

Kaash

ONE'S first reaction after sitting through this incredibly dull movie by reputedly offbeat director Mahesh Bhatt is : "*Kaash yeh film na bani hoti.*" The film is on the tired theme of a wife defiantly walking out on her husband and then repentantly returning to him. This theme has had several incarnations in Hindi cinema, as in *Thodi Si Bewafai*, *Nazrana*, *Yeh Nazdikiyan*. But it is more vicious in *Kaash* because, in the earlier films, the wife left following a single act of adultery by an otherwise good husband, whereas the husband in *Kaash* is neurotically possessive, abusive and violent.

Puja finds herself in a fairly common situation when unemployed husband, Nitish, living off her earnings and the sale of her jewellery, regularly throws tantrums, gets drunk and beats her up. She endures the maltreatment and asks the doctor who treats her bruises not to speak to Nitish as he will object to her having revealed family problems to outsiders. Only when Nitish insists that she either leave her job or leave the house does she exercise a choice in favour of her job.

Following in the footsteps of its predecessors, the film then uses the child (the mandatory son) to force the woman into submission. In its depiction of the custody battle, the film mischievously reverses reality. The mother has social support (a sympathetic employer and a skilful lawyer) while the father, poor lone man, argues his case while literally standing in the dock. He has only love to offer ; she has material comforts.

The discriminatory legal provision whereby a Hindu father is



Whose burden?

the "natural guardian" of a child over five, and the mother can get custody only by proving him unfit, is nowhere clarified. The only realistic touch is that the man's false accusation that his wife is having an extramarital affair swings the case against her. But the film overlooks the illogicality of this argument and shows it as quite justified.

Nitish gets custody and Puja visitation rights. But how can Mahesh Bhatt rest content with a viable situation which leaves the woman with any sort of independence ? So he gives the poor child leukemia. The child must die so that a worthless marriage may survive. The sadism inherent in this manipulation of plot informs all aspects of the film's sentimentality. Another example of it is Romi enjoying his parents fights as a symptom of "normality." They playact a fight to please him and Nitish throws Puja around. Like her son, she has now learnt to accept violence as normal and says it did not hurt her. This depiction has much more to do with Bhatt's fantasies than with child psychology as most children get traumatised by adult violence and tension rather than blissfully falling asleep to the sound of their battles as Romi does.

But realism, ethics, plot and character, all are sacrificed at the altar of the rapacious male ego. The most striking evidence of this merciless sacrifice is the character of Alok, Puja's employer. At first, he is shown as an extraordinarily sensitive, albeit conservative, man. He shares a house with Puja for many months but does not so much as make an advance. One naturally thinks she has found a man in a million. But one soon discovers this was only Bhatt's way of keeping Puja "pure" for the husband to whom she is to return.

It does not strike Bhatt as incredible that so refined a man as Alok should suddenly turn brutally insensitive to Puja's feelings. This volte face is required so that Puja can unabashedly desert Alok and return to Nitish. Character portrayal is worth nothing to the director when weighed against the pleasure of taming a recalcitrant wife.

In the meantime, Nitish is also provided with worldly success. Throughout the film, man-woman love is depicted as synonymous with success. Nitish recalls their romance as another achievement of his, comparable in glamour to the awards and acclaim he had won. So it is only fitting that Puja return to him, at the same time as he returns to the limelight.

As he walks away into the dawn, a solitary heroic figure in blue jeans and sneakers, she runs after him to plead : "Give me another Romi." It would be more appropriate to say what Bhatt really means : "Give yourself another Romi"—as Nitish had outright refused to let her even visit Romi, until the court intervened, and had told the boy in true Bhatt father-son romance tradition : "You are mine and will remain mine." But what do such little details matter when it comes to the great reunion scene between wife and wifebeater ? All one can say is that Bhatt's characters certainly deserve each other, even if the audience doesn't quite deserve to suffer Bhatt's tedious films.

-Ruth Vanita