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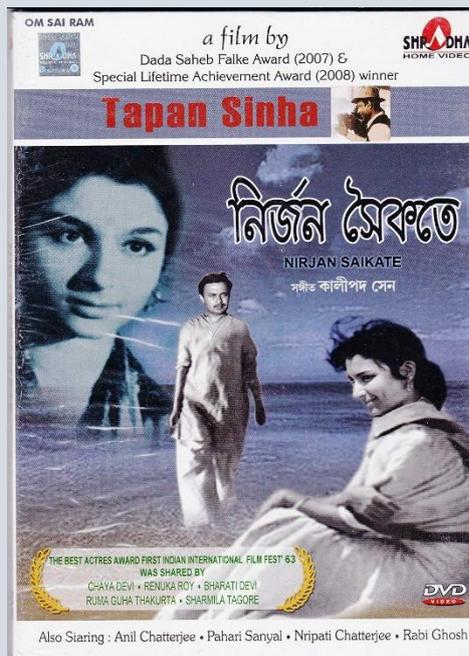
Anuradha Kunda

Sisterhood, Witches and Resistance: A Few Films

Witch hood is sisterhood. Witches are women. They are sisters. The bonding stands against mainstream culture. In ancient times wise women were called witches. Medea, the wise was a sorceress to the Greeks. Had she been a man, she would be a magician. When sisterhood triumphs, counter discourse is born.

Of all the versions of Macbeth, one has to get fascinated by the one by Michael Fasbinder in which the film opens with the burial of a kid, probably a Macbeth child and three women standing on the other side of the grave. The three weird women. This is how the three witches of Shakespeare's shortest play are introduced. They are women with beards, flying on broomstick and threatening the pilot's wife much to the delight of the groundlings. The three witches share sisterhood which is a kind of spiritual bonding that keeps them in togetherness in fair and in foul. Following the counter theory of the subalterns, these three women could have been the homeless women of Scotland who had lost their husbands, brothers and sons in war or in famine. They are now outcaste, thrown

out of villages, sustaining on sisterhood, the bonding that has become a major source of sustenance in the modern times of Facebook and WhatsApp. Yes. Now women are proud to be called witches, 'pishachinis' and 'dakinis' as the terms that were once coined by patriarchy to condemn them, have now been decoded. Witches are sisters and sisterhood is coveted because they oppose the system of oppression. A counter culture is being born and this article tends to find sisterhood in a few Indian films, presented by filmmakers, now and then. Sisterhood promotes resistance and without resistance, no counter culture is born.



Nirjan Saikate

New Theatres produced *Nirjan Saikate* in the year 1963. Tapan Sinha directed the film based on the story of Kaalkut, showing five women travelling to Puri. Travel enlarges human heart, relieves the burdens and purifies the soul. But was ever travelling meant for women? And only women by themselves? The scriptures have warned men. 'Pathi Naari bibarjita'. Once men travelled light, leaving women at home. Family vacations started with going to changes. Travelling was a big no for women unless and until they got aged and widowed.

The film shows a very lively Sejdi (Chhaya debi), an inquisitive Shibidi (Renuka Roy), a not so motherly and narcissistic Abudi (Bharati debi) a well reserved and literate Chotoboudi (Ruma Guha Thakurta) as four widows along with a heart broken young Renu (Sharmila Tagore) travelling to Puri and finding an erudite young man in Anil Chattopadhyay as a male assistant. It is interesting to find that these widows are not unhappy, gloomy women. They rather enjoy life as much as they are allowed to do. They get down from the train, ride rickshaws to their destination and immediately rush to the local market as being widows they will not eat in the hotels and prefer to cook by themselves. A huge energy is found in these women who being widows are deprived of most of the worldly pleasures and even considered 'unlucky' or 'evil' in social occasions since ages. Sinha depicts different shades of womanhood in these women. The wittiest dialogue is delivered by Bharati debi, who puts powder on her face and is criticised for that as widows were not

