even for his parents and children. Both Bhanendra Nath Saikia and Shyam Benegal use different tools to unearth the unjust patriarchal society. Saikia especially raises voice through the character of Menoka who denies the male authority and revenges on her husband in a new and unique way. In *Agnisnan*, gender is portrayed to reflect concerns and anxieties of our society .

Patriarchy and phallogocentrism are intrinsically linked in both *Agnisnan* and *Bhumika*. Mulvey argues that woman has two roles in film: erotic object for the characters in the story and erotic object for the spectator. In patriarchal hierarchy women are denied the subject position and always thrown to the margin. But in *Bhumika* and *Agnisnan*, the film makers in a 'recalcitrant' manner support the cause of the new women and try to subvert the hierarchal order in a patriarchal society.

Women in both the films play a key role as subjects than objects. How does the audience view Usha? What is the reaction of the audience while Menoka's dauntless stride? Dr. Bhaben Barua, in *Prasanga: Bhabendranath*, says that at the time of producing *Agnisnan* both Barua and Saikia were thinking about the reaction of the audience: "People may raise question "a housewife, the Lakshmi of a house turns to a prostitute". Barua advised him to

give the name *Agnisnan* remembering the icon of a faithful woman of India, i.e., Sita, to use it as a covert counter discourse. In this film the connotation of '*agnisnan*' (bathe in fire) cannot be confined within the framework of feminism. Sorrow, suffering, human duty all are vivaciously presented here." *Agnisnan* presents fundamental human rights from the perspectives of a woman:

Menoka: Tell me about the marriage how it took place?

Kiron: Father is very poor. He gave money to arrange marriage. Father was happy to give away the burden.

Menoka; Didn't they know that your would be husband has a wife with four children?

Kiron: They knew.

Menoka: Did they ask whether you want to get married?

Kiron: No.

After eleven years of their happy conjugal life Muhikanta (Biju Phukan) feels attracted to a young beautiful village girl of a poor family. She is Kiran (Kashmiri Saikia Barua). Muhikanta gives the money to her father to arrange that marriage. Menoka cannot believe that a father of four children will go to marry another girl. She says to the old woman of her neighbour who has given her the information, "If it is a lie!". The only reason to marry that girl, as told by Muhikanta, "So many wealth, who can finish these heaps of wealth? I have money, therefore, I am going to marry." The feelings, sorrow and tragedy of his wife is not known to him. He has no love, no responsibility and sympathy towards her. She is nothing but a worn out body now. Muhikanta goes out of his house before her eyes riding on an elephant to marry Kiron. At this point, the criss-cross of Menoka's outward silence and the storm inside her, lead her to live in a confinement which is strange to the audience. The storm of her mind is presented through a series of powerful images. Her final decision to invite Madan at night is again a shocking experience for Indian audience.

Usha, in *Bhumika*, also feels shifted and oppressed. She began an affair with her co-star

Rajan before her marriage. Her husband swore her while she became intimate with Rajan. The irony of the fact is that after marriage Keshov becomes her business manager and arranges starring roles for her where Rajan is cast as her co-star. This stifled lady begins affair one after another with her co-star Rajan, the film producer Sunil Berma and the wealthy man Vinayak Kale. In both *Agnisnan* and *Bhumika* women are compelled to do something illicit by the injustice done by their husband. The conflict of good and evil, revenge and protest are exquisitely unearthed through these characters.

Both their husband's are abusive in different ways. Muhikanta, like all male members of Indian society, wants his wife to be loyal, while he himself thinks it his right (phalious) to marry two or more wives: "Who will raise question? The first wife of Premadhar gave her jewellery to marry the second wife for her husband, if the second will give her jewellery, he will marry the third one." He cites the example of a number of men of that area who have taken two wives. He asks Menoka what those former wives have done to the husbands for taking two wives. It is the matter of jewellery and money. If you have money you can take several wives.

