

**RESISTANCE TO STEREOTYPES: GENDER PERSPECTIVES IN
KETAN MEHTA'S *MIRCH MASALA*
AND GOVIND NIHALANI'S *SANSHODHAN***

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Gender is a social and ideological construct and ideology is a shrewd veneer over the surface of reality. The New Indian Cinema or the Indian New Wave emerged as an artistic practice for uncovering such realities in the 1970s and 1980s. It was a resurgence of the parallel cinema of the 1940s, which had received remarkable prominence with Satyajit Ray. It penetrated into the reality of such stagnant ideologies through its counter-discourses and enabled its audience to interrogate these 'seemingly truthful' stereotypes. The hypocritical charade of society is brought forth on the cinematic screen.

Ketan Mehta's film *Mirch Masala* aims to question such ideological stereotypes in the light of gender inequalities. The protagonist Sonbai is a self-esteemed, poor village woman, who for the sake of her self-respect as a woman stands as a powerful challenge to the inequitable advances of the Subedar, the native colonial agent. Set in the pre-Independence Kutch of Gujarat, the story visualizes a vivid spectacle of the colonial rule in India. Colonialism was always a patriarchal enterprise and the Subedar is one of its arrogant (native) agents, but this strait-laced patriarchal agency is valiantly confronted and splintered by Sonbai. She does not succumb to the unfair intentions of the Subedar and the luring conciliations of the villagers. On the whole, the film ". . . hits out at a whole value system and ideology which legitimizes the subordinate position of women" (Mazumdar WS-83).

For the Subedar, woman is merely a means of sexual gratification. He victimizes poor women of the village and threatens the men by extorting heavy 'lagaan' from them. Poor village women succumb to his masculine overtures, but Sonbai turns down his inequitable advances and stands as a powerful challenge to the patriarchal orthodoxies in pre-Independence India. Mukhiya's wife also questions the patriarchal orthodoxy and masculine chauvinism in the film. When the schoolmaster asks her about sending her daughter to school, she retorts saying, "Yaharivajkahahailadkiyokopadhaneka" (There is no cult of sending girls to school here). The schoolmaster tells her that cults are changed with the course of time, but she answers saying, "Pahle log tohbadalnechahiyena" (First of all people must change). Unlike other people of the village, Sonbai does not feel intimidated or frightened of the threats of the Subedar. She says, "Khathode hi jayega. Aadmihi tohhai, koi hauwatohnahi" (He will not gulp me. He is a human being only, not a ghost). Ketan Mehta also attacks the conservative and submissive propensity of the village women. Poor and illiterate village women hold a view that a girl child cannot and should not go to school. The director aims to foreground the mental set-up of the contemporary rural India. He puts a question mark on the stagnant orthodoxies.

Sonbai slaps the face of the Subedar when he waylays her and behaves objectionably. Here the masculine arrogance is piqued by feminine dauntlessness. And he plans to bend her self-esteem to her knees. But Sonbai thwarts the sexual advances of the Subedar and remains intact with her persevering self-esteem.

The chilly-spice factory is a metaphor of resistance to the contumacious patriarchy and irrational masculinity. It becomes a shield of rescue not only for Sonbai but for all the women working there. The old man, Abu Miyan is its humanitarian guard. He loses his life for the sake of poor women and children. Mukhiya's wife wages a battle against the unfair demands of the Subedar and gives a powerful, feminine response to his autocracy. "And except for the wife of the village head, (Dipti Naval) who revolts and musters a few women who bang their thalis in protest to shame their men into rescuing the women, to the others, the inevitable *bali* (sacrifice) is necessary to pacify the monster. The women rise in revolt because they are, and this is the message of the film, the oppressed the oppressed" (Jain). Maithili Rao comments in this context:

.... *Mirch Masala*, with its stunning use of colour as metaphor and stylized melodrama, was an exhilarating saga of women's liberation. They use the spices they grind for a living as a means to vanquish the oppressive outsider and shame the impotent local men (*Rebels Without a Cause*, 241).

Sonbai acts as a radical figure/dauntless revolutionary in the motley of timid women. She initiates the venture of breaking free of the fetters of gender discrimination. Nevertheless, she is not a radical feminist, as she nurtures a deep devotion to her husband. And moreover, she is not an escapist like her husband; she ekes out her living alone in the village. Sonbai's character brings the whole corpus of gender-based discourses, along with the exploitative apparatus of British imperialism. She is a one woman army against the edifices of colonialism/imperialism, male chauvinism and strait-laced system of society.

The film also divulges the 'divide and rule' policy of the British rule. However, there is no English character in the film, but the imperial apparition is present as an amorphous clout. Subedar is a harnessed and co-opted tool of the British system. In fact, the native agents are outflanked by the imperialists.

Govind Nihalani's 1996 film *Sanshodhan* is based on the third tier of local administration in rural Rajasthan when it was being implemented with great barriers involved. The film comes to interrogate some patriarchal stereotypes marking the apparatus of the rural society of India. The plot is set in a small village of Rajasthan, dealing with the constitutional reforms for women in 'Panchayatiraj' system in India. The one-third representation of women in village 'panchayat' (village council) is just a titular one. Women are elected in general panchayat elections, but the actual functionaries are their husbands. This feasible issue becomes the motif of the film. Samita Sen argues about the contemporary relevance when the law was implemented:

The panchayati reservations were passed in a sudden move that generated little debate and no opposition. Male parliament members "gave" women one-third of the seats in the lowest elected bodies in the country. This measure had (or still has) the potential of revolutionizing not only the common lot of village women but also India's political culture. Immediately after the first round of elections there was a great deal of skepticism. . . . women's roles were highly circumscribed (Sen 48).

Vidya, an educated and enlightened young woman, challenges the patriarchal and feudal ideology not only in panchayat, but also in the society she lives in. She is inspired by the

pertinacious Mahesari, a low-caste woman whose husband is egregiously exploited and driven to death by the exploitative and feudal 'thakur' family. Vidya fights tenaciously for the rights and rudimentary needs of the poor masses, especially for the construction of school-building in the village.

The film exposes the corruption involved in the structure of local government. The government officials are also indulged in corrupt activities apropos of the Panchayat funds. Vidya seeks to expose this morass of treachery, inequity, dishonesty and corruption. Nihalani looks into the harsh realities of unequal power relations, the ignoble caste-system, the perpetuating feudalism, and exploitation of women and children in this film. He makes an effort to wake the orthodox men from their slumber of stereotyped and naturalised gender roles. He develops a critically humanitarian outlook in portraying the characters.

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