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The Politics of Selection and Omission of Sources: What Sources in the biopic *Zubeida*?

KAVITHA L.¹

ABSTRACT

Khalid Mohamed, a journalist turns a screenplay writer on the insistence of Shyam Benegal to write the story of his real-life mother Zubeida. Zubeida aspires to be an actress. Her father arranges her marriage which ends with talaq. She leaves her son to live with a Hindu prince. Both die in an air crash. Riyaz, the reel Khalid who also happens to be a celluloid journalist-son, unfolds Zubeida's life based on the archives and accounts that were hidden, available, and explored. He chooses to reconstruct and understand his mother in the process as he had never seen her. An attempt is made to condone her violations of patriarchal norms, gender roles, religious sanctions, and social conventions. The myth of mystifying and victimizing transgressor-Muslim-women is reinforced through the biopic. The blame is placed on Zubeida and the uncontrollable forces for her denouement.

Keywords: *Biopic, Zubeida, talaq, Shyam Benegal, Karishma Kapoor, Rekha, victim, trilogy, Muslim actress, vulnerable, air crash.*

I. INTRODUCTION

People around the world share a typical interest in the lives of others. The genre of biopic satiates the fascination of the audience by serving them real-life stories. The level of inquisitiveness intensifies in the case of a woman and doubles if it is an actress who lived an unconventional life and died young. Zubeida, an aspiring actress's dreams are shattered by her orthodox Muslim father. Her forced marriage ends with talaq. The husband deserts Zubeida and the child to migrate to Pakistan. She leaves the child under the care of her parents to marry Maharaja Hanwanth Singh of Jodhpur. Khalid Mohamed, her son out of the first marriage was two years old when she died a mysterious death at the age of 19. The journalist-son has written the script of *Zubeida*. It stands out from other real-life based stories as Khalid himself confesses that writing the script was "an attempt at personal therapy".² It is the journey of a son who probes into crevices of memory, archives, hearsay, and oral accounts to know his mother. In the

¹ Author is a Research Scholar at Department of English, University of Mysore, India.

² Priya Kumar and Khalid Mohamed, 'An Interview with Khalid Mohamed' (2006) 47 *Framework: The Journal of Cinema and Media* 100.

process of exploring the resources available to him, there arises the dilemma of selection and omission. The paper investigates out of the available materials what version of Zubeida he chooses to project and whether *Zubeida* evokes the real life of a survivor or a victim.

Zubeida is one of the personal trilogies made on Aladiasisters. Khalid's *Mammo* was about his grandmother and her sister Mehmooda. *Sardari Begum* was made on his grandmother's sisters. The films trace their journey for survival as Muslim women in the film industry, amidst partition and personal tragedies. Shyam Benegal read Khalid's own intense and emotional accounts. He was so impressed that he entrusted Khalid to write the script and he directed the trilogies. When Khalid informed his maternal grandmother that he was writing a screenplay of *Zubeida* for Shyam Benegal she angrily said: "Why do you want to sell your mother's story?"³The justification he provided was that he wanted to "make people remember her" through the biopic.⁴ When asked about his reason to make *Zubeida*, Shyam Benegal in an interview said, "I thought it's a wonderful story and it has no villains. Also, one very important thing was that they are all people who are caught up in problems that they have very little control over. They are equally victims. That is what appealed to me at that time. The world isn't a villain either." The victim is chosen to be eternized without the least intention of villainizing anybody.⁵

Riyaz, the reel Khalid in the biopic researches to reconstruct the identity of his real-life mother based on accounts and archives He has often heard from his maternal grandmother Faiyyazi, relatives, and maids talk about his mother. He has to collage the fragmented pieces of her life through the diary, reel of the film, family album, oral accounts from family, friends, and colleagues of her mother, and hearsay. At times as he admits Zubeida's life and her belongings were guarded. The oral accounts were many times self-contradictory. Shoma Ajoy Chatterji observes that "the oral histories triggered within him the desire to learn more about her, as a son and as an objective observer of a woman who dreamt of making it big in mainstream films but left everything for love that took her life instead. In return, she was rewarded with complete erasure both from memory and from official history." Riyaz unravels Zubeida's coming-of-age saga to the audience and self simultaneously.

