

## Tracing Female Voices in Indian Parallel Cinema with Reference to Shyam Benegal's Films

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Received: 5 July 2024, Revised: 30 August 2024, Accepted: 20 September 2024, Published: 4 November 2024

**How to cite this article:** Pushplata (2024). Tracing Female Voices in Indian Parallel Cinema with Reference to Shyam Benegal's Films. *CTD International Journal for Media Studies*, 2(2), 8-11

### ABSTRACT

This research paper will examine how versatile filmmaker Shyam Benegal critically shows women in his movies. He says that traditional patriarchal portrayals of women in movies need to be challenged if India wants to become more equal and democratic. Shyam Benegal's representation of women becomes significant because the women in his films are not glorified like Mother India or shown as the epitome of beauty, unlike the majority of films in mainstream cinema. His movies give a woman from a group that has been traditionally oppressed, exploited, and left out of society a voice and a sense of power. This research paper's broader objective is to examine the representation of women in Shyam Benegal's early films and also look at his commitment to and depiction of cinematic 'realism.' The paper will do this in light of observations from four films – Ankur, Nishant, Manthan, and Bhumika. To highlight women's voices and silences, which often pass unnoticed, we will do a comparative study of four masterpieces by Shyam Benegal to analyze the portrayal of women's conditions. This paper aims to not only resurface the buried voices in terms of representation but also to dig out the "subaltern" issues which have drowned in this silence for ages. This research paper uses perspectives from articles, reviews, and personal observations of movies to show how motherhood, independent women, sexual morality, and class consciousness are shown differently for men and women in movies from the given time period. It also looks at how different female voices are shown in movies from that time period. Through various cinematic apparatus - the camera eye, shots, narration, lights, use of spaces, spoken dialogues, facial expression, body language, as well as silence, this paper will study the themes of sexual exploitation of women in Indian feudal patriarchy.

Keywords: Alternate cinema, representation, women, social issues.

### INTRODUCTION

*"Some people are activists, some make films. The idea is to arouse empathy in a class that may otherwise not care about people who don't belong to and occupy the same spaces as they do."*

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Shyam Benegal

Late 1960s and early 1970s were undoubtedly the heady days for Indian cinema as it led to the emergence of the "Indian New Wave" or the "Parallel" cinema. Madhav Prasad in *Ideology offilms*, frames the cinema in political and ideological context, stating the Indian states crisis of legitimacy in the 1970s led to the emergence of middle-class and 'developmental realist' films which was supported and funded by The Film Finance Corporation (FFC). This was a cinematic movement which responded to the kind of films being made in the mainstream cinema of the time. Filmmakers like Mani kaul, Mrinal Sen, K.A. Abbas, M.S Sathyu, Satyajit Ray etc. created a realistic depiction of human life and struggles with use of unconventional themes, complex relationships and characterisation through film narrative. Cinematic experimentation and cinematic realism, both of technique and story, were two characteristic attributes of this movement. The New Wave filmmakers focused on the ills of Indian society, like, poverty, social injustice, the inherent violence of social structures, the entrenched power of feudalism, the pitiless subjugation, and exploitation of lower castes and women, and so on. The movement grew into a wave of offbeat, artistic cinema. It was a cinema committed to social transformation, with a perspective that was critical. Having been dubbed a cinematic- movement with a "social conscience", bringing forth the society's truth became the priority of the filmmakers who contributed to it.

Starting from the 1970s, Shyam Benegal arose as a pioneer of the Movement. His films subvert the dominant representational norms followed in mainstream Indian Cinema. Prasad 2019, traces sign of progression in

representation in cinema by referring to Benegal's film from revolt against feudal oppression in *Ankur* (1973) to feudal violence and retaliation in *Nishant* (1975), and ultimately to developmental aesthetic in *Manthan* (1976). Benegal's use of innovative techniques, themes, unique film narrative and women portrayal always calls for attention as it challenges the dominant discourses causing disruption in normative society (Saika, Bhattacharya, 2019).

