Mhjournal
MIGUEL HERNÁNDEZ COMMUNICATION JOURNAL
ISSN: 1989-8681

Alternativas al amor: el cine indio reinventado en la Gran Asia

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Palabras clave

"historia del cine"; "Mitología indostánica"; "India"; "cineastas independientes"

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Resumen

A medida que el Bollywood más convencional continúa prosperando, las producciones independientes en la India están adoptando temas más insurgentes e historias desafiantes. Siguiendo el ejemplo del actor y productor inconformista Amir Khan a raíz de *Dhobi Ghat* (2010), películas como *A Death in the Gunj* (2016) y *Sir* (2018) no solo presentan temas femeninos, sino que agregan el color y el movimiento del cine indio al tiempo que incorporan temas serios. India sigue siendo un foco vital en la escena cinematográfica mundial, ya que las tradiciones de la cultura y el cine son muy anteriores a las oportunidades de distribución en línea.

Basándome en teóricos del cine como Ashvin Devasundaram, Madhuja Mukherjee, Chidananda Das Gupta y Neelam Sidhar Wright, examino las dos películas elegidas para el análisis en un contexto histórico. Junto con la influencia de la mitología hindú, este artículo busca una plantilla para un cine efectivo y globalmente relevante que respete la noción de orientalismo de Edward Said. Si bien considera las tradiciones narrativas de Rabindranath Tagore y Satyajit Ray como voces literarias y cinematográficas, este documento también consulta a los expertos en escritura de guiones occidentales Stephen Cleary y Robert McKee en su búsqueda por apoyar los objetivos artísticos del cine de la India. India merece ser defendida por sus siglos de logros artísticos inigualables y su exuberancia cinematográfica sin igual.

Alternatives to Love: Indian Cinema Reinvented in Greater Asia

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Summary
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Abstract

As conventional Bollywood continues to thrive, independent productions in India are embracing more insurgent themes and challenging storylines. Following the lead of maverick actor/producer Amir Khan in the wake of Dhobi Ghat (2010), films such as A Death in the Gunj (2016) and Sir (2018) not only feature women's themes but aggregate the colour and movement of Indian cinema while enlisting serious subject matter. India remains a vital focus on the world cinema scene as the traditions of culture and cinema predate online distribution opportunities by centuries.

Drawing from film theorists such as Ashvin Devasundaram, Madhuja Mukherjee, Chidananda Das Gupta and Neelam Sidhar Wright, I examine the two exemplary films as textual analysis in a historical context. Along with the influence of Hindu mythology, this paper seeks a template for effective, globally relevant cinema which respects Edward Said's notion of Orientalism. While considering the storytelling traditions of Rabindranath Tagore and Satyajit Ray as literary and cinematic voices, this paper also consults Western screenwriting experts Stephen Cleary and Robert McKee in its search to support the artistic aims of cinema from India. India deserves to be championed for its centuries of unrivalled artistic achievement and unparalleled cinematic exuberance.

1.1. Introduction

Indian independent films tell stories rich and unique. For Giorgio Agamben's influential yet Amero-Eurocentric «philosophical paradigm of a state of exception», such Indie films distinguish themselves as they «exhume ghosts or forgotten and precluded stories» from mainstream cinema. According to Ashvin Devasundaram, Indian Indies help prevent «discriminatory social practices and human rights violations' from advancing unchallenged (2018, p. 8). As conventional Bollywood continues to thrive, Indian independent productions supported by Netflix and other streaming apps are notably embracing more insurgent themes and challenging storylines (Devasundaram, 2018). Consequently, while Netflix steers its Asian production arm toward South Korea, India remains a vital focus on the world's cinematic scene. For Devasundaram:

> […] the fact that the Indies have thrust a mirror in front of hegemonic Bollywood interpolating the mainstream leviathan and causing the industry to introspect, reappraise and reorient its stereotypical mode, grammar and idiom of cinematic expression, is case in point [… with] films such as *Padman* (2018) positioning Bollywood star Akshay Kumar as an altruistic social campaigner (Devasundaram, 2018, p. 8).

Influencing mainstream films such as *Toilet: A Love Story* (2017) and the previously mentioned *Padman* (2018) lies the unignorable presence of the Indian Indies. In recent decades, following the lead of maverick actor/producer Amir Khan in the wake of *Dhobi Ghat* (2010), films such as *A Death in the Gunj* (2016) directed by Konkona Sen Sharma with Vikrant Massey and Rohena Gera's *Sir* (2018) with Tillotama Shome forge an independent production path, apparently proving Devasundaram's claim.

These two Indies not only feature women's themes, stories of caste exclusionism, elitism and alternative approaches to sexuality but they also aggregate the colour and movement of traditional Bollywood cinema in unique ways. Netflix and other streaming apps may provide vital platforms for exhibition, but the conventions of Indian culture and cinema pre-date these distribution opportunities by centuries – hence my inclusion of a brief history of the Indies in India in this paper.

1.2. Objectives

Like a good thriller, this paper moves fast across the ground of Indian cinematic history (Cleary, 2013), observing the development of Parallel Cinema and the post-millennial rise of the Indies. The paper then interrogates the two select examples of Indian independent filmmaking –*Sir* and *A Death in the Gunj*– with a dual focus: to examine Indian Indies for evidence of progressive film art and to interrogate the films' cultural and political claims through an ideological lens. The paper asks: what taboo themes contained in India's Indies help distinguish them while circumventing the strictures of Bollywood filmmaking?

My subsidiary enquiry asks: how do these films excel or fail to challenge social anxieties, dislocations, prejudices and restrictions in an Indian context? To these ends, I consult expert voices on Indian independent and global cinema along with the insistence of Hindu mythology.

