Munnudi, Hasina and Gulabi Talkies: A Preface to Gender Justice

Poarkodi Natarajan

Abstract

Representation of Muslims in Indian cinema has been marginal. Kannada cinema, despite an impressive new wave, has produced abysmally low number of films on the minority community. Even as the state's history is a witness to a number of Muslim regimes and Islamic architecture constitutes a part of its heritage, there are hardly films on the community that are noteworthy until 2000. In this background, three Kannada language films – Munnudi (2004), Hasina (2006) and Gulabi Talkies (2010), dealing with the life of Muslim communities in Karnataka, become significant. This paper discusses the depiction of Muslim women – their status in the community, the problems and challenges they faced and their resistance to women's oppression. The paper specifically examines the issues related to marriage, family, divorce and polygamy.

Key words: Gender, Film Studies, Representation, Indian cinema.

INTRODUCTION

Representation of minorities, including Muslims, has been a problematic issue in Indian media. Films have been no exception to it. For various reasons, at different periods of Indian cinema history, there were certain kinds of representations of Muslim community in Hindi language cinema through Muslim historicals, Arabian Nights fantasy, courtesan films, Muslim socials and Partition-based films. Even as their numbers are insignificant in comparison to the overall production, the films were significant. There are Hindi films with Muslim characters in strong supportive roles too. However, over the last three-decades, there are increasingly negative portrayals of Muslims as terrorists/outsiders in Hindi films.

In contrast, in the history of Kannada cinema, it is quite difficult to even trace some peripheral Muslim characters. The extent of marginalization of Muslim community in Kannada films has been almost to the level of invisibility. The issue here is not of under-representation or mis-representation, rather it is of non-representation. A meteoric matinee idol like Dr.Rajkumar, who had played a wide array of roles, hadn’t played a Muslim role. It is noteworthy that his counterpart in Tamil Nadu Dr.MGR has donned as Muslim protagonist in films like Gulebakavali (1955), Alibabavum 40 Thirudargalum (1956), Baghdad Thirudan (1960) and SirithuVazhaVendum (1974).

This is strange as Karnataka is one of the Southern states whose history is encompassed of famous Muslim rules – Bahamani Sultanates, Sultans of Bijapur (Adil Shahis) and Sultanate of Srirangapatna, and the Hyderabad Karnataka region was under the rule of Nizam of Hyderabad. The state takes pride on Islamic monuments like Gol Gumbaz and Tipu Sultan’s forts as part of its architectural heritage. Secondly, the region has a rich Sufi tradition and music that is syncretic. Thirdly, there is a substantial Muslim population in the state. Fourthly, there is a remarkable, if not prolific, literature on the Muslim social life. Despite all of this, the fact that the region has not produced any Muslim historical films or films with significant Muslim characters needs to be critically examined. Films have been made on the region’s glorious fight against the British colonial rule. Kittur Rani Chennamma and Sangolli Rayanna are raised as icons of the freedom movement in films. Tipu Sultan as key figure in the movement is missing in films.

1 Assistant Professor, Department of Digital Journalism, Kausal Kendra Loyola College of Arts and Science, Chennai
The Kannada new wave that started in the 70s addressed issues of caste, gender and hierarchy, but did not attend to the issues of minorities. The only exception in Kannada cinema seems to be Santha Shishunala Sharifa (1990) on composite tradition, directed by T S Nagabharana, renowned for middle cinema. The film is based on the real life of saint-poet Shishunala Sharifa, who is born into a Muslim household, is educated by a Hindu Guru, inspired by the works of the medieval saint philosopher Allama Prabhu and becomes a wandering mendicant spreading the message of equality and social reformation through his songs.

In such a vacuum, the three films – Munnudi (2000) directed by P. Seshadri, Hasina (2004) and Gulabi Talkies (2008) by Girish Kasaravalli, pertaining to the Muslim milieu, made in the first decade of 21st century, assumes prominence. These films came up in the post-Babri Masjid phase when communal issues started flaring up in the state.