Claire Johnston, 1973 in her article 'Women's cinema as counter cinema' states women have been stereotyped in films since the days of silent era, Benegal's films *Ankur*, *Manthan* and *Bhumika* and challenge such narrow conventions. In his films women were different and significant because they are not what you will find in your typical, commercially successful mainstream film. The Benegal woman is complex, confused, imperfect, and most importantly, real. She represents a woman created by the oppressive structures of subordination and violation in our society. Be it the poor, Dalit Lakshmi of *Ankur*, or the popular and talented actress Usha of *Bhumika*, these women reflect what being a woman in Indian society looks like from different viewpoints.

In Benegal's film women's rights have played an important part from the beginning. Deviating from the deeply ingrained trope of the dutiful daughter, faithful wife, and sacrificing mother, he was committed to create an alternate space for women in films. In an interview with Harvard Business School's Baker Library he said "*For me it's about equality. The traditional view has to go, because otherwise there will be no equality. There will be no real democracy, either*". Benegal's characters show that women are not only givers, without expectations or desires, and that they do not have it all together. They can be vain, superficial, caring, resilient, weak, crude, mean, strong, wrong, loving, and much more.

### **ANALYSIS OF WOMEN CHARACTER IN BENEGAL'S FILMS**

*"As a filmmaker, I am a critic of the present. I've always been a critic of the present... My subjects have emerged from that consciousness."* - Benegal

The female is not the 'damsel in distress' for Benegal – if she does not rescue herself, nobody comes to save her. *Ankur*'s Lakshmi takes care of herself and her husband, Kishtiya, and finds ways to make ends meet. Even when pregnant with the young landlord's child, she continues to work because there is nobody to look after her. She is not put on a pedestal because of her pregnancy, rather, it is treated by the man whose child she bears with scorn and worry, as he fears if the word of it spreads, it will ruin his reputation. Lakshmi, on the other hand, is firm on keeping the child. Even when told that her child will not be taken care of by him, she strongly says, "*Did I ask you to?*". This woman bears all that comes her way because she has no other options. Her resilience is not a choice but a compulsion of her circumstances.

Where in a mainstream film just as a female-lead is about to be raped, she is rescued, or her 'honor' somehow restored, you again have Sushila of *Nishant* in comparison. Abducted from her house, gang-raped over a period of weeks, while being forcefully held in the feudal lords' house, Sushila's husband tries every possible legal recourse to get his wife back and bring her perpetrators to justice, but the authorities completely fail him. Traumatized and distraught by what has happened to her, Sushila eventually forgoes any hope of ever getting back her life as it used to be, and helplessly compromises with her situation. Rukmini, the wife of the youngest feudal lord of the house, is a woman who feels for Sushila and is shown to be disturbed by what the men of the house are doing to her. In one of the scenes, she even calls out her husband by saying to him, "*Have you proved you are a man now? Are you contented?*", "... *you all are butchers, doing that to the mother of a child.*" Yet, when her husband grows emotionally close to Sushila, Rukmini becomes indifferent towards her. Later, she is shown to have conceded to the fact that her husband has a mistress.

*Manthan*'s Bindu is proud, strong, and not afraid to say her mind. She continuously questions the vested interests in the film. Bindu is also the one who leads the group of women to go to the milk cooperative for the first time when Mishra, whose company the villagers sell their milk to, lowers the rate of buying milk from the farmers again.

Last but not the least *Bhumika* narrates a story of an urban class female named Usha, who is an actress by profession. In search of her identity and esoteric world she keeps on marrying one man or another and becomes a sex object for male. Usha causes threat to the patriarchal social order, being a victim of poverty since her childhood she is not treated as a human being but is constructed as a woman as Semon de Bevoüre says in the second sex.

All these characters are complicated – their emotions, and personalities being a result of their socio-economic circumstances.

If the system is hell-bent on dehumanizing your oppression, ignoring the trials of your being, how can you be a goddess, an ideal, the perfect woman? Will you not be a product of what society does to you, won't you respond to it? This is what Benegal's female characters show you, that women do not just love and give; they are hurt,

they struggle, they have needs, and they are violated, both emotionally and physically.