1.3. Review of Literature

Drawing from film theorists such as Ashvin Devasundaram, Madhuja Mukherjee, Chidananda Das Gupta and Neelam Sidhar Wright, I analyse the two films as story and text in a historical context. While Mukherjee chronicles an alternative view of Indian cinema, Das Gupta details the mannered films of 1980s Bollywood. It is, however, Devasundaram's 2018 study *Indian Cinema Beyond Bollywood*, which guides my closer scrutiny. Along with Brian Collins' (2014) application of Girard's theories of Hindu mythology in *The Head Beneath the Altar*, this paper celebrates independent cinema as *glocal*: «global in aesthetic and local in content» (Devasundaram, 2018, p. 1).

As a Westerner living in Asia, I do not wish to fetishize intellectual filmmakers such as Satyajit Ray or the storytelling traditions of Rabindranath Tagore manifest in the two films. I also note the influence of Marathi Theatre such as Mahesh Elkunchwar – otherwise known as India's contemporary Anton Chekhov. Further, I consult Western screenwriting experts Stephen Cleary and Robert McKee (1999) – infamous American screenwriting guru whose analysis favours European and American cinema and provides a largely modernist perspective. Cleary (2013), by contrast, champions genre film and Australian indigenous communities, which demonstrates a more globally relevant approach.

1.4. Methodology

Any study of glocal filmmaking must contextualize research within a body of national and international cinema. Therefore, with a fascination for Indian cinema over past decades, I watched films, both Bollywood and Indie, at globally orientated film festivals (including the Indian Film Festival of Melbourne and Melbourne International Film Festival), on VHS and DVD (sometimes anonymously pirated) then subsequently on Netflix. Investigating Netflix's distribution strategy included my own articles from *Channel News Asia*. Semiotic and mythical readings of *Sir* and *Gunj* exemplify their contrasting use of Indian politics and narrative affect from Devasundaram's perspective – the former proving only ostensibly feminist, the latter more effective in its Marathi-like indictment of middle-class behaviour. While wary of my own potentially Orientalising fetishism of India Cinema, I also consult my twenty years as a professional director/screenwriter.

1.5. Scope

Analysis funneled down to two films representing Mukherjee's categories for the two pre-

dominant forms of Indian screen stories: the renunciation plot and Oedipal conflict plot –demonstrated in *Sir* and *Gunj* respectively (2018, p. 218). Consequently, I will not be covering the entire breadth of modern Indie filmmaking in India. Further, where Devasundaram concentrates on the films of the 'noughties', I feature the current wave of 'New India' Indies (2016-2018). Narrowing the field to just these two examples allows for greater depth of analysis. Although hoping to cover alternative sexualities, and notwithstanding the relational taboos depicted in both films, themes associated with the LGBTQA movement remain outside the scope of this paper.

1.6. History of Indian Cinema Pre-Bollywood

With an eye on post-millennial Indies, the scholarship of Gupta and Mukherjee involves the history of Indian cinema from the 1920s when Indian silent films contained inter-titles in various languages (English, Hindi, Gujarati, Bengali). Mukherjee consults surviving films and the original Indian Cinematograph Committee Report (ICCR, 1927–1928) outlining Bollywood's formation (2018, p. 213).

By focusing on «the complicated regional production and circulation of Hindi cinema», Mukherjee argues for an «alternative, and more geographically complex, historiography of Indian cinema» (2018, p. 213). While emphasising local and national influences, Mukherjee notes that Indian distribution was aided through United Artists' Asian distribution networks (Nitin Govil and Eric Hoyt cited in Mukherjee, 2017, p. 213). Hindi cinema in Calcutta in the 1930s underscored the Indian National Congress's desire to export Indian culture globally (Mukherjee, 2018, p. 215). By extrapolation, Mukherjee illustrates how Indian cinema advanced modernity while incorporating «eminent musicians, technicians and authors, including Nobel laureate Rabindranath Tagore» to emphasise India on the global politico-cultural map. Mukherjee cites radical intellectualism as influential for Indian cinema including: Saadat Hasan Manto, Krishan Chander, Ali Sardar Jafri, K.A. Abbas, Ismat Chugtai and Chetan Anand (2018, p. 217).

By the 1950s, the influx of bucolic migrants into Indian cities expanded cinema attendance, thus pressuring film supply and attracting post-war «black money» to the burgeoning Bollywood industry (Barnouw and Krishnaswamy, 1980, p. 127-128; Mukherjee, 2018, p. 217). With the subsequent rise of Hindi Socials, Indian cinema was influenced by two main story forms: 1) the renunciation plot, where the hero eschews authority such as *Devdas and Pyaasa*; while 2) Raj Kapoor's *Awaara* (1951), *Deewar* (Yash Chopra, 1973) and *Shakti* (or *Power*) (Ramesh Sippy, 1982) represent the (Oedipal) conflict plot depicting India's struggles against «authorial father figure[s]» (Mukherjee, 2018, p. 218).

At this time, however, the social realist movement known as Parallel Cinema became the primary source of ascendant cinema by contrast to mainstream Bollywood. Contemporarily, India's Film Finance Corporation (FFC) and National Film Development Corporation (NFDC) made their presence felt during the 1970s and the 1980s. During this transforma-

tional period, Indian cinema applied «three distinct aesthetic formations—the new [state sponsored, developmental] cinema, middle-class [commercial] cinema, and the popular cinema of mobilization» (Prasad, 1998, p. 118). Further, by comparing A-movies to B-movies, Mukherjee exposes the hybridised and transnational quality of this contemporary Indian cinema while remaining thematically distinct.

This period also marks the rise of «Middle Class Cinema» from progressive realism, particularly in the films of Prabhat: a cinematic phenomenon, which prefigures the ideological lens that contemporary Indies would shine on the Motherland (Mukherjee, 2018, p. 219). Mukherjee laments that the Bombay film industry reduced the thematic integrity of Bengali «social» films, which nevertheless defied Hindi «nationalization» and retained poignant regional features (Prasad, 2011, p. 78; 2018, p. 220).

