

Hindi Film ‘*Astitva*’ : Aditi and her Journey of Self-Discovery

Dr. Anuradha Deepak

Associate Professor, Department of English, Kishan Lal Public College, Rewari
Affiliated to M.D.University, Rohtak

Abstract:

Media possesses an important position in contemporary world and its role cannot be under-estimated. Films being the visual media are significant in themselves that while entertaining the audience, become a tool for the portrayal and production of certain ideologies. The film taken up for analysis for the present paper is the film *Astitva* that is a 2000 Hindi film directed by Mahesh Manjrekar. The film is about the identity of a woman named Aditi, a quintessential middle class Indian wife devoted to her home and family. She is educated and intelligent too but she lives a marginalized life as she has no say in any of the decisions taken for the family or even her ownself. She is simply taken for granted to cater to the needs of the family and in the process, she herself remains oppressed. Her life takes certain twists and turns and she comes to the realization that she can no more allow herself to be victimized. Confined within the boundaries of four walls of home and prescribed social norms, she realizes that she too desires to look to the ‘open’ spaces and she chooses to move beyond the margins set for her. The film is about her journey of self-discovery. Rather than remaining a docile and submissive wife and mother who is often disrespected, she chooses to assert her right to a life of dignity and leaves the family to begin her life afresh.

Keywords: Film, identity, oppression, marginalized existence, dignity

*“ Itna na mayoos ban tu kar zara zindadili
Kyon nahi dikhti tumhe vo kabra par khilti kali
Jisko kehte ho andhera din ki vo shuruaat hai
Zindagi kya baat hai, zindagi kya baat hai.....”*

These are the lines from a song in the beginning of Hindi film *Astitva* that take us from despair to hope and positivity. Presenting before us the bright side of life, they encourage us to look forward and enjoy life.

Films have always been a popular source of entertainment. Having a “uniquely powerful ubiquity within human culture” [Shah:2011], they have emerged as a powerful visual art form. Films do have a great impact on society and are instrumental in sensitizing the audience to a large extent. The present paper focuses on the character of Aditi in Hindi film *Astitva* (2000), directed by Mahesh Manjrekar. Via her character, the director has portrayed the marginalized existence of a woman who remains within the confines of her ‘defined’ identity as prescribed and set for her by patriarchy. The film presents her realization where in quest for her own identity, she desires to move beyond those strict and suffocating ‘definitions’ and finally takes a daring decision to cross all of them to not only know but also feel her ‘natural’ and ‘real’ self. From a victimized person she becomes a victorious one in her journey to move beyond the margins where she had to exist at the mercy of family and society. She chooses a life of dignity and self- respect rather than

succumbing to the pressures of family and the so called norms prescribed by the society specifically for a married woman.

Astitva is a well made film made with the thought of defying the social structure of the society regarding the identity and status of women. It raises several pertinent questions about the life of a woman. She does not possess anything of her own except her biological body which too is bound by various socio-cultural codes. Even the name given by her parents does not remain her own in several cases, as the name of the family to who she goes after marriage might give her a new name according to their own wishes, demands and requirements. Her biological identity has to pass several rigorous tests. Tahir rightly says, “The unremitting focus on women as the symbol of male honour has increasingly transformed her body into the space where male vendettas are carried out.” [2010] In the process, no one bothers to care that for her, the body is not just a ‘biological’ or ‘physical’ entity. It is the ‘body’ that she lives. It is the body via which she communicates. It is the body which becomes a means for her to identify herself, define herself and express herself too in different situations of day to day life.

Aditi is representative of any and every middle class wife who is educated, intelligent, devoted to family, concerned about the husband’s needs and works consistently to keep the whole family happy and healthy. Her husband Srikant however is the husband who believes in setting do’s and don’ts for the wife. The film begins with a simple daily routine of Indian household where the husband is going to office. Suddenly there is an information that Sri’s old friend Dr. Ravi Bapat has arrived from Goa with his wife Meghna and they are immediately invited for lunch. Srikant’s important assignments are all cancelled and the son Aniket is asked to bring Revati, his fiancée, home. Aditi is just told about all this and it is understood that she will take care of everything unquestioningly.

