

Hitler Ki Asli Pasand

Beta

Mrinal Pande

THE slogan 'Emancipation of Women'was invented by Jewish intellectuals..... our women's movement has in reality but one single point, and that point is the child."

(Hitler—1934 speech)

Imagine the usual Ma-Beta fare of Hindi films blended with a bedraggled feminist rhetoric, replete with a sickle-bearing Shakti-prototype of a cute and aggressive maiden (Madhuri Dixit) and you have a brand new success formula for a box-office-hit Hindi film of the 90s. Strange bed-fellows these. But together they have managed to turn an otherwise lacklustre feature film, *Beta*, into a blockbuster.

At the heart of this strange new combine is Madhuri Dixit, a school teacher's daughter, innocent of face and unjaded in her manners, who challenges the *Samaj* (read males) and dares break her engagement. She offers the average Hindi movie buff the newly titillating thought that feminism too can be considered and presented as fit subject for soft-porn sex when the baddies try to rape her as punishment for her defiance. In fact the success of the film proves that it perhaps stimulates the average Indian libido much more to see a man subdue, conquer and dominate such a fire-brand than to film the old fashioned singing around bushes routine with a passive and bovine virgin.

The film opens with the village school teacher hitting a little boy on

his palm with a stick because he has not written an essay on the Mother. Amid a wail of sarangis, the teacher is informed that alas the poor boy has no mother! After much shedding of tears and precociously sad (or sadly precocious) chatter about how mummy must come when the sunny boy cuts the cake on his birthday, a mother (Aruna Irani) materializes from a fog at the flick of the father's wrist. This mother, the servants and villagers inform us, may seem to be all sweetness and light, but is in reality the usual step-mother, a *nagin*, who is lusting after the millions the boy has inherited from his own mother, and which he may not give away without the consent of his wife-to-be. The evil mother is soon joined by her evil brother (Anupam Kher) a Shakuni-prototype replete with a limp—and his wife. This three-some proceeds to banish the humble father figure to a back-room, after having him declared insane, and, of course, after getting him to impregnate the stepmother with a son of her own. This done, the mother unhooks the stepson from his studies, tells him that learning never leads to riches (while her own son is sent to study medicine) and the stepson (Anil Kapoor) grows up to be an illiterate moron. The son is oedipally close to his mother. She feeds him, croons him to sleep, hugs and kisses him, and in turn he fills her barren lands (any symbolism?) transforming them into lush green

fields, and when anyone dares insult his mother, he beats them black and blue.

Then karmas strikes. The moron meets a liberated Shakti - prototype, Madhuri Dixit, falls in love, and in a melodramatic scene, is made to put sindoor publicly in her *Mang*. Against a jangling of temple bells, he marries her to help her retain her 'honour'. The stepmother had fixed up another match for him with a lady-moron, but never mind. She grins and embraces the new *bahu*. She is to bare her fangs to the *Bahu* later when the latter chances upon the mother and her brother discussing their evil plans. After this, the usual woman-is-woman's-worst-enemy-not-man theme, so beloved of feminism-bashers, takes over. The two women are now pitted against each other, but each is fighting for her man. Neither can afford to let the men in on this, though. So they scheme, smile, snarl, simper, grab and snatch family money and men by turns while exchanging the usual warm compliments in praise of motherhood. It is a tough battle which eventually the pregnant daughter-in-law wins.

At this point it could have become an ironic commentary on the doublestandards that create the Indian myth of motherhood. But that is not the intention here. The evil stepmother is overtaken by the spirit of Mother-hood and regrets ruining the family out of greed, and poisoning (literally) her stepson's milk. She even clings to the stepson's feet, begging him not to leave her (her own son having kicked her solidly in the behind for a woman and a handful of silver). Mother having returned to motherhood, the Father (Akash Khurana) is reinstalled at the heart of the family, as *Ghar ka Malik*, by the triumphant *bahu*, who, as the priestess in the temple of patriarchy, has succeeded in putting an end to mother-in-law's-Raj.

Thus is Patriarch reestablished in the *Khandan-Id-Haveli*, not with a whimper but with a bang. No female victim of patriarchy could try to locate in the characters of this step-mother or their daughter-in-law the sense of humiliation, helplessness and pain two women must feel when trapped in a strange relationship in families like these. The film takes care to cut off all channels to empathy by presenting both women as social clichés in black and white. Look at Madhuri Dixit, it seems to say, she is good because she is happy serving even a moronic husband and a manic-depressive father-in-law. The evil woman, her mother-in-law, in contrast is busy siphoning off husband's money to her *maika*. What does it make her? Doesn't that prove that it's women like her who poison the lives of men and women by being dominant? Who wreck families, with their love for their brothers and their natal families. Even maternal relatives are portrayed as evil. This is a traditional Indian myth though. Remember Kansa? Remember Shakuni? See the buck-toothed Mama Ji? Throw out mothers' Raj, Mama and all, is the message.

What the Indian viewers are perhaps never going to be told is what takes place in the mind of young women who are brought into so many Indian families as wives to old men, to play mother to stepchildren. Who may become the ladies of the house in name, but who in reality, apart from being sexually frustrated, can own or inherit nothing at all? What actually happens to women who come into houses as scared young brides and are told that they must be ever respectful of the mothers-in-law, and serve and smile and sleep with the men and consider them their sole meal-tickets?

Perhaps, if it were told like it is, it would be too depressing a story—not fit for a box-office hit. In a country

where most married lives are formal and dull, and seethe with the unexpressed anger of the wives and daughters-in-law, it would be totally non-glamorous and non-titillating for audiences to be faced with the bald truth about themselves. When films like *Beta* end, the air of the movie-hall is thick with self-congratulation and reassurance. This is what brings them back, a feat so necessary for the creation of a box-office hit. A truthful film about Indian families would bear a damp, musty and familiar odour of deceit and decay. After seeing it, people would not be able to come out of the movie hall and gleefully discuss women's injustice to other women, and the need for the younger women to fight injustice (that is the

mother-in-law) and relocate justice (that is father-in-law) at the heart of the family, as Madhuri Dixit does in *Beta*. Humankind, as Eliot said, can not bear very much reality.

Will no one ask how we may stop putting women in unhealthy relationships as wives and mothers, who raise violent morons like Anil Kapoor and his brother as a revenge? Are the sons, who, in the name of the mother or the motherland, can justify the most bloodcurdling variety of violence against other men, women and children going to lead mankind to democracy? If Hitler were alive today, under that prophet of violence and the establisher of Fatherland, *Beta* would perhaps be deemed compulsory viewing.

A Machine

*On sale
A machine, young and alive
energetic, smart and in working condition.
It cooks
washes
serves
earns money
entertains guests
keeps the house clean
welcomes you with a smiling face
prepares tasty dishes for you
fulfills your needs in bed
generates your family.
If in disorder
it only babbles
Slap it and it will be alright
No maintenance
Only daily food
And with it come fifty thousand rupees
Hurry up
Order today only*

Ashwini Dhongde