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Sunday Special » Kaleidoscope

Posted at: Mar 4, 2018, 12:04 AM; last updated: Mar 4, 2018, 12:04 AM (IST)

Her early magic could never be replicated in Mom or English Vinglish

By Gautaman Bhaskaran

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By Gautaman Bhaskaran

Much like Satyajit Ray who moulded Madhabi Mukherjee into a fine actress in Charulata, much like Guru Dutt who literally created the Waheeda Rehman we all knew in Pyaasa and Kagaz Ke Phool and the way Shyam Benegal moulded Smita Patil, legendary auteurs like K Balachander, Balu Mahendra, Mahendran and Bharathiraja fine-tuned Sridevi into a sparkling star.

People beyond the Vindhyas would hardly remember Sridevi's early innings in Tamil cinema. Facing the camera for the first time as a four-year-old child, essaying Lord Muruga, she got her real break much later in the 1976 Moondru Mudichu. A riveting revenge drama, where a shattered Selvi (Sridevi) watches her lover (Kamal Haasan) drown in a lake with his best friend, Prashant (portrayed by Rajinikanth with superb authenticity), refusing to help, she gets her chance to get even. She marries Prashant's widowed father and plays the evil stepmother with vindictive relish!

Paradoxically, Sridevi's own life would run on a similar track. If her last movie, Mom (in Hindi), was also a revenge drama like her first, Moondru Mudichu, her own death in a Dubai Hotel bathtub seemed like life mimicking cinema. In Mom too, her relationship with her stepdaughter, Arya, is fraught with difficulties — much like, as I am told, the actress's personal ties with husband Boney Kapoor's two grown-up children, (one of them being actor Arjun Kapoor) from his earlier marriage.

When Arya gets raped after a night out and is thrown into a wayside ditch, Sridevi's Devaki Sabarwal plans to kill all the four guilty men, let off by the court on a flimsy ground. The ruthlessness with which Devaki goes about bumping off one man after another, despite Akshay Khanna's cop hot on her trail, reminded me of her cold resolve to teach Prashant a lesson he would not easily forget.

Strangely, many of the characters Sridevi played were troubled. In Bharathiraja's 16 Vayathinile, she is torn between two men, a lame Kamal, who is the butt of village jokes and an urbane veterinarian. She conveys the dilemma with remarkable fortitude, and helped the film attain a cult status. It is still considered as one of the best works portraying most realistically Tamil Nadu's rural life. In the 1981 Meendum Kokila, she is the wronged wife who moves heaven and earth to win back her straying husband (Hassan). In Mahendran's Johnny, she just cannot decide which of the two men (both essayed by Rajinikanth) she really cares for. And who can ever forget her in Balu Mahendra's Moondram Pirai (1982), where she slips into retrograde amnesia and becomes childlike, and is taken under the care of a schoolteacher (Kamal). Tending to her childish fantasies for several months, he falls in love with her, and in the end when she regains her memory, the

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scene of their paring is what great love stories are made of. The now-cured woman has no inkling of her care-giver and goes away without even a goodbye — with Haasan trying desperately to evoke her intermediary memory.

Incredible as it may sound, Sridevi’s off-screen life, despite all the glamour and glitz that surrounded her, was, in the words of Ram Gopal Varma, nothing better than that of a caged bird. “Except for the short glimmer of English Vinglish — which got her career re-rolling in 2012 after a 15-year gap (when she is supposed to have played mother to her two daughters and been the perfect homemaker), Sridevi was pretty much an extremely unhappy woman. The uncertainty of her future, the ugly twists and turns in her private life (a failed romance with Mithun Chakraborty and the turbulent affair with a married Boney) left deep scars in the superstar’s sensitive mind”, wrote Varma in his Facebook blogpost.

Her mental scars notwithstanding, Sridevi had to grapple with a physical image that was hard to keep. She knew she was beautiful, and her fans adored her for that, but she also realized that age could be a cruel wrecker. She is reported to have undergone a number of cosmetic surgeries, and these certainly took a toll on her health.

(The writer is commentator and film critic, and may be reached at gautamanb@hotmail.com)

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