The guests arrive and the two friends sit down to have drinks. The manner in which the scene has been picturized is symbolic of the gap between the men and the women. The women are in the kitchen discussing their notions of identity; the men are in the garden busy enjoying drinks and talking about women and beaches. The whole scene is sufficient to understand the gap between the two sexes that has always been propagated in the society. Revati is a working woman and Meghna is a divorcee with two daughters. Srikant shares his discomfort at the thought of a working woman as his daughter-in-law as he has never allowed Aditi to work outside home despite his being away from home for months altogether when Aditi could easily pick up a job as she wanted to, for the simple reason of fighting her loneliness. Moreover, he is confused regarding the relationship of Ravi and Meghna since Meghna is a divorcee. All this reveals the real character and mindset of Sri.

The next situation is about the letter that comes in the name of Aditi and Sri takes that very blatantly and opens it, the simple clarification being that Aditi is his wife and he possesses the right on everything meant for her “*biwi to meri hai na! kya fark padta hai...*”. He goes on reading that letter in front of everyone, laughing exaggeratedly and cruelly teases her on receiving a big legacy, as the letter reveals. In sheer frustration he makes fun of her and salutes her very ironically. Aditi feels embarrassed and Meghna too feels all this behaviour of Sri to be very shocking.

The letter and the legacy disturb Sri and he becomes suspicious of Aditi. Sri has been in the habit of writing diary and he flips back through its pages and arrives at the conclusion that he is not the biological father of Aniket, depending upon the history and time period of Aditi’s pregnancy. He decides to directly ask Aditi about it and when asked, she frankly admits that Aniket’s biological father is Malhaar Kamat who used to be her music teacher once. Aditi’s startling honesty is an important moment in the film. Srikant is not able to hear the truth and immediately slaps her. The hurt manhood of the husband is not ready to respect the honesty of the wife. Aditi could easily have manipulated the situation in her favour but she

confesses the truth of the situation. Sri's slap at such a moment is not a slap to Aditi but rather truthfulness and honesty of a woman. With a shattered ego, Srikant is set to emotionally devastate more the already broken Aditi as he calls Ravi and Meghna to discuss the issue when Aditi requests him to tackle the same personally. The situations so created force her to speak out and confess everything in the presence of all including her son Aniket. This behaviour by Srikant is a violation of Aditi's right to privacy as her marital relationship too is put to the public view by her own husband. Understanding the situation of Aditi when Srikant's friend Ravi reminds him of his own marital infidelities, he has the audacity to say "I did not bring the result of my infidelities home." Aditi is humiliated mercilessly for her infidelity and the husband considers himself completely free of any guilt. Even her own son is not ready to understand her situation who gets harsh enough to reject even her touch, "Do not touch me you bloody- Don't you dare touch me." Later on, when Aditi goes to his room, he bluntly asks her to go out saying :

Oh God! Is aurat ke pet se mujhe paida hi kyon kiya!

Aditi's dignity is violated multiple times by the men of the family : firstly her physical needs are not taken care of by her husband which in itself is an act of violence and then she is attacked for being infidel putting her biology at the centre. Even her own biological son is not ready to respect her for the same reason. The violence has many forms: the biological, the mental, the emotional and the psychological. This is a clear example of how the family and social training of the men takes place in our society where they imbibe the idea of men being superior, more capable, wise and strong and the women is usually at the receiving end for the simple reason of being the women who is inferior to them and less capable. "Gendered behaviours, expectations, practices, and roles are seen as reflective of social and cultural processes and are not biological 'givens'." [Nash: 2009]

The whole situation becomes more ironical and humiliating for Aditi when she realizes that she is expected to beg forgiveness and stay back, but not with the dignity of being a wife or a mother. She has always loved her husband despite his workaholism, his involvement with other women and even his biological inability to father a child. She has unconditionally loved her son but none of them is ready to accept her. For them, she does not have any existence as a human being in any of her roles she fulfills in the family with commitment. She is nothing more than just every other 'thing' in the house. The unforgiving Srikant however wants her to stay back to guard his truth (of being impotent) from the family and friends. In a very authoritative tone, he orders her to stay back:

"tum kahin nahi jaogi. Isis ghar me rahogi apne pati ke saath jo tumse kabhi baat nahi karega."

The cold callous cruel men want her to stay back with no concern about her identity and honour but rather for the sake of their own unblemished and safe social status and identity.

Aditi remains at the margins despite all her commitment for the family. The men of the family are unquestioningly at the centre, being the bosses and the chief decision makers who have the authority to pass judgements on Aditi thereby simply forgetting her presence and importance in their lives. The marginalized ones get so accustomed to all the oppression sometimes that they often fail to recognize their own 'self'. They not only forget their 'real' self that lies within them but rather take a back seat because of constant oppression. The strict moral and social codes and situations surround them so much that they become all pervading, putting an end to all their mental growth. But this too is a common fact that the 'reality' of 'real' cannot be suppressed for long. All suppression accumulates angst and bitterness and ultimately results in a blast, just like the eruption of a long asleep volcano. Aditi's life is a perfect example of this situation.

A woman is a man's shadow and in a very subtle way, the film presents before us this assumption. This is so intricately embedded in our socio-cultural fabric that unless a woman is jolted out of

it, she does not resist and reconciles to it as her lot. Aditi is an example. Meghna, from the very beginning, dislikes and disapproves what Srikant does to his wife. Tired of her drab existence and repeated insults, the marginalized, the oppressed and the suppressed Aditi finally decides to leave home but the decision does not come easy and is rather painful. She has to leave a home where despite every odd, she has stayed for years together compromising time and again, in her efforts to feel loved and cared for. But her husband's consistent callousness forces her to realize her own condition of homelessness and worthlessness and then comes the moment when she decides to draw upon her strength.

Aditi's decision portrays her journey from shock to realization. Srikant has always been the accuser and the judge- all on his own. Then comes Aditi's moment to choose between a life of indignity or freedom in the real sense. And obviously, she chooses the freedom with dignity. It is in the nuances of the character of Revaty and Meghna also that womanhood emerges. During all these strifes, Revaty comes to understand the real self and mindset of Aniket. She finds the reflection of her own future in the mother-son relationship and breaks engagement with Aniket. Meghna always has been supportive to Aditi advising her to maintain her self-esteem : " Never mortgage your self-esteem..." She has always tried to make Aditi realize her own worth suggesting her to start doing something besides being merely a housewife. Aditi's hesitation and reluctance get a push by Meghna as she motivates Aditi saying : It's never too late." So finally realizing her worth, the docile and submissive Aditi emerges as a resolute and resilient person. She walks out of her suffocating life in Srikant's home, aspiring and moving towards the open spaces; the vigorous world full of love, life and spontaneity. Listening to the call of her inner urge, the urge to be herself, she moves beyond all the boundaries and margins set for her, and the film ends with the lines :

*" mai thee,
mai hoon,
mai rahoongi."*

The film is not just about the female desire or sexuality or the marital infidelity but rather about the power relationships as they work and govern the society. The woman is the powerless one unable to take any decision even regarding her own life and the man in all his roles is the powerful one who has complete hold on a woman's life in all its possibilities. It is not merely about existence, as the name may suggest on the face of it. It is "the assertion of all that which constitutes a personality with its distinct relationships, anxieties, dependencies, dispositions, impulses and aspirations, prejudices and predilections." [Mehta: 2009]

According to the German philosopher Martin Heidegger's concept of 'existentiality', "Each is cast into a world, not of his own making, that he refers as 'facticity'. From this 'facticity', each has to appropriate, assimilate and transcend the given world." [as quoted by Mehta: 2009] And Aditi does her bit, thereby breaking her silence and moves on to the final crusade that brings to her the dawn of a new day after a dark and horrifying night. In the end she says,

"Aaj mujhe ghar chhodte hue koi afsos nahi ho raha hai. 'Srimati Aditi Srikant Pandit'...is naam me Aditi kahin kho gayi thee. Aaj khula aasmaan mujhe bula raha hai. Mai besabra hoon apna astitva dhoondhane ke liye. Man me bechaini zaroor hai lekin darr bilkul nahin.....mera naya janm hua hai."

And the beginning lines of the paper [as taken from a song in the film] stand justified.

" Jisko kehte ho andhera din ki vo shuruaat hai"

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