supposed to deck up. However, her fellow women are liberal and take it easily and when a youthful Anil Chatterji who calls these women 'Boudi' asks if the tour would be more pleasant if Abudi would be accompanied by her husband in her youth, the gorgeous lady says '*Aar bolish ne baapu. Tor daduo molo. Aamio hap chere bnachlam.*' (Don't tell me. Your dadu died and I was free to breathe). The delivery of the dialogue is hilarious and releases laughter but the undercurrent of oppression is strongly felt. These ladies, once young, married and confined within domestic walls did not enjoy freedom. Life had been restricted and dominated by the patriarchal husbands. Now widowhood has freed them and sisterhood has given them the scope to come out in open air to breathe freely. The note of spontaneity is obvious which is hardly found within the domestic walls. The dialogue delivered somehow relates to a novel by Bani Basu. In her novel *Didimasi Gene*, Basu tells us the story of a very vibrant didimasi, an old widow who tells the grand daughter how scared she was of her much older dominating husband, reluctantly bore children on yearly basis and got much relief when the husband died. This sounds hilariously tragic that the wife is relieved at the death of the husband but it clearly shows the kind of oppressed life that the young brides had to lead. Loveless conjugal life was punishment for many, like the widows in Sinha's film. They walk and giggle which is probably prohibited at their own place. They cook and invite a stranger to accompany them. The sharing is remarkable as they are at their normal free selves. If the first outcome of sisterhood is freedom, the second aspect of sisterhood is empathy. All are single women who understand each other socially, emotionally and being educated Ruma Guhathakurta has the intellectual and refined apprehension. Sisterhood helps Renu (Sharmila Tagore) to get rid of her trauma resulted from a heartbreak. The film is thematically modern and the concept of sisterhood creates a broad spectrum. Although the title card starts with the names of Anil Chatterjee and Sharmila Tagore as they are the stars, the four widows are the fountainhead of the film. The dialogues reveal the amount of joy they gather. As they come to Udaygiri, a spontaneous confession is released: 'We had always been confined within four walls. Who knew such joy was waiting for us?' A talkative Abudi humiliates Renu and later makes a candid confession, 'Having been confined within the kitchen and store, we have become narrow minded'. This is a very important exposition, a significant realization that exfoliate traditional womanhood and brings fresh air. They do not consent to the traditional idea that widows are not entitled to enjoy

life. Rather they change the discourse of enjoyment and brings forth a cultural revolution.



It was 1982 when another Tapan Sinha film stormed the silver screen. It was *Adalat O Ekti Meye*. Three female teachers plan holidaying and visit a sea beach on Gopalpur. Right from the train journey they are disturbed by the hooligans, threatened, scared and finally one gets raped. This was a controversial film. The point that I would like to focus that though the fiancé of the rape victim leaves her at the moment of crises, the two friends never leave her side. In fact they condemn the escapist fiancé as a coward, nincompoop. The focus of the film is captured by the police sub inspector brilliantly portrayed by Manoj Mitra, the arrest of the culprits and the trials and court room scenes dominated by the advocate played by Nirmal Mukherjee. But one can never ignore the female colleagues of Urmi who stand by her in her distress. Sisterhood is not pronounced here but it makes the frame of the plot. It is a long way from the calm, religious beach experiences of orthodox people to the voluptuous beach crowd. The film created sensational reviews and even in social circle women were forbidden to travel by themselves, even in groups. The trial room gloom spreads in the school where Urmi teaches and guardians declare that they would shift their kids to other schools as they cannot accept a rape victim to teach their offsprings. The ending is optimistic as the girl students encircle their teacher and it is a story of female fraternity defying the codes of patriarchy that

determines rape as the greatest punishment. In times of *Nirjan Saikate* Renu could go for solitary walks in the sea shore. In 1982, sea beaches had become dangerous to some extent. But sisterhood remains almost the same. It supports and resists oppression.

