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Contesting Traces: Embedding the Comic Within the Martial in *Jaane Tu...Ya Jaane Na*

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Résumé

Cet article cherche à discuter la conception de la masculinité mise en scène dans le film hindi *Jaane Tu...Ya Jaane Na* de l'année 2008. Cet article affirme que le film tente une subversion délicate de la masculinité hégémonique en contestant les traces d'une masculinité martiale qu'elle s'efforce d'abandonner. Le film réussit dans cette contestation car il traite les personnages représentant cette masculinité martiale sur le mode humoristique, les rendant ainsi comiques. Empruntant de la théorie de la Performativité de Butler et de l'élaboration par Vasudevan du rôle de l'humour, cet article étudie la performance de la masculinité dans le film, son abus, la fonction de l'humour, et les conséquences qui en résultent.

Mots-clés : masculinité, martial, comique, cinéma hindi, performativité

Contester des traces : inscription du comique dans le martial dans *Jaane Tu...Ya Jaane Na*

Abstract

The paper attempts to discuss the understanding of masculinity as portrayed in the 2008 Hindi film, *Jaane Tu...Ya Jaane Na*. The paper argues that the film attempts a subtle subversion of hegemonic masculinity by contesting the traces of a martial masculinity it seeks to abandon. The film succeeds in this contestation as it infuses the characters representing this martial masculinity with humour, rendering them comic. Borrowing from Butler's theory of Performativity, and Vasudevan's formulation of the role of comic, this paper studies the performance of masculinity in the film, its excess, the function of the comic, and their subsequent implications.

Keywords: masculinity, martial, comic, hindi cinema, performativity

Hindi cinema in India has always been something of an enigma. Film stars are revered, songs re-made as bhajans, dance moves replicated in every club and wedding, and dialogues reinscribed into everyday conversations. In a nation divided by all its differences, cinema emerges as a crucial site of intersections, of shared desires, anxieties, and identities. As a discursive mediator of our everyday sociality, cinema, especially Hindi mainstream cinema with its immense influence, also

holds the power to imagine and re-imagine its cultural codes. Cinema attempts to reconcile the contradictions arising out of a nationalist discourse, where it fashions certain identities and values as hegemonic, propagating a heteronormative social structure. These cultural modernities hence enter the public sphere and become negotiable, while also calling forth the private into debate. In every sense, then, the cinema in India is a significant medium through which sociocultural and political meanings are produced and circulated. One of the tools that cinema employs to propagate these heteronormative nationalist discourses is the articulation of an understanding of gender which complies with and falls into the hegemonic social structure.

The formulation of a gendered 'hero' in a post-independence India has largely been a negotiation with the aporias of the nation's politics and its socio-economic capacities. Responding to such stimuli, cinema constructs certain images of masculinity and reproduces them as nation myths; these images carry the potential to be inscribed as norms and codes. Once the construction of an understanding of masculinity becomes hegemonic, it shifts all other constructions of masculinity contrary to it on to the periphery, while inviting complementary masculinities closer to the centre. These centres are not fixed, but change constantly. "Hegemonic masculinity' is not a fixed character type, always and everywhere the same. It is, rather, the masculinity that occupies the hegemonic position in a given pattern of gender relations, a position always contestable" (Connell 76). Hindi cinema, similarly, attempts to appropriate certain such masculinities as hegemonic, providing the audience with a mould for a 'real man'. Registering the socio-economic developments, it dictates the construction of an ideal son, lover, husband, father, constantly shifting the closely-knit centres according to the demands of the dominant narrative. The repeated reiteration of heteronormative masculinities however also uncovers the fragility of such narratives. The anxieties within the structure float to the surface, and are often attempted to be foreclosed without disrupting the narratives of family, gender, and nation. So while films like *Ishaqzaade: Born to Hate... Destined to Love* (Rebel Lovers, 2012), which portrays a young rebellious couple from rival political families in a small town in India, do get made, the protagonists have to be brutally killed at the end since they cannot be contained within the narrative framework of the nation. The love story has to be aborted before it can mature. Similarly, while a *Dostana* (Friendship, 2008) attempts to bring forth a conversation about homosexuality, emerging out of the apertures in a heteronormative structure, it ultimately has to represent homosexuality as a mask, and not accept it as an identity. Similar panicked foreclosures of anxieties have been common in the industry, despite a conscious narrative shift in the recent

decades. Within this wave of interrupting narratives, *Jaane Tu... Ya Jaane Na* (Do You Know... Or Do You Not, 2008) quietly enters the domain of mainstream cinema and subtly tweaks the narratives of masculinity.

The coming-of-age film follows the lives of a group of recently graduated college friends as they battle with their understanding of friendship and love. The protagonists, Jai and Aditi, appear to their parents and to their friends (Shaleen, Jiggy, Bombs, and Rotlu) to be in love, while they themselves seem to be oblivious of it. Trying to make sense of their feelings for one another while searching for 'soulmates' in their respective partners, they undergo a process of maturation. In a moment of cinematic self-reflexivity, the film, through a dialogue between the group of friends and an outsider to the group, declares that like any other romantic comedy of Hindi Cinema, this story too includes "a hero, a heroine, fights, songs, misunderstandings, and a climax at the airport". Yet, the film attempts to distance itself from the formulaic character tropes repeatedly reproduced in the industry. With a male protagonist decisively holding his stance as a non-violent entity come what may, and the female protagonist intent on using curse words and a punch every opportunity she gets, the film plays around with normative gender characteristics. It opens doors to the possibility of an exploration of masculinities beyond the dominant and the hegemonic. The film attempts a shift away from the toxicity of a dictated masculinity, towards a more flexible and a broader understanding of several masculinities, without coming across as didactic. In its matter-of-fact stylistic approach, the film questions the normalisation and acceptance of noxious masculinities.

The film introduces us to Jai, the protagonist, whose mother, Savitri, brings him to Mumbai at a very young age after the death of his father, Amar Singh Rathore. The film consciously moves out of the bounds of a surveillant family, that in Ranjhore, a small town in Rajasthan where Jai hails from, into a more liberal space of the metropolis which allows for this shift. Savitri has to move out of Ranjhore in order to prevent her son's identity being constructed along the lines of a normative Rajput masculinity as portrayed in the film, that of a pro-violence warrior. Jai is brought up by Savitri in Mumbai, as opposed to in Rajasthan, making him believe that his father was a propagator of non-violence, as opposed to the '*soorma*' (valiant warrior) who lost his life in the battlefield. Although Savitri leaves the physical space of Ranjhore, its traces continue to haunt her; the ties to Ranjhore are attempted to be effaced, but they seem unerasable. One such trace manifests itself as a dream that Jai seems to be continually haunted by, that of a man riding a horse in a desert, a sword in one hand, in "full costume-drama" (*Jaane Tu...*). The silhouette of the masked man against the sinister backlighting of the sun

and the desert gallops across the sand, clothes flowing in the wind. The colours progressively drain, fading into more monochromatic tones; the *mise-en-scène* is accompanied by grave, suspenseful music, adding to the uncertainty and the terror, pierced by a jarring ringing towards which the horse begins to gallop. The dream often includes a male character being chased by Jai, someone who otherwise comes across as a threat to him. The ringing turns out to be a telephone on a desk. As the man raises his sword, the shot cuts to Jai waking up on his desk and receiving the telephone. The exaggerated performance of the dream is a function of the melodramatic mode. Juxtaposed to the image of the masked man on the horse, we are now introduced to Jai as a sensitive young man who is ready to give up his examination to help a friend cope with the loss of a loved one. The excessively 'masculine' image in the dream is contrasted with the image of a 'chocolate boy' not afraid to display his affection towards his mother physically as he plants a kiss on her cheek before leaving the house. This juxtaposition anticipates the film's deviation from the strictures of violence, authority, and a threatening power usually associated with hegemonic masculinity.

The dream is actually Jai's father, Amar's tool for coercing him towards being physically aggressive. Employing elements of magic realism, the film introduces Rathore's talking portrait, giving voice to the patriarchal authority, the father. Savitri asks Rathore to stop intruding into Jai's dreams. Rathore replies with a curt, "Then you stop raising him like a coward! I'm ashamed to look at him. He's a Rathore, a Rathore from Ranjhore" (*Jaane Tu...*). We immediately identify Rathore's association of bravery and violence with the diktats of a masculinity he wants his son to be fashioned into, while Savitri attempts to run away from such strictures. The portrait serves as an interesting narrative device since it gives us access into the town of Ranjhore, its history, and its practices without stepping out of the geographical space of the metropolis, continuing the narrative in the space that allows transgressions while also being disrupted by the forces of Ranjhore. It also provides us with a loose familial structure even though Savitri is the only character talking to the portrait. The ties to the Rajput family of Ranjhore which Savitri has attempted to extricate herself and Jai from are also formed through the portrait. It gives an active voice to Amar, thus providing us with a better understanding of the construction of a Rajput masculinity, a masculinity that Savitri rejects. Ranjhore, and its subsequent ties and traces, then stands for the martial Rajput masculinity. Another such trace of Ranjhore masculinity is introduced with the two brothers, Kuber Singh Rathore (Bagheera) and Vinay Singh Rathore (Bhalu), who we discover towards the end of the film are Jai's childhood companions.

The film gives us access into two generations of the Ranjhore clan - the older through Amar Singh Rathore, and the younger through Jai, and the two brothers, Bagheera and Bhalu. This provides us with different narratives of the construction of Rajput masculinity. While the brothers grow up listening to tales of valour of the Rajputs, especially those of Amar Singh, Jai is brought up with the ideology of non-violence, making him “the most non-violent person in the world” (*Jaane Tu...*), as Shaleen describes him in the film. The brothers have also been conditioned to provide a proof of their masculinity through the fulfilment of three conditions that marks their initiation into manhood - to ride a horse, to beat someone up, and to get arrested and be locked up in a jail. They travel from Ranjhore to Mumbai in order to fulfil these conditions since they are unable to do so in Ranjhore, thus being subject to mockery. The conditions also symbolise the association of violence to an acceptable masculinity. The requirement of the fulfillment of certain condition in order to a proof of their masculinity however, brings to surface the anxieties of the narrative of hegemonic masculinity. Such hegemonic masculinity is impelled into a repetitious enactment of itself that indexes its vulnerability and anxieties.

Ranjhore manifests itself as an elemental force which has tried to be repressed and abandoned. Savitri runs away from Ranjhore due to her belief that a new imagination of masculinity is possible only out of the bounds of the small town in Rajasthan, realising this possibility in the metropolis of Mumbai. Mumbai is imagined as the gateway between the physical spaces outside the country which allow for such transgressions and that of a small town like Ranjhore with boundaries demarcating the constraints of a masculinity, constraints that must not be trespassed. Even though Savitri aims to abandon the ties to Ranjhore, she realises that she cannot be completely free of her sedimented past. They come back to haunt her in the form of the talking portrait and the dreams, and later the brothers. These traces are, however, employed comically, subverting the narrative and diluting their force. The brothers from Ranjhore, Bhalu and Bagheera, caricatured as “a pair of clownishly threatening “cowboys”” (Selinger 59) throughout the film, fulfil the function of comedy. They admittedly “lack intelligence” (*Jaane Tu...*), as they confess to Jai, congratulating him on deceiving them with his wit. Their jester-like exaggerated actions ridicule their performance of masculinity - they ride around the town on horses, with cowboy hats and bejewelled leather vests, embodying the comic.

Judith Butler, in her seminal theorisation of gender as performance states, “[G]ender is instituted through the stylization of the body and, hence, must be understood as the mundane way in which bodily gestures, movements, and enactments of various kinds constitute the illusion of an abiding gendered self” (519). The

insistence of the brothers to abide by the norms of masculinity and thus 'belong' to the Ranjhore clan drives them to excessively enact their gendered selves, constructing an identity acceptable as 'masculine'. Their actions come across as an exaggerated performance of a masculinity that they are desperate to provide proof for, thus revealing its anxieties. Further, examining the distinction between sex and gender through Beauvoir's claim of woman as a historic idea, Butler states, "To be female is, according to that distinction, a facticity which has no meaning, but to be