

Critique

Debjani Halder

A Politics of Representation: Portrayal of the Suppression of Women in Indian Patriarchy



Mahishahur Mardini: A Night to Remember (2022)

Theoretical implications about the mother goddesses and motherhood in the film have prolonged across the world. The sudden emergence of the idea to raise a debate about the representation of Mother cult in Indian culture was influenced by the feminist film theories in the 1970s onwards. Several scholarships revealed that to understand not only how the mother cult or maternalis represented in films but also most significantly what the function of representation is. In the early era to the present context, it is the main trend of mainstream cinema to make a sharp deviation between good and bad which were historically associated with the mother goddess's cult (Good Goddesses and Bad Goddesses). The mainstream cinema located in womanhood, wifehood, and motherhood within the duties of domestic labour, while goddess ritual creates submissive sacrifice qualities, and concentrate on producing a subjectivity of not owing valour among women concerning

husbands and sons. In the mainstream cinema, the concept of good mother is always depicted as one who feeds the child on-demand with a wholesome homemade complex. Renowned Indian psychologist Sudhir Kakar states: The Indian mother is intensely attached to the child ... From the moment of birth, the Indian infant is greeted and surrounded by relentless physical ministrations. The emotional sensuality of nurturing in traditional Indian families serves to amplify the effects of physical gratification. An Indian mother is inclined towards a total indulgence of her infant's wants and demands whether these be related to feeding, cleaning, sleeping or being kept company. Moreover, she tends to extend this sort of mothering to well beyond the time when the 'infant' is ready for independent functioning in many areas. Thus, feeding at all times of night and day and 'on-demand'. (Kakar: 1996).

In the film ‘Mahishahur Mardini: A Night to Remember (2022), Kolkata-based feminist Film Director Shri Ranjan Ghosh reveals the politics of the representation of woman’s identity in Indian patriarchy. The plot is based on Durga Puja which is considered a religious cultural event in Bengal, signifying the victory of good over evil and worshipping the female form of God. Mahishasur Mardini - Durga -Dashabhujā all are synonyms. Very recently UNESCO has included Kolkata's Durga Puja in its list of Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity. In his 126 minutes, film director Ghosh very consciously depicts the politics of patriarchal ideas of imposing the image of a mother goddess on women and depicted the truth that the status of the Devi or goddess which is a veiled form of exercising male authority but it fails to recognize women’s rights when it is about to be achieved. Ghosh depicted behind the glorification of women, paraded with pomp and splendour by male authority, how women lose their individuality. The film starts with the incident of a ten-year-old unnamed deaf-mute girl who is gang-raped and murdered a night before Durga puja is scheduled to begin in Kolkata. She happened to live through her days and nights at the local Hindu crematorium and Muslim graveyard. The identity or the name is less significant here because maybe she is Ashifa or Amina or Durga or Lakshmi or Shanta or Mariam or Jerry, but she is the daughter of India. Director has revealed the truth that in India regardless of the type of disability, incidents of rape with disabled women and minor girls are much higher than with other women and minors. The story brings us to the memory of what all started in the Mathura Rape Case, in the state of Maharashtra in which a teenage mute Adivasi girl was abducted by several policemen, the convicted were acquitted by the Supreme Court creating an uproar a national scale and through which the feminist groups themselves were able to come together across the country for the first time. Ranjan very sensitively explores the question of body politics here, which specifies that the rape or sexual assault of a woman or a girl with a disability is often not seen from the standpoint of the double discrimination they face as a woman as well as a person with a disability.

