

SURABHI DENA:

MALE MANIPULATION OF FEMALE SEXUALITY

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Surabhi Dena was a film that attracted a great deal of attention over the past year because of the refusal of the Public Performances Board to give it a certificate for public distribution. The theme of the film, surrogate motherhood as a commercial undertaking, was a new one for the Sinhala cinema and the film was said to have sexually 'explicit' scenes and conversations, which many felt would have contributed to the delay in granting it a PPB certificate.

Having seen the film after its recent release for public viewing, I must confess that there were several factors in it which I found offensive — but whether these were the ones that offended the censors, I would not dare to venture an opinion on.

The film had an almost didactic, very boring approach towards promoting contraceptive methods for the rural poor — along with the propagation of the perception that fornication is their only form of relaxation with villagers themselves having no desire to control the size of their family. Indeed at times, especially towards the beginning of the film, one wondered if one had strayed into a Family Planning propaganda film by mistake.

It was a real pity that the Family Health worker in the film was portrayed as a shrewish woman who had no concern for any aspect of the lives of the people she was dealing with, other than that of clamping down in a puritanical and authoritarian way on their fondness for re-producing themselves; I have known Family Health Workers who are in fact very sensitive and felt that if the promotion of contraception was one of the aims of the film — as it seemed to be — this end could have been better served by a more sympathetic presentation of this role.

The main point of my objections to the film, lie elsewhere, however. The plot is a simple one: A rich man (Keerthi) has a barren wife (Sama). He is desperate for a child of his own flesh and blood to bequeath his property to. On their estate lives a poor farmer (Simon) with a fecund wife. (Soma). The rich man strikes a commercial deal with the poor man, to plant his seed in the poor woman's womb and purchase the end product. The price is only fifty thousand rupees. Life is cheap in Sri Lanka, if one needed to belabour that point. Conception takes place, the womb bears fruit, a son is born. The poor woman refuses to give up her child. She is murdered by her husband. Rich man and wife get their son. Poor man goes to jail. Poor couple's children (four of them) go to an orphanage. End of story.

Throughout the film, both men, rich and poor, manipulate their respective women and try to get the women to manipulate each other as well. The rich man drives his wife to utter despair by his constant harping on their lack of a child, to the point that she becomes willing to solicit a womb for his seed. The poor man pressurises his wife to agree to 'rent' her womb to the rich man and his wife, luring her with what the rent money could buy for them and their children.

The whole issue of women's sexuality as opposed to her capacity—or rather, the capacity of her womb—to reproduce, is looked at from what I can only describe as a 'male' point of view. Infertility is something that can ruin a woman's life; the '*vanda geni*' (barren woman) is one of the most marginalised and ostracised figures in Sri Lankan communities, cutting across class, ethnic, and religious barriers. However, in the film, woman is finally reduced to womb, thus reinforcing the traditional perception that it is only motherhood that can really fulfill a woman's role in life. Sama is depicted as suffering because of her barrenness. At one point she says she would never have married Keerthi if she had known she was unable to bear children. His capacity to reproduce is affirmed by his boasting about having made a village girl pregnant in his youth; he pushes Sama to a point where she asks Soma to bear his child. Their entire relationship would be jeopardised were she to refuse.

Soma is at first horrified by the proposition, then bullied into it by Simon. The sexual/physical encounters between Soma and Keerthi are romanticised photographically, but, in the end, she is only womb, not woman. One of the few episodes of the film that I found touching was one in which Sama and Simon are sitting in the garden, the barren and the impotent (in that he is unable to prevent his wife with sleeping with another man), waiting for the two 'actors' in the piece to appear; it is at this point that Soma is described as the '*surabhi dena*' the sacred cow that grants you your heart's desire.

In spite of the fact that the film chose to juxtapose rich and poor couples as protagonists in the story, in fact, the complicity between the classes, the tenuous ways in which the relationship between master and servant, rich and poor, male and female, barren and fertile, are played out in this very complicated web of relationships somehow seems to have passed the film's director by.

The denouement of the film proceeds to build up from the point of the birth of the child. Biological motherhood rears its head with a vengeance, breasts leaking milk and Soma fighting for her right to keep for him and for the child construct her as the typical female victim, and this becomes the theme that is played out in the film, to the bitter and bloody end.

Despite the fact that over and over again nature and society point out to us that physically giving birth to a child does not automatically imbue a woman with maternal feelings—and that childless women can often be very loving foster/adoptive mothers—*Surabhi Dena* takes us all the way back to the biological determinism that has contributed so much to destroy woman's autonomy in modern society. It depicts Soma's reaction to giving away her infant as irrational, biologically determined by the fact that she gave birth to it; the culmination is the final act of male manipulation of female victim, the murder of Soma by Simon, accompanied by his admonition to his little daughter that she should become the mother of the family.

It seemed that while the director of the film had been bold in his choice of theme, he had lacked the patience and/or insight to work the plot through to a conclusion that would have challenged existing presuppositions about women and reproduction, rather than end up with a rather jaded view of the same 'reality' that has hounded women down through the centuries—that woman = womb.