Munnudi, Hasina and Gulabi Talkies critically address the status of ordinary women in the Muslim community. All the three films are based on Kannada literary works – Munnudi is based on Bolwar Mohammed Kunhi’s short story titled “Muthuchera”, Hasina is based on Bhanu Mushtaq’s “Kari Naagaragalu” and Gulabi Talkies is based on Vaidehi’s short story of the same name, and employ the Kannada dialect of Muslims. Interestingly, the Gulabi character in Vaidehi’s story is a Christian but in the film adaptation she is a Muslim as Kasaravalli tries to extend the story to the contemporary scenario of communalisation in Coastal Karnataka presenting a new tale distinct from the original.

Marriage as Commerce, Woman as Commodity

Munnudi (A Preface) is the debut feature film of director P. Seshadri realised through a cooperative initiative by nine people, hence, the production title Navachitra. The film is about an obnoxious practice of “Arabi Marriage” in a coastal hamlet of Karnataka where young Muslim girls are married to visiting Arab traders and divorced in three months as the menfolk return to their homeland. The girls in abject poverty are promised one-time meher (maintenance amount) for this “contract” and a visa for their brother’s to go abroad. In the absence of a sustainable livelihood and the impossibility of a traditional marriage owing to their impoverished state, the Arabi marriage becomes a compulsion for the poor girls. The middleman cunningly takes advantage of the desperation of the families and strikes deals with the local timber merchants and the Arab parties. At the end of their sojourn, the Arab’s issue divorces through triple talaq in a single sitting. A few of these girls get remarried to other Arab’s arriving in future seasons and get divorced again and others live as divorcees forever. The girl children born out of these weddings have no escape from the ordeal of becoming brides of Arab men as the locals will not marry the “fatherless” girls.

Rukhiya (actress Tara), the protagonist, is reliving her pleasant past with her Arab husband and is eagerly awaiting his return for several years. She works as a domestic help in a timber merchant’s house and her adolescent daughter Unnisa rolls beedis. As a young girl Rukhiya was married to an Arab trader. Unlike the other Arabs, he “truly loved” her and departs with a promise of return without issuing divorce. However, he doesn’t return leaving Rukhiya in a precarious situation of neither being inside a marriage nor being divorced. Rukhiya keeps her hopes alive and doesn’t reconcile to the fact that he will not return. Her daughter is her only solace and she is determined not to let her daughter’s life wither through the disastrous Arabi marriage system. The rest of the narration revolves around the Arabi marriages in the village, the misery of these girls and finally, what happens to Rukhiya’s daughter Unnisa.

On the one hand, director Seshadri projects the dream of love, marriage and fulfilment through Rukhiya and on the other, the disappointments and the despondency of the short-lived marriages through multiple characters. Juxtaposing the flashbacks of Rukhiya’s romantic rendezvous with the unpredicted fiendish interruption of middleman Hasanabba (Dattatreya), director Seshadri captures her deep anxiety over the future of growing Unnisa. Reveries turn into nightmares. Rukhiya loses her peace. She tries to hide Unnisa from public gaze, especially that of Hasanabba. Her neighbour Saramma, married in the previous season, gets prepared for second marriage in exchange of visa for her brother and will have to brave a solitary life. In a heart wrenching incident, Unnisa’s friend Ameena goes missing after marital rape in the very first night of her Arabi wedding.
Rukhiya's master gives command to her to consent for Unnisas’s marriage with the old Arab, as a replacement for Ameena. As usual the local youth, including the rebels against this system, refuse to marry “fatherless” Unnisa leaving Rukhiya with no other option but to accept this proposal. As the wedding rituals commence, Ameena’s dead body is found floating in the sea. The infuriated Rukhiya disrupts the wedding and takes cudgels against this practice.