Here as the language of narratives, Director Ranjan has adopted the concept of framed and the proscenium structure. The basic story focuses on the house of a landlady, who is an astronaut about to fly for her new venture, and her four college-going “progressive” tenants are busy with last-minute Durga Puja preparations. The entire story is gyrating to keep Durga Idol as background. In subplots incidents like an abandonment of the girl child, domestic violence, abuse, rape, human trafficking and prostitution, communal conflict, hypocrisy, etc located in fly space, and temple space, the gallery is used as a “picture frame stage” because the spectators observe the action through the proscenium arch. Which is used here as a direct descendent of the proscenium and scene of the action. Subhadeep Dey’s



cinematography and PV Manikumar’s colour correction have imposed a magical visual construction, while as an editor Amit Pal’s improvising the concept of time and space has included a poetic grace to the entire narratives. According to Ranjan’s narration, “this film is a one night-one location narrative about guilt-ridden memories, fake appearances of nobility that we all put on, and how these appearances eventually crumble. It avoids a mechanical plot in that the dramatic moments here do not emerge from the causality of usual plot-driven stories. It is also my humble tribute to the rich Indian theatre tradition and the Indian aesthetic of cinema - I have explored and experimented with the formal elements of both. The entries and exits of characters, their performances, dialogues and activities, the staging and blocking, the use of props, the lighting, and shot-taking are all arranged to creatively combine the language of film and the elements of theatre. Unapologetically feminist and political, Mahishasur Mardini is my attempt to create a bleak and haunting world that evokes our shame and leaves us bruised.” (Ghosh Ranjan: 2022).

In this film Protagonist, the landlady (actor Rituparna Sengupta), herself represents as an archetype, which carries a sense of satisfaction for being, and somehow, she is being compared with Dasabhuja, because of her two fold representation, benevolent and terrible. She is characterized in terms of a mirror function: a disposition to see the world as a mirror, more prominently as a projection of one's fear and desires, thus she unfolds patriarchal hypocrisy. It started with a progressive police officer who raised the question of the purity and impurity of a woman's body and mind. Resolving the woman's question in the sense meant that control of the nation (the body politic) was linked to the control of women (the female body). The Director of the film envisages that the West, in general, became the maker of essential 'Indian-ness' and not surprisingly converged centrally on the figure of the woman, focused on her devotion as a wife, her celibacy as a widow, and the rules for women's rituals. The move from anti-imperialist rhetoric to nationalist self-definition is premised on the Indian woman (*Bharatiya Nari*), as a passive subject, centrally relegated to the field of excess (*Nationalism*), but excluded from the Arnoldian notion of culture which by implication belonged to men. It seems then as Chatterjee has shown (1989), that 'tradition' became the closed realm of the woman, even as the field of modernity opened up for men. This episode carries a sense of betrayal in romance and interpersonal relationships and constitutes a strong critique of the sexual politics of the revolution and its Bhadrak society. From progressive political policymakers to the unscrupulous politician all draw a rudimentary identical distinction between the liberal and insincerity, which encounter their identities in front of an archetypal astronaut. This mirror reflection creates a drama whose internal thrust is precipitated from insufficiency to anticipation – and which manufactures for all the subject, caught up in the lure of spatial identification, the succession of phantasies that extends from a fragmented body-image to a form of its totality.

In this field director Ranjan Ghosh, held the view that the 'mother complex is a basic primordial force'. He brought to the fore the image of the 'Great Mother, as a rejuvenating force as a way out of women's repression and erosion of human values. He believes that the concept of the 'Mother Goddess' was born of fear and wonder of people in primitive societies. He is also aware of the fact that this turned in the hands of the clerics into a tool of exploitation in the garb of religion to perpetuate male hegemony in society and benefit the ruling class. This notwithstanding, he modelled his central female characters on the image of the 'Great Mother, the image incarnates of self-sacrifice, tolerance, and preservation. This emotional engagement with the image of the 'Mother' transforms the protagonist into symbols. Ghosh uses the 'Mother' image to glorify the sacrifice and tolerance of Bengali middle-class women in post-colonial Bengal. Through this film, he wants to build a tunnel back to mythical times so that the apparent reality merges with the real to infuse life into the sculpture of contemporary reality. That is why as an ending the film inherits a utopian social concept while a Dalit girl has broken all prejudices of patriarchy and her social enlistment is not restricted by upper-class Brahmanical stereotypes.

☞ **Dr. Debjani Halder is a Documentary Filmmaker, Writer, Film Historian, Professor of Filmmaking in RV University Bangalore.**