

Enclosed World of Women in Films – Zubeida

Dr. Veena Jain

Lecturer in English, BSR Govt Arts College, Alwar, Rajasthan, India

Shashi Deshpande's statement covers the entire canvas of exploitative and repressive categories in the Indian cinema ranging from the stoning of Anarkali to Damini's silencing, from the Bandit Queen's torture to the curbing of Zubeida's spirit. When "one half of humanity" is being silenced, when the space for freedom goes on shrinking, existing social structures become questionable. And when a woman's name is entirely wiped out from history as in *Zubeida*, several challenging questions are thrown at the society vis-a-vis the audience.

I have especially taken up *Zubeida* for my discussion as I feel that the seemingly contented, romantic life of Zubeida was, in fact, a short-lived world of dreams within enclosed parameters. *Zubeida* is not just a beautiful romance, though the word Zubeida strikes a note of romance, beauty, love and loneliness. It is a questioning of the social, feudalistic and patriarchal structures of society with its smug acceptance in relation to both history and the present. If we think of Zubeida only as "*Pariyon ki Shehjadi*" as Zubeida's mother wants her grandson to think, we would miss the point.

The whole story can be seen as a romance. But then the main issue of freedom would be sidetracked. Before beginning with a discussion of Zubeida, I would like to turn to some of the movies where woman's victimization, social exploitation and oppression is more pronounced and blatant in the Indian scenario. *Sahib Bibi aur Gulam* depicts the Indian woman cloistered in the confines of the Rajput family: the male exhibiting his manliness through arrogance, wine and women and the wife desperately attempting to lure her husband from the "kotha", (brothel house) by breaking traditional confines of behavior. She resorts to drink in order to gain his love and companionship.

Similarly, in a later movie *Daman*, the husband is a brute who tortures his wife physically and emotionally. In both the cases women suffer to an extreme degree. In the former, ironically, the wife is murdered. Her unconventional act is seen as a crime

against the norms of the Rajput family, in the latter, the wife kills her husband for the sake of her daughter in the guise of Goddess Durga. Her suppressed rage finds an outlet in violence. Coming to another aspect of sacrificial love as in *Main Tulsi Tere Angan Ki*, the male participates in both the worlds. The mistress satisfies his romantic urge and the wife gives him family solidity and respectability. There are innumerable Indian movies where a similar equation can be seen. In all these pictures where the binary opposition of mistress/wife, home/outside world, love/duty and freedom/restriction exists, mistress has no choice left but to die in the end after giving birth to a child. She has to make place for the wife: the legitimate mate of her husband. Two women are pitted against one another but the husband smugly enjoys both the worlds with nothing to lose. A more modern version of a similar situation can be seen in *Biwi No One*, where the seriousness of the issue has been given a lighter touch by making it more of a comedy. Here the male openly lives with his mistress till the wife is successful in luring him back into the family fold by a series of tactics. The title itself becomes misleading as the second woman is never made a Biwi. For the husband, the affair becomes a mere fling or a weakness easily forgivable by his loving wife. The above mentioned movies are taken here for discussion to show that Zubeida neither suffers from any kind of physical or emotional torture, nor is she a mistress. And yet the question still lingers — how free is she? There are other questions like — why was her name obliterated from history? What made her life desperate towards the end? In trying to answer these questions, spatial contours of Zubeida's life have to be defined.

The very fact that the story is based on the real life history of the Maharaja of Jodhpur, Maharaja Hanumant Singh, brings to light certain glaring realities which exist in our society. History gives the director "an extra-aesthetic authority" as Lionel Trilling says in "The Sense of the Past": In the existence of every work of literature of the past, its historicity, its pastness is a factor of great importance. In certain cultures the pastness of a work of art gives it

an extra aesthetic authority which is incorporated into its aesthetic power. (Trilling 2601).

The Maharaja of Jodhpur had brought with him a professional singer whose name went into oblivion immediately after the air crash which killed her and the Maharaja. The life history of Zubeida has been put into the cinematic mould and brought to light by none other than her own son — Khalid Mohammad, the producer of Zubeida (and also of Films). It is his attempt on his part to bring her non-existence back to life and pay homage to her. The medium of cinema gave him an added advantage of giving this true story a universal appeal. The movie unfolds itself through a multiple Zubeida seen through the eyes of the music director, the actress Miss Rose, diaries, her mother, the elder Maharani of Fatehpur and its people. He is also able to see the cinematic shots of Zubeida. The son is both the omniscient narrator and the listener concurring with different voices to fill in the gaps in Zubeida's life. It is Zubeida, the dancer, the woman, the daughter, the wife and the rani seen in different roles. The flashback technique used by the director Shyam Benegal attempts to put back the broken fragments of Zubeida's life together. One is reminded of Nelly Dean, the controlling voice of Emily Bronte's *Wuthering Heights*. The last scene is extremely crucial to the movie, where Zubeida's son visits Fatehpur to collect bits and pieces of his mother's life and visualize her as the rani. The moment he arrives, he is forbidden from even mentioning her name. He is told that the Maharaja had only one wife, the elder Maharani of Fatehpur. There is no trace of her existence. She is deliberately obliterated, cruelly annihilated. Is it because she is held responsible for the Maharaja's death or is it because she is a Muslim? Whatever the reason, she must have had to put up with a lot of humiliation. For the Maharaja Zubeida was only a romance, a beautiful obsession, a distraction which would later become a hindrance in his public and private life. In a perfectly legitimate relationship, Zubeida's second marriage gives her the position only of a mistress whereas bigamy committed on the part of Maharaja is neither questioned nor made uncomfortable for him. It is viewed as a royal prerogative.