Seshadri uses the motif of a girl’s shadow in three segments of the film – in the beginning, when Hasanab-ba and the rich merchant converse about arranging girls for the season, second, when the merchant demands Rukhiya to agree for her daughter’s wedding and at the end, when Rukhiya succeeds in stopping the wedding. The girl – the mute witness, emerges out of the shadow into the light in joy. The motif is employed as a metaphor of liberation – from darkness to light, from the oppressed state to the state of consciousness and assertion. Director Seshadri raises the beautiful silk scarf of Rukhiya - a gift of love as a symbol of hope, desire and passion. She possesses it, preserves it and ultimately, burns it as all her expectations are foiled and Unnisa’s future is at stake.

Munnudi is an obituary to this practice of “institutional” sexual slavery and a preface to the struggle for gender justice. The women characters in the film empathize with each other’s victimization while the male characters on their part are perpetrators of the Arabi Marriage - either as bridegrooms or financial beneficiaries or as those refusing to marry / remarry the girls. The film is a critical reflection on the patriarchal mindset that women are objects of pleasure. The impossibility of any conversation with the Arab husbands as the brides don’t know Arabic language and the Arabs don’t know local language is in itself a testimony to this plain sex-machine role. The entire wedding contract is an arrangement for sanctioned sexual promiscuity (without any family responsibility) for rich men within the religious tenets through manipulative interpretation of the shariat to suit this abhorrent practice.

**The Birth Pangs of Resistance**

The film Hasina begins with a dharna of a pregnant woman, Hasina (Tara), in front of a mosque seeking justice. The film’s narrative is broken into multiple episodes of the proceedings inside the mosque and the flashbacks of her life and is adeptly fit into the interstices of consecutive prayers.

Hasina has three girl children and is pregnant with the fourth child. Her husband Yakub is jubilant expecting a male heir until an ultrasound reveals otherwise. This leads to a spate of violence on Hasina unfolding the pro-male biases within the Muslim community that are manifested in the preference of male child, divorce procedures and the practice of polygamy.

Yakub holds Hasina responsible for the inability to produce a male child and deserts her. Hasina’s attempts to win him over not only fails but onsets new cycles of violence. Meanwhile, the possibility of regaining vision of her visually challenged daughter Munni diverts her attention towards saving money for the surgery. However, her hard labour as domestic help doesn’t yield her enough money to meet the expenses of the surgery. As Yakub prepares for another marriage, she pleads Jamaath to intervene in fetching her entitled Meher and Iddat money for the purpose.

Hasina is in a tight spot unable to demand talaq from Yakub before his remarriage as he is reluctant to provide maintenance nor can she exercise Khula as she will lose her entitlement to maintenance. She has no holds whatsoever and is forced to endure Yakub’s animosity and contempt. The feminist debate on personal laws, especially talaq, being discriminative to women finds its echoes in the film.

At every stretch the film exposes the extent violence against women has become integral to the society. A poor Muslim woman at the margins of the society aspiring to restore the vision of her child is caught between the politics of the religious authorities. Justice is delayed and derailed. The authorities in a way become responsible for impaired Munni’s death adding to Hasina’s misery. The film is remarkable in the solidarity that it builds around Hasina. Educated Julekha Begum is a constant source of support and inspiration providing guidance to Hasina and preparing petitions. Ameena Begum, wife of the religious head, extends warm hospitality
when Hasina comes with petitions. During dharna she steps forward to provide food to starving Hasina and her kids and rescues the kids from being forcibly evacuated by Yakub’s mother. Yakub’s fiancée Zarina promises to demand talaq from Yakub’s first marriage to ensure Hasina gets her due Meher. Children Munni, Shabby and Habiba share work and responsibility in many ways. As the male religious authorities turn insensitive to Hasina’s plight and suppress her, the staunch support of the womenfolk doesn’t let her spirits extinguish.

Kasaravalli parallels Hasina’s life with that of Ameena Begum’s highlighting religious head Muthavali to be no exception to women’s oppression. Despite the progressive deterioration of her health after several deliveries, he does not permit her to prevent conception through family planning operation refuting that as per shariat she will go to hell where raging fire fries her alive and black cobra stifles her to death. He goes further to crush Ameena’s effort to get clarification on it from Julekha.