Menoka is bold and decisive from the very beginning. While Muhikanta arranges his second marriage, Menoka stops talking with him. Her protest is against Muhikanta, against the authoritarian institution, i.e., patriarchy, against male dominance. She relieves Kiron, her co-wife, as she too is a victim of the authoritarian institution. Menoka never misbehaves the later.

Usha is a complex character, a woman who at times wants conventionality and yet is willing to defy every convention. She will be wife, mother, provider but on her own terms. She searches for a complete life, an ideal life where she can be mother, wife, lover, yet never bound. She drifts from man to man in her search, because in India a woman can try to be what she wants to be, but still needs a man to achieve that goal. Every time Usha runs away from Keshav, her mother and daughter stay on in his household: for them the respectability is with the man. Even if Usha is the bread earner the decision maker is Keshov. At its core, the film is extremely

feminist in content. The whole institution of patriarchy is shaken while Kale's wife tells Usha "Bistar badal jaate hain, rasoi badal jaate hai, admiyan ke naqaab badal jaate hai, par admi nahin badalte" (Beds change, kitchen can change, masks change, but all males are the same". In *Bhumika* Benagal successfully weaves a complex and moving tale of greed, betrayal, the pursuit of self discovery and the final apprehension of reality.

While Muhikanta is going to marry she does not cry. She gets isolated herself. But silently she reflects upon a revenge by developing a relationship with Madan, the thief, and subsequently becomes pregnant. It is, indeed, a very well-designed revenge. Muhikanta becomes mad in anger at the news of her being pregnant. Along with disloyalty, her disobedience creates disruption to patriarchal hierarchy. He asks her to go with him to the rice mill together with him in Samaru's cart. But, Menoka refuses to go with him and calls Sadhu's cart to go there. Muhikanta asks her alone inside the mill, who is the father of that child. Menoka answers boldly: "I never tell you who the father is. I can always maintain such illicit relationship with him, but I don't do that. I don't want to make myself dirty forever. You have a wife and four children, yet you have married another girl." She again says, "You have five children, I am not the mother of the fifth child. I am going to give birth my fifth child, and its father is not you." She then continues, "You are so shameless that while I spend a sleepless night, you are laughing and merrymaking with your new wife. Just as I have been suffering you should also suffer secretly".

The concept of equality as a co-relate of the concept of individual freedom is alien to Indian society (Singh. 37). Muhikanta defends himself while he does wrong against his wife, but while Menoka does the same wrong he shouts, "It must be trialed. It is impossible. I will kill you putting you on the machine of the mill." Actually, Indian woman's identity is connected to and denied by societal and cultural norms, and is defined in terms of gender relation within the parameters of patriarchal familial structure (Singh. 37). Menoka says to Muhikanta that he would be an ideal woman before the society. Everybody will know that Muhikanta has

a sound relationship with his first wife also, that is why she is going to deliver her fifth child.

Conclusion

Menoka and Usha are rebellious. They are the epitomes of protest against social inequity, patriarchal domination and subjugation. They questions power and authoritarian domination and try to subvert the power structure by fighting against the social conventions, societal norms, even against social values. At times they appear unchaste in the eyes of the audience. In both the films the question of chastity has been raised. The figure of the husband as wife-god or 'potidevata', who is always worshipped by Indian women as adviser, protector, mentor, guide and teacher is also brought into interrogation. The traditional role models of Ramayana, Mahabharat and scriptures are not projected through the characters of Usha and Menoka. The self discovery of Usha and the bold protest shouldered by Menoka benchmark something beyond the parameters of feminism, setting against patriarchy, authoritarian domination and gender inequality.

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Gitali Saikia is a bilingual writer, a translator, a poet and a short story writer. Her translations have got published in Indian Literature (Sahitya Akademi's bi-monthly journal), The Thumb Print, nezine etc. Her *Sahitya-Kosh* (2009), a book on literary terms, *Jonakat Batahar Haat* (2012) an anthology of her Assamese poems, *Moi Vidya* (2013), translation of India's first transwoman's autobiography, *I am*

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