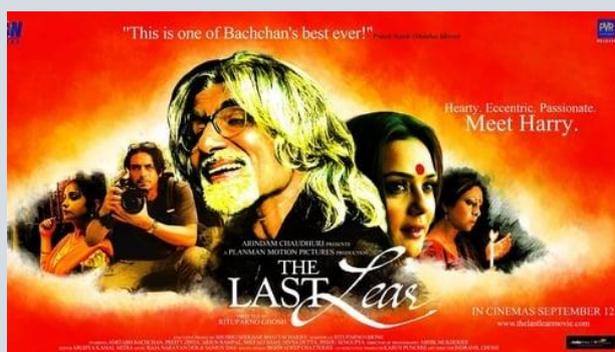
The importance of sisterhood is growing day by day. As people are getting more and more into complex problems, female bonding has become necessary. In her debut movie *Aparna* Sen had two strong female leads. While the older one, Miss Stoneham tried to communicate, the young one refused and exploited the elderly lady's emotions. Bonding is out of question in exploitation. A different perspective is found in *Paromitar Ek Din*. It is a story told by a housewife who experienced the ups and downs of life in a typical North Kolkata environment. A newly married girl enters a joint family, where the father in law reads *Playboy* and a drunk husband makes a lousy first night encounter. The only person, sensitive to the needs of Paromita is her mother in law, played by the director herself. Paromita gives birth to a son but he is declared a special child by the doctor. As the husband accuses Paromita for giving birth to a special child, Sanaka, the mother in law defends Paromita by saying that the genetic disorder exists on the father's side. She points out at Khuku, the special girl in the family and provides emotional protection to the daughter-in-law. A very tender, warm sisterhood is formed between Sanaka and Paromita in spite of their age difference, difference in point of views and attitude. This sisterhood is the focus of *Paromitar Ek Din*, as the film starts with the funeral of Sanaka. All the family members are in a gossiping mood and the only one who is truly grieving is Paromita. She has divorced and is now married to a sensible man. But for her the funeral ceremony of Sanaka is a throwback, a journey to the past when she shared a wonderful bonding with her mother-in-law. The sisterhood is felt in the pulse. When all the other members of the family are annoyed with the visit of an old acquaintance (played by Soumitra Chattopadhyay) who could be Sanaka's lover in youth, but is just a friend at present, the only one who regards the relation and pays proper respect to the old man, is Paromita. After the death of the father-in-law, Paromita secretly arranges to take Sanaka out and have her favourite fish fry. As Sanaka remains engrossed in her television serial, Paromita protects her by keeping the inquisitive visitors away from her by saying 'Mother is sleeping'. The two women take the special child to a spastic school, enjoy outdoor life, share bubble bath and exchange views. They share their poetic experiences too

and when Paromita decides to divorce her husband and get rid of an abusive conjugal life, Sanaka feels insecure. She is jealous because of the entry of a second man in the life of Paromita but understands the practical needs of the young woman. She consents, though reluctantly and is left alone with Khuku, the spastic girl. Her last days of renal failure are relieved to some extent by Paromita only, who comes to the house of her ex husband to nurse Sanaka. She is the only person who knows the needs of the dying lady. She assists her to urinate by arranging a temporary toilet in the bedroom as Sanaka fails to use catheter. Sisterhood reaches a magnificent height in this film .It is beyond gossiping and shopping or just hanging around. Paromita is intelligent, sensitive and sensible. But the entire family of her ex husband criticises her. She is a divorcee, now married to a sensible man. She must be an outcaste. She is different from others, the women who abide by the patriarchal rules happily. She stands out alone in the crowd. It is the matter of consent that makes women 'ideal' according to patriarchal norms. Paromita resists and resistance is fruitful when it comes unitedly. She denies to be 'ideal'. There lies her strength.