Mukherjee illustrates that the: «continuing dialogue between global Bollywood and local cultures highlights the authorial, industrial and cultural transactions that still exist between the Hindi mainstream and its many others» (Mukherjee, 2018, p. 222). This is shown in Calcutta-based cinema such as *Kahani* (*Story*, Sujoy Ghosh, 2012) and *Piku* (Shoojit Sircar, 2015). Indeed, Mukherjee concludes by pointing out that the historical evolution of Hindi cinema involves the production of complex films. Further, what appears to be a sudden influx of «local» casts, crews, themes, locations, idioms and character types within the globalised Bollywood industry actually represents a cultural vibrancy stemming back to early Indian cinema (2018, p. 223).

In the 1970s, propaganda based on DMK politics informed the then 630 million population. As such, the governmental policy-making post-independence had not fully reformed rural areas or «terminated the tyranny of the landowner or the grinding poverty of the landless» (Gupta, 1980, p. 33). By 1978, the mainstream influence of crime and vengeance cinema in India mimicked James Bond films in a third of its output, yet homages to religion also predicated this escapist mainstream cinema (Gupta, 1980). As such, the influence of regional cinema began to wane.

The 1990s then witnessed a split into New Bollywood as the Bollywood old guard matured and global themes crept into Indian mainstream cinema. In this culturally curious, though hamstrung intellectual environment, the Indie cinema raised its mythological head. Sangita Gopal (2011) notes an increasing capitalisation, restructure and regulation of Hindi film at this time, thus changing distribution and exhibition processes. Bollywood became commercialised and branding reflected the global economy with a switch to middle-class themes that became increasingly transnational in nature. High-end technology merged with radical filmmaking styles inherited from Parallel Cinema, while diversifying genre influences, rejecting song-sequences and embracing on-screen Hinglish (Wright, 2015, p. 5).

Films such as Karan Johar's 2001 melodrama *Kabhi Kushi Kabhie Gham* proved the country's highest grossing film and attracted local and European audiences (Wright, 2015, p. 2). Sub-

sequently, films such as Golden Lion winner *Monsoon Wedding* (Mira Nair, 2001) and *Bend It Like Beckham* (Gurinder Chadha, 2002) precipitated Eastern/Western hybridisation and scored BAFTA and Golden Globe nominations (Wright, 2015, p. 3). Other hybrid forms emerged such as the 2008 remake of the legendary 1970s Amitabh Bachchan vehicle, the 'curry Western' *Sholay* (Ramesh Sippy, 1975), and the Indian remake of Christopher Nolan's *Memento* (2000) smashed all box office records in India (Wright, 2015, p. 4).

1.7. Developing Indian Indies

In India, the contemporary surge in Indie production provides marginal stories and representations to mainstream Bollywood under the questionable theology of Narendra Modi's Hindutva. Devasundaram (2018) argues that 2017 was a definitive year for content-driven Indie realism, which chose an alternative story path – especially in depicting subaltern marginalization, which like 1970s Indian art movies, made a quantum leap in representation on screen, especially regarding gender roles, identity and socio-cultural insights (Datta, 2018, p. 228). As such, Indian Indies have become glocal:

> […] the domain of Indian Indie filmmaking has witnessed a continual and sustained period of expansion and intensifying discursive entanglements with political, religious, social and cultural structures in India […] The new Indies 'reflect multifarious dimensions' of 'multi-layered modern Indian society' (Devasundaram, 2018, p. 1; 2016a, p. 2).

Devasundaram sees Indian Indies as an authentic register distinct from Bollywood mainstream fare. Hence the phenomenal rise in India's film production – now a habitual aspect of India's exported product (Devasundaram, 2018, p. 1). Acknowledging this, Devasundaram «draw[s] independent Indian cinema out of Bollywood's towering shadow in the shape of the industry's meta-hegemony» (2016a). Thus, by «providing a more nuanced, multifaceted, self-appraising and alternative insight into India», revolutionary voices in Indian cinema arise (Devasundaram, 2018, p. 1).

This is vital because India is currently under the spell of Modi's Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) and its «saffron wave» whereby the «metaphysical ideology» of theocratic nationalism – Hindutva – perverts the statutes of respectable traditional Hinduism. The answer to this politico-moral dilemma, argues Devasundaram, lies with independent film's aim «to combat the combined repressive forces of socio-cultural orthodoxy and politico-religious dogmatism» (2018, p. 2). Examining *Sir* and *A Death in the Gunj*, puts this charge to the test.

A further problem in reading the Indies is that sclerotic film theorists resist post-millennial independent cinema while similarly disparaging the cultural worth of Bollywood. Similarly, Wright argues that many scholars refuse to acknowledge Indian cinematic developments post-1996 and deride New Bollywood's lack of critical horsepower claiming less value than

their Bollywood predecessors (Wright, 2015. p. 7). Departing from the arguably tendentious Hindi cinema paradigm of literature on Indian cinema, these scholars, like Mukherjee, highlight Marathi, Tamil, Bengali and Manipuri independent film preceding Bollywood (2018, p. 3). Films like *Dhobi Ghat* solidified the NFDC's efforts to bolster Indie production and encouraged intelligent filmmaking by supporting New Cinema (Devasundaram, p. 38). With social realist Parallel Cinema as their 'progenitor' and the support of the Film Bazaar Co-Production Market the new Indies develop with arguably less intellectualism than «Ray, Sen, Ghatak, Kaul, Shahani or Benegal», but with equal passion for cinema and social issues (Devasundaram, 2018, pp. 3-5/206).

