



Mera Pati Sirf Mera Hai

by
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TEAR JERKER, melodramatic family drama from the staple fare of Bollywood. For aficionados of the popular Hindi film they hold few surprises. Tyrannical in-laws, cruel step-parents, wayward sons, suffering wives, doting grand parents - all these and many others flit across the silver screen, helping us reconfirm our age old prejudices about the 'other' in family life. It is not just the characters which are stereotypical. Institutions and relationships too follow a predictable pattern. By the end of the film the virtues of the family, of marriage, of sibling ties - all are held up as unchanging and eternal.

As a concession to modern times, the Hindi film has not remained insensitive to the growing problem of marital discord. Central to the many causes of household disharmony is the 'other woman'.. Normally vampish and scheming, the siren temptress wreaks havoc in the otherwise placid family. But in the end the errant husband, realising his follies, reforms himself. The happy family rises above these travails and reasserts itself. Norms remain safe.

Not all Bollywood characterisations are so crude or predictable. Periodically we encounter characters that we can

recognise - complex, vacillating, not easily classified in the moral domain. They linger in our memory, sometimes help us question ourselves. Even within the popular genre - the films of a Basu Bhattacharya or a Mahesh Bhatt - *Anubhav, Aavishkar, Arth* - rise above the stereotype. And yet, notwithstanding the fact that tensions and discords, even divorces and extra marital relationships are presented by some film makers without the protective covering of moral posturing, the stereotypes remain. Just as in the end virtue always triumphs, the model for the Indian couple remains the Ram - Sita duo.

While being more than aware that the 'traditionalists' still hold sway over popular Hindi cinema, *Merapati Sirf Mera Hal* still manages to shock. Not just in its crudity or loudness, the vulgarity of its characterisation or the banality of the narrative, but in the ease with which it offers its unique solutions to the problem of marital discord. Since discord arises only when the various protagonists drift away from these properly designated roles and paths - in particular, the woman as wife who does nothing that she ought to be doing - the answer lies in literally knocking sense into her. Just boff her one or two, and she will rapidly realise that the axis of a 'fulfilling family life' consists in recognising the husband as the fount of all that is worthwhile. The corollary is that the husband too resume the true role of the *karta* of the family. Since women are, in any case fickle and unreliable, the blame for letting things fall apart is the man's. Till he behaves the world cannot be put together again.

The hero of this utterly irredeemable film is Jumping Jack Jeetendra. Employee in a successful clothing store, his songs are an additional bonus for all customers. His only problem is that he does not want to go to his home, understandably because the practice seems to be that wife either is fighting and complaining, or is away watching a film (somewhat like the one being reviewed), leaving behind a wailing daughter in a locked house. Just in case you wonder why our hero puts up with all this nonsense, you are informed that he is also an ideal brother. His sister is married to his wife's brother, whose house too is ruled by Jeetendra's mother in-law. We thus have two houses, two suffering men (the hero and his father in law) two suffering women (his sister and his daughter) and two triumphant and malicious women (his wife and his mother in law).

Into this not so blissful set of households enters the 'other woman' (Rekha). A successful professional in a bank, smart, suave, considerate and kind - not our stereotypical other woman'. Fairly rapidly, she strikes up a friendship with the hero's daughter. Having set herself up as the alternative to the shrewish wife, she soon becomes an object of suspicion. The wife accuses her of having an affair with her husband and

converts the matter into a public scandal. It is here that the film proposes a novel solution for the wronged woman. Having become the but of derision by the neighbours, and also having lost her job (on grounds of moral turpitude) she decides to fight back by becoming what she was being accused of. She moves into the hero's house - the deal being that either the wife publicly retracts her calumnous statements or else she will live in her house as the 'other woman'.

Thereafter matters hot up. Since the husband too demands that his wife apologise, she moves out of the house. All attempts to patch up fail, till the wife's father decides to act. He first slaps his worthless son and harridanish wife silly. That sober them up. He then asks his daughter to go back to her husband and apologise. Since this fails, he too moves out and into his son in law's house.

The upset and humiliated wife then strikes back. First she tries to woo her daughter. When that fails, she has the daughter kidnapped, and accuses the 'other woman' of having murdered the child. In a ludicrous courtroom drama, the situation takes a dramatic turn when the defending lawyer manages to accuse the wife of having murdered her own child. The catch is that the child's body is still missing.

Now we get a shift of scenes. Suspecting that the audience now needs some 'action', having had enough of family melodrama, the hero assumes the role of a vengeful angel - beats up the villains in a manner that would put a Rambo to shame, rescues his daughter, and clears both his wife and the 'other woman' from the charge of murder.

By this time all loose threads have been tied up, except that the wife, bruised and battered, is still unrepentant. But once she is confronted by the hard choice of losing both her husband and her daughter, a realisation that dawns on her when she discovers that her husband is about to marry the 'other woman' - and this time with the full support of her natal family - she breaks down. Confession and repentance follow and amid a welter of tears and sobbing, the other woman reveals that all of this was only a charade to help the wife see the light. Wisdom dawns. The shrew is tamed. She realises that her destiny is at the feet of her husband. The other woman leaves and all is well.

If the reader is a little confused by the narrative it is understandable. The writer as a viewer shared the same torment.

Mera Pati Sirf Mera Hal is a film that makes one despair of the censor board. There is, or at least ought to be, some limit to what we can be subjected to. Every character is painted in dark hues. All transformations in character are both sudden and complete. No scene has a touch of reality. Loud and garish, the film remains a good example of what it ought not to be.