Zubeida aspires to be an actress. No orthodox muslim family then would allow the daughter to be associated with acting. She rebels against her father by doing a song sequence in a film. Her father sensing her free-spirited nature arranges for her marriage to his friend's son against her wish. She had

³ *ibid.*

⁴ 'Project MUSE - Framework: The Journal of Cinema and Media' <<https://muse.jhu.edu/journal/326>> accessed 15 November 2023.

⁵ *ibid.*

to curb her acting and dancing dreams. Zubeida struggles to fit into the role of a wife and mother. She tries to come to terms with life forgetting her dreams. Suddenly comes the fatal blow of talaq. A divorcee and a mother at a very young age she finds her love in Vijayendra a married Hindu prince. Her mother who is never vocal till now asserts the matter of the inter-faith affair and gives Zubeida a chance to choose between her love and son. Her father has no say in this. At every stage vulnerability of a woman in a Muslim household is exposed through multiple narratives. But there is just a victim before our eyes suffering and the victimizer is invisible but felt. Shyam Benegal cast Karishma Kapoor for the role because "she had the right amount of daring on one side as well as vulnerability on the other. . . . She will dare but she is extremely vulnerable. She can be hurt easily." The vulnerable-looking actress is cast to play a vulnerable victim.⁶

Zubeida chooses life with the prince. The spirit of life in her is visible in her effort to emerge out of the trauma of divorce, her decision to get involved in a relationship with a married Hindu prince, to live with him, cross the thresholds of one's faith, abandon the child and parents, challenge the established norms of the society and break the stereotype of submissive Muslim woman, unlike her mother. The new lease of love life gradually shows its true colours. She has to change her name to Meenakshi Devi. Being a transgressor Muslim woman she is reduced to the position of a consort by the prince and men of the royal family. The women of the palace are no different. Speaking about the representation of the first wife of the prince, Mandira Devi, played by Rekha as a benevolent Rajmatha, Khalid writes, "... to be honest, I spitefully softened the Rekha character. I thought, okay, so you made my mother's life miserable, my brother died under your care, but I am not going to make you a nasty woman." There arises a streak of doubt about the kind gestures of Rajmatha being sympathetic to M (she called Zubeida M), keeping the things of M safely, cherishing the moments of their togetherness, agreeing to meet Riyaz, and presenting souvenirs.⁷

Riyaz's narration engulfs us to believe his version of Zubeida. Sangeetha Datta points out that *Zubeida* is the celluloid resurrection of this woman's life. She lived life on her terms but lost, also on her terms.⁸ The filmmakers had already engineered the ploy to victimize the subject. The chronicled life of Zubeida reiterates that "the downward spiral is the basic narrative structure of the female biopic." Every time she is elated there is an unfortunate happenstance following. There is a ray of hope and it is dashed the very next moment this phenomenon

⁶ Shoma Chatterji, 'Shyam Benegal's Zubeida: Memory as Voice' [2015] *The South Asianist* <https://www.academia.edu/64047298/Shyam_Benegals_Zubeida_memory_as_voice> accessed 15 November 2023.

⁷ Christopher Sharrett, 'Michael Haneke and the Discontents of European Culture' (2006) 47 *Framework: The Journal of Cinema and Media* 6.