Taking a look at Zubeida's life, she is seen as a passionate, beautiful girl, fiery and spirited filled with a desire to enjoy life and freedom. As a child she is fond of dancing and wants to her career in films when she grows up. But women artists who chose a career of art out of choice or by following the family tradition

were branded as social outcasts. It became an oppressive tool for women. Entering such a world meant crossing the threshold or the Lakshman Rekha. Hence her father, who is a film producer, strictly warns her from indulging in any such stupidity. Zubeida makes an abortive attempt. Her only dance in a film, with the song "*Mein Albeli*" sums up her total self — seen in her youth, grace, desire and freedom. The film is never made, nor are her dreams ever fulfilled. Her son is able to procure the reel of this film only towards the end of the movie.

Zubeida's father marries her off to his friend's son in spite of her vehement opposition. She even tries to kill herself while the song "*Mehndi hat rachne wali, Hathon mein hai gehri lali*" ironically plays in the background with the festivities of marriage being carried out. She tries to adjust to her married role and gives birth to a son. But the marriage is annulled when her father-in-law decides to leave the country and go back to Karachi taking his son along with him. Zubeida's father cannot let his daughter leave. A divorce follows. The fathers decide their fate. There is no possibility of either delaying or questioning the decision taken by the fathers. The young lovers are parted, and the child separated from the father. The boundaries of Zubeida's life are defined by her almost dictatorial father who thwarts her at every step. It is only when she meets the Maharaja through Miss Rose that she decides to carve a niche for herself in a world of limited options. A beautiful world opens out before her for the first time. A world of her dreams, of love, of romance and life. The Maharaja is equally enamored, almost bewitched by her. Her parents acquiesce to her marriage but set a pre-condition before her. Her son is to stay with them to be brought up as a Muslim. Thus in order to fulfil her own personal desire, she is asked to sacrifice her motherhood. For a brief period after reaching Fatehpur, she is lost in a world of dreams. The song "*Me/ski me/ski hai rahein behki behki hai nigahein*" gives a clue to the deep love and happiness surrounding her.

Her idyllic world is cut short when she realizes that she has to fall in with the ways of the royal family, which leaves little freedom for women. She is placed in a separate "Mahal" by the Maharaja. Only then does she realize her status in the whole setup. She is only a plaything, a sexual object, to be made love to when the Maharaja is free from his stately affairs and family ties. For there is another woman, the elder Maharani also to be attended to and who performs the customary

and traditional duties of the Rajput family. Zubeida cannot and will not take the marginal position of being thrust aside as a sexual object.

She rebels as soon as she realizes that she has become an "object" for the male, a "receiver", the "receptacle" as Simone de Beauvoir (65) calls the woman. Hence the desperation seen in her towards the end, when the world seems to be slipping by. She clings to it, pushes aside the elder Maharani and takes her place alongside the Maharaja in the scheduled flight for the election campaign. There is a plane crash and the couple die. Their death is shrouded in mystery, but Zubeida's name is entirely wiped out after her death. Her only remembrance is in the form of an album and the dance reel is presented to her son by the elder Maharani. The all-imposing patriarchal structure of society does not leave much choice for the elder Maharani as well. The Maharaja is free to satisfy his romantic urge and sexual desire by remarrying. But the elder Maharani is caged within the confines of her home and has to put up with this injustice through restraint and contentment. Actually, both the women inhabit worlds that are equally fragile. While Zubeida enjoys her husband's love which borders more on sexual fascination and the Maharani enjoys the privilege of social prestige attached to her title, both women have to bear with the partial fulfillment of their married roles. It is the male who satisfies different aspects of himself through these women. For him multiple existence has a social sanction. For the woman it becomes a transgression.

Zubeida is more like a free bird in spirit. The song "*Mein albeli, hun akeli, pagli hum mein rangili, Tu mastili*" throws light on her real personality. She is not passive and hence feels the pinch of the patriarchal

hold more strongly. Her father keeps the bird caged from her childhood. He takes all the decisions and controls her life from marriage to divorce to remarriage. It is the Maharaja who gives her love but cannot give her respectability. In her decision of remarrying the Maharaja, she defies her father. As a result, her son is separated from her. She is not forgiven even after her death.

If home gives Zubeida a secure foothold, it is also a confining place in her father's authoritarian regime. The outside world is free but is equally precarious in its branding of woman as the social outcast. If she tries to seek more freedom in her husband's house, she meets with disappointment and criticism. The word "freedom" thus takes two different meanings in society. For the male, freedom would mean realizing of the self: without any curbing of spirit and living with his multiple existences through women. For the female, it is conforming to social attitudes, norms, behavior, and code of conduct. She has to fit into the role assigned for her or suffer for overstepping its boundaries. Her area is decided and controlled by male sanction and authority. Zubeida brings out this dichotomy successfully.

References

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