In the side glow of Bollywood, the Indies remain a stronghold for robust female roles on both sides of the camera as the «broader discourses of poverty, feudalism and rapid industrialization» find their fertile ground» (Devasundaram, 2018, pp. 3-4). Indies include such feminine social apparitions as the video diaries of Yasmin, the immigrant Muslim girl in *Dhobi Ghat*, and the dead wife's VHS tapes of pre-satellite television era Doordashan comedies in *The Lunchbox* (2013) (Devasundaram, 2018, p. 206). These are ghosts which exemplify a change in Indian gender roles and Rohena Gera's assured direction of *Sir* with Tillotama Shome's stunning portrayal of love beyond caste, rank and sex is a prime example of this.

In the wake of such thematic and financial progress, Bollywood megastars hoping to attain artistic kudos have joined the social protest and topicality of the Indies (Devasundaram, 2018, p. 7). This is ironic given that Bollywood has previously privileged its larger commercial interests for upholding neoliberal capitalism (Devasundaram, 2018): an «externally-imposed marketisation – whether naïvely, through 'cookie-cutter' market reforms, or wantonly through the predatory ambition of capturing local markets»; Venugopal, 2015 p. 8;). With such hybridization between Bollywood and the independent cinema, Devasundaram opines, the Indies are poised as the «future torchbearers of Indian cinema», which is a good point to turn to a deeper analysis of the two films.

2. Results & Discussion: FILM ANALYSIS

2.1. Analysis of Key Contemporary Indies

In examining the post-millennial rise of Indian Indies, I return to my two objectives: an examination of Indian Indies for evidence of progressive film art; and to interrogate the Indies cultural and political claims through an ideological lens. Accordingly, I ask what taboo themes contained in India's Indies help define them and how do they excel or fail in challenging social anxieties, dislocations, prejudices and restrictions? This analysis concentrates on salient points highlighted above with reference to *A Death in the Gunj* and *Sir* and to Bollywood's attempt to indie-fy mainstream cinema with such films as *Padman* and *Toilet*. As Devasundaram points out, films such as these:

[…] have been well received by the public, and have won several awards at the national and international level. The thematic markers of these films have largely been the same as that of new cinema: representing the mundane and quotidian life of ordinary characters, contemporary social and political issues with an emphasis on strong characterisation, story line, a compact script, etc. (2018, p. 38).

In her «geographically complex, historiography of Indian cinema», Mukherjee suggests that Bollywood's formation also launches the post-millennial Indies. Mukherjee notes the influence of Marathi theatre and Rabindranath Tagore to emphasise India on the global politico-cultural map. Her contention that Indian «cinema was imagined as a vehicle of modernity» is evident in Indies (Mukherjee, 2018, p. 213). At risk of sounding like a sclerotic Western film theorist, this does not necessarily implicate Bollywood, but certainly manifests in the Indies. Thanks to FFC and the pre-Bollywood tradition, we have Indies demonstrating a moral cinema – a convention inherited from literature.

Indie art cinema seems universally A-movie in nature while based on the budgets of B-movies, yet the imposition of Netflix augments the tradition of «distinct aesthetic formations of the new [state sponsored, developmental] cinema. While it might be seen as middle-class [commercial] cinema, it nevertheless holds a moral "mobilization" common to the popular cinema of India» (Prasad, 1998, p. 118). Indies also benefit from the tradition of «Middle Class Cinema» of progressive realism of Prabhat, which illuminates contemporary Indies through an ideological lens (Mukherjee, 2018). Like Modi's BJK politics, the «nationalization» of the Bombay-Hindi film industry cannot prevent India retaining its regional features in the Indies (Prasad, 2011, p. 78; Mukherjee, 2018, p. 220). In Indies there is less of what Mukherjee calls the «loss of thematic and iconic integrity» and more of women's themes, based on historical awareness suppressed under Bollywood postmodernism (Wright, 2015). Stories of caste exclusionism, elitism and alternative sexualities are still influenced by the colour and movement of Bollywood.

While Devasunderam claims that Indie films distinguish themselves as they «exhume ghosts or forgotten and precluded stories» on screen, Wright's criticism shows New Bollywood's «mimetic and anti-original qualities and […] how contemporary films now seek to 'rework' rather than invent stories» (Degli-Eposti, 1998, p. 5 cited in Wright, 2015).

2.2. *Sir*

Rohena Gera's *Sir* (2018) features Tillotama Shome in the lead role – a veritable Indie star acclaimed for her key performances in Mira Nair's *Monsoon Wedding* (2001) and Florian Gallenberger's *Shadows of Time* (2004), also appearing as Bonnie in *Gunj*. In *Sir*, Shome plays opposite Vivek Gomber – an emerging actor seeking gravitas in the Indies. *Sir* is a quality film with nuanced performances – particularly from Shome who portrays the honesty and delicacy of the domestic maid Ratna superbly. *Sir* challenges «discriminatory social practices and [potential] human rights violations» by dramatizing the story of a demure rural

woman who enters the domestic employ of urbane society gentleman, Ashwin (Gomber). The Dalit maid dreams of becoming a seamstress/designer but is humiliated by her boss's fiancé and social circle. In the meantime, her employer falls in love with his maid Ratna's unassuming authenticity – and she responds to his romantic advances. Personal niceties become loaded with amorous overtones until the taboo screen kiss manifests between maid and boss.

The action flaunts not only timeless Bollywood principles, but piques an abiding feminine anxiety in Asian cinema, wherein, after modernization saw the influx of lower caste bucolic women into domestic servitude, the city wife's anxieties about maids' dalliances with their husbands reached fever pitch in the 1960s. While Gera's *Sir* escapes the overt misogyny of thematically parallel films like Ki-young's *The Housemaid*, she nonetheless dramatizes a traditional theme in the guise of screen criticism (Berry, 2019).

