

# The Rise of Spy Universe in Contemporary Hindi Cinema: Masculinity and Nation-Building in *War* (2019)

[Shreya Sharma](#) and [Payel Pal](#)

## Introduction to the Indian spy universe

The persistent interconnection between masculinity and nationalism has held a prominent position within the realm of Hindi cinema. Movies such as *Border* (1997),<sup>[1]</sup> *Soldier* (1998),<sup>[2]</sup> *Sarfaroosh* (1999),<sup>[3]</sup> *Mission Kashmir* (2000),<sup>[4]</sup> *Lagaan* (2001),<sup>[5]</sup> and *Mangal Pandey* (2005)<sup>[6]</sup> serve as cultural representations that explore the patriotism and heroism of Indian freedom fighters, that emerge as glorifying and aspirational. These portrayals amalgamate elements of masculinity, youth, and militarism, presenting a thought-provoking perspective that has somehow shown its alignment with the undercurrents of nationalism. Parallel to this, there is another genre of Hindi spy or espionage films that revolve on and depend upon several closely intertwined iterations of heroism and masculinity. However, it is interesting to note that the 'espionage' or 'spy' film genre has been relatively less popular than those focusing on patriotic themes. Spy fiction is a genre that commonly portrays characters who possess exceptional proficiency in fighting, intelligence acquisition, and other specialised abilities and are employed by governmental entities or other establishments with the objective of safeguarding their nations. Frequently, these entities function clandestinely and partake in activities such as espionage, sabotage and other covert endeavours to accomplish their goals.<sup>[7]</sup> The spy genre emerged within the realm of Hindi cinema throughout the period between the 1960s and 1970s. However, the representation of espionage in Hindi films has seen notable transformations over the course of time, particularly in terms of story construction and character depiction.

While earlier films placed greater emphasis on the narrative structure and plot of the story, contemporary Hindi spy films have redirected their attention onto other aspects, such as the building up of incredible action sequences, representations of masculinity, depictions of masculine bodies, aggression and violence. The present article focuses on the crucial underpinnings of these aspects of contemporary Hindi espionage films. For analysis, the article takes up the movie *War* which came out in 2019 and was directed by Siddharth Anand.<sup>[8]</sup> It is my contention that the film serves as a prime example of how the representation of hegemonic masculinity via alpha males as the leading protagonists is carved in the popular imagination, showing its indispensability in the process of nation-building. I posit that digitalisation is used to endorse heroism and hypermasculinity and dramatise actions, stunts and bodies and brings these aspects to the forefront rather than creating plausible storylines. In this article, I examine *War* as representative of how cinema can become a medium of disseminating discourses of 'toxic' masculinity and shaping perceptions and entrenched inequities.

After the James Bond films became a worldwide economic success in the 1960s, several imitations and parodies of the original were produced in various regions of the globe. In India, the influential Hindi film industry drew inspiration from the franchise, first with the release of the spy thriller *Farz* in 1967.<sup>[9]</sup> Subsequently, in the 1960s and 1970s in Hindi cinema, we witnessed the emergence of movies such as *Jewel Thief* (1967),<sup>[10]</sup> *Aankhen* (1968),<sup>[11]</sup> *Shatranj* (1969)<sup>[12]</sup> and *Johnny Mera Naam* (1970),<sup>[13]</sup> among others. These films can be considered quintessential spy films that effectively capture the stories'

narrative, essence, and portrayal. A similar trend was observed during the 1970s and 1980s with films such as *Keemat* (1973),<sup>[14]</sup> *Agent Vinod* (1977),<sup>[15]</sup> and *The Great Gambler* (1979).<sup>[16]</sup> These films' plotlines and narratives were more significant than depicting individual characters. The lead characters of this era did not possess the perfectly sculpted muscular physiques that have become an indelible characteristic of contemporary actors in the twenty-first century. In the 1970s and 80s, the sagging arms and pot bellies of heroes were readily apparent, and their bodies were average and naturally flawed.<sup>[17]</sup> In the words of Sudhana Deshpande, 'actors like Dilip Kumar, Shammi Kapoor, or Rajesh Khanna never displayed their biceps. Even the angry young man persona of Amitabh Bachchan was not premised on muscular physique.'<sup>[18]</sup> Rather, the films predominantly featured protagonists who embodied a wide range of values and moral purity, therefore assuming the role of heroes. They were depicted as guardians of the public and upholders of law and social order rather than idols of masculine physique and violence. The genre underwent a downturn in the following decades due to a waning interest among filmmakers in producing films inspired by the Bond franchise. During the onset of the twenty-first century, a novel genre of espionage thrillers began to garner significant attention within the realm of Hindi cinema. They were then promoted as redefined forms of espionage thrillers in which the protagonists were shown to be working for the Indian intelligence system. These films derived their real-life tumults of political events of the 1990s, including the Kargil war and the concomitant strife. The films such as *The Hero: Love Story of a Spy* (2003),<sup>[19]</sup> *Mukhbiir* (2008)<sup>[20]</sup> and *Lamhaa* (2010),<sup>[21]</sup> revolve around the narrative of courageous Indian operatives emerging victorious over their Pakistani counterparts, the Inter-Services Intelligence (ISI). Moreover, the cinematic genre of espionage thrillers, exemplified by films like *Madras Cafe* (2013),<sup>[22]</sup> *Holiday* (2014),<sup>[23]</sup> *Baby* (2015)<sup>[24]</sup> and *Phantom* (2015),<sup>[25]</sup> showcased and celebrated the portrayal of Research and Analysis Wing (RAW) agents on the silver screen, while 'centering an adult male muscular body' to protect the nation.<sup>[26]</sup>

