

“Femininity” in Recent Cinematic Frames



Divine Wind

The open forum discussions at the recently concluded 3rd Guwahati International Film Festival (GIFF) where speakers shared their varied “film experience” ended on cordial notes. A moderator once touched on the scope of the film festivals opening up new vistas particularly for the women filmmakers. The deliberations on the spur of the moment even shifted to the so-called “female gaze” which was opposed by one lady discussant interestingly. The outcome was however unanimous as everybody agreed to the role of the artist in addressing the problems and discriminations including gender bias and related issues; for, despite all the achievements being made concerning women’s rights, sexism can still be found everywhere: the eye-catching #MeToo movement and recent judgment of the Supreme Court of India allowing entrance of women to religious place only vindicated this observation. Films as the most important art form address these issues at all levels.

Dynamism in artistic expressions is thus

linked to the socio-economic transformations. Films sometimes drawing from humanistic ideals go beyond the clichéd gender politics, but, nonetheless, they present the so-called weaker sex in the center while emanating voices of the suppressed women. Sustaining tailor-made roles for women characterized as either a Madonna or a slut is a thing of the past. Women taking equal strides with their male counterparts, in fact, in today’s space age and terror-inflicted surreal world, is hard to escape the inquisitive mind of writers of all hues. So it would be worthy of weighing a few recent films screened at GIFF to gauge what filmmakers – both men and women – have got to offer and how they focus on women.

Veteran Algerian director Merzak Allouache’s no-frills drama *Divine Wind* (2018) is about a pair of young jihadists who bond before a planned suicide attack on a North African oil refinery. A textbook style intimate drama involving the pair Nour and Amine is full of emotional and intrinsic acts where the lady is

overpowering and on the driving seat on the fundamental level, though in logistics like driving their four-wheeler through the vast Saharan desert she depends on her male companion. The black-and-white photography also kills two birds with one stone – by keeping the focus on the emotions while abstaining from slightest reference of the complex issues and by pinpointing the harshness of blatant rhetoric on which violence thrives. The film wears a distinct femininity as in a world dominated by men, Nour the lady is a stern believer, commanding and hardened with purpose, while her companion is mostly quiet, meek at the face of grim challenges. Their contrasting personality – a romantic young man who wants to fight but not to die and a fanatic woman who sets her heart on martyrdom – wouldn't have been more apt but for the stark black and white cinematography that zooms on a subtle exposition of extremist psychology. With this film, the director of such other films like Bab El-Oued City (1994) and The Repentant (2012) again offers an insight into the violent fundamentalism with a female taking the center-stage.

survival tactics from a fellow male prisoner and increasingly is drawn to him under pathetically threatening conditions of the camp.



Eternal Winter

It is a survival drama where vulnerability of love, intensity apart, between two souls ignites the fire of longing – veiled in her dreams of meeting her daughter – which is the prime reason for Irene's resolve to reunite with her daughter and family at the end of her service at the labour camp. The film's mise-en-scene is quite evocative of the Soviet era, and its appeal buttress the argument for a critique of the horrid side of the nation state.

Equipped with a strong sense of women's self-respect that often triggers debates over men's exploitative psyche, the Israeli auteur Michal Aviad's Working Woman (2018) exposes male illogicality through a woman's experiences in her office and home. Workplace sexual harassment is under surveillance in this engaging portrayal of a character named Orna who has to deal all the unwanted vices of her boss in a real estate firm she works with. She successfully reasserts control and prestige in the office but seems powerless in the face of her loving husband's unfounded suspicion. Orna is dumbstruck at the turn of events leading to blaming herself, but ultimately her courage and intelligence bears fruit. The director's earlier feature Invisible (2011) also deals with women issues, and unlike that one, her latest film prefers deeply charged emotions not by verbosity, but by non-verbal ways with power and conviction – the scene where the lady herself writes a certificate, denied by her boss,



Bulbul

Attila Szasz's new Hungarian film Eternal Winter (2018) gives a vivid account of young ethnic German women of Hungary taken away by the invading Soviet soldiers to a labour camp to work in the coal mines under inhuman conditions. It is said to be based on facts that remained untold in cinema for seventy years. Irene, the film's protagonist, learns

that she would require to get a new job elsewhere is exemplary of this thrust.

Sonja Prosenc has already proved her worth in exploring a different pattern of understanding and telling about the traumas of young people with her debut feature *The Tree* (2014); and her new film *History of Love* (2018) also is about a young woman coming to terms with the death of her mother. In an unconventional visual treat, the film shows a 17-year old Iva trying hard to discover her mother's estranged lover who is a musician, often trespassing into his domain, even his living place. The unfolding drama which also involves her grown up



History of Love

brother has an uncanny twist to the plot but which never elbows out Iva's ultimate hold over some demanding situations. As in her first film, the director tells the story with silence, not with words, and through strong images and direction. Through this film too, the Slovenian director writes another visual poetry that allows the viewer to have own reflection on the exploits of the young woman who confronts meaning of life that undergoes constant change through relationships.

A dark drama based on human trafficking, *Moving Parts* (2017) is the debut feature by documentary filmmaker Emilie Upczak who is also well known Creative Director of the Trinidad+Tobago Film Festival. With the twin island nation forming the backdrop of the proliferating worldwide sex trafficking and forced labour, the film tells the story of

an illegal Chinese immigrant who meets her brother only to discover all too morbid truths. With a knack for storytelling, the director has effectively employed an ever-consequential female gaze to look into the subject matter; and in the process, while dissecting of the system of sex trade, the director succinctly puts her point of view as a strong undercurrent of the narrative. A high point of the film is the characterization and background score, both providing a subtle ambiance of a diversified Trinidadian demography.

A talented Nepali director Binod Paudel's *Bulbul* (2019) is another film that supersedes the stereotype of objectification and exposure of the female to the scrutiny of the male gaze in a method by which femininity is confirmed. But then the film gives the strong side of a woman who never succumbs to pressures of loneliness, abandonment by her legal husband, daily hardships of earning by ferrying passengers with a self-driven three-wheeler on the street of Kathmandu, other mundane affairs of looking after a lone paralyzed father-in-law and her infant daughter. But the same person becomes a loser and heart-broken when she finds herself betrayed again by a man posing as a selfless lover. There is an underlying thread of the universal desire of love, bonding and protection in the storyline which are manifested in controlled histrionics



Moving Parts

and mostly without being superfluous on the theme of women's emancipation.

Critics, both men and women around the globe, engaged themselves with “the woman question”, what new and expanded roles were women playing in society and how were films depicting it. Films which are realistic in their portrayal of women are praised. Decades before Laura Mulvey criticized Hollywood of misrepresenting women to satisfy the male fantasy as she brought the term “male gaze” to film criticism, writers in both sides of the Atlantic used “realism” and “truth” as the benchmark against which the representation of women in film is assessed and evaluated. Thus it has been a tradition to put filmic representations of women on the critical map. Yet it is heartening to note how film criticism opting for a discussion about gender, changing social roles and positive and negative portrayals of women has become a part of a nation’s film culture. In a 2010 book, Melanie Bell acknowledges the spirit behind such extra-cin-

ematic discourses, feminism in cinema to be precise, by which films circulate in the public domain.

But society and its understanding of gender equality are yet to get on the right track. E. Arnot Robertson once said that the gap between men and women had narrowed to such an extent that the “we boys and you girls attitude of dividing human beings in this way in matters of art and taste” was redundant. Yet studies of feminism in cinema gained momentum against a backdrop of rising crimes against women. Filmmakers are just keeping their eyes open to the changing mores, to the challenges posed by the unfolding real dramas everywhere: the recent films only give their perceptions. Art of course is a life changer, some would say, especially the dreamers would; and filmmakers are dreamers with their vision, tools in hand.

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