In this way, Gera's feminist statement clashes with the embedded ideology in *Sir*. As Sangeeta Datta claims, an Indie such as *Sir* has the potential to «challenge[s] a largely misogynist and patriarchal mainstream psyche and radically transform[s] female subjectivities» (2018, p. 229). Yet, as Sidhar Wright points out, such an «abstraction of realism», as *Sir* demonstrates, can lead to the dramatization of pseudo-feminist politics (2015, p. 2). This paradox between progressive feminism and disguised reactionary pseudo-feminism is crucial to the reading of *Sir*, which nevertheless has the potential to realize Devasundarum's charge to «exhume ghosts or forgotten and precluded stories» from mainstream cinema and prevent the advance of «discriminatory social practices and human rights violations» (2018, p. 8). *Sir* exposes such discrimination and shows love relations uncharacteristic of a Bollywood approach, but ultimately becomes a victim of dominant patriarchal values.

As observed in Bollywood cinema, the sanitization of the home space in mainstream Indian movies led to the simplification of female representations such as the idealized mother or wife. It could be argued, then, that *Sir* as an example where «Indie cinema liberates female identity» (Datta, 2018, p. 228), but this claim necessitates a further understanding of the film from the position of embedded ideological narratives.

As excellent as *Sir* is in terms of performance and mise en scene, the film is an example where a superficial feminine liberation disguises a deeper, centrifugal masculine pleasure at play. Indeed, in an act which would clearly fail the Bechdel test, only the male protagonist's didactic (male) friend has anything to say about the unethical actions of the film's middle class male love interest. Although depicted as genuinely in love, the employer nevertheless brings about the sexual and romantic oppression of Ratna. As film scholar Sheersha Perera intimates: «*Sir* takes a classic decolonising position [but fails]. It goes out of its way to pander to a Western audience» and, as such cannot be «gritty and truthful», but rather fairy-tale in its soft delivery of pseudo-feminist politics (S. Perera, personal communication, June 4, 2021; Wright, 2015).

Indeed, the centralised relationship in *Sir* brings love into servitude – an act of modernity in itself – yet the fact that *Sir*'s relationship is taboo means ideology is already present. While distinctly non-Bollywood in style, the film *Sir* still delivers the colour and movement of mainstream Indian cinema by clever use of materials and designer shops to replace song and dance routines. The film also brings the reality of the sewing machine forward – a symbol of strength, self-resilience and the heroine's ticket to fashion design within the New India, yet ironically implies exploitative sweatshops and British oppression. This is a polysemic image – one that Gera's intelligent direction embraces: freedom and oppression collapsed.

However, although *Sir* critiques the «discriminatory social practices» it dramatizes, the film nevertheless depends on such prejudices for the plot to move forward (Devasundaram, 2018, p. 8). The sewing machine, for example, is Ashwin's gift to Ratna and allows her to ply a trade, which potentially liberates her from domestic servitude, yet it also steers her fate toward further oppression of labour. Ideologically speaking, the renunciation plot highlighted by Mukherjee functions as a conscious denial of the sociopolitical narratives running counteractively to support a meta-hegemony equally represented inside and outside of Bollywood. There is an unprocessed approach to pseudo-feminism abiding in her film as evidenced in the film material analyzed below. Thus, the gravitational pull of the narrative is not strong enough to escape Bollywood industry's «towering shadow» in Devasundarum's (2018) sense.

Indeed, the didacticism of the plot is carried by the very society figures who personify the film's ostensibly critiqued elitism. While questioning the male protagonist for his dalliance, *Sir* nevertheless bears a twofold irony: first, the film's central message is conveyed by an ill-advised didacticism and second, the righteous remonstration of the hero is delivered by a man – and a man of privilege at that.

While McKee (1999) criticizes the use of cinematic didacticism to deliver theme – suggesting, for example, that such cinematically challenged decisions as placing the male friend's criticism within the film's dialogue only highlights the fact that the film has not effectively visualized the plight within its diegesis. In this case the indulgence» is doubly ineffective given that the critique of elitism and sexual misdemeanor comes from *within* the class it critiques. In Wright and Lyotard's sense, the postmodern plot emphasises the film's «consciously mimetic and anti-original qualities [… and] seek[s] to 'rework' rather than invent stories» (Degli-Eposti, 1998, p. 5 cited in Wright, 2015, p. 9). Contrary to its ostensible feminism then, the film *Sir* demonstrates that only a man can rescue the damsel who does not have the intellectual powers to defend herself and bring about the desired social change.

In Gera's potentially disruptive mise en scene it is frequently Ratna who guiltily spies upon Ashwin as if to challenge the misogynist mainstream notions of Bollywood (Datta, 2018, p. 229). In shots which ostensibly detail radical new «female subjectivities» (Datta, 2018, p. 229), Ratna is effectively trapped within the structures, patterns and sanitization of domes-

tic spaces such as the kitchen and wardrobe. Contained within time-compressing close-up shots featuring Ratna's internality, we are emotionally encouraged to see the world through her eyes. Ratna spies through the kitchen paraphernalia toward Ashwin – frequently captured in wider shots – so while the traditional male gaze is ostensibly reversed to favour a woman looking at (and defining) a man, the filmmaker still allows the damsel to succumb passively to the advances of the male hero, Ashwin.

In this way, a masochistic feminine position emerges thematically, as if unwatched behind the intelligent decisions of the *mis en scene*. While the film ostensibly tracks the liberations of a Dalit maid, it is in fact the traditional male seduction which *acts upon her*. Thus, embedded ideological narratives in the guise of superficial feminine liberation disguises the film's masculine-serving pleasure principle. Succumbing to *his* desire in the guise of its protagonist Ratna takes the form of a demure response rather than – as Cleary (2012) defines a protagonist – a radical heroine taking actions and decisions while defending against the provocations of the antagonist.

