Introduction:
Masculinity and Post-Liberalisation Indian Cinema

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Cinema, as a cultural artefact and medium, performs a crucial role in the development and retention of meaning. The interplay between cinema and society, influenced by culture, creates a complex and intriguing relationship that incorporates the intricate connection between motion pictures, societal framework, ideologies, and viewership.[1] Cinemas, employing the underlying concepts of transportation theory, involve viewers in an immersive story that corresponds to their requirement for cognitive participation. The premise of 'transportation'[2] within cinema refers to the intellectual, psychological, cognitive, and visual immersion in a narrative through a fully-fledged experience that involves a shift of focus from the real-life setting to the fictional one portrayed on screen. In this aspect, cinema employs visual depictions that precisely represent our lived experiences, thereby capturing and safeguarding elements of life and functioning as 'the resources and practices of everyday life.'[3] Therefore, cinema becomes a powerful tool for actively engaging with, discussing, and subsequently confronting relevant societal issues while also shaping individuals' understanding, beliefs, assumptions, and attitudes. It is widely acknowledged that films have the capacity to bring attention to important social issues and carry out various functions beyond merely providing entertainment. As a consequence, they can enhance knowledge and generate intellectual curiosity in viewers, motivating them to delve deeper into the subjects covered in the narrative itself.[4]

The artistic form of cinema incorporates a unique potential to represent the depths of the human psyche, covering viewpoints, emotions, impulses, and motives and their resultant impact on how individuals act. The application of cinema as an effective method of learning involves the fundamental components of human existence, such as the method of carrying out inquiries and engaging in intellectual conversations.[5] In the Indian film industry, films that focus on women and gender issues, caste issues, heroic journeys of the protagonists, environmental concerns, and other socio-cultural issues provide diverse ideologies. These films have the capacity to influence and change the perspectives of viewers, serving as catalysts for individual and collective change. This is accomplished through an approach to critical thinking and a resulting display of knowledgeable assessment and practice, leading to an expanded awareness of these important concerns in society.[6] This guest-edited issue explores the concepts of masculinity in Indian film culture by examining it as an ideological and historical domain. Within the discipline of western media and cinema studies, scholarly works have explored the concept of masculinity, delving into contemporary interpretations and exploring its diverse manifestations. However, within academic scholarship on Indian cinema, the exploration of masculinity is a relatively recent and still developing area, with only a limited number of works exploring its various dimensions. Within this specific context, the issue under discussion explores the various aspects of masculinity portrayed in films, with a specific emphasis on Indian cinema from the post-liberalisation era.

The impact of economic liberalisation on Indian cinema, particularly for those who were born in the 1990s or earlier, is most effectively demonstrated by the shift from outdated single-screen cinema halls to luxurious multiplex theatres. During this time, the cinematic contributions of three directors—Sooraj Barjatya, Aditya Chopra, and Karan Johar—ushered in what film critic Anupama Chopra refers to as 'a generational

change.'[7] An exemplary illustration of the film industry's cosmopolitanism during that era was the emergence of the Khans—Shahrukh Khan, Aamir Khan, and Salman Khan—who maintained their dominant position in the industry while embodying distinct facets of Indian neoliberal masculinity. As previously pointed out, the three Khans represented distinct aspects of male stardom in the period following liberalisation: 'Aamir, Salman, and Shah Rukh embody the "thinking man", "the bad boy", and "the emotional man, who is also the successful outsider", respectively.'[8] As noted by Sudhanva Deshpande, the post-liberalisation era in the industry has led to the emergence of a 'consumable hero' who appeals to viewers largely by his physical appearance instead of his personality.[9] The emergence of the consumable hero archetype has prompted actors to develop a well-defined physique, resulting in the portrayal of a powerful and heroic appearance.[10]

As a consequence, we observe an embrace of nationalist and distinctly male representations by international media outlets and cultural creators to be consumed in the worldwide marketplace. The portrayal of prominent male actors in Hindi movies plays a crucial role in reshaping the perception of India for international consumers. Regarding domestic consumers, it is necessary for these portrayals to represent prevailing masculine behaviours, although not always concurrently, while also constructing idealised forms of hegemonic masculinity.[11] Indeed, over the past few years, the mainstream media's coverage of these films has not only increased the popularity of male actors but has also elevated them to the same level as other prominent male personalities in India. This highlights the dominant form of masculinity in Indian media, which has been present for many years in the production of films, cultural standards, and various media platforms.[12] In recent years, mainstream and 'pan Indian' films have portrayed men as 'hero masculinities,' which are idealised depictions of masculinity characterised by gigantic protagonists and personified by a larger-than-life star. Heroic masculinities encompass a range of expressions of masculinity, including authoritative and assertive behaviour, flamboyant displays of masculinity, impulses towards violence and aggression, thus ensuring the safety of the nation and family, embodying the ideal lover, and displaying inappropriate emotional responses.[13]

The surge of pan-Indian films following *Baahubali* has been speculated to be propelled by the notion that the distinction between Hindi, Telugu, or Tamil films no longer exists. However, there is an overlooked factor in the strategy for the commercial success of pan-Indian films: a revival of hypermasculinity. This is a recurring feature among many of the latest films promoted as pan-Indian. Their posters feature muscular guys with a dominant presence, frequently displaying an angry and threatening expression while brandishing terrifying weaponry. The majority of these films exhibit a shared theme with one another: intensified idolization of heroes, aggressive masculine traits, and all the elements necessary to cultivate an engaged audience.[14] Simultaneously, contemporary Indian films also showcase other facets of masculinity such as peripheral hyper masculinities, dalit masculinities, gay and queer masculinities, performative masculinity, and its aesthetic dimension in relation to gendered identities. From this perspective, this issue, encompassing seven articles, explores how cinema interacts with other emerging forms of media, specifically focusing on the portrayal of male bodies and masculinities in Indian films.

Notes

[1] Anita L. Cloete, 'Film as Medium for Meaning Making: A Practical Theological Reflection,' *HTS: Theological Studies* 73(4) (2017): 1–6, especially p. 1, doi: 10.4102/hts.v73i4.4753.

[2] Melanie C. Green and Timothy C. Brock, 'The role of transportation in the persuasiveness of public narratives,' *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* 79(5) (2000): 701–21, especially p. 702, doi: 10.1037//0022-3514.79.5.701.

[3] Gordon Lynch, 'Religious Experience and Popular Culture,' in *At the CrossRoads of Art and Religion: Imagination, Commitment, Transcendence,* ed. Hetty Zock, 71–83, Leuven: Peeters, 2008.

[4] Goutam Karmakar and Payel Pal, 'Knowledge Born through(In)Justice: Gender Testing, Imposed Humiliation, and Epistemic

Interventions in the Indian Hindi Film Rashmi Rocket,' *Quarterly Review of Film and Video* December (2023): 1–36, especially pp. 1–2, doi: 10.1080/10509208.2023.2296368.

[5] Ryan M. Niemiec and Danny Wedding, *Positive Psychology at the Movies: Using Films to Build Virtues and Character Strengths,* Göttingen: Hogrefe Publishing, 2008, p. 5.

[6] Payel Pal and Goutam Karmakar, 'Acid attacks and epistemic (in)justice: Violence, everyday resistance and hermeneutical responsibilities in the Indian Hindi film *Chhapaak*,' *Sexuality, Gender & Policy* January (2024): 1–21, especially p. 2, doi: 10.1002/sgp2.12083.

[7] Lata Jha, 'The liberalization of Bollywood,' *Livemint,* 20 Jul 2016, accessed 20 Jan. 2024.

[8] Praseeda Gopinath, 'A feeling you cannot resist': Shah Rukh Khan, affect, and the re-scripting of male stardom in Hindi cinema,' *Celebrity Studies* 9(3) (2018): 307-325, especially p. 321, doi: 10.1080/19392397.2017.1411202.

[9] Sudhanva Deshpande, 'The Consumable Hero of Globalized India,' in *Bollyworld: Popular Indian Cinema Through a Transnational Lens,* ed. Raminder Kaur and Ajay Sinha, 186–203, Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage, 2005.

[10] Alyssa Grace Lobo, 'Constructions of Masculinity in Bollywood Promotional Content,' *Theses All* 290 (2018): 1–136, especially pp. 14–20.

[11] Anne Ciecko, 'Superhit hunk heroes for sale: Globalization and Bollywood's gender politics,' *Asian Journal of Communication* 11(2) (2001): 121–43, especially p. 131, doi: 10.1080/01292980109364807.

[12] Goutam Karmakar and Payel Pal, 'Delinking "The Gentleman's Game": Visual Epistemic Representations in the Film *Shabaash Mithu,*' *Visual Anthropology* 36(2) (2023): 142–74, especially p. 143, doi: 10.1080/08949468.2023.2195343.

[13] Lobo, *Constructions of Masculinity,* p. 23.

[14] Rohitha Naraharisetty, 'How the 'Pan-India' Movie Phenomenon Embodies—and Redefines—Toxic Masculinity,' *The Swdl,* accessed 20 Jan. 2024.

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