A wonderful form of resistance and sisterhood was found in a Ketan Mehta film *Mirch Masala*, filmed against the background of colonial India. When a Tahshildar of Company put his evil eye on a village belle (Smita Patil) working in the mirchi factory, and chases her, the female army of the factory, along with only one armed guard (Om Puri) resists the attack and finally the battle is won with the help of pepper spray in raw form. Another resistance comes from the

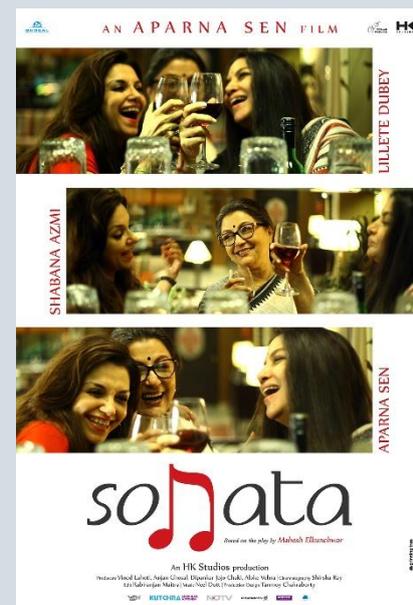
Thakurain of the village (Dipti Naval) who has to fight against her husband's authority to support the village girls. If this is resistance in a loud, dramatic form, Paromita's battle is subtle. She resists calmly, following her own conscience. There is nothing dramatic but the two women army in *Paromitar Ek Din* leaves a lasting impression. Sisterhood triumphs in different ways but the factor of multiple kinds of resistance creates a cultural difference. When Writuparno Ghosh directed *Dahan*, the focus was on the women. Romita, Jhinuk and Jhinuk's grandmother. Romita (Writuparna Sengupta) is molested on the streets before her husband and Jhinuk (Indrani Haldar) comes to rescue. Based on the real story of Ananya Chatterjee, the film encased a strong bonding between these two women. Jhinuk is fiery and straightforward whereas Romita is tender and traditionally obedient. In course of time Romita changes. She is molested by her husband and Jhinuk is seduced by her fiancé to give up the process to find out those who have molested Romita. Though Romita fails to identify the culprits in the court and family pressure eats up her energy, finally it is she who makes the resistance. Jhinuk submits to the desire of Tunir and consents to adjust. The sisterhood of these two women, who meet only once, when Jhinuk rescues Romita remains unfulfilled. Sisterhood is not allowed to form in *Dahan* as it is the voice of the voice less. Sisterhood is threatened and overpowered by the pressures of family and society, legal system and administration which are all patriarchal domains. The end shows Romita trying to head for an independent existence. This is a kind of resistance that is the most possible and credible in middle class society.



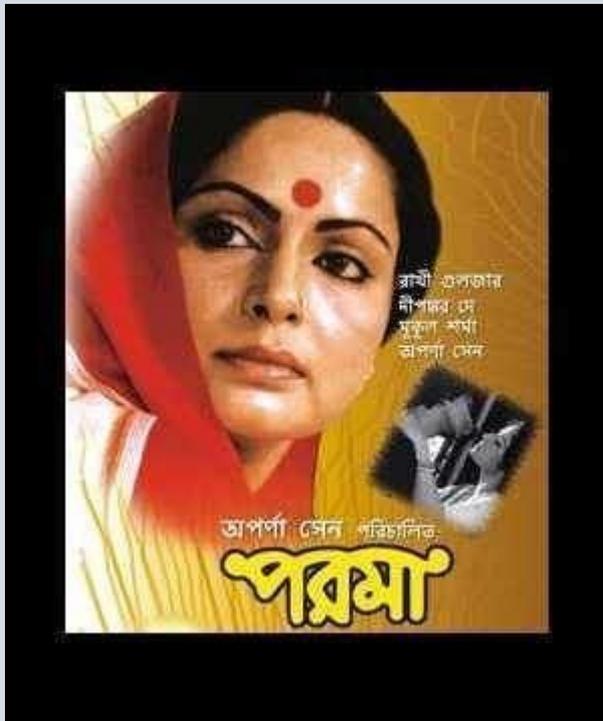
In *The Last Lear* Writuparno Ghosh presented a sub plot of solidarity and sisterhood. The very young wife of the Lear actor, the young nurse in awe of her lover and the film star who is roughly abused by her husband....the three women sit and keep on talking. Some food is ordered and the talk turns to self revelation. The apparent glamorous life of the film actor Shabnam played by Preity Zinta, the lonely existence of the deprived wife (Shefali Chaya) and the scared nurse with her never ending wait make a meaningful confessional session.