To her credit, Gera is clearly a director who works to nurture performance, yet even this excellence in craft tends to undermine the film's stated theme. For example, Gomber's understated performance in *Sir* contrasts to other of his overweening performances in such television series as *A Suitable Boy* (2020) – based on Vikram Seth's 1993 novel – however, it is the very authenticity of his performance in *Sir* which allows a conservative, Bollywood influenced worldview to sneak in through the back door. In *Sir*, Gomber's more sensitive portrayal of a middle-class man who is morally divided is perfectly designed to affect a reverse gaze upon Ratna and seduces the viewer to reduce their criticism of the ethical situation in pursuit of the human heart.

As Bertolt Brecht describes in *The Messingkauf Dialogues* (1985), such sentimental performance principles undermine the politico-social effects of a play or film. This is also the case for Gera's sensitive casting of an actress like Shome whose sheer excellence in the art of internal authenticity strengthens our allegiance with her. Indeed, personal communication with Shome confirmed the integrity of her professional pursuit of the authenticity paradigm – a principle prevalent for modern actors (Naremore, 1988) – particularly in Indian Indies (and often in contrast to Bollywood showmanship).

Yet, while Shome's performative authenticity elicits the audience's masochistic identification (either male or female), we still succumb to a conservative picture of taboo desire. In this case, critiquing the taboo has not subverted the ideologically dominant principle of *man pursues girl* – or, as John Berger famously expresses it: «men act and women appear». In this way, as Sidhar Wright illustrates, *Sir* dramatizes only pseudo-feminist politics while reverting to more ingrained ideologies (2015, p. 2). *Sir* potentially exhumes the ghosts of former Indian screen subversions, but it has not prevented the advance of the very «discriminatory social practices» the film ostensibly condemns (Devasundarum, 2018, p. 8). While a domestic helper's journey into taboo desire might not amount to «human rights violations»

in Devasundarum's sense (2018, p. 8), it still implies that upper caste/middle class modern Indian men can and should offer «love» to their maids without significant legal or social repercussions – a conversative discourse not far from a Bollywood worldview.

Contrary to Devasundarum's expectation of Indie emancipation then, *Sir* still panders to the patriarchal and evolving metrosexual structures of Bollywood: Ratna as innocent damsel and the projected male gaze of violating her honor lurks uncomfortably beneath the surface (Mulvey, 1999). In this way, the taboo theme dramatized in *Sir*: love with a master (as opposed to the equally patriarchal symbol of love with an older concubine in *Paggliat* (Umesh Bist, 2021)) portends to challenge patriarchy but ultimately fails due to the ideological flipside of the sublimated sexual fantasy embedded in the film. Defying the Bollywood taboo in the case of the eventuating screen kiss in *Sir*, does not overturn the trajectories of traditional desire embedded in the film industry. Despite censorship, sex prevails in *Sir* – replete with the guilty male fetishism of the servant girl, but in this film the violence of centuries is repressed just as much as escapist mainstream cinema.

Yet, *Sir* still has the potential to hold a mirror up to middle class exploiters. Like the sewing machine or the sanitized domestic spaces featured in the plot, *Sir* functions as postmodern polysemy – and effectively so. In this way, the privileged «wrong lover» fiancé character functions as a Baudrillardian simulacra – a shallow middle class stock character whose sole dramatic purpose is to belittle Ratna, to offer noise, colour and stillness by contrast to the movement, silence and drab costume design of the maid. In this way, it might be theorised that *Sir* prefigures a Bollywood influence that «thrust[s] a mirror in front of hegemonic Bollywood» (Denvasundaram, 2018, p. 8), but the mirror – especially featured in the mise en scene of *Sir*, reflects only the hero and heroine's guilt, not the moral implications of intra-class seduction or the Indian social phenomenon of Eve Teasing.

Such implications also manifest in many other Indian Indies. Respondent films such as *Padman* and *Toilet* still feature the same non-Bechdel male hero (in the form of Akshay Kumar) who rescues damsels – even if these damsels are not so much throwing down their hair as taking a communal pee in the bushland – an image from *Toilet* which further suggests Eve Teasing as the men harass the women from the privileged, phallocratic position behind their motorbike headlights. This is an indelible moment in the plot, but are such films «causing the industry to introspect, reappraise and reorient its stereotypical mode, grammar and idiom of cinematic expression» (Denvasundaram, 2018, p. 8)? Is there hegemonic reappraisal involved or just surface change? This change may be akin to Mirimax's embrace of American independent cinema only to exploit the movement via mainstreaming avenues.

While there is evidence of progressive film art in *Sir*, an examination of the film's cultural and political claims through an ideological lens has revealed the preponderance of more traditional, patriarchal narratives capable of reversing the film's ostensible thematic position. While this unique Indie film certainly excels in selecting such themes and dramatizing relevant social anxieties, dislocations and prejudices, while it espouses a pro-feminine sub-

ject matter, it nonetheless fails to fully circumvent the strictures of Bollywood filmmaking. This brings the discussion to *A Death in the Gunj* – a film more adept in its critique of Indian middle-class society.

2.3. *A Death in the Gunj*

A Death in the Gunj represents a well-constructed modernist plot resembling the tradition of Marathi theatre despite its predominantly Bengali origin. *Gunj*, written and directed by Konkona Sen Sharma, features Vikrant Massey as its humble protagonist, Shutu. The plot centres on this innocent character whose human decency is undermined by bourgeois reticence, petty bullying and the ostensibly kind but ultimately damaging seductions of Mimi. Shutu tries to overcome the shame of failing his exams in the company of his family and friends, mostly shallow society types, on a rural holiday. The superstitious Shutu succumbs to the taunts of the self-aggrandising cad Vikram (Ranvir Shorey) and takes drastic action. Tillotama Shome again appears as the effervescent Bonnie while the self-interested lover Mimi is played by Kalki Koechlin.