The film calls for gender just reforms in the community. Though Hasina’s struggle doesn’t yield justice, she survives the trials and tribulations of justice and passes on the baton to other women. Women who used to disappear from streets when Muthavali enters, as a mark of respect to his authority, resist doing so. The film ends with a positive note as Ameena opts for family planning. The film is exceptional in the way it snowballs individual assertion of women into a unified protest and in turn offshoots several individual assertions. The surrealism of the scene where Hasina, shocked by Munni’s death, hurls the petitions in air, it flies and reaches the hands of the women in the neighbourhood, they read, lift up their purdahs and march towards Hasina is awe-inspiring.

The Distant Talkies of Women's Freedom

Kasaravalli presents the story of a Muslim mid-wife, Gulabi (Umashri) and a Hindu fisherwoman, Nethru (Pallavi) in the backdrop of the advent of globalisation and rise of Hindu fundamentalist forces in Coastal Karnataka.

Gulabi, deserted by her husband Moosa, lives alone in a hut in fishermen’s hamlet. After her menial tasks of mid-wifery, she goes to cinema everyday. Cinema is an irresistible force in her life. It is her passion, her dream, her companion and her world. During one of her routines at the cinema hall, she is physically lifted to assist a complicated delivery in a rich household. As she refuses to budge, she is promised with a colour television and dish antenna that brings home cinema in exchange of her “reluctant sacrifice” and service. The technology sets in motion a series of changes in the lives of fisher women. The huge umbrella like dish antenna forays into the hamlet catching everyone’s attention. Women and children eagerly peep through the windows of Gulabi’s hut in curiosity and get fascinated with the new sensation.

Incidentally, the satellite television starts breaking down the segregation between Hindu and Muslim women and unites them under Gulabi’s roof. As in cinema halls Gulabi puts up cinema posters on her walls. This “Gulabi Talkies” with regular soap operas and the mutual exchanges between women gives rise to new dreams. Strangely, Gulabi is united with her estranged husband Moosa. However, the disappearance of Gulabi’s friend Nethru coincides with Moosa’s missing creating furor and rendering Gulabi vulnerable.

Kasaravalli deftly parallels this with the entry of large MNC vessels that disturbs the lives of fisherfolk creating huge resentment and resistance. Local Muslims like Moosa become the mediators between MNCs and the locals earning the wrath of the Hindu businessmen. The MNCs disrupt the fishing business by absorbing the workforce, competing in their markets and causing price fluctuations. As the Kargil war commences, the simmering trade enmity along with the jingoistic frenzy of the war and anti-Muslim sentiments becomes the breeding ground for saffron forces.

Through several incidents Kasaravalli delicately conveys that rumours are the hard currency for the thriving of communal forces. Nethru’s disappearance, even as disconnected with Moosa, gets communal hues and a group of self-appointed vigilantes search her and force her back to the hamlet but Nethru disappears again as she cannot bear the prospect of staying with her nagging mother-in-law. Gulabi is interrogated about Nethru’s whereabouts and forcibly evacuated from the hamlet.
In this film, Kasaravalli brings forth the onslaughts faced by women in conflict situations. Women, as demonstrated by the characters Gulabi and Nethru, are at the receiving ends of oppression in the family, vested interests of local business and the fanaticism of communal outfits. Though Nethru’s and Gulabi’s dreams shatter, Gulabi is unfazed as she is confident that pregnancy is inevitable for the human society.

Nethru, frustrated by lack of sexual fulfilment in her marital life as her husband never returns from abroad, elopes transgressing the notion of sexual sanctity and becomes the easy target of communal outfits. In the name of protecting honour, the vigilantes discipline women into the traditional strangleholds of family and religion.

Conclusion
The protagonists Rukhiya, Hasina and Gulabi challenge the patriarchal values and represent the Muslim women’s aspirations for dignity, equality and liberty. They are the forerunners of the modern aspirations of Muslim women and invite attention to their subservient status, and gross violations and injustices.