A wonderful bonding is found in these women from three different classes and different backgrounds. Ivy, the nurse is waiting for her dominating boy friend to fetch her in the candle lit night. The man threatens her as he does not like Ivy doing night duties. Ivy bursts out. How long she can go to the centre and beg not to give her night duty. The man is suspicious of ‘night duties’ and the lady of the house explains how he makes phone calls in the middle of the night ‘What are you doing?’ Ivy defends her boy friend by saying that probably he has no charge in his phone and that he ‘is not a bad person’ in spite of all these. When she tries to convince him of the security of her service by saying that the film actress is also there, the man makes nasty comments on film actresses and their life style. And the film actress, educated, intelligent and gorgeous opens up. She too faces the same situations. The same questions arise...why night shift. Who are around. The nurse says that her man says he will feed her and she should stop working. Three women work under pressure on different levels. As the men in the movie strive for greater success and perfection the females strive for love and a little bit of freedom. The violent encounter between Shabnam, the actress and her husband is no less than the unseen violence between Ivy and her boyfriend. Shabnam has to answer whom she is going to meet and her resistance is stifled with the spray of perfume blown on her face by her husband. The entire violence, ironically takes place in the heavily decorated bedroom, before a fresco of Abolokiteswar. The three women share their trauma .The three witches tradition continues to flow. Witch hood is sisterhood when it comes to the matter of resistance.

The three women syndrome is the centre of Aparna Sen’s *Sonata*. Aruna, a writer, Dolon, a bank executive and Subhadra, a journalist are the three women whom society will term as ‘weird’. They are singles, professionally successful and sensible. But Sen portrays these women in their loneliness and that is cliché. Women in loneliness is a myth that draws self pity and melancholy. Subhadra is in a turbulent relationship, gets beaten by her boyfriend but the positive thing is that ‘she gives back as much as she gets’. Dolon is sensual and loves to shower love. She hates and loves passionately. Aruna is just the opposite. She is reserved and calm. But it seems



strange that a professional writer would act so prudent as the word ‘touch’ embarrasses her. Dolon identifies herself with Surinder, a character in Aruna’s book but none of them uses the word ‘lesbian’. Being a drawing room drama, *Sonata* captures the claustrophobia of academic and intellectual existence,



captures sisterhood in talking, drinking, watching men on TV but does not go beyond it. What after that? It is the question that keeps haunting existence. In *Parama* Sen had depicted how the emotional support of the daughter and the friend had helped Parama to find her identity. The friend even found a small job for her. *Sonata* has women who have nothing to do with the helpless condition of Parama. But they are helpless in some other way. Good thing is that they can speak out and together, they could be a force. But their loneliness kills them and over intellectualism spoils growth.

Still they are together, trying to make their different values work at different levels.

Years back, *Nirjan Saikate* presented sisterhood under many restrictions. But the female solidarity succeeded to free Renu from all the shackles of fear and prejudice. When she goes away, it is according to her own will, the same will that prompted her to choose Nikhil and get hurt. The elderly sisterhood gives her the strength to escape the stifling pattern of existence. The growth of civilization lies in the support of the counter system. A film might date back but it can certainly enlighten. What do the contemporary movies say!

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