Amid the production of such movies, Yash Raj Films came up with the movie *Ek Tha Tiger* in 2012, which marked the beginning of the YRF spy universe. The spy universe is constructed around a series of espionage action films featuring several fictional operatives from RAW. The franchise has achieved significant financial success, accumulated substantial capital, and garnered considerable public attention. The inception of the shared universe originated from a particular series of films and has subsequently expanded to incorporate analogous narrative elements, settings, actors and fictional personas. Salman Khan, who assumes the role of a RAW operative in his inaugural cinematic venture, *Ek Tha Tiger*, further reprises this character in the subsequent instalment, *Tiger Zinda Hai*, which was released in 2017. The narrative of *War* in 2019 revolves around a renegade operative of RAW, portrayed by Hrithik Roshan. *Pathan* has emerged as a notable addition to the espionage genre, achieving the distinction of being the highest-grossing film of the year 2023. In this regard, the present study seeks to elucidate the underlying dynamics of masculinity and nationalism in the film *War* (2019), helmed by director Siddharth Anand. The film serves as a prime example of how the concepts of 'masculinity, virility, and physicality'<sup>[27]</sup> are upheld and embraced in multiple contexts and forms. Through a non-linear narrative, there is an exhibition of underlying hegemonic masculinity that is promoted and sustained by mainstream Hindi cinema and media portrayals. The film demonstrates the prevailing societal perceptions of masculinity and heroism that the increased influence of digitalisation and cinematic representations have shaped. This study aims to analyse the portrayal of espionage in spy films as an exaggerated representation of nationalism, characterised by a strange amalgamation of hypermasculinity, machismo, heroism, and romance, which deviate significantly from reality.

### Reading nationalism and masculinity in *War*

*War* (2019) is a Hindi action thriller directed by Siddharth Anand and serves as the third production in the YRF Spy Universe. The film centres on the characters Kabir Dhaliwal (Hrithik Roshan) and Khalid Rahmani (Tiger Shroff), who assume the roles of RAW agents. The film serves as a visual portrayal of

the decorated performances of masculinity and their intricate ties to the construction and protection of a nation and the ideals of patriotism. There are specific elements of masculinity that are depicted through physicality, aggression, rationality, and power, which establish, exalt, and rationalise the protagonist's masculinity and his unchallenged authoritative position. In recent times, the assessment of gender has played a significant role in the academia of film studies and narrative cinema.

Masculinity has acquired a prominent space in films in the narrative of nation-building and security. In his work *Masculinities*, R.W. Connell affirms that masculinity and femininity are often envisioned as 'gender projects' that involve constructing social practices and relationships based on gender.<sup>[28]</sup> This process is influenced by recognising bodily differences, which confer power and privilege upon specific individuals or groups, resulting in the legitimate status of dominance. The case study of *War* can be best understood by examining Connell's theoretical framework on masculinity, which posits that masculinity, characterised by traits such as strength, toughness, and rational competence, is constructed through the rejection of femininity, which is associated with qualities like fragility, incompetence, and docility. The story of *War* revolves around Kabir, a RAW agent who has gone rogue as he kills his commanding officer, V.K. Naidu (Mohit Chauhan), instead of eliminating a dreaded terrorist, Farid Haqqani. Taken by utmost surprise, Colonel Luthra summons and instructs Kabir's student, Khalid, to capture him. It is revealed that in the past, Major Abdul Rahmani, the father of Khalid, was engaged in an act of betrayal towards the army, resulting in Kabir sustaining two gunshot wounds and the unfortunate demise of his partner. Subsequently, Kabir proceeded to actively pursue and execute Abdul because of his treachery. Initially hesitant to collaborate with Khalid, Kabir eventually acquiesces to his inclusion within his team, which comprises some of the RAW operatives—Saurabh, Prateek, Muthu and Aditi. Together, they embark on a triumphant mission in Tikrit, where they successfully eliminate a group of individuals affiliated with Haqqani. Kabir's character aligns with and adheres to the construction of 'hegemonic masculinity,'<sup>[29]</sup> a collaborative endeavour pursued by men who seek to adopt and enact it in everyday actions. The script that encompasses these roles is predominantly oriented towards exhibiting the prowess of male individuals, focusing on their enormous physical aura and invincible stature. It is quite interesting to note that the film is anchored to a prominent aspect of male dominance and hegemony, which is exemplified by Kabir's charismatic leadership in devising a rational plan to eliminate the terrorists. The representation of Kabir's masculinity in the film reflects the performative and precarious construction of his masculinity, as he assumes the role of a 'real man' by engaging in acts of manhood to safeguard his nation. His failure to do so would blemish his manhood.