Gunj is a case where the neoliberal family unit taunts, toys with and refuses to acknowledge Shutu as they immerse themselves in their own privileged desires. But it is Shutu – as metaphorical depiction of an untouchable – that suffers the sacrifice. The fact that the middle-class narcissists surrounding him learn nothing after his sacrifice becomes the central tragedy of this film, which operates like a Marathi play text. Marathi theatre, like the plays of Anton Chekhov, brings a theatrical pride back to the movies to counterbalance the mainstream. The film's theatrical construction contributes to the sheer depth of its character profiles, which successfully resists Bollywood stereotypes more effectively than *Sir*.

Indeed, in *Gunj*, the family are trapped in their Lyotardian grand narrative while denying the unexceptional hero's existence as he takes a personal «demotic turn» and the only way out (spoiler alert) is death – his own sacrifice and the fatuous nature of it (Turner, 2004, p. 82). The effect is anything but postmodern however, as the grand narrative signed by the greater family unit runs parallel to the very personal and fragmented journey of Shutu. The film's dramatization of a game of tag exemplifies the demotic over the grand: Shutu carries a simple low status gentility, which defines his character function, and in the game of tag his honesty undermines him – allowing the bully to entrap him in an insidious ruse. This stands in stark contrast to the other characters whose shallow, bourgeois and self-interested harassment manifests in the game. The game played in the dusty yard of the country cottage proves impossible to win for all but the privileged – a perfect cinematic metaphor for the lives of the Dalit lower castes in India: while neoliberalism promises the betterment of life for all who are willing to work toward their goal, in actuality the phenomenon ignores the underprivileged while favouring the rich.

As Sangeeta Datta illustrates, the film definitely «examine[s] the issues of identity, implicated by caste, class and gender» (2018, p. 229) in a successful, Marathi-like, almost Che-

khovian, challenge to Bollywood and the New India it embraces. By dramatizing such «discriminatory social practices», the film establishes its unique local quality, yet its aesthetic application is global and therefore becomes *glocal* in Devasundaram's sense (2018, p. 8). In fact, the plot literally manifests the exhumed ghosts of stories excluded from mainstream Bollywood as the tragic apparition of Shutu brings the film to its conclusion.

Deeper analysis of *Gunj* also reveals the presence and subversion of Hindu mythology to challenge India's neoliberal Hindutva. Here, Indie cinema raises its mythological head – a clumsy metaphor in honour of the Hindu gods and their decapitating obsessions. The (mercifully off-screen) removal of the human head only for the sufferer to be exalted in the form of a liminal animal-human god resurfaces in the back of the car as the guilty middle class family travel with the unseen ghost of the hero propped up in the back seat – ever expectant of his redemption. As Girard suggests, in Hindi tradition (spoiler alert), Shutu blows his own head off like gods losing their heads only to be replaced with animal heads and thus, Shutu enters the mythical and balances the crucial symbology of the film.

As Collins argues, Hindu texts contain a critique of both sacrifice and the scapegoating mechanism in a singular image. This stands alongside the critique that Girard sees embodied in the life and death of Jesus of Nazareth, who exposes the protagonist victim's innocence. Girard sees the figures of Prajāpati and Puruṣa as two aspects of one character and one sacrificial role—Prajāpati the alleged sinner put to death for incest, Puruṣa the positive, creative result—and Collins suggests that this bifurcation persists in post-Vedic texts. The sacrificed/sacrificer becomes a transcendent outsider figure «that embodies the self-deconstructive potential of the sacrifice» that Collins deems «by far the most radical critique of sacrifice in the Sanskrit tradition» (2014, pp. 130/136/239).

In *Gunj*, metaphorical evocations of gods and ghosts in scenes such as the fake séance foreshadow the death that will subsequently happen in Hindu tradition: symbolically, the young man is terrified in a way that caste and education might prevent. While it would be erroneous to suggest that such mythological references do not persist in Bollywood, here in the Indies the allusion becomes more subtle, thematically driven and deeply embedded in the texture of the film rather than symbolically flaunted as in Bollywood.

As mentioned, *Gunj* is a tragedy in the vein of Marathi theatre and *Hamlet* (a play Freud exemplifies as depicting the quintessential Oedipal triangle). As Gupta illustrates, «the tyranny of the landowner or the grinding poverty of the landless» haunts *Gunj* in its very rural location – despite the distinctly urban, middle-class characters of the film's plot (Gupta, 1980, p. 33). Indeed, without crassly depicting it as such, *Gunj* references rural suicide in India: the death of the disenfranchised. There remains in this action, the flipside implication of «rapid migration from rural areas' as manifest in India's farmer suicide endemic. But is the film just another example of middle-class spectacle? I argue not. *Gunj* takes Shutu's predicament further when Mimi's sexual fascination for the feminised young man leads the audience to think she may offer love, but she proves to be a Brechtian/Marathi symbol of

exploitation without responsibility – just like the rest of her family and friends.

While conservative in nature, *Gunj* still represents progressive film art. Its triumph resides in its simple narrative focussed through a planned ideological lens. The film excels in highlighting – and challenging – certain social anxieties, dislocations, prejudices and restrictions: anxieties underpinning the New India and the changing nature of middle-class affluence; anxieties embodied within centuries of animal depictions of Hindu gods; and problematises reactionary Bollywood models. While still middle-class in nature, the film nonetheless represents a social phenomenon supported rather than destroyed by forms such as Marathi theatre in the new cinema. In *Gunj*, the plight of Shutu, a «mundane and quotidian» character, plays out with honorable depth in the shadow of religion and the behemothic presence of Bollywood (Devasundaram, 2018, p. 38).

With the Indies, as with Mukherjee's contention that Indian «cinema was imagined as a vehicle of modernity» (Mukherjee, 2018, p. 213), artistic independence such as *Gunj* represents returns Indian cinema to genuine modernist commentary: a set of principles inherited from literature, but surpassing the time that modernism remained healthy in literature. Shutu's plight mirrors the alienation, disruptures and anxieties of earlier Indian films even as it refreshes tradition with a visual lyricism equivalent to the authorship of Tagore. As such, new morality – and its diegetic absence in its more reprehensible characters – are questioned from inside and outside the frame. As Prasad suggests, the film's «distinct aesthetic formations» contribute to a «moral "mobilization" common to the popular cinema of India» (Prasad, 1998, p. 118).

