

THE award-winning film *Godmother* probes the question of women in politics, exploring the dilemmas of female leaders trying to maintain power in the culture and society around them. *Godmother* is not a simple Bollywood masala movie, nor does it claim to be a serious bio-pic in the tradition of *Gandhi* or *Bandit Queen*. There are strong echoes of *Mother India*, with the twist that Shabana Azmi's Machiavellian "Godmother" persona is the anti-heroine contrasted to Nargis' morally unassailable "Mother." Loosely based on the biographical sketch of the contemporary Gujarati politician Santokhben Jadeja, this cinematic account crosses the boundaries of real life authenticity and the constructed world of fiction, producing a new category merging elements of both drama and creative non-fiction.

The tale is framed as a tragic moral fable, and this presumably serves as the pretext for its heavy dependence on high melodrama. Rambibai begins as the wife of a moderately successful community leader, and ends up as a powerful politician in her own right, deified as a result of her incredible ascent to power.

The film opens rather undramatically, with a panoramic scene depicting the desert environment of rural Gujarat, where the story is set. The camera then follows some characters coming to offer their prayers at a shrine to the Godmother in the middle of the desolate sandscape. As the film progresses, we see that these are the main players in the movie. This is followed by an introductory sequence of flashforwards, with a series of shots splicing together the various important episodes that constitute the "godmother" Rambibai's biography. The film is strategically structured as an elaborate flashback on the focal character's life.

FILM REVIEW

Sita Turns Godmother

Director: Vinay Shukla

Review: ○ Anurima and Madhu



Godmother centers around Rambibai's ongoing relationships to several people: her husband Virambhai, her brother-in-law Veerubhai, the lawyer and politician Kesubhai, her bodyguard, her son, and finally, the object of his obsession, a college student named Sejal. First as a wife, and then as a mother figure, an independent politician, and a community leader, Rambibai wields an extraordinary hold over each of these characters.

The relationship between Rambibai and Virambhai, her husband, symbolizes the formative bond structuring Rambibai's development as a character. Their link

is undoubtedly one of the most sensitive portraits of marriage that an Indian film audience has witnessed in years. Absolutely shattering stereotypes, it paints a very tender image of conjugal relations. Small glimpses of their sharing and trust are revealed in key sequences, as Virambhai consults his wife not only on domestic matters, but for business deals and political strategies. Rambibai's sentiments, opinions, and judgments matter to him. He also relies on her support for resolving his crises of conscience. The sweetness of the bond is highlighted in *Godmother's* sole love scene, which seductively and imaginatively conveys the

chemistry and playfulness between the pair. Their mutual desire is beautifully evoked through the most subtle gestures of intimacy.

This totally non-stereotypical view of Rambibai assuming command of her sexuality, and acting in full partnership with her husband, rejects the constructed image of rural women, which would normally have us believe that they are coy, submissive, backward, and confined by puritan norms. Rambibai experiences the kind of confident and egalitarian relationship that is normally assumed to be available only to urban sophisticates.

When Virambhai is murdered by a political rival, Rambibai is totally shattered to begin with but recovers fast. After Virambhai's death, her brother-in-law returns, ostensibly to settle his brother's affairs and comfort his sister-in-law. However, she overhears a conversation where Kesubhai is goading her brother-in-law to prop up Rambibai as a candidate for the coming panchayat elections on the seat reserved for women. Their idea is to use her as a pawn for fulfilling their own political ambitions. Angered by his assumption that she is simply a puppet in their hands, Rambibai decides to show them her real mettle.

As she makes the shift from occupying a confined domestic sphere to dominating the public and political realm, her integrity is ultimately recuperated through maternal love, which offers a way out of the scarred life she has lived.

As the moral center of the film, Rambibai repents and renounces her past acts, before dying from an assassin's bullet. Her impassioned speech — in which she indicts herself and bemoans the disintegration of the political system — forces her listeners to shed a few crocodile tears as she absolves herself. But is any Indian tale of female martyrdom

complete without reference to the famed mythological heroine Sita? *Godmother* proves the answer is a resounding 'No' — for Rambibai suddenly presents her life as a struggle of a Sita to keep the Ravans at bay, whereas so far one got the impression she wanted to prove she could outdo any Ravan, with aplomb.

Unfortunately, *Godmother* seeks recourse to cliché, presenting love and principle in a privileged position vis-à-vis power and corruption. In its form as a mini-epic of sorts, *Godmother* haphazardly touches upon virtually every issue significant in the contemporary India — caste, class, communal clashes, family loyalty, political savagery and corruption.

Sadly, the ability to tell a good story has been sacrificed at the altar of melodrama. Its abuse is so abject and extreme that killing is presented as the only method of resolving a crisis of any kind — there is always an immediate shortcut to murder. Combined with this visual sensationalism, we are treated to a non-stop audio assault. As the crude violence escalates, there is an accompanying crescendo in the audio attack, making the viewing experience unbearable.