In a society that is structured around gender distinctions, the qualities of strength, authority, rationality and the ideals of nobility and heroism are commonly attributed to men.<sup>[30]</sup> Consequently, these virtues are regarded as essential characteristics of masculinity and, by extension, humanity, resulting in the establishment of men's hegemonic status. After the successful operation in Tikrit, the group led by Kabir achieves the apprehension of Basheer Hassib, a terrorist, consequently prompting their primary objective, Rizwan Ilyasi (Mashhoor Amrohi), a terrorist businessman, emerging from hiding. The portrayal of Kabir's utilisation of rationality (Figure 1) to apprehend Ilyasi, despite Aditi's comprehensive knowledge of the operation, effectively represents a prominent characteristic of hegemonic masculinity. The team reunites with the objective of apprehending Ilyasi in the city of Marrakesh. During his apprehension, Ilyasi discloses to Kabir that he has strategically placed an undercover operative within his team. Saurabh's identity as the mole is unveiled through his actions of causing the demise of his teammates, Prateek and Muthu. The sequence commences with Khalid engaging in a pursuit atop a rooftop as he endeavours to apprehend Saurabh. A confrontation occurs at ground level, resulting in a violent exchange of gunfire between the factions led by Kabir and Ilyasi. During this altercation, Kabir sustains a gunshot wound and subsequently regains consciousness several days later in a medical facility. Kabir encounters Khalid, who is afflicted with severe injuries and is informed that he is responsible for the demise of Saurabh. The complete series of events involving the pursuit of Ilyasi exemplifies the potency, jurisdiction, might, and dignity of the nation's intelligence operatives, highlighting

them as fundamental aspects of the hegemonic masculinity of Kabir and Khalid.



Figure 1. Kabir exhibits his 'rationality' to eliminate Ilyasi in Tikrit.  
Source. Still from *War*, 21:29.

According to Cynthia Enloe's insightful publication, *Bananas, Beaches, and Bases*,<sup>[31]</sup> the emergence of nationalism can often be attributed to the influence of masculinised memory, masculinised humiliation, and masculinised hope. The author posits that within nationalist movements and conflicts, the primary individuals involved are men who are actively safeguarding their personal liberties, upholding their sense of dignity, protecting their native land, and ensuring the welfare of women within their society. Khalid's participation in the mission to apprehend Kabir is jeopardised following the untimely demise of Lt. Col. Jimmy Shroff at the hands of Kabir. Subsequently, Kabir arranges a public gathering alongside Khalid aboard a train, wherein he discloses that his forthcoming objective is to target Dr. Utpal Biswas. In the city of Lisbon, Khalid finds himself unable to intervene and prevent the untimely demise of Biswas at the hands of Kabir. RAW suspended Khalid after the occurrence. Khalid successfully locates Kabir by leveraging information from a prior investigation. It is revealed that Kabir was engaged in a clandestine operation aimed at locating a government hard drive containing classified codes. Furthermore, Kabir's focus was primarily on individuals associated with Ilyasi. Khalid discovers that Kabir engaged in a deceptive association with Naina Sahni, a dancer, with the intention of recruiting her as a spy to gather intelligence on Firoze Contractor, a former associate of Ilyasi. Naina met her untimely demise at the hands of Firoze—a revelation that Kabir deduces to be the result of Firoze assuming the identity of Ilyasi after undergoing a plastic surgery procedure performed by Dr. Mallika Singhal. Here, the concept of Kabir and Khalid's hegemonic masculinity is critically brought to foreground. The film constructs the characters of Kabir and Khalid, who align well with the definition of hegemonic masculinity. These two protagonists assume the role of safeguarding freedom, honour, homeland and the well-being of women, but Kabir's masculinity takes on an ironic dimension as he proves unable to prevent Naina's demise. The narrative presented by *War* serves as a space for intricate displays of the conventional masculine ideal.

Nationalist politics serve as a significant platform for the construction and enactment of masculinity due to various factors. As mentioned above, the national state can be regarded as a predominantly masculine institution highlighting the hierarchical nature of its authority structure, the predominance of males in decision-making roles, the power dynamic of male superiors and female subordinates, the internal division of labour and the male-driven legal regulation of female rights, labour, and sexuality.<sup>[32]</sup> Furthermore, the construction of nationalist culture is designed to highlight and align with cultural themes

that are traditionally associated with masculinity. The differentiation between concepts such as honour, patriotism, cowardice, bravery, and duty is challenging due to their inherent association with both nationalism and masculinity.[33] The argument posited is that the microculture surrounding masculinity in everyday life effectively aligns with the requirements of nationalism, specifically its militaristic aspects. Kabir and Khalid exemplify the masculine attributes of rationality and power in their efforts to protect their nation, as demonstrated by their portrayal of authority and assertiveness in the movie. Furthermore, the filmmaker strengthens the notion that nationalism is predominantly a 'masculine domain'[34] while constructing the overarching narrative of hegemonic masculinity. Male spy agents are commonly seen as persons who exhibit elevated levels of reasoning, adept problem-solving abilities and unwavering bravery. Kabir and Khalid are regarded for their noteworthy achievements and diligent efforts, whereas the tale lacks sufficient emphasis on the women's opportunities to explore their capabilities. Despite extensive operations knowledge, Anushka Goenka failed to secure the lead. She is merely there to lend a helping hand to Kabir, whether it is by assisting him in his missions or making an antidote in advance to prevent him from being poisoned by Khalid on the houseboat. In contemporary countries, where professional roles are sometimes influenced by cultural preconceptions that deem certain jobs as unsuitable for individuals depending on their gender, the film effectively portrays the limited range of occupational goals available to women. Thus, in the movie, by establishing a connection between hegemonic masculinity and the concept of the nation as an imagined community, nationalism not only effectively constructs a portrayal of itself in contrast to the 'Other,' but it also accomplishes the manifestation of the nation within its male individuals.

### **Hypermasculinity, male bodies, and violence**

Hypermasculinity is a gender-oriented ideology characterised by the amplification of beliefs regarding the attributes and behaviours associated with masculinity. The conventional tropes associated with masculinity propagate the notion that men ought to possess qualities such as dominance, emotional detachment, aggression, and a well-defined physique, among others.[35] The impact of Hindi cinema on perpetuating detrimental stereotypes is widely acknowledged by astute observers of gender discourse within the industry. The persistent fascination with Hollywood[36] has undeniably positioned Hindi cinema as more than just an entertainment sector in India but as a significant influencer of culture.

*War* features the collision of two prominent stars, Hrithik Roshan and Tiger Shroff, who are widely acclaimed for their contributions to the action genre. Hrithik's intriguing portrayal of the character Kabir (Figure 2), characterised by a well-defined physique, rusty complexion, and finely sculpted facial features, captures the interest of both Khalid and Colonel Luthra in the movie. The two protagonists, renowned for their well-developed musculature and defined abdominal muscles, compete to determine superiority based solely on physical strength. Kabir and Khalid engage in a physical altercation, utilising punches, kicks, and forceful strikes, resulting in significant bodily harm. The audience is captivated by their aesthetically pleasing physiques as they observe this spectacle. Hrithik Roshan demonstrates exceptional prowess in his portrayal of the anti-hero, while Tiger effectively matches his senior counterpart (Figure 3) in terms of both captivating on-screen intensity and the execution of dynamic action sequences. Both actors rely on each other's skill in performing attractive action sequences. Additionally, hypermasculinity places significant emphasis on the masculine attributes of power and invulnerability. The scene depicted in Figure 3, as Khalid persists in combat despite sustaining injuries, serves as a demonstration of his resilience, as he maintains his masculine identity without succumbing to physical pain. The scene is reiterating the stereotype of hypermasculinity that men do not feel pain and are always invincible.



Figure 2. Hrithik's jaw-dropping entry in the film.

Source. Still from *War*, 15:03



Figure 3. Tiger Shroff's depiction as a 'real man' through his ribbed and injured physique.

Source. Still from *War*, 139:29

According to Connell's scholarly publication *Masculinities*, the cultural understanding of gender heavily relies on the physical manifestation of masculinity and femininity.<sup>[37]</sup> Masculinity encompasses various physical attributes, including a distinct tactile sensation, robust physique, particular postures, and engagement in aggressive and perilous behaviours. Additionally, masculinity establishes physical stereotypes such as resilience, fortitude, and a certain level of emotional detachment.<sup>[38]</sup> The outward display of masculinity demonstrated by Kabir and Khalid can be characterised as hypermasculinity or machismo.



Figure 1. Tiger exemplifying masculinity by wielding a heavy machine gun.  
Source. Still from *War*, 27:22.

Figure 4 illustrates Khalid engaging in hypermasculinity to compensate for perceived threats through the exaggerated display of masculine traits, exemplified by his wielding of a heavy machine gun in combat against enemies while in operation in Tikrit to catch Ilyasi. Hrithik exhibits hypermasculine aggression and engages in destructive behaviour to protect his nation from Dr. Utpal Biswas, an adversary, during a clandestine operation aimed at preventing the unauthorised disclosure of a government hard drive and its confidential codes (Figure 5). Both protagonists convey a sense of masculinity through their actions, emphasising the necessity of their hyper-performance in safeguarding their nation despite their roles as covert operatives tasked with operating discreetly.



Figure 5. Hrithik exhibits masculinity through violence and destructive acts.  
Source. Still from *War*, 99:01.

During the commemoration of the mission's accomplishment in protecting the government's classified codes aboard a houseboat, Khalid administers a toxic substance to Kabir by surreptitiously adding it to his drink. The revelation arises that Khalid met his demise at the hands of Ilyasi, finally succumbing to a

fatal gunshot wound while engaged in their operation in Marrakesh. Saurabh thereafter underwent a plastic surgical procedure performed by Dr. Mallika Singhal with the intention of assuming a new identity as Khalid. Saurabh forcibly submerges Kabir in the river before reuniting with Ilyasi, stationed aboard a heavily fortified icebreaker vessel in the Arctic Circle. Following a sequence of unpredictable occurrences, a violent altercation between Kabir and Saurabh reaches its climax as Kabir causes Saurabh's demise by deliberately causing the collapse of a church's dome that falls on him.<sup>[39]</sup> The portrayal of multiple instances of physical confrontation between the characters played by Hrithik and Tiger in the film indicates the presence of hypermasculine attributes that are deemed superfluous within the context of an espionage genre.

The portrayal of hyper-masculinity in Hindi cinema serves to present male characters as resilient, assertive and emotionally detached, thus serving as role models for both young boys and older men to imitate. The depictions of hyper-masculinity, particularly those that idealise aggression, reflect a distinct view of masculinity. The portrayal of aggressiveness and conflict as synonymous with rugged manhood in these depictions raises concerns regarding the representation and enactment of masculinity both within the context of the media and in real-life situations.<sup>[40]</sup> Besides, this film exemplifies a particular style of Hindi cinema that incorporates vibrant song and dance sequences, with the spies Kabir and Khalid (Figure 6) having a dance faceoff set against elaborate and colourful backgrounds juxtaposed with emotionally charged scenes. This approach intends to convey to the audience that the film encompasses a wide range of elements, including action, drama, comedy, emotion, music, dance and romance, without adhering strictly to narrative coherence.<sup>[41]</sup>



Figure 6. The dance faceoff between Hrithik and Tiger.  
Source. Still from *War*, 40:27.

Also, the utilisation of Hollywood-inspired representations in the film raises significant concerns, giving rise to several inquiries, one such being the comprehension of portrayals of masculinity and a war-oriented culture. In this context it is crucial to examine how expressions of hyper-masculinity, which are reinforced in mass media and frequently observed in Hindi blockbusters, contribute to this phenomenon. *War* is a flaunting representation of hyper-masculinity in the Hindi cinema, specifically elucidating its influence from Hollywood films. The employment of visual effects (VFX) and hyper-digitalisation in *War* serves to accentuate some aspects of masculinity that lack narrative significance within the cinematic



context. Hypermasculinity delves into the various approaches employed by these representations to negotiate themes of struggle, power, violence, and domination, and analyses their connection to the discursive construction of masculine identities. The film features a moment whereby the character Kabir engages in a gravity-defying act by ascending onto an aircraft wing (Figure 7), therefore gaining access to an Indian Air Force plane. He drives himself from the wing and successfully adheres to the aircraft's base with the help of substantial magnets, thereby gaining access to its interior.



Figure 7. Hrithik represents his hypermasculinity by jumping from the wing of the plane  
Source. Still from *War*, 56:35.

The influence of Hollywood on Hindi films has been evidenced in the incorporation of exaggerated elements and deviations from truth, as seen in this sequence from the movie. According to Connell and James Messerschmidt, certain patterns of aggressiveness have been associated with prevailing conceptions of masculinity, not merely as mechanistic outcomes, but rather as underlying factors in the quest for dominance.<sup>[42]</sup> Kabir and Khalid exert a significant influence over the overarching storyline of the film, surpassing not just their male counterparts but even the female characters within the narrative. Both protagonists demonstrate assertiveness, intelligence, hostility, muscular ability, rationality and a competitive spirit as they vie for dominance throughout the expedition. Their actions deviate significantly from the expected norms of secret agents, who are typically expected to operate covertly and independently.

In a recent interview, Vikram Sood, former Chief of RAW, conveyed his lack of inclination towards dedicating his time to viewing Hindi espionage flicks. During a discussion on spy films within the Hindi film industry, Sood underscored the significance of effectively amalgamating elements of entertainment and authenticity within this genre. Sood expressed his disappointment over such cinematic productions, asserting that the art of crafting authentic espionage films has not yet been fully realised in Hindi cinema. There exists the potential for improvement and more realism in their capabilities. When asked to provide further explanation about his critique of the absence of realism, he wittily said that the endeavour to produce a James Bond film inherently entails a departure from realism. Sood acknowledged having viewed the 2012 film *Ek Tha Tiger* with Salman Khan and Katrina Kaif and expressed amusement and enjoyment, attributing it to the film's quaint appeal more than its genuine portrayal.<sup>[43]</sup>

Sood's statement is even more relevant when analysed in the context of the film *War*, as it portrays the spies as a peculiar amalgamation of masculinity, valour, and romanticism. The inclusion of a redundant

love sub-plot between Hrithik Roshan and Vaani Kapoor, the visually stunning bike and car chases between Hrithik and Tiger, the energetically choreographed dance sequences, and the depiction of exotic places[44] frequently exhibit an ironic juxtaposition with the reality of the lives of secret agents, as portrayed in Hindi cinema. However, Sood expresses his support for Tom Hanks' 2015 espionage thriller, *Bridge of Spies*, asserting that it exemplifies the essence of authentic spy cinema. The film deals with 'actual facts,' which refer to the spy's engagement with objective and verifiable information, devoid of embellishments or extraneous elements, leading a solitary existence, devoid of social interactions and relying solely on one's own company.[45] Consequently, the emergence of spy films in Indian cinema has raised concerns regarding the depiction of inflated masculinity and the excessive emphasis on aggression and violence as essential attributes of masculinity. This portrayal raises doubts about the authenticity of such films since they deviate significantly from the actual experiences of real-life agents.

### Submissive masculinity and submissive femininity

It is imperative to emphasise that *War* does not exist in a vacuum but carries on and perpetuates the legacy of hypermasculinity that has been the centre of certain Hindi films. The narrative of *War*, however, presents a problematic aspect in that it not only enunciates the parameters of hypermasculinity but depicts it alongside submissive masculinity and submissive femininity. Most of the supportive actors in the film are sidelined, despite the narrative's demand to justify their presence on screen through their adaptability to various roles.[46] For instance, Ashutosh Rana's portrayal of Colonel Luthra in RAW exemplifies a manifestation of submissive masculinity, as his presence is marginalised and excluded from assuming a dominant role, despite his position as the commanding officer. Being under the command of the defence minister, Sherna Patel (Swaroop Ghosh), it is also seen that Kabir, who serves as his agent and reports to him, is beyond his control and authority (Figure 8). When Kabir deviates from the expected course of action, Colonel Luthra convenes a gathering with the purpose of locating Kabir. However, in this scenario, Khalid raises doubts about the colonel's intellectual capabilities. When Luthra cannot ascertain Kabir's motive, he assigns Saini (Imraan Ahamed) to the task. However, Luthra eventually yields to Khalid's request to allow him to find Kabir, as Khalid asserts that he is the person who truly knows Kabir. Moreover, throughout multiple instances depicted in the film, Colonel Luthra is observed adhering to the directives issued by Kabir and Khalid, thereby exhibiting behaviour that contradicts his higher-ranking authority. It is evident that the colonel is not so much a masculine figure because, though he holds a position of authority, he is dependable on the masculine decisions and strategies of the central protagonists.



Figure 8. Colonel Luthra represents submissive masculinity despite being in a superior position.  
Source. Still from *War*, 06:14.

The representation of female characters in the film similarly lacks strength and depth, mirroring the narrative structure, which fails to provide ample opportunities for the female protagonists to corroborate their agency. Naina Sahni (Vaani Kapoor) is a moral guide for Kabir and has an objectified portrayal. Naina, a dancer (Figure 9) facing financial difficulties in her pursuit of ensuring a stable life for her daughter, is enlisted as a 'civilian asset' in the mission to apprehend Feroz, who is identified as the sole connection to Ilyasi. However, Naina delivers one of the most promising lines in the movie, 'Not every Indian is a soldier, not every Indian is out to save the country. Some of us fight to give our little child a simple, good life. These are the battles being fought by ordinary Indians.'<sup>[47]</sup> Naina's role and agency remain subordinate, not thoroughly examined, or investigated.<sup>[48]</sup> Similarly, Khalid's mother (played by Soni Razdan) lacks a commanding presence as a strong character because she briefly appears to provide an emotional centre. Women in this film are constructed either as voiceless individuals or as glamorous sex objects,<sup>[49]</sup> reinforcing the paradigms of masculinity embodied by Kabir and Khalid.

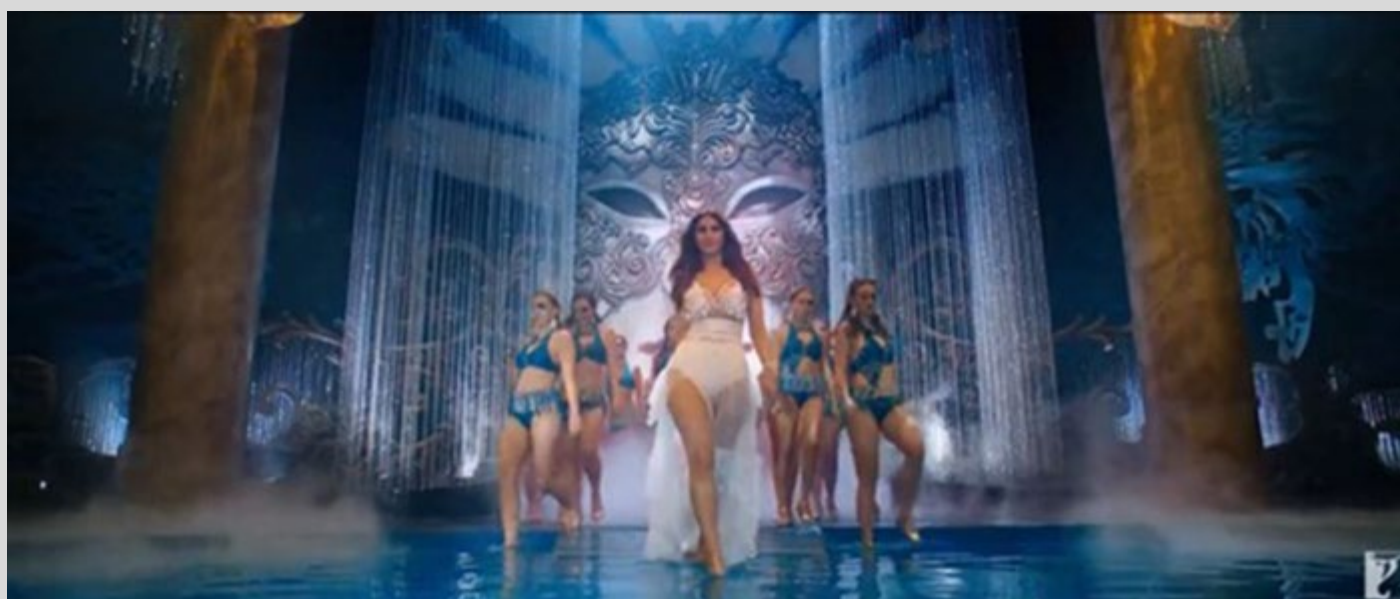


Figure 9. Vaani Kapoor, a dancer used as a 'civilian asset' by Kabir.  
Source. Still from *War*, 70:37.

## Conclusion

Like any quintessential Hindi masala movie, *War* presents diverse elements within its narrative, encompassing action, drama, music, romance, exotic locales, and vehicular pursuits. The screenplay incorporates various elements commonly found in commercial films. In ways to emulate the Hollywood style of the Bond series, the film has incorporated and showcased strategically crafted numerous stunts, supposedly corroborating that the nation needs strong and masculine heroes to stay protected against antagonist forces.<sup>[50]</sup> Masculinity and nationalism are intrinsically connected and are informed by underlying prejudices ingrained within a gendered societal framework, which influences the establishment and administration of nations and governments. In recent years, Hindi espionage films have evolved as a medium for portraying the alpha male archetype, embodying an extreme kind of hypermasculinity, machismo, or masculinist gender performance in the context of national security. The recognition and acknowledgment of contributions made to national defence tend to be biased towards male individuals, neglecting how women also actively participate in equal measure within this domain. The portrayals in the film *War* ascribe masculine attributes to the nation, with particular emphasis on the

hegemonic masculinity and hypermasculinity of its protectors. Considering that the protagonists are covert operatives, it is evident that both male protagonists engage in physical altercations, but the glorification and romanticisation of this violence seem to be problematic.<sup>[51]</sup> There is a need to refute such biased perceptions propagated through films and ensure equitable representations, acknowledging women's contributions to the task of nation-building.

## Notes

- [1] [Border](#). 170 mins, 1997, produced by Bhanwar Singh and J.P. Dutta, directed by J.P. Dutta, *YouTube*, accessed 28 Jun. 2023.
- [2] [Soldier](#). 156 mins, 1998, produced by Kumar S. Taurani and Ramesh Taurani, directed by Abbas-Mustan, *YouTube*, accessed 28 Jun. 2023.
- [3] [Sarfarosh](#). 164 mins, 1999, produced by John Matthew Matthan, directed by John Matthew Matthan, *YouTube*, accessed 28 Jun. 2023.
- [4] [Mission Kashmir](#). 137 mins, 2000, produced by Vidhu Vinod Chopra, directed by Vidhu Vinod Chopra, *Prime Video*, accessed 29 Jun. 2023.
- [5] [Lagaan](#). 187 mins, 2001, produced by Aamir Khan, directed by Ashutosh Gowariker, *YouTube*, accessed 30 Jun. 2023.
- [6] [Mangal Pandey: The Rising](#). 144 mins, 2005, produced by Bobbi Bedi, Deepa Sahi and Ketan Mehta, directed by Ketan Mehta, *YouTube*, accessed 30 Jun. 2023.
- [7] [Jason Helleman](#), 'Decoding the Spy Genre in Films and TV (Definition and Examples)', *nonfilmschool*, 21 Apr. 2023, accessed 10 Aug. 2023.
- [8] [War](#). 152 mins, 2019, produced by Aditya Chopra, directed by Siddharth Anand, *Prime Video*, accessed 25 Jun. 2023.
- [9] [Farz](#). 154 mins, 1967, produced by Pothina Dundeshwara Rao and Sunderlal Nahata, directed by Ravikant Nagaich, *YouTube*, accessed 2 Jul. 2023.
- [10] [Jewel Thief](#). 169 mins, 1967, produced by Dev Anand, directed by Vijay Anand, *YouTube*, accessed 2 Jul. 2023.
- [11] [Aankhen](#). 171 mins, 1968, produced by Ramanand Sagar, directed by Ramanand Sagar, *YouTube*, accessed 2 Jul. 2023.
- [12] [Shatranj](#). 169 mins, 1969, produced by N.N. Sippi and S.S. Vasan, directed by S.S. Vasan, *YouTube*, accessed 2 Jul. 2023.
- [13] [Johnny Mera Naam](#). 164 mins, 1970, produced by Gulshan Rai, directed by Vijay Anand, *YouTube*, accessed 2 Jul. 2023.
- [14] [Keemat](#). 131 mins, 1973, produced by P. Mallikharjuna Rao, directed by Ravikant Nagaich, *YouTube*, accessed 3 Jul. 2023.
- [15] [Agent Vinod](#). 145 mins, 1977, produced by Tarachand Barjatya, directed by Deepak Bahry, *YouTube*, accessed 3 Jul. 2023.
- [16] [The Great Gambler](#). 163 mins, 1979, produced by C. V. K. Shastri, directed by Shakti Samanta, *YouTube*, accessed 3 Jul. 2023.
- [17] Krzysztof Lipka-Chudzik, 'Bodies, Bollywood and Bond. The evolving image of secret agents in Hindi spy thrillers inspired by the 007 franchise,' *Acta Orientalia Vilnensia* 12(2) (2011): 31–46, doi: [10.15388/AOV.2011.1.3934](https://doi.org/10.15388/AOV.2011.1.3934).
- [18] Sushanva Deshpande, 'The Consumable Hero of Globalised India,' in *Bollywood: Popular Indian Cinema Through Transnational Lens*, ed. Raminder Kaur and Ajay J. Sinha, 186–203, New Delhi: Sage, 2005.
- [19] [The Hero: Love Story of a Spy](#). 174 mins, 2003, produced by Dhirajlal Shah, Hasmukh Shah and Pravin Shah, directed by Anil Sharma, *YouTube*, accessed 3 Jul. 2023.
- [20] [Mukhbiir](#). 138 mins, 2008, produced by Sudhish Ram Medhla and Sudhish Rambottla, directed by Mani Shankar, *YouTube*, accessed 3 Jul. 2023.