Within this moral recalibration of *Gunj*, women's issues are represented uniquely. It might be argued that the film's political themes overshadow its reactionary attitude to female characterisations – for example, *Gunj* presents stereotyped women in such roles as the seductress (Mimi), the good woman (Bonnie) and the controlling wife, but on closer inspection these women all possess contrasting desires and conflicting needs as opposed to Bollywood single dimensionality. Bonnie is both sympathetic and self-protective in tandem. Mimi enacts her sexuality in modern and complex manner despite the ultimate selfishness of her intentions toward Shutu. For example, while indulging in the contemporary screen kiss, the film depicts Mimi as a modern sexually-motivated woman who acts upon her desires to offset the restrictions libelled against the «It Girl» as in traditional Bollywood.

Even its changing usage of gender representation (although less obvious than *Sir*'s) shows women in greater positions of power, affect and agency: Bonnie and Mimi are not only modern women, but the film's self-reflexive appraisal allows us to examine their reprehensible behavior without defaulting to condemnatory stereotypes (Devasundaram, 2018, p. 38). In this way, though only centre-left, women's themes as historically aware critiques of Bollywood stereotypes are present in *Gunj* (Wright, 2015). Further implications of caste exclusionism, critical examination of elitism and 'soft' depictions of alternative sexualities are still present in the film text. Such sexual morays contrast to the Hindutva of Modi's

BJK and while the film's politics and themes may be national in nature, they are a far cry from nationalistic.

Using Devasundaram's premise to examine *Gunj* displays the film as a content-driven Indie, yet while hardly an example of Indie realism or revolutionary filmmaking, its intelligent representations thrive and make their point admirably. While not subaltern *per se*, its themes generate comment on subaltern marginalization in the wake of Devasundaram's claim to Indian art movies making their «quantum leap in representation» (Datta, 2018, p. 228). The film intensifies its «discursive entanglements» utilizing metaphorical representation of contemporary Indian political life and figurative use of religious themes such as Hindu decapitation while mixing them with contemporary themes in a cultural and social context. The character Bonnie in particular carries a scathing discourse of neoliberalist charity for the subaltern representation that is Shutu, which ultimately washes its hands of any real commitment to the poor or their concerns in the New India.

While borrowing its authenticity from previous forms such as Marathi theatre, the film nevertheless challenges Bollywood conventions. As such, *Gunj*'s commentary establishes its point of difference from Modi's «saffron wave», especially in that the country's nationalist debates come under scrutiny in the film. The very fact that the brothers laugh as they bury Shutu's body is a self-appraising aspect of the film, which attests (ironically and poignantly) to the moral decrepitude of this community microcosm. Thus, as Devasundaram claims, the film engages broader discourses on issues such as figuratively represented feudalism, poverty and the metaphorical effects of industrialization (2018, pp. 3-4).

Gunj might well raise the ire of sclerotic film theorists in that it avoids the colour, movement, showstopping dance routines and ceremony of a Bollywood more suited to their tastes, as Devasundaram argues, but this example of post-1996 New Bollywood does not lack critical horsepower (Wright, 2015. p. 7). With Parallel Cinema as its 'progenitor' the film is as intellectual as Ray's cinema, while tailoring itself to an intelligent global market. Set around the tragedy of Shutu, all other characters come under the scrutiny of the filmmaker as the audience is encouraged to examine the characters' motives and their own questionable behavior. In this way the general society depicted in *Gunj* represent a multi-layered modern India: an effective cinematic commentary distinguishing itself from «Bollywood's towering shadow» and its ingrained meta-hegemony (Devasundaram, 2018, p. 1; 2016a, p. 2). Regardless of the differing emphases embedded in the film, *Gunj* is a fine example of the Indies as India's future torchbearer. So, while *Sir* only toys with ideas subversive to Bollywood, *Gunj* fully embraces a network of challenges which proves Devasundaram,'s claim to the triumph of Indie cinema.

3. Conclusion

While *Sir* and *A Death in the Gunj* present alternate depictions of non-mainstream film subject matter, *Gunj* is more successful in delivering Devasundarum's charge as a mirror

and challenge to Bollywood. Indeed, embedded cultural practices find their «contemporary manifestation» in the Indian Indies, as inherited from the «vibrant [...] earliest days of Indian cinema» (Mukherjee, 2017, p. 223). The Indies represent a space where themes of «subaltern oppression, economic disparity and social injustice» can play out, can provide the potential for counterhegemonic depictions of the caste system and of women on screen. However, while the potential to challenge mainstream is considerably higher in an Indie context, it is the responsibility of the individual filmmakers to realize their insurgent themes with integrity and this requires intellectual and creative effort.

These findings exemplify *Sir* and *Gunj* as worthy «torchbearers» of Indian cinema. For example, while India's films from the 1950s to the 1980s already challenge McKee's Westernised notion of genre, it seems the renunciation plot still haunts *Sir* – but ultimately proves closer to a redemption plot as India exonerates its hierarchical structures – both predating and enhanced by exploitative British colonialists. *Gunj*, on the other hand, is unquestioningly an Oedipal conflict plot, where the young male protagonist battles and loses against an «authorial father figure» – in this case politically oriented as the neoliberalist bully Vikram taking *Schadenfreude* pleasure in goading the hero. As such, both films, to varying degrees challenge Bollywood's presumptions and excel as artistic products. But does Bollywood reciprocate? While films like *Padman* and *Toilet* suggest a definitive change in Bollywood cinema, the real influence of the Indies remains to be seen in further research and movie production.

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Cómo citar este texto: