

BHUMIKA (THE ROLE) 1977

Shyam Benegal

(Hindi language)

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OVERVIEW

In making *Bhumika (The Role)*, director Shyam Benegal turned away from his 'rural' trilogy of films about exploitation of the poor and returned to the urban world of Bombay, and more specifically to the film industry itself. *Bhumika* is faithfully based on the memoirs of a famous actress from the 1940s and 1950s. In the film, she is called Usha, with the stage name of Urvashi. Her life illustrates the suffering of women in both family and public spheres. By playing roles on the stage and by being treated as a 'public' woman by her lovers and husbands, she forgets to live her own life. She searches for financial security, for public recognition and for personal love but only encounters a series of deceitful, arrogant and greedy men. There is a glimmer of hope at the end, in the form of her grown daughter and an old lover who asks her to play one more role, but Urvashi had already played too many roles for one life.

CULTURAL SIGNIFICANCE

Bhumika was significant in that, whereas earlier films had explored the place of women in a male-dominated society, it examined that issue within the film industry itself. It was also one of the first Hindi films to combine the aesthetic values of Bengali art-house films (pioneered by Satyajit Ray) with the popular appeal of Bollywood. Also, and like Benegal's other films, it attempted to present an authentic, almost documentary-like picture of a particular cultural form (film) at a specific historical time (c. 1930-1950). Benegal once explained that he wanted to film the memoirs of the famous actress Hansa Wadker because it allowed him to 'recreate the studio atmosphere of the 1930s, 40s and 50s' and because 'it deals with a woman trying to find her individual place in the society of the time.' It is also worth commenting on the two names that Benegal chose for his heroine. Usha, a fairly common name for a Hindu woman, means 'dawn', which has obvious relevance to the bright future of a child-star. Urvashi, the stage name that Benegal gave her, refers to a group of heavenly courtesans in Sanskrit mythology who danced and sang for the gods. As the ancient equivalent of Hansa Wadker herself (and of Usha), they are first actresses in Indian history.

Childhood Next, Usha's backstory is told through a series of sepia-toned flashbacks. Usha is the granddaughter of a famous female singer (in the courtesan tradition) in Goa, on the west coast of India, south of Bombay. Against the wishes of her mother, Usha is groomed for a career of acting and singing by her grandmother. Keshav, the middle-aged son of a neighbour, also takes a not altogether healthy interest in the young girl.

Child-star After the early death of her abusive father, Usha is taken to Bombay by her grandmother and Keshav for an audition in a film studio. With her grandmother's smiling approval, Keshav's support and her mother's scowl, Usha becomes a child-star.

STORY

Present chaos The story begins in the present, with a fierce argument between Usha and her husband Keshav, witnessed by their daughter, Sushma. Usha has just returned to the family home (from where and for what reason is unclear at this point), but Keshav suspects that the man who dropped her off is her lover. Recriminations and mistrust grow as they argue about whose money it is that she earns in the film studio. Usha, unwilling to put up with his abusive language, leaves.

Marriage After a meteoric rise, and again defying her mother, Usha marries Keshav, who has already made her pregnant. Soon it is apparent that there is tension between Usha's private and public lives.

Keshav proves to be a financial disaster and forces Usha back onto the stage to make money. What is worse, he arranges roles for her opposite Rajan, who is a matinee idol and also in love with her. Usha's on-screen chemistry with Rajan fuels speculation about their off-screen relationship. Usha now has a daughter and wants only to be an ordinary housewife, but she recognises the necessity of an income to bring up her daughter.

Marital breakdown The already strained marital relationship eventually breaks down when Keshav (influenced by film magazine tittle tattle) becomes insanely jealous that Usha is having an affair with Rajan. Usha comes back from her glamorous role on stage to be an abused and alienated wife in the home. For a time, she leaves Keshav and her daughter and goes to live by herself in a hotel, where she has unhappy sexual relationships with two separate men: film-director Sunil and businessman Vinayak.

Mistress She makes a double-suicide pact with Sunil, which he reneges on, and she ends up as Vinayak's mistress in his rural mansion. Although she gains a modicum of respectability as a mistress (Vinayak's wife is bedridden) and enjoys the admiration of Vinayak's mother and son, she is still under his control. Desperate, she takes the only route open to her and writes to her hated husband, Keshav, who, with the help of the police, 'rescues' her from Vinayak and takes her back to Bombay.

Return Usha refuses to live again with Keshav, but nothing else has changed for her. She sees the billboards in Bombay with posters of her famous face. Keshav tries to persuade her to go back to films, but she refuses. Keshav takes her to a hotel, where Sushma, her daughter, is waiting for her with the happy news that she is married and pregnant. For a moment, a bright future opens up for Usha, but she realises that she cannot escape her past and must confront her own loneliness. The movie ends with a phone call from Rajan, who wants to bring her back to the studio, but she hangs up while he is still talking.

THEMES

Male gaze This film examines the personal and social consequences of the role that women play for (largely) male audiences. Gender expectations combine with cinematic technique to create what is often called the 'male gaze' in its double and conflicted aspects of desire and censure. Usha's tragic life is the result of her life as a female performer, whose success can never be separated from the male desire to see a female body. This is illustrated by the opening sequence (behind the rolling credits) showing a dance and song performance in the style of *lavani*, a traditional Marathi genre. Three women gyrate in provocative ways in front of a large ballroom filled with turbaned men. The performance is saucy, naughty and erotic. A woman sings, 'He is besotted by my looks. I am anxious for his arrival.' The camera cuts to a young man with excited eyes, stroking his moustache. This is the role that Usha, like her grandmother before her, plays. A role she performs more out of necessity than choice. That is the crucial point. Usha would rather play the role of housewife, where she is beyond the male gaze, except that of her husband. Usha's roles in films are also those of women who are controlled by men. The most famous of her movies (within the movie) is a story from the Ramayana, in which the wife (Sita) is forced by her husband (Rama) to prove her chastity by entering a fire. This 'trial-by-fire' (*Angipareeksha*) is the title of the movie in which Usha acts in *Bhumika*. It would also be a good description of Usha's life outside the stage. She must perform, whatever the costs.

Nostalgia This expose of the treatment of female actors is leavened by the director's nostalgic view of traditional forms of entertainment and an earlier period of film. Benegal looks at the history of popular entertainment in the first half of the twentieth century from the perspective of someone who (as shown in his other films, especially the 'rural' trilogy) values communal life and is critical of modern commercial capitalism. Thus, while the pre-war Bombay film industry might be tawdry and sexist, it can be appreciated for its sometimes romantic innocence. In one scene, for example, when Usha and Keshav (the wife and husband in a poisoned marriage) happily hum along to a love song, we the audience hum along, too. At other times, the director views with affection the cooperation between the studio staff, who make the stars possible—the stagehands, scene painters, song composers and make-up artists. If female stars like Usha have a love-hate relationship toward films, the director Benegal himself has a similar ambivalence toward his profession. Indeed, the entire film is saturated with confusion about films. The repeated shots of faces reflected in mirrors underscore the idea that the actors spend their lives being seen in ways and cast in roles that may not correspond to how they view themselves.

CHARACTERS

Usha Usha (who has the stage name Urvashi) is the female actor at the centre of the film. Usha is a young, headstrong girl who loses her vivacious spirit over the course of the film and ends up a tragically lonely middle-aged woman. She has a terrible childhood until she is swept away to the Bombay studios, where she becomes a glamorous star. But she is racked by conflicting desires. She wants to be a star, and she also wants to be a wife and a mother. She wants love and admiration, but she is unable to resist the advances of less than honourable men. She waffles, going back and forth between the stage and her family life (both controlled by her husband, Keshav). She gets married, she leaves, she leads a single life, she becomes a mistress and she returns to the stage.

Content The only time (excluding childhood) that Usha appears to be happy is when she becomes a mistress, or really second-wife, to a rich man named Vinayak. She is accepted by Vinayak's first wife, who is bedridden, and by their son, to whom she acts as a mother. In one particularly affecting scene, she opens the shutters of her room and looks out on glorious gardens and forests. Then she walks downstairs and enters a room where Vinayak is pouring over some papers. She stands somewhat behind him and plays one or two notes on a piano, a tune from her days as an actress. She is dressed in an expensive sari, but wears it modestly and has put a *bindu* (red dot) on her forehead, as married Hindu women do. When Vinayak turns and smiles, she goes toward him and takes his hand. They look at each other with deep affection. Then he hands her the keys to the house. 'What's this?' she asks, and he tells her (using an interesting double entendre) that she is the 'mistress' of the house. 'Even nursing my wife is your responsibility now,' he says and takes her in his arms. It is a scene of serene bliss between man and woman.

Trapped Throughout the film Usha is haunted by her past. While she wants to be a wife, her lack of freedom in that role propels her back to the stage. A very moving illustration of the way her career has entrapped her occurs at the very end of the film. She has left Vinayak and come back to Bombay, where Keshav has arranged for her to stay in an apartment. She is between worlds, neither mistress nor wife, uncertain and edgy. Going to a gramophone, she picks up a record and hears a voice behind her say, 'It's grandma's!' Sushma, her daughter, rushes to her and the two women embrace. Then Sushma tells her mother that she is two months pregnant. Usha is aghast. 'What have you done?' she cries, remembering her own sexual misadventures. 'A woman's character is her most precious possession.' Sushma laughs and says, 'Mother, you still talk like you're in a film. I'm married.'

In that brief moment, Usha is happy and proud. She will have a grandchild, a future. She asks about her daughter's husband. 'We want you to stay with us,' her daughter says, urging her to become a normal granny. But Usha turns away, her face ashen. She goes to the gramophone, collects the record and turns back to face her daughter. Saddened, weary-eyed, she asks, 'Did mother remember me?' The daughter nods. Usha, manages a half-smile and says, 'Come to meet me some times.' Staring out the window, she declares, 'I have to come to terms with my own loneliness.' Trapped by her past, by her roles, she cannot escape even when her daughter is ready to help her become a new person.

Keshav Keshav is Usha's husband. Keshav is a fragile character, without the strength of Usha or the confidence of Vinayak. He is the classic 'middleman' who arranges for Usha's audition and then manages her career in film. Lacking talent or any outstanding character traits of his own, he is reliant on her career to provide him with a role in life. He is a poor businessman and loses lots of money, making him even more dependent on Usha, which in turn makes him more susceptible to jealous rages. His low self-esteem is not helped by the fact that Usha's mother disapproves of him since he is not (like them) a Brahmin. In the end, his nasty temper and fragile ego are exposed.

Jealous Keshav's jealousy is evident from the very first scene in which he appears, watching from the balcony of his apartment as his wife climbs out of a taxi. She is with Rajan, her co-star and possibly (if gossip is to be believed) her lover. They exchange a few words, but nothing more, and Usha comes upstairs and into the apartment. Keshav stares at her with cold eyes but doesn't speak until they are alone in a bedroom. Then he unleashes a torrent of angry questions about her movements, her friends and her general behaviour. The abuse grows louder and more severe, until their daughter, Sushma, tries to drown it out by playing a record on the gramophone. Keshav's face hardens and his eyes narrow as he continues to insult his wife by hinting at her infidelity. The scene illustrates Keshav's weak character, his lack of dignity and his smouldering anger.

Groveling As the story unfolds, we come to understand that Keshav is a parasite, who feeds off Usha's career, which he is convinced he has created. A good illustration of his weak character occurs at the midpoint of the film, when Usha has come back to him after a brief interval of living on her own. Keshav stands behind her as he talks, as if he could not bear to have her look at him eye-to-eye. He explains that a director has asked him to convince her to take on another film role. He speaks haltingly, casting down his eyes from time to time, because he knows that she will see through his pathetic attempt to get her to make more money. When she does not accept the offer of the role, he begins to grovel and plead, saying that he is her saviour, that he made her and that she owes it to him. It is a pitiable revelation of his weakness.

Vinayak Vinayak is a wealthy man who takes Usha as a mistress. Vinayak is the complete opposite of Keshav. Wealthy, cultured and self-assured, he is able to offer Usha a comfortable (if constrained) life as his mistress-cum-wife. His flaw is that he likes to be in control, which includes restricting his wife's movements. Still, he is sincerely in love with Usha and treats her with tenderness, as long as she conforms to his expectations of a traditional wife.

Polite Vinayak shows us his cultured principles in the very first scene in which he meets Usha. Vinayak is entertaining a male guest by playing a song that his guest wants to hear. One song is by Usha's grandmother, which Usha hears from outside. She then knocks on the door and is ushered in to hear the song. When it is over, Vinayak wants to put on a record by another singer that his guest has requested. Usha is adamant that she must hear her grandmother's song a second time, but Vinayak says that 'the principles of culture' require that he honour his guest's preferences. He is attracted to Usha, the glamorous film star, but he emphasises that politeness comes before pleasure.

Authoritarian Vinayak is a wealthy and conservative man, used to having his way with others, including his wife. Now that Usha has stepped into that role, he controls her also. A dramatic display of his authoritarian nature occurs right after a contrasting scene that shows how much he loves and cares for Usha. Usha sets out to take Vinayak's son to a fair, but the main servant, Damu, refuses to drive her and the boy. Usha then confronts Vinayak, complaining that Damu was rude, but Vinayak only sighs wearily and explains that 'Damu is an old servant. He knows the rules and traditions of this house.' Usha snarls, 'Rules? Is there a rule that I cannot leave the house?' 'You are asked to do what all ladies of his house are expected to do,' Vinayak explains, as if talking to a child. 'My mother and my grandmother did not go out alone.' Usha points out that she 'is not part of the family', and again Vinayak explains calmly that she 'was not forced to enter this house, but when you did, you became part of the family. You will not have the freedoms of Bombay here.' It is not so much the content of what he says—as if the twentieth century had never happened and the old feudal system is still in place—as the manner with which he says it. Calm, cool and confident, as if he is stating obvious facts to a confused teenager. Needless to say, Usha does not remain long in his house.

Shantabai Shantabai is Usha's mother.

Sushma Sushma is their daughter.

Rajan Rajan is an actor cast opposite Usha and who is in love with her.

Sunil Sunil is a director who has an affair with Usha.



(Usha dancing as Urvashi in one of her early films)



(Keshav confronts Usha)



(The young Usha learns singing from her grandmother, in a flashback)



(Usha attempting to see her true self)



(Usha with her young daughter, Sushma)



(Vinayak shows his affection toward Usha)