- [21] [Lamhaa](#). 181 mins, 2010, produced by Bunty Wali and Juspreet Singh Walia, directed by Rahul Dholakia, *Hotstar*, accessed 3 Jul. 2023.
- [22] [Madras Cafe](#). 128 mins, 2013, produced by Sheel Kumar and John Abraham, directed by Shoojit Sircar, *Netflix*, accessed 3 Jul. 2023.
- [23] [Holiday](#). 161 mins, 2014, produced by Aruna Bhatia and Vipul Amrutlal Shah, directed by AR Murugadoss, *dailymotion*, accessed 3 Jul. 2023.
- [24] [Baby](#). 159 mins, 2015, produced by Shital Bhatia and Shivaji Dasgupta, directed by Neeraj Pandey, *Hotstar*, accessed 3 Jul. 2023.
- [25] [Phantom](#). 129 mins, 2015, produced by Sajid Nadiadwala, Siddharth Roy Kapoor and Ranjan Kapoor, directed by Kabir Khan, *Netflix*, accessed 6 Jul. 2023.
- [26] Sikata Banerjee, *Gender, Nation and Popular Film in India: Globalizing Muscular Nationalism*. New York, NY: Routledge, 2017.
- [27] Donald L. Mosher and Silvan S. Tomkins, 'Scripting the macho man: Hypermasculine socialization and enculturation,' *The Journal of Sex Research* 25(1) (1988): 60–84, specifically p. 64, doi: [10.1080/00224498809551445](https://doi.org/10.1080/00224498809551445).
- [28] R.W. Connell, 'Gender Politics for Men,' *International Journal of Sociology and Social Policy* 17(1–2) (1997): 62–77, specifically p. 63, doi: [10.1108/eb013292](https://doi.org/10.1108/eb013292).
- [29] Mike Donaldson, 'What is hegemonic masculinity?' *Theory and Society* 22(5) (1993): 643–57, specifically p. 645. doi: [10.1007/BF00993540](https://doi.org/10.1007/BF00993540).
- [30] Allan G. Johnson, *The Gender Knot: Unraveling Our Patriarchal Legacy*, Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2005.
- [31] Cynthia Enloe, *Bananas, Beaches, and Bases: Making Feminist Sense of International Politics*, Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1990.
- [32] R.W. Connell, *Masculinities*, Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1995; Judith Grant and Peta Tancred, 'A feminist perspective on state bureaucracy,' in *Gendering Organizational Analysis*, ed. Albert J. Mills and Peta Tancred, 112–28, Newbury Park, CA: Sage, 1992.
- [33] Jamie Munn, 'The Hegemonic Male and Kosovar Nationalism, 2000–2005,' *Men and Masculinities* 10(4) (2007): 440–56, specifically p. 448, doi: [10.1177/1097184X07306744](https://doi.org/10.1177/1097184X07306744).
- [34] Debapriya Ganguly and Rajni Singh, 'Reading patriarchal manhood, violence and love in *Kabir Singh* (2019),' *South Asian Popular Culture* 19(1) (2021): 15–32, specifically p. 21, doi: [10.1080/14746689.2021.1879094](https://doi.org/10.1080/14746689.2021.1879094).
- [35] [Sara Bardhan](#), 'Bollywood's Tryst with Toxic Masculinity,' *Feminism in India*, 16 May 2018, online:, accessed 16 Sep. 2023.
- [36] [Why Does Bollywood Copy Everything?](#) Exploring the Trend,' *Bollyflix*, 5 Aug. 2023, accessed 29 Sep. 2023.
- [37] Connell, *Masculinities*, p. 52.
- [38] Connell, *Masculinities*, p. 55.
- [39] *War*.
- [40] Lara Mazurski, 'Imagined violence: Representations of masculinity and a culture of peace,' in *Communications and Peace*, ed. Julia Hoffmann and Virgil Hawkins, 107–19, New York: Routledge, 2015.
- [41] [Anna M.M. Vetticad](#), 'War movie review: Hrithik-Tiger starrer runs a loyalty test for Muslims under cover of an exciting action drama,' *First Post. Entertainment*, 3 October 2019, accessed 29 Sep. 2023.
- [42] R.W. Connell and James W. Messerschmidt, 'Hegemonic Masculinity: Rethinking the Concept' in *Gender & Society* 19(6) (2005): 829–59, specifically p. 834, doi: [10.1177/0891243205278639](https://doi.org/10.1177/0891243205278639).

[43] ['Former RAW Chief dismisses "Pathan" & "Ek Tha Tiger" as unrealistic; demands better spy movies,'](#) *India Forums*, 6 Jun. 2023, accessed 29 Sep. 2023.

[44] [Sonal Gera](#), 'War movie review: Hrithik Roshan, Tiger Shroff's film is a flawed spectacle,' *India TV: Entertainment*, 2 Oct. 2019, accessed 28 Jul. 2023.

[45] 'Former RAW Chief,' paragraph 2.

[46] [Monika Rawal Kukreja](#), 'War movie review: Hrithik Roshan—Tiger Shroff drama is high on action, low on story,' *Hindustan Times*, New Delhi, 6 July 2020, accessed 28 Jul. 2023.

[47] *War*, 81:18–81:40.

[48] Vetticad, 'War movie review,' paragraph 14.

[49] Gera, 'War movie review,' paragraph 16.

[50] [Rachit Gupta](#), 'War Movie Review: Lot of style, stunts and show, but lacks a solid storyline,' *Times of India* (Mumbai), 3 October 2019, accessed 29 Jul. 2023.

[51] Katharine M. Millar and Joanna Tidy, 'Combat as a moving target: masculinities, the heroic soldier myth and normative martial violence,' *Critical Military Studies* 3(2) (2017): 142–60, specifically p. 146. doi: [10.1080/23337486.2017.1302556](https://doi.org/10.1080/23337486.2017.1302556).

MAIN

---

Published with the support of Gender and Cultural Studies, School of Culture, History and Language, College of Asia and the Pacific, The Australian National University.

URL: [http://intersections.anu.edu.au/issue50/sharma\\_pal.html](http://intersections.anu.edu.au/issue50/sharma_pal.html)

© Copyright

Page constructed by [Carolyn Brewer](#)

27 December 2023 1313, Last modified: 9 March 2024