⁸ Bhairav Acharya, 'The Four Parts of Privacy in India' (2015) 50 *Economic and Political Weekly* 32.

continues till her death. Of the three theories regarding the death of the prince and Zubeida, Khalid picks up the one that his grandmother had fed him as a kid which had a romantic angle "... that she [Zubeida] blew it up for love [laughs]. But that's the way I like to look at it." [8] Riyaz doubts if his mother was responsible for the air crash. He prefers to look like his mother brought it on herself. It seems to be a conscious effort to omit the other possibilities of the murder attempt.⁹

Unable to fathom what Zubeida was and wants, Riyaz asks his grandmother "akhir ammy chahti kya thi" (After all What did ammy want?) Zubeida's life is construed by the filmmakers with an intent to portray the victim affected by her own decisions. Her father, mother, first husband, father-in-law, Rose aunty, Vijayendra, Uday Singh, Mandira Devi, and her son all played their assigned roles and did not influence her life. Her "brash defiance of male authority", and "boldness of spirit", are punished by representing her as an emotionally unstable, attention-seeking, alienated, and self-destructive trespasser. Discussing biopics about female artists Codell opines that "love and ambition construct a hysterical female". An attempt is made to condone her violations of fundamental moral values, gender roles, religious sanctities, and social conventions. She and all the other characters as the director claims had no control over life. The enigmatic life of his mother remains incomplete and unfathomable.

The erasure of Zubeida from the pages of Hindu royal history and Seth Sulaiman's Muslim family on the one hand and an attempt of the son to resurrect Zubeida in the public memory on the other polarize the politics of the biopic. The Jodhpur royal family agrees to the making of the biopic only after a thorough scrutiny of the script and suggested a change. Khalid says they did not like the biopic "...they thought it would have been more revelatory, which it wasn't" ? The reason behind not being revelatory enough, softening the characters, submitting the script for the perusal of the royal family's approval, and changing the names of the characters and the names of the city is not innocent unintentional, and beyond the control.¹⁰

Riyaz constructs the story of a victim but Khalid deconstructs the very sources and the story in his interviews. While watching the movie with his aunts Khalid exclaims "... all loved it. They cried their hearts out, but they also kept saying that wasn't the way it exactly happened."¹¹ He tried to pacify them by saying that it was a fictional representation of reality. The biopic then

⁹ '(PDF) The Lives and Times of the Biopic' <https://www.researchgate.net/publication/296676006_The_Lives_and_Times_of_the_Biopic> accessed 15 November 2023.

¹⁰ Julie Codell, 'Gender, Genius, and Abjection in Artist Biopics', *The Biopic in Contemporary Film Culture* (Taylor and Francis 2013) <<http://www.scopus.com/inward/record.url?scp=84917414040&partnerID=8YFLogxK>> accessed 15 November 2023.

¹¹ Sharrett (n 7).

does not tell us what happened. Filmmakers “naturalize abjection” to insulate themselves from possible hazards. The royal Hindu family approves the biopic for not disclosing. The Muslim family of Zubeida cries out that it is camouflaged. Truth is interpolated somewhere between these familial tropes. The myth of mystifying and victimizing transgressor women is reinforced through the biopic. The blame is placed on her and the uncontrollable forces for her denouement.

II. CONCLUSION

The biopic "Zubeida" explores the complex life of an aspiring actress, Zubeida, who faced societal constraints, forced marriages, and eventually an unconventional love affair with a Hindu prince. The film, part of a personal trilogy by Khalid Mohamed, aims to remember his mother. Shyam Benegal directs the trilogy, emphasizing the lack of villains and portraying characters as victims of circumstances. Riyaz, Zubeida's son, researches her life for the screenplay, relying on fragmented memories, archives, and oral accounts. The narrative unfolds as Zubeida rebels against societal norms, marries a prince, and faces the consequences. The film is criticized for victimizing Zubeida and omitting alternative perspectives. The biopic's politics involve the Jodhpur royal family's scrutiny, resulting in softened characters and changes to the script. The family's approval reflects a desire to avoid revealing details. Khalid acknowledges the fictional nature of the representation, leading to discrepancies in audience perceptions.

In the end, the biopic perpetuates the myth of mystifying and victimizing transgressive women, placing blame on uncontrollable forces for Zubeida's fate. The search for truth is complicated by familial perspectives and the need for approval from those involved.

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