This murder-a-minute aesthetic is especially ironic since the film is set in the region of Gujarat associated with Gandhi, the father of non-violence. Nevertheless, despite its overdetermined histrionics, *Godmother* does attempt to examine the dichotomy of narrow Darwinian dictates exalting self-interest, and living according to principles that transcend the logic of simple self-preservation.

In *Godmother*, the migration to an urban setting amplifies the significance of caste in modern state formations. Once Virambhai and Rambibai come to live in an urban centre after having to leave their village, their ordinary lives change

radically, becoming suffused by an unprecedented level of violence marking their struggle for survival.

Rather than limning a false portrait of caste as either a remnant of feudal culture, a relic of the past, or exclusive property of village life, *Godmother* draws attention to its nature as an agent determining access to channels of power in the modern urban sector. This is not only because caste affiliation provides a source of belonging and acceptance in a city setting that primarily adheres to a code of individualism and anonymity. Beyond its exchange of extracting certain allegiances and conferring privileges on members, a particular community identity comes equipped with a readymade constituency behind it, thus becoming a source of power in the cutthroat competition for status, influence, and prestige. Caste presents a perfect foundation for building political power.

Godmother also showcases the likely fallouts of the attempt of the state to encourage the inclusion of women in politics as elected representatives through reserved seats. Rambibai's original entry into politics is facilitated by the reservation system. Yet, *Godmother* delineates the way Rambibai doesn't *transform*, but *conforms* to the demands of the corrupt system in which she functions, and in fact attempts to surpass her male counterparts when it comes to cruelty and manipulation in the nasty game of politics. Her story also shows how reservations may simply allow for the multiplication and consolidation of the existing power structure (here, for instance, caste domination).

Godmother illuminates another subtle but significant distinction about people like Rambibai and Virambhai, caught in the current political nexus: negotiating with the modern state makes them criminals; they are not innately criminals

negotiating with the modern state. It is the system which is rotten to the core. The colonial state machinery, combined with the overwhelming demands of city life, makes for a particularly inhuman existence. The logic of a criminalised state makes for a criminalised society.

Godmother has been under pressure from various agents to reconsider the scope of its representations. The Censor Board ordered several cuts in the film, stating its opposition to scenes depicting unusual cruelty. Santokhben openly opposed the film and took it to court in order to prevent its release, or at least alter its portrayal of events in some form. She succeeded in having a love scene between the bodyguard (played by Nirmal Pandey) and Rambibai (played by Shabana Azmi) cut out. Ironically, there is a statement preceding the film, in which the producers make the obligatory declaration that the movie is a work of fiction, and “any resemblance to any person, living or dead, is purely coincidental.” But thanks to extensive media coverage of the whole pre-release controversy, now the entire saga involving Santokhben, the Censor Board, and the producers is a matter of public knowledge; and that pre-emptive statement is guaranteed to be laughably inadequate as a cover-up.

In spite of these limitations, the film has been honoured by six national awards. Judging by the skill with which she interpreted this role, Shabana Azmi certainly deserved the best actress award bestowed upon her. She delivers an outstanding performance as the *Godmother*, handling the demands of the part with flair and control. In her transition from innocent wife to savvy politician, the required changes in mood and personality register with total ease. In one

scene, she lambastes one of her workers on the phone, using the choicest abuses imaginable — and amazingly, the next minute, she is a picture of repose and self-possession, as she speaks tenderly with her prospective daughter-in-law. In an earlier scene, she has one man killed, and subsequently visits his inconsolable widow, paying her respects and offering solace, with a deceptively somber expression. Suddenly, as Kesubhai’s accusing stare falls upon her, she hardens her face and meets his gaze intensely until he is forced to avert his eyes. Evidently, she conquers him in this strange battle of wits and wills. The

juxtaposition of their interlocking gazes is one of the most intense moments in the movie. Thanks to Shabana’s acting prowess, the shifts in Rambibai’s persona are totally credible and convincing.

Still, *Godmother’s* resort to needless melodrama shows even a serious film cannot altogether rise above the limits of an industry saturated with formulaic treatment of complex themes. Here, a strong story, which had the potential to become a great film, has been marred by the overuse of ineffective Bollywood devices like hyperbolic melodrama, jarring background music, and gratuitous violence. □

Grahamstown

*Water touched by wind
and the smell of saturated stone
these are things I know
as a halfawake town begins to live.
Even with manicured lawns,
upright, straight-line lampposts
and tagged trees,
the wilderness will not retreat.
Implicit in each birdcall
and almost tangible in the restless air.
Water touched by wind
seamlessly becomes a tree
or a segment of sky.
The odours of an infant summer
remind me of breakfast.*

*The faint smell of citrus
mingled with tobacco smoke;
strains of music — clandestine revelations
of overheard fragments of the creative process.
Nearby a sprinkler: overkill after a thunderstorm.
All I can think of
is the orange gone wrong from today’s supper.*

Aparna Jayachandran

APOLOGY

In the last issue of MANUSHI, the poem *Colour Me* by Aparna Jayachandran was inadvertently attributed to Richard Bach. We deeply regret the error and present here another poem by Aparna Jayachandran. — Editor