Violence and the Good Women of Bollywood

Hridaya Ajgaonkar

1. Introduction: Registering the Dual Pleasures of Sex and Violence in Mainstream Indian Cinema

Contemporary South Asian societies and their foundational narratives often share a turbulent relationship with the ›question of the female‹, where public expressions of femininity, and particularly female sexuality, are met with the constant ambivalence of desire and moral mortification. The female body, through its varied representations, is seen and used as a means of reifying ideology, captured most effectively in popular art that uses suitable subterfuges to control its morally disruptive potency while still depicting it to satisfy desire. In a 2006 documentary film, culture critic and cineaste Slavoj Žižek states that »[c]inema is the ultimate pervert art. It doesn't give you what you desire – it tells you how to desire« (00:30–00:38), pointing to the ideological malleability of the viewers' desire, and to its artificial means and modes. The ›teacher‹ or determiner of these desires is not the genre of cinema alone, but the ideological apparatuses at play behind the screen. In its dynamic contexts, South Asian cinema is particularly shaped by the pressures of a postcolonial society and producers of art and culture that cater to the economically, sexually, and politically demanding gaze(s) of its audience. It is this cinema, a robust cultural machine, that has emerged as one of the most powerful means of accessing mass ideology in contemporary India.

In popular Indian film, essentialised, archetypal and mythically recognisable figures are often a formulaic way of ensuring commercial success across class, caste, and linguistic lines. For over a century, these set formulae have been applied to the configurations of the filmic hero, the villain, and the heroine, tweaked to suit the demands of a particular era's typical performance of gender. The figure of the heroine, who is the specific quarry of my study here, is almost invariably constructed as a ›good‹ woman to buttress a nationally homogenous narrative of the patriarchal, heterosexual Indian family unit. Since the 1980s, owing to newer feminist sensibilities in the Indian audience as well as a growing discontent with sexual discrimination and crimes against women, the cinematic formula has been

revisited to include a careful construction of a ›good‹ woman who turns violent due to her circumstance.

My contribution looks at the fraught construction of this new ›good‹ woman of Bollywood through three films – *Khoon Bhari Maang* (1988), *Goliyon ki Rasleela: Ram Leela* (2013), and *Darlings* (2022) – to demonstrate the variety of strategies used in her construction, and a sustained reliance on certain tropes of female violence. Through these films, I question the agency afforded to these female characters, as well as the factors that undercut or enhance this agency.

The commercial Hindi film industry, also known by its alias ›Bollywood‹, has long relied on the format of the melodrama to grapple with the hegemonic pressure of, on the one hand, upholding the figure of the ideal, respectable, and ›pure‹ Indian woman. On the other hand, Bollywood has recognised and included the aesthetic, scopophilic, and commercial requirements of its vast, heterogeneous audience – and the consequent variety of its sexual idiosyncrasies – that demand an erotic spectacle for visual pleasure in addition to the idealised moral universe. Karen Gabriel describes the format of the melodrama as »reliant on the organization and narrativization of the sexual – and thus on the family which is a crucial manifestation of the organization of sexuality« (Gabriel 2010: 67). The melodramatic mode registers simultaneously the anxieties and desires of the public and often ›resolves‹ them within the boundaries of the cinematic universe itself, allowing a coexistence of these diverse pressures.

The figure of ideal womanhood was initially constructed by reactionary nationalist discourses during India's Independence era, and calcified post-Independence through films such as *Mother India* (1957). In her essay »Hidden Pleasures: Negotiating the Myth of the Female Ideal in Popular Hindi Cinema«, Asha Kasbekar writes of the ›idealised moral universe‹ constructed by the Hindi film industry in order to uphold the modern state's vision of the Indian woman as muse rather than erotic spectacle, or in other words, to uphold an official definition of femininity (Kasbekar 2001: 293). The idealised moral universe registers the legitimate desire associated with the ideal mother or the ideal wife, the women who uphold the values of the traditional Indian family unit. The official and desirable men of this universe valiantly defend these values, often through exaggerated violence. At the same time, the formulaic film also makes a provision for the erotic spectacle through story-based circumstance (such as the hero's fantasy of the heroine or a peeping tom), or through stock female characters such as the vamp. The vamp often acts as a foil to the good heroine, and her overt immoral coding (through skin-show or a consistent, one-sided seduction of the hero for example) allows for her sexualisation without disturbing the moral universe of the film.

The unique melodramas of Bollywood are thus thoroughly inundated with paradoxes, held together in a fragile, indulgent plot. In other words, although the plots of these films protect the rhetorical narrative constructions of this idealised moral

universe, we also see in them the paradoxical invitations to the dual visual pleasures of sex and violence.

These are often (over)loaded onto the typical Bollywood film poster; for instance, the poster of *Sholay* (see fig. 1) is framed by the two heroes and two other supporting male characters. The two heroes are seen carrying guns, thus promising violence. The female love interest of only one of the main heroes- she appears several times in the film but is not crucial to its main plot- is centred and in a state of vulnerability. Her still in the poster is from a scene in the movie where the villain *forces* her to dance erotically for him, thus creating in the plot the possibility of an erotic spectacle (which is duly promised to the audience through the poster) without compromising the morality of the ›good‹ woman and, subsequently, the idealised moral universe of the film.