### THE 'REALITY' EFFECT

Since the purpose was to create the effect of reality, these films went for a documentary-like recording of everyday life-events. There is no drama as such apart from what the daily lives of the characters entail. Yet, it does not mean that the films lack complexity of thought. Quite the contrary, the sheer honesty, and sincerity towards life make the briefest dialogues something to take note of as they speak volumes about the society we live in. For example, the scene in *Manthan* where Bindu, a Dalit farmer, tells the cooperative-official, Dr. Rao, how Bhola and the Sarpanch do not get along since Bhola was to get some land but could not because of the Sarpanch, and without any spectacularism, she says, "*Bhola apni zaat ka haina, sahib* (Bhola is from my caste, sir)." A harsh social truth, that Dalit people in villages still do not have land-acquisition rights, is thus stated using only six words.

### USE OF CINEMATIC TECHNIQUE TO EXPRESS EMOTIONS

Yet, Benegal does not use dialogues as much for communication. Instead of words, the expressions capture sentiments through close-ups. Hence, close-ups play a very significant role to bring out the emotions experienced. Benegal skilfully uses camera movements to bring out the helplessness and fear of his characters. For instance, in *Nishant*, the extremely disconcerting scene when Sushila wakes up after having being raped, the top-angle, long shot communicates her feebleness. As her hands slowly go on to clench her whole body and she starts crying, the sheer shock and disbelief of this woman, sitting in a room alone and scared, is brought alive to you.

Shot on locations where the films are situated, long shots establish a scene's setting and generate an effect of reality. For example, *Bhumika* being the story of an actress has many scenes taking place amidst the equipment used in filmmaking. The lighting brings out emotional intensity strongly yet beautifully. It matches the time of the day that is trying to be depicted. Extra light is not necessarily used and things are as they would be in real life at that particular time, which aesthetically produces the reality-effect.

A similar purpose is achieved by the sound-element. Winds blowing, crickets chirping, ruffling of leaves, and the noise of domestic animals lend a certain authenticity to films like *Nishant*, *Manthan*, and *Ankur*, which are set in rural-areas. Similarly, the sound of Bombay waters, cars, radio in the house, and classical music in the background in *Bhumika*, not only add authenticity but also align with the characters' personality. For example, whenever Usha hears classical music, she is taken back to her childhood as she recollects a time when she was a little girl and life was not as complicated.

The progression from one sequence to another is achieved through the fading-out effect. A significant aspect of editing is the use of non-dramatic cuts which make the films easy to follow, and realistic. Close-up to the faces of the people around is another aspect of editing that fits extremely well to impassionate a scene. For example, the climactic-scene of *Ankur* where Kishtiya is being beaten up goes from one helpless face to another of the villagers gathered around, and then back to poor Kishtiya being beaten up.

While watching these films, the viewer inadvertently keeps hoping that something good should happen, that the characters' lives should become better somehow, and that there be happy-endings. But in none of these films that happens, for the filmmaker is letting you know this is how real life works – there are no easy solutions.

It focuses on how people have to compromise with situations and are forced to accept the harsh truths of life. In *Nishant*, even as the people revolt against the oppressive feudal-lords, the innocent Rukmini and Sushila are also slaughtered in the process. Rukmini, exhausted of the course her life has taken, does not even attempt to run when the angry masses get into the house, while Sushila laments in sorrow for her child, from whom she had been separated since being abducted. Both women die unhappy. Therefore, Benegal shows you that life does not always end on a blissful note.

### CONCLUSION

While the endings are not where everything is settled, the films do close on some note of hope. Taking the example of *Ankur*, when the deaf and dumb Kishtiya is beaten mercilessly by the landlord who wrongly fears that Kishtiya has come to beat him for impregnating his wife while he is only there to ask him for a job, the end shows a little-boy throwing a stone at the landlord's house and breaking his window. This symbolizes that the seedling of resistance has been sown. It is this act of first resistance that ends the film.

Benegal creates an ambiance which makes you forget that this is not reality but is only happening on a screen. The momentum created in two-hours sweeps you away to Benegal's cinematic-universe, filling you with passion and really making you think beyond what you know.

### ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

#### Funding Details

This research received no external funding.

**Declarations**

Author declares that all works are original and this manuscript has not been published in any other journal.

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