

SMITA PATIL: THE 'DARK BEAUTY' WHO REPRESENTS THE REAL INDIAN WOMAN ON SCREEN

Sambhu Nath Banerjee

Guest Faculty
Institute of Agricultural Sciences
University of Calcutta
E-mail: sambhunb@rediffmail.com

Abstract

From parallel cinema to the more popular mainstream Hindi movies, the journey of Smita Patil into the pantheon of greatest actresses remains fascinating. In the early years of her career, Smita was busy with 'small cinema', which won her many accolades including National Film Award for the Best Actress for her role in *Bhumika* (1977). Smita has the rare distinction of having worked with the acclaimed directors who are the pillars of Indian parallel cinema including Satyajit Ray, Mrinal Sen, Govind Nihalani and Shyam Benegal, for whom she happens to be the most favourite actress. Initially reluctant to appear in the Hindi popular films, she finally relented and accepted the offers from the directors of name and fame in commercial films as well. Smita had acted opposite to the mega-stars of her time including Amitabh Bachchan and Dilip Kumar, apart from sharing screen space with another superstar of the 80s, Mithun Chakraborty in a number of movies. She remained as bold and graceful while portraying these characters, as Amitabh Bachchan found Smita as 'the strongest woman' he had ever met who was 'committed to her work and to her beliefs'. Many of the commercial movies she acted were released posthumously during late 80s including few memorable ones like *Mirch Masala* and *Dance Dance*. For her role in *Mirch Masala*, Smita is included in the list of 25 greatest acting performances of Indian Cinema by Forbes India in 2013. Simple in her look, next-door girl appearance with panoply of acting skills make Smita one of the most adorable film personalities. The present article throws light on her portrayal of the life of another film personality in *Bhumika* (1977) who embodies the courage, feminism, resilience and liberalism, the quintessential traits of Indian womanhood.

Key Words: *Bhumika*, Cinema, Shyam Benegal, Smita Patil

Introduction

There has never been any dearth of great female actors in the history of Indian film industry who have set new standards by their acting prowess. The task becomes easier for them, who are beautiful and elegant because their mere presence on screen is enough to draw the crowd into the cinema halls. Their mannerism, dress code, hair style rule the roost of the young generation. The task becomes a bit challenging for those actors who are average or ordinary

looking, as they have to replenish the deficit in their glamour department simply by the skilful acting to clinch an immortal place in the audience mind. Smita Patil, the dusky beauty of Indian cinema, is among the league of such rare actors who in a very brief span of her career (1975-1986) has taken the level to such a height that is very difficult to emulate.

From the desk of news reader to the cinema world

In the initial years, Smita used to visit the campus of Film and Television Institute of India (FTII), Pune, the city where she was born, to watch evening screenings with some of her Theatre Academy friends. Hitendra Ghosh, sound recordist and an alumnus of FTII got in touch with Smita, when she was already engaged as a newsreader in the Marathi Doordarshan channel and offered her a role in the film *Teevra Madhyam*. It was as if the association with the galaxy of budding theatre and film personalities at Pune that sparked the urge she was harbouring in her mind to be a film actress. She spent no time to greet the proposal from Mr. Ghosh to be a part of Arun Khopkar's 1974 graduation film project of FTII. Ketan Mehta, who was also graduating from the institute in the same year was paired with Smita in *Teevra Madhyam*, only a 20-minute celluloid drama. Truly speaking, Hitendra Ghosh was the man instrumental in bringing Smita into the film world, giving her a break in that short project as well as introducing her to Shyam Benegal, a revered name in Hindi parallel films (1). Mr. Ghosh went on to become a distinguished sound designer in Hindi film world, winning the National award for *Junoon* in 1978; the director once again was Shyam Benegal.

Smita and Shyam Benegal

One of the outstanding filmmakers of post 1970s, Shyam Bengal was influenced greatly by the maestro Satyajit Ray, the pioneer of bringing neorealism in Indian cinema. Just as Ray is remembered for casting new faces like Soumitra Chatterjee, Aparna Sen and Sharmila Tagore, who eventually achieved stardom status, Benegal is also instrumental for fostering the film careers of Anant Nag, Shabana Azmi, Naseeruddin Shah, Om Puri and Smita Patil. Starting with *Charandas Chor*, Smita has acted in as many as six of Benegal's films which are regarded as milestones of Indian parallel cinema. Incidentally Benegal directed his first feature film in 1974 (*Ankur*), and only in his second film *Charandas Chor* (1975) Smita got the break.

***Bhumika* (1977) –A tale of a successful actress who strived to have a sweet peaceful home but failed repeatedly**

Inspired by the book 'Sangtye Aika' (in Marathi, meaning You ask, I tell), an autobiography by Hansa Wadkar, *Bhumika* paints the harrowing tale of a successful screen actress from her childhood to her bitter married life haunted by conflict and disillusion. It's pertinent to mention here that Hansa Wadkar (1923-1972) was herself a successful stage and film actress, appearing in a number of Marathi and Hindi films. She had to face many difficulties in her life including marital problems, humiliation, physical molestation and separation from her own daughter. Wadkar has depicted all her harsh and sour experiences with surprising candour in her autobiography 'Sangtye Aika'. Benegal has made a masterpiece out of this

book, and it is because of the exceptional acting by Smita Patil, that has also earned her National Film Award for best actress, that the film turns out to be a milestone in history of Indian parallel cinema.

The plot of *Bhumika*, has a gripping storyline. Usha alias Urvashi has been forced into the singing and acting profession to overcome the economic instability of her family, following the untimely death of her alcoholic father. Usha is married to Keshab Dalvi (Amol Palekar), the person who has helped her to get into the acting profession, but much older to her age. Usha is prepared to leave the screen world for good after marriage. Her husband, however, insists that she must continue in that role as the earnings from his business are not enough to run their family. It may be described as the patriarchal compulsion of a typical Indian family –husband is far from accepting the free mixing of his famed actress wife with her co-stars and other influential people of the film unit. Usha has some soft corner for her co-star Rajan (Anant Nag), which is quite natural for a lady being in the acting profession. Here begins the problem of all sorts –husband becomes suspicious and starts doubting on the morality of his wife, unleashes a volley of physical and mental assault on her. Usha being a strong willed lady does not succumb to the subalternity and leaves her home in search of a better partner. After an unsuccessful liaison with the nihilistic director Sunil Verma (Naseeruddin Shah), Urvashi tries to find peace in the palatial estate of the wealthy businessman, Vinayak Kale (Amrishi Puri). After spending few days as his mistress and de facto second wife (his first wife is bedridden), Usha is stunned to know that she is not permitted to visit the nearby fair with the boy of his first wife. Unable to accept such sacrifice of her personal freedom, she takes help of her first husband to rescue her from the grip of the wealthy businessman. Time has passed, her daughter is now married, but Usha refuses to stay neither with her daughter nor with her first husband. She prefers to live alone in a hotel, the void within being her only company.

Critical Review on the Directional Dexterity of Shyam Benegal

“But Ray also occupies historically a very interesting position in Indian Cinema because when you talk about Indian films, you always say this is something before Ray and this is something after Ray” –talking on the launch of ‘Satyajit Ray Film Retrospective’ in Israel, the National Award winning Director acknowledged Ray’s profound impact on the next generation film makers (2). And Benegal himself is no exception in that. The treatment of the film *Bhumika* is superb, thought-provoking and shows the innovativeness that the young directors should follow and apply in their work. Benegal alternately uses monochromatic and colour mode throughout the film. The director emphasizes mostly the shades of red when featuring the present life of Usha in the film, and her past has been shot in black and white –a fine mosaic of colour and monochrome adds nicely to the overall impact of the film (Pic 1, 3). The red is physically demanding and emotionally intense colour that causes stimulation and instils anger, impulsiveness, energy, courage, vigour, love and passion. The impact of the maestro is evident on the camera work of Benegal as well. Ray has brilliantly captured the beauty of Sharmila Tagore, in the form of close-ups in *Apur Sansar* (3). Benegal has also made the best use of the camera to spot the expressive eyes of Smita –an asset she is naturally

blessed with (Pic 1, 2). Her eyes can say too many things without uttering any word; in the time of anger or anguish her eyes flash that scorches everything present around and during the time of love and affection, they gleam gently exuding a sense of happiness and tranquillity (Pic 1, 2). One sequence when Keshab drags Usha pulling by her hair before the household God to make a commitment is noteworthy. It reminds us the infamous scene of Draupadi Vastraharan or disrobing where Dushasana drags Draupadi in to the court room of Hastinapura by her hair. Like Draupadi, Usha vehemently reacts to such action by casting a fiercely enraged glance (Pic 2a).

Final Words

The volume of work Smita has achieved in her 11 years career, the range of characters she has portrayed with such diverse shades is phenomenal. Just like in her real life, Smita has hardly been submissive in these roles; rather she has revolted like a wounded tigress against the oppression and abuse meted out to these docile women. She has always worked against social injustice, gender inequality and female subalternity. Such is the power of emotion, agony and ecstasy Smita has generated and injected into these characters that the presence of other contemporary greats cannot overshadow her performance. The little idiosyncrasies including the typical accent of a lady living in a slum and her bathing act in open air much to the voyeur of the sweeper in the film *Chakra* (1981, director Rabindra Dharmaraj) are exceptional. Smita can go to any extent for the sake of art, her bold depiction of the character bears testimony to that fact. Another dynamic, courageous and undaunted performance is illustrated in the character of Sonbai, in *Mirch Masala*, directed by Ketan Mehta. Sonbai refuses to budge against the most indecent proposal of a subedar (tax collector), puts up the stiffest resistance inside a spice factory and brings down the subedar on his knees – the ultimate triumph of women power and unflinching resolution. Benegal and other directors have been fortunate to have a thespian like her, who has made their task several folds easier by superb acting display. The vacuum created due to the untimely demise of Smita is hard to be filled up. Long live the queen of acting in the heart of the audience!

References

1. “How being a newsreader helped Smita Patil bag her first short film – Anniversary special”, October 2021, Cinestann. <https://www.cinestaan.com/>
2. “Shyam Benegal: There's been no filmmaker like Satyajit Ray”, January 2017, ETimes, <https://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/etimes>
3. Banerjee, S. N., 2022, “APUR SANSAR – OF LOVE AND ANGUISH: A RHAPSODY OF INTENSE HUMAN EMOTION”, Harvest On-line, Vol 7(1), P 1-8.



Pic 1 (a, b) Smita in divine look (Pic Courtesy Shemaroo)



Pic 2 (a, b) Smita in rage and in tranquillity (Pic Courtesy Shemaroo)



Pic 3 (a, b, c, d) Predominance of Red Colour (Pic Courtesy Shemaroo)