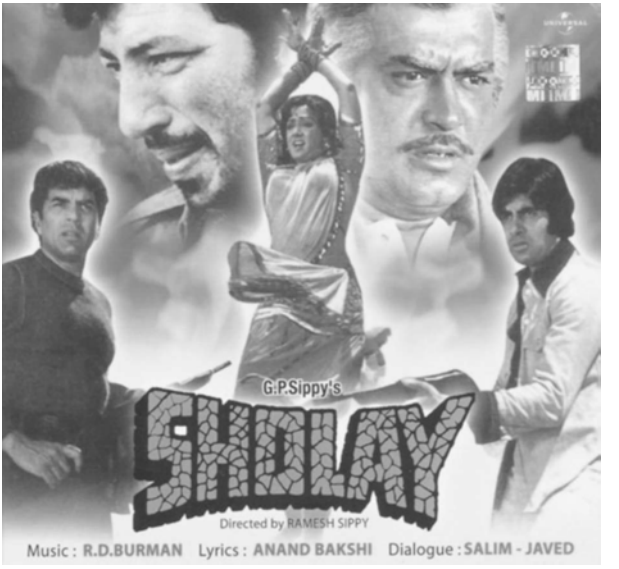

Fig. 1: Poster of Sholay (1975)

In *Sholay* and other films of the mid-20th century, thus, sex is often negotiated on the body of the woman, especially the aforementioned »good« woman. Films use strategies such as fantasy subplots, where the heroine's erotic activity, commonly in the form of a song-and-dance montage, is limited to the imagination of the hero or a »dream sequence« and thus not a part of her real-life femininity. Plot devices such as molestations by the villain, for instance, also ensure the show of skin while protecting the nationally constructed moral fabric of the film. Violence, on the contrary, is

categorically given over to the agency of the men, both good and bad. Their violence is a show of their power and a reaffirmation of their manhood, as well as a means to the catharsis experienced by the audience. Even in settings defined by violence, such as the gangsters' lair, the closest most female characters come to a gun is by being a ›gun moll‹, the gangster's mistress, who is also at times the vamp. In the films of the 1950s and 1960s especially, the moll is relegated to a peripheral role and even when she is part of the »criminal« story, she fails to initiate any crimes and has little or no connection with firearms. This denial of firepower occurs despite the placement of the gun moll outside the respectable and official central narrative of the film (Yadav 2019: 149).

2. Angry Wives and Mothers: Violence and Melodrama in Bollywood

Closer to the turn of the 21st century, however, a new formula that fused the duality of the pleasures of sex and violence in the figure of the violent »good« woman emerged in Bollywood. The origins of this formula could be manifold – India stood at the brink of its global exposure, and its cinematic culture increasingly interacted with the trends of female-centric films that proliferated in the West. Indian film producers (both men and women) responded to the new post-Independence generations of mostly urban women who began renegotiating their position in society, who entered the workforce, and displayed more openly transformatory and malleable configurations of femininity (Datta 2000: 73, 79). Representations of women in cinema, thus, began to move beyond the popular tropes of the typecast mother, wife, and daughter-in-law. These new significations of woman, however, were never set and complete. Her carefully constructed identity on screen was built to balance between the pressures of the image of the new woman and the demands of the traditional one.

The violence that was now a possible part of the ›good‹ woman's repertoire was inserted into the melodramatic formula that had heretofore ensured commercial success for films. This synthesis resulted in a specific brand of violence for the ›good‹ women of Bollywood, a trend that Maithili Rao, and later Lalitha Gopalan, call ›lady avengers‹ or ›avenging women‹ (quoted in Gopalan 1997: 43). In this format, the emotionally charged, heightened instances of (often sexual) wrongdoing against the painstakingly constructed ›good‹ woman are followed by equally heightened resolutions in the form of defeating the villain and societal reconciliation. Starting in the 1980s, the anxious mass audience of a young, postcolonial country eagerly invested in these melodramas for a vicarious rectification on screen of the anxieties of violence and female powerlessness that evade any easy resolution in the non-diegetic ›real world‹.

Some early applications of this formula include B. R. Chopra's 1980 film *Insaaf ka Tarazu* (translation ›The Balance/Scales of Justice‹), starring Zeenat Aman and Raj

Babbar. The film is loosely based on Lamont Johnson's 1976 Hollywood film *Lipstick*, pointing to a clear cultural synapse forming between the cinematic aesthetics of Hollywood and Bollywood in depicting the figure of the woman and the moral discourse surrounding her. Similar to the Hollywood original, the film revolves around a model who is raped and shoots her rapist. However, *Insaaf Ka Tarazu*, like its successors, translates the narrative into the heroine's ›Indian‹ femininity (often visible in her sartorial choices) to suit the moral requirements of its audience. Lalitha Gopalan in her essay on »Avenging women in Indian cinema« adds that »any Indianness we attribute to these cinemas lies in the various ways censorship regulations of the Indian State shape and influence cinematic representations; we must acknowledge and theorize the presence of the State when discussing the relationship between films and spectators« (Gopalan 1997: 44). The 1985 film *Durgaa*, directed by Shibu Mitra, is named after the Hindu goddess Durga who is associated with strength and motherhood, as well as destruction. In the film, the eponymous Durgaa is tricked and jilted in love by her husband, who also abandons her, and she consequently faces social ostracism for being single and pregnant. At the end of the film, she seduces the men who have tricked her and shoots them. Remade in Hindi from the Telugu original, T. Krishna and N. Chandra's 1988 film *Pratighaat* (translation ›Counter-Attack‹) also follows the story of a housewife who is publicly disrobed by a corrupt local politician for testifying against him. She kills him in the end with an axe, in an image that references, once again, another Hindu goddess, Kali. In a similar vein, K. C. Bokadia's 1991 film *Phool Bane Angaare* has at its centre a housewife who is raped and whose husband is murdered. The violent heroine of the film is constructed using a reference to Lakshmibai, the Queen of Jhansi, who is a historical icon for her resistance against the British Empire. In the climax of the film, she rides into a political rally on horseback, and kills the rapist-murderers with a sword. The new female figure, as seen in these films, is in a limbo between the paradoxical requisites of being an aggressive new-age sex symbol and being the keeper of the moral integrity of the traditional family unit.

2.1 *Khoon Bhari Maang*

The interstitial space between new and traditional womanhood is heavily foregrounded in Rakesh Roshan's 1988 film *Khoon Bhari Maang*. The film is particularly crucial in the genealogy of female-centric revenge films in Bollywood due to the considerable attention that it pays to the transition and build-up of the ›violent good woman‹, with a clear before-and-after sequence for the heroine who straddles the diegetic as well as the real past and present. The film is loosely based on the Australian mini-series *Return to Eden* (1983), and may be seen as another outcome of the aforementioned synaptic international cinematic discourse on the figure of the violent woman. Unlike the Australian series, the Indian adaptation ensures that

the heroine's misfortunes are entirely circumstantial, where she is unexpectedly widowed for instance, and not someone with a ›failed‹ marriage like the Australian heroine.

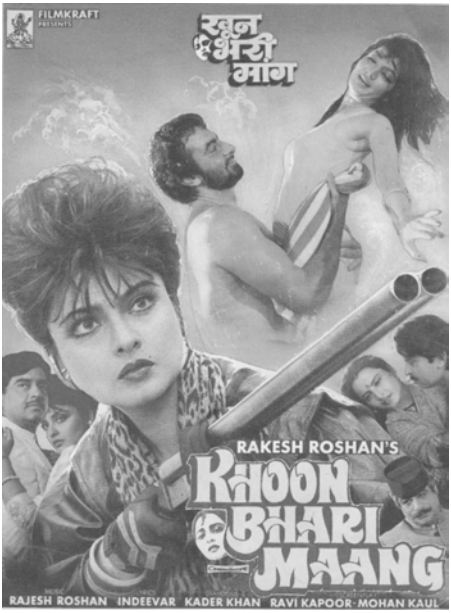

Fig. 2: Poster of Khoon Bhari Maang (1988)

The title *Khoon Bhari Maang* is a play of words that translates roughly to the parting of a woman's hair filled with blood or to a bloodthirsty demand. The title plays on the word ›maang‹, which is a homonym that denotes 1. The parting of a woman's hair and 2. A want, desire, or demand (Shabdakosh.com). The title of the film thus, on the one hand, refers to a lust or desire for blood, in line with the revenge plot of the film, and is highlighted by the central gunwoman in the film poster. On the other hand, the title could also be seen as referring to blood in the parting of a woman's hair and this semantic is seen in the small image of the central female character with a bloody forehead next to the title of the film in the poster (see fig.2). The second version of the title displays in its very construction an alliance between violence and the corporeal organisation of the Hindu woman. The *sindoor* or vermillion that is traditionally worn in the parting of a Hindu woman's hair codes the most immediately visible part of her body with her marital status, her femininity, and her connection to a man. This religio-gendered coding of her femininity is interrupted by the insertion of blood in

the parting of her hair, much like the familial narrative of the ideal woman in the film is interrupted by her husband's sexual betrayal and her subsequent revenge on him. It seems to proclaim at its very outset that the violence of the ›good‹ woman in this film is powered by the institutions that underpin her identity constructions.

The film is easily recognisable as an early Indian feminist revenge film, part of the lineage of films that I have discussed before (see section ›Angry Wives and Mothers: Violence and Melodrama in Bollywood‹). Its background primarily unfolds around the central character Aarti, whose position in the traditional heterosexual family unit affirms her as the quintessential ›good‹ woman. Her identity is smoothly constructed through her morally cognizant wifely, filial and maternal roles, especially to her two young children and her numerous pet animals. This idyllic construction is interrupted by the death of Aarti's husband, which makes way for Sanjay, an ambitious young man, to hatch a plan to take over Aarti's wealth. This ploy against Aarti by Sanjay, whose villainy is external to Aarti's idealised moral construction, deepens the sacrificial goodness of Aarti's character as a model widow; she lives an extremely colourless life after the death of the husband, is almost completely desexualised through her purposefully dull clothing in comparison to the rest of the female characters, and smiles only for the sake of her children. Aarti's best friend Nandini, who is also Sanjay's lover, is a constant foil to Aarti's simplicity – she is ambitious and glamourous, and easily swayed by Sanjay into duping Aarti. Sanjay, in cahoots with Nandini, pretends to be in love with Aarti and promises her the safety of a »man«; he vows to look after her, be a father to her children, and multiply her wealth, all while pretending to be extremely wealthy himself and thus benevolent in his intentions. Shortly after they are married, Sanjay attempts to murder Aarti by pushing her into a river full of crocodiles. Aarti is attacked by a crocodile, and Sanjay additionally shoots at her. Thinking Aarti is dead, the couple leaves. Unbeknownst to Sanjay, Aarti survives and returns in a new avatar, under the name Jyoti, now seeking vengeance. She eventually pawns her jewellery to get plastic surgery to hide her wounds and returns for her revenge. The film culminates in a dramatic showdown between the characters, as Aarti rides in on her horse, armed with a lasso, a dog-belt and a gun. At the end of the film, after a scuffle with Sanjay, Aarti pushes him into the same river, where presumably the same crocodile attacks Sanjay, and his death poetically unfolds in the same fate that he had planned for Aarti.

The film's depiction of turn-of-the-century Indian feminism relies on the recognisable aesthetic valuation of the gunwoman as the good-woman-turned-avenging-angel. Aarti's femininity in the first half of the film is defined as largely submissive, and sartorially coded in a particularly modest version of the sari. The song-and-dance-sequences are all familial as well. The ›before‹ or the first half of the film, which I argue is an almost indispensable addition to the image of the gunwoman, revolves around the creation of a moral universe that is underpinned by a ›fetishiza-

tion of chastity‹ (Kasbekar 2001: 293), thus resulting in a transition to the gunwoman in the ›after‹ or the second half of the film that is meandering and long-winded, devoid of any moral shock.

The moral and ethical credentials gathered by the fetishized chastity of Aarti in the first half enable a contrasting latter half that leads to her sexualisation and gunwomanship without sullying the nationally and familially coded narrative of the film. The second half of the film, where Aarti returns as Jyoti, ensures a visible modernisation of Aarti, leading also to a subsequent sexualisation of her appearance that stands in stark contrast to the desexualised widow of the first half of the film. For instance, her clothing becomes more 1980s ›Western‹ (although she does not show too much skin), she wears make-up, light-coloured contact lenses, urban hairstyles, and replaces her best friend at the modelling agency – all of which can be seen as facets in her transition into a gunwoman.

The female body's sartorial performance as the ›good‹ woman and gunwoman are an integral part of the film's narrative constructions. Aarti, before and after her transition into a gunwoman, shares an intricate and complex relationship with the clothing she wears, what it covers and what it doesn't, as well as in the play of colour and make up. Jane Garrity notes how »[c]lothes have the chameleonic ability to create character and to embody political and economic history. References to dress must be read with the understanding that fashion's social codes and political connotations are inseparable from their representations of gender« (Garrity 2014: 261). In the climactic scene of the film Jyoti takes off her light-coloured contact lenses to reveal her true identity as Aarti. However, sartorially speaking, she is still in »Western« clothing, and does not return to her plain, homely sari. As a gunwoman, her clothing is not glamourous either, but more functional. It is built for action, and her jacket and pants even resemble what Sanjay, the villain, is wearing. Given this, *Khoon Bhari Maang* and several other films (see section ›Angry Wives and Mothers: Violence and Melodrama in Bollywood‹) often seem to construct a (inter)culturally recognisable appearance, almost like a uniform, such as that of a mythological character or of a traditionally violent male character, for the violent gunwoman.

The visibility of Aarti's transition into a violent woman, in a way, also reasserts her original goodness at the same time that it conveys the circumstantial and ethical grounding for her violence. As she begins physically harming Sanjay, Aarti/Jyoti's violence is consistently intercut by flashbacks of her marginalisation, ensuring that the construction of Aarti's goodness stays intact through the violent dismantling of Sanjay's masculinity. In the final speech that Aarti delivers before she attacks Sanjay, she refers to Sita, Mother Mary, Durga, Kali and multiple other goddesses in Indian mythology, delivering not only an affirmation of herself as on the ›good‹ side of Indian moral systems, but also an archetypal ›good‹ woman who destroys evil, with full mythological legitimacy.

In other words, the ›good‹ gunwoman in films such as *Khoon Bhari Maang* is almost invariably used as a means to feminist catharsis, which in turn relies on the idea that a woman *resorts* to violence as a result of her marginalisation. Her violence is necessarily hyphenated and prefixed with a ›counter‹. Her fetishized chastity lays the foundation on which her equally fetishized gunwomanship is built. This use of weapons of physical violence is rarely depicted as a product of her affinity – or even liking – for it, which begs the question (that I attempt to answer) of whether this mandatory filmic marginalisation of the violent woman undercuts her agency.

Another facet of this politics of ethical violence lies in the evolution of the ›bad‹ woman, as seen in the character of Nandini. Although she is not a ›good‹ woman, she still ends up as a victim of Sanjay's (almost one-dimensional) villainy. Nandini also becomes violent as a result of the marginalised position that she finds herself in. However, since she does not embody the ›good‹ femininity that Aarti does (she is an ambitious, glamourous model who betrays her best friend and has an affair with Sanjay) her violence is limited and restrained to her own body. She is shown getting drunk and threatening to harm and kill herself multiple times, without any access to a weapon or consequential action. In other words, Nandini's moral compromise in the cinematic narrative seems to rid her of the right to be an ethically violent woman. Nandini's helplessness in the final scenes of the film is once again a foil for Aarti's agency, although she briefly redeems herself by taking a bullet for her former friend.

2.2 *Ram-Leela*

A quarry of the morally charged and patriarchally infused constructions of the good woman and her fraught relationship with vengeance and violence can also be enriched by a study of *Goliyon ki Rasleela: Ram Leela* (2013) (hereafter *Ram-Leela*), primarily because it is not a feminist revenge film formally, and yet falls back on the familiar tropes of the violent yet good Bollywood gunwoman.

The film, which is a culturally translated adaptation of William Shakespeare's *Romeo and Juliet*, is set in a (largely) fictionalised set of villages in present day India that run entirely on the manufacture and sale of weapons. The poster of the film depicts the star-crossed lovers standing on a mountain of guns (see fig. 3). Like more traditional Bollywood poster formats (fig. 1), the image of the heroine is centred and seemingly vulnerable, while the hero seems more menacing, and his line of vision is more directly towards that of the audience's gaze. The full title of the film, *Goliyon ki Rasleela: Ram Leela*, translates as »A Celebration of Bullets: Ram-Leela«. It makes a reference to the popular and religiously connotative folk art form of the Ramleela, which is a theatrical performance of excerpts from the ancient Hindu epic Ramayana, and at the same time primes the violence of the film. The visual cues that inaugurate the film seem to stress that *even* women and children are involved in the gun business and always wear a gun on them. However, the space is not a neutral

dystopia of gun-usage. As a ›bawaal‹ or small riot breaks out at the beginning of the film, the men all bring out their guns while the women are largely afraid of the guns or, at the very least, irritated by them. Here again, female characters are *reluctant* participants in the ›Goliyon ki Raasleela‹. In the busy marketplace, men deal guns, while the images of women largely include domestic chores like embroidery: they hold needles in their hands, which much like their guns, can draw blood, but are never used for that purpose.

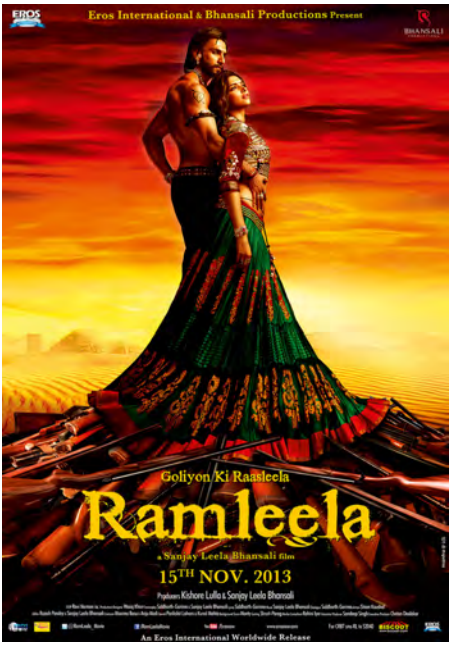

Fig. 3: Poster of Goliyon ki Rasleela: Ram Leela (2013)

The titular Leela (the ›Juliet‹ of the adaptation), in her very first shot and in her introduction to her titular Ram (the ›Romeo‹ of the adaptation), finds that Ram is pointing a gun at her, albeit a water-gun, during Holi[1] celebrations. However, she points a real gun at him. He, instead of taking it as a threat, and in a show of surrender and love, raises his hands in the air. He does fire the water gun, while Leela lifts the real gun up in the air and the sound of her bullet leads to more guns being

1 Holi is a South Asian spring festival characterised by people playing with colour and water. People often use water guns to spray coloured water on one another.

fired and an intensification of the celebration. This exchange, although it involves shooting, successfully rids Leela of the violence and bloodshed that is associated with the firearm. The film is peppered with such instances, where the gun for the figure of the woman, be it Leela, or the matriarch Dhankor, often remains ornamental, used in dance and celebration. In spite of easy access to guns, when Dhankor says she is forced to punish Leela for eloping with Ram and refusing to marry a man of Dhankor's choice, she uses a type of nutcracker (used otherwise to cut betelnuts) to chop off Leela's ring finger. In this instance as well, Dhankor's violence against her daughter is almost an obligation to the traditions of the family. This violence is immediately followed by a scene where Ram has cut his own finger in solidarity with Leela, thus immediately overshadowing this violence between the women with the image of a lover's pain and sacrifice.

Due to the family business of bullets, the gun also becomes a source of wealth for the women, and a mundane part of their daily domestic labour. The bullets, for instance, are often stored in the inner courtyard of the traditional house, under piles of drying chillies. A particularly relevant scene in the film involves Raseela, a new widow, who is asked to pull out bullets from her husband's dead body with a knife. The clear association of weapon as ornament is particularly visible in this scene as it is often customary (and this image is used in Bollywood aplenty) for a woman who has just been widowed to cry and break the bangles in her hands to mourn her husband. The ornamental broken bangles are replaced here with the knife. Nevertheless, this knife is not shown or used in self-defence when the same widow is assaulted by a group of men later.

Guns and other weapons, thus, are economy and accessorizing jewellery for these women. They are sartorial rather than hostile or militaristic, and the women's bodies and gun usage are coded as such. Leela also points the gun at Ram multiple times in the course of the film, but fires at him only at the end, when they both shoot each other in an act of Shakespearean lovers' suicide. The peace treaty at the end of the film is also formulated by the women of the warring houses.

The evasion of unconditionally violent female characters in the Bollywood adaptation is also reminiscent of Baz Luhrmann's 1996 Hollywood adaptation titled *William Shakespeare's Romeo + Juliet*, where the men perform the gang violence that forms the backdrop of the film, while the women continue to evade it. Across cultures and continents, and in translations that are deeply different contextually, there continues to be a tendency (or almost a requirement) for female characters and their association with violence and firearms to be morally and mythically coded and constrained. A more recent example of this codification can be found in the confrontation portrayed at the beginning of Patty Jenkins' 2017 film *Wonder Woman*, where the Amazons of Themyscira, the women who live in a single-sex utopia of sorts, are all adept warriors, all armed, but with traditional and mythologically legitimised weapons. Their weaponry is untouched by modern, ›masculine‹ war-

fare. Their all-female utopia is, interestingly, penetrated and interrupted by male soldiers fighting World War I, who are all armed with guns.

Aside from Bollywood or Hollywood cinema, there have been several permutations of the violent woman in small-budget, parallel, or arthouse Hindi films of the last two decades, such as in *Lajja* (2001), *7 Khoon Maaf* (2011) and *Angry Indian Goddesses* (2015). However, there is a common and striking absence in most mainstream and melodramatic Bollywood narratives of a commentary on widespread systems of caste-based or economic marginalisation of women. Apart from their conditional access to weapons, the gunwomen in these films, as seen in *Khoon Bhari Maang* and *Ram-Leela*, enjoy subscriptions to caste as well as class privileges. These subscriptions suggest that the trajectory of the Bollywood gunwoman often relies on a socio-economically neutralised plot, that is, a plot that allows the clash of the gunwoman only with an individual, an evil villain, or even a lover, rather than layered patriarchal systems or an intersection of oppressive structures. This neutralisation of the plot underlines the individually feminised and restrictively cathartic production intent of the ›good‹ gunwoman's conflict. Menka Ahlawat in her work on the angry young woman in the Bombay cinema of the 1970s, for instance, suggests that unlike the angry young man in 1970s Bollywood films, the enactment of the female protagonists' revenge and the rhetorical discourse framing it, render the legitimacy of her anger relatively suspect as compared to her male counterparts. Her quest for retribution is not couched in the laudatory language of social justice, and the injustice against her is not shown to be embedded within social structures (such as patriarchy), unlike the man's. Hence, it gets cast as an isolated incident of hurt/anger. This is ultimately resolved on an individual level, rather than being afforded a network of solidarity with other women/minor characters. When her trauma is the result of circumstances unique to her as a woman (and not, for example, as the member of an economic class) it is represented as ›merely‹ a private issue (Ahlawat 2019: 204).

Given this, I believe that Jasmeet K. Reen's film *Darlings* (2022) is particularly striking for its intersectional and renovated representation of the figure of the violent woman.

2.3 *Darlings*

Jasmeet K. Reen's dark comedy *Darlings* was released digitally on Netflix India in August 2022. Although the film did not have a conventional theatrical release, like several aforementioned Bollywood films, it was marketed heavily through billboards

and digital advertisements, and unlike many small-budget undertakings was afforded a certain level of ›mainstream‹ value.[2]

Fig. 4: Poster of Darlings (2022)

The narrative follows the life of Badru, a young, newly married woman whose husband turns out to be abusive. Badru's husband Hamza is the clear villain of the film; he is an alcoholic who regularly beats up Badru, and emotionally blackmails her into forgiving him the day after. The recurring domestic and sexual violence in the film peaks when a suspicious Hamza beats Badru up and pushes her down a staircase, causing her to miscarry her pregnancy. After this incident, Badru struggles briefly with suicidal thoughts, but finally chooses revenge. She assaults and drugs Hamza, binds him, and begins assaulting him, often imitating the manner in which he would assault her. Badru's mother, Shamshu, and Shamshu's business partner

2 The film is also produced partially by Red Chillies Entertainment, a company owned by Shahrukh and Gauri Khan. Shahrukh Khan's brand name is heavily associated with mainstream Bollywood.

Zulfi eventually get involved too, although Badru is not fully sure of her course of action with Hamza. She debates killing him, and decides on it. With the help of the others, she ties him to a train track to get run-over, but changes her mind at the end in order to not be ›haunted‹ by him. Hamza immediately begins speaking rudely to Badru when he realises that she does not intend to kill him. However, he is accidentally hit by a passing train and dies.

Badru's violence against Hamza in the film involves no firearms, but is still extremely relevant to any discussion of the violent yet ›good‹ gunwoman in Bollywood, not only because the plot of the film is formally a feminist revenge narrative, but because the narrative evades the clearly cathartic visibility of a large, powerful, and volatile gun in the hand of the woman.

It replaces the gun with the more unassuming, yet subtly incisive syringe, or the more domestic stove lighter. In the poster of the film (see fig. 4) these are, rather interestingly, held precisely in the way a gun would be held. It is with this syringe that Badru drugs and controls Hamza, while the stove lighter is used to cook food that contains substances to control his alcoholism. Badru is most definitely armed in the film with contextual weapons. Although she does not shoot bullets at him, she ›shoots‹ debilitating drugs into his system.

Much like the prototypical Indian feminist revenge film, *Darlings* is evenly divided into a first and second half that corresponds to the transformation of Badru into a violent woman. In the first half, Badru wishes to try for a child and purchases a red dress, red high heels and lipstick to seduce Hamza – here we see her sartorially self-coding for Hamza's pleasure. In the second half, however, she wears the entire outfit as planned earlier while she sits before Hamza to torture him. Her ›uniform‹ for violence, although it is not as constant as in *Khoon Bhari Maang*, is a reclaimed outfit of the old Badru. The sexiness of the outfit that initially contributes to Badru's wifely and maternal urges is repurposed to insert Badru into the image of a *femme fatale*. In a particularly intense scene post-transformation, Badru wears bright red lipstick, red nail paint, her red dress, and red high heels, a colour that would signify both blood and sexuality, as she begins aggressively bargaining with Hamza for a new house. Although Badru is dressed in an outfit that was originally intended for sexual expression and visual pleasure in Hamza and Badru's conventional heteronormative coupling, her body has unglamourous, realistic bruises in different stages of healing, which serve as a reminder of Hamza's violence and are a consistent disturbance in any perfected, cathartic image of the violent ›good‹ woman or avenging angel. Additionally, at multiple stages in this dressing up, Badru looks at herself in the mirror, cheating the male scopic drive and asserting, in some sense, an autoerotic self-hood.

The film eventually reveals that not only is Badru violent, but so is her mother. The climax suggests that Badru's father did not, in fact, leave the family, but was murdered by his wife. Badru recognises the violence in her mother and sees it differ-

ently only after her own husband is dead, making her own violence part of a pattern, a system and a legacy. The construction of female violence in the film also crosses the line of control around age and violent female power. Badru's mother, a middle-aged woman, finds a young lover in the course of the film, and is eager, from the very outset of the story, to murder Badru's husband.

Unlike each of the films that I have looked at so far, however, the entire narrative of *Darlings*, is imbued with dark humour. Comedy has been critiqued as a male-identified genre (Gillooly 1991: 475) and, in many patriarchal cultures, coded as a masculine practice. Regina Barreca in her introduction to *Last Laughs: Perspectives on Women and Comedy*, presents a critique on »the inability of the critical tradition to deal with comedy by women rather than the inability of women to produce comedy that accounts for the absence of critical material on the subject« (Barreca 1988: 20). Eileen Gillooly in a review of *Women and Humour*, draws from Barreca and from Annette Kolodny's ideas of gendered reading and suggests that women's comic productions often radically undercut rather than ultimately affirm dominant cultural values (Gillooly 1991: 475). For Barreca, »Women's comedy is ›dangerous‹ because it refuses to accept the givens and because it refuses to stop at the point where comedy loses its integrative function. This comedy by women is about decentering, dislocating and de-stabilising the world… The fixed idea of women as ›the unlaughing at which men laugh‹ has been used as a weapon against both the ›pretty little girls‹ and the ›furious females‹ in order to negate whatever powers of humor they seem to possess« (Barreca 1988: 15).

The portrayal of female expressions that generate humour is then a deviation from more popular cultural practices, especially in patriarchally-informed Bollywood cinema. When this humour is created in collaboration with violence, as in *Darlings*, one might argue that its role becomes significantly subversive.

The women speak of violence and murder jokingly right from the start, thus first starting the dismantling of the idea that a woman, otherwise entirely innocent, opts for violence as a last resort. While the expression of female violence is in in itself recognisable as a special generic permutation or formula, such expression, when accompanied by humour that evokes laughter among other female characters and the audience, proves to be deeply unsettling. Hamza's death as well evokes a shocked laughter for the unexpected poetic justice that it brings. The film, in its depictions of violence, femininity, and female humour, thus threatens the meticulously created moral universe that forms an integral part of the mainstream cinematic narratives of Bollywood. In their laughter, the women seem to almost childishly enjoy the possibility of harming Hamza, and even when they do eventually harm him, they hardly resort to any grand speeches about womanhood, mythology or goddesses. One may say that they laugh to survive in their marginalisation, and at the same time make ridiculous the insurmountable systems that marginalise them. Their laughter, I would argue, is also a weapon.

Hamza, however, is not the singular, lone villain of the film. In spite of a clear demarcation between heroine and villain, the film covers several intersections of marginalisation. Badru, her husband, as well as her mother Shamshu live in chawl, which is typical low-quality housing found in Mumbai, and thus largely consisting of socio-economically disadvantaged working-class populations. The floors are creaky, the walls are thin, and Badru's neighbours are privy to the domestic violence against Badru based on the sounds that travel through the halls. Shamshu's husband (and Badru's father) is shown to have mysteriously disappeared in Badru's childhood, and Badru grows up with a single mother. Additionally, the entire family is Muslim, and thus a marginalised religious minority in the urban Indian context. As a result, Hamza's accidental death at the end of the film does not cleanly wrap-up the problems that Badru faces. It highlights, instead, how she continues to survive. In other words, the insertion of other intersections of marginalisation in *Darlings* that affect both the female protagonist and her abusive husband, who is the villain, as well as her mother, who is seen as her ally, places their violence and counter-violence outside the idealised moral universe that numerous Bollywood films rely on. In their counter-violence, they are also enabled by other figures that, while they may not be central to the narrative of the film, accompany them on the margins of social spaces. The local Muslim butcher helps Badru and her mother in their final plan to kill Hamza, and is shown to have helped Badru's mother as well when she perceivably murders Badru's father. A working-class woman, who runs a small beauty parlour and sympathises with Badru when she is assaulted, later turns a blind eye to Badru and her mother suspiciously disposing of what appears to be Hamza's body. Their counter-violence does not destroy the system or the cause of their pain, such as in *Khoon Bhari Maang*, but is rather a localised subversion that they carry out collaboratively. Although unarmed, they are ladies in arms, since their violence is collaborative and snakes through the very systems that marginalise them.

3. Conclusion: Violent Collaborations

This brings me to an approximate answer of my original question, that is, does the mandatory filmic marginalisation of the violent woman undercut her agency? As seen in most mainstream Bollywood feminist revenge films from the 1980s onwards, a socio-economically neutralised plot, in combination with the fetishized chastity of the violent and armed woman, is seamlessly cathartic. It sets out to process and dispel the anxieties and desires of its audience while staying firmly within the glass boundaries of Indian moral systems. *In Khoon Bhari Maang*, Aarti's construction as the ideal Indian mother and wife, thus also leading to her morally pure gunwomanship, aims to play a reassuring role for the audience; the wrongs done to her are avenged (and thus fixed) within the plot of the film, while she is presented as a ›new‹

Indian woman who straddles the divide between tradition and modernity without betraying the morals of her family-oriented cinematic universe.

In a similar vein, *Ram-Leela* places female characters at the centre of the plot, often in conflict with one another and resorting to violence. Yet, these characters are secondary to stories of the pain and pleasure of the titular lovers. Guns, in spite of their ample availability, are economy and accessorizing jewellery for the female characters. In the rare instance that they do become actively violent, such as in the case of Dhankor, the weapon used is actually a domestic tool. Although Leela fires at Ram at the end of the film, at the same time that he fires at her as part of the lovers' suicide, they are in an embrace, firing at one another consensually. One might even venture to say that it is the Shakespearean plot that demands Leela's violence in the story, rather than it being a choice springing from her agency.

Such narrative procedures curtail the subversive actions of female characters such as Aarti and Leela to the idealised moral universe of the film, thus considerably undercutting their agency.

A film such as *Darlings*, however, with a plot that includes socio-economic and political pressures, notably constructs complex, uncertain, and not definitively chaste characters. These characters navigate intricate ethical layers of the social margins that they are constructed in and continually disrupt the boundaries of any such moral cinematic universe. The film places the agency of the woman not in a cathartic act of violence alone, but in her navigation of those intersecting paths and networks of marginalisation. Badru and her mother Shamshu operate in a network of solidarity.

The figure of the violent woman, when constructed thus, is part of a network built in marginalisation and empowered by its moral ambiguity. She is able to rhizomatically evade dominant, ideological narrative restraints; she is not morally perfect or represented through a straightforward ›goodness‹, she is violent and complex. Here, her agency is thus possibly empowering to others, especially other women, and is shared collaboratively. Badru and her mother Shamshu's stories of violence are shared and mirrored, inviting a reflection even outside their cinematic universe. The ladies, we realise, are not only armed, but arm in arm in their subversion.

Works Cited

Ahlawat, Menka (2019): »›itni bhhi mahaan main nahi hoon, raja!‹ (I'm not that Great, O King): The Angry Young Woman of the 1970s«, in: Saswati Sengupta/Shampa Roy/Sharmila Purkayastha (eds.), ›Bad‹ Women of Bombay Films, Cham: Palgrave Macmillan.

Barreca, Regina (1988): Last Laughs: Perspectives on Women and Comedy (1st edition), London: Routledge.
Darlings (2022) (India, dir: Jasmeet K. Reen)
Datta, Sangeeta (2000): »Globalisation and Representations of Women in Indian Cinema«, in: Social Scientist 28.3/4.
Durgaa (1985) (India, dir: Shibu Mitra)
Gabriel, Karen (2010): Melodrama and the nation: sexual economies of Bombay cinema, 1970–2000, New Delhi: Women Unlimited.
Garrity, Jane (2014): »Sartorial Modernity: Fashion, Gender, and Sexuality in Modernism«, in: Robert DeMaria, Jr./Heesok Chang/Samantha Zachner (eds.), A Companion to British Literature (vol. 4): Victorian and Twentieth-Century Literature 1837–2000, Oxford: John Wiley and Sons Ltd.
Gillooly, Eileen (1991): »Review of Women and Humor, by Nancy Walker, Zita Dresner, Regina Barreca, Candace Lang, and Linda A. Morris«, in: Feminist Studies 17.3.
Goliyon ki Raasleela Ram-Leela (2013) (India, dir: Sanjay Leela Bhansali)
Gopalan, Lalitha (1997): »Avenging women in Indian cinema«, in: Screen 38.1.
Insaf ka Tarazu (1980) (India, dir: B. R. Chopra)
Kasbekar, Asha (2001): »Hidden Pleasures: Negotiating the Myth of the Female Ideal in Popular Hindi Cinema«, in: Rachel Dwyer/Christopher Pinney (eds.), Pleasure and the Nation, Oxford: Oxford University Press.
Khoon Bhari Maang (1988) (India, dir: Rakesh Roshan)
māṅga, (Shabdakosh.com: English Hindi Dictionary)
Phool Bane Angaare (1991) (India, dir: K. C. Bokadia)
Pratighaat (1987) (India, dir: N. Chandra)
Sholay (1975) (India, dir: Ramesh Sippy)
The Pervert's Guide to Cinema (2009) (United States of America, dir: Sophie Fiennes)
Yadav, Neha (2019): »Guns, Gangsters, and »gandagi«: The Moll in Hindi Cinema«, in: Saswati Sengupta/Shampa Roy/Sharmila Purkayastha (eds.), ›Bad‹ Women of Bombay Films, Cham: Palgrave Macmillan.