

# Real voices

**CINEMA** Directors Jocelyne Saab and Fareeda Mehta feel that films can work as a wake up call to women



**WOMEN'S TAKE** Film directors Fareeda Mehta (left) and Jocelyne Saab PHOTO: R. SHIVAJI RAO

**I** don't like feminism, it separates men from women. I used to be against women's film festivals though my films have been screened in such fests in Italy, Turkey, Spain and India (in Chennai). But now I feel we need this space to listen to many voices, see with many eyes," said Jocelyne Saab to Fareeda Mehta, both were in the city recently. Their films "Duniya" and "Kaali Shalwar" were screened at the Women's Film Festival (March 1 to 8) organised by InKo Centre. Mehta finds the atmosphere different at a women's festival, especially in Kerala where she saw people getting fired up by ideas and aggressive about positions taken. She explains, "It is important to discuss and represent women's views, to create – if not an overt impact – certainly a ripple effect in consciousness." On this first visit to India, Saab notes that the experience is as important for men as for women.

The Chennai Fest's inclusion of films made from 1960 to 2007 was an advantage. Saab and Mehta found that the older films remained modern in spirit and content, and refreshing to watch in the present age when rising fundamentalism freezes minds in dangerous clichés. Mehta thinks that the eclectic range is good to orient viewers, and prepare them for future fests.

"When we get a whole lot of films clubbed as women's work, we need to see the common threads in form and content," she continues, "Kick up the settled dust and look for patterns, and may be new formation of ideas to stimulate you as an artiste."

The films she saw at the Chennai did spark Saab's interest. Aparna Sen's "Yugant" had a protagonist opting for modernity but

not to throw roots away. Lena Wertmuller's "Seduction of Mimi" (Italy) followed a married woman catching up with civilization and demanding her rights. In Fareeda Mehta's "Kaali Shalwar" the story of a young sensuous woman coming to town became the tale of the city itself. "Sometimes women themselves hold back. These films say, hey, wake up! You have to redefine yourself in society!"

## Redefined roles

Mehta smiles as she interpolates, "They're about society's redefining itself as much as women redefining themselves. I find it suffocating to put a rubber stamp on women's festivals and say here women talk only about themselves. We need a world vision and new ways to shape it." She too liked "Seduction of Mimi" for its subversive humour, and Saab's "Duniya" for its attempt to find a new language for feminine eroticism, and then to transcend it.

Both directors agree that women's film festivals let viewers pause, reflect, and realise that there is a long way to go. Says Saab, "We must stop depicting women as victims alone, but show the search for fulfilment." Mehta asks, "Should we not also recognise how women have internalised that male gaze? How else do we explain TV soaps made for women?" They know that the answer is to be more self-critical, and discard all that stands in the way of fulfilment.

Meanwhile Jocelyne Saab and Fareeda Mehta were not only delighted to be part of Chennai's Women's Film Fest, but to know that a new festival has sprung up in the city to show that there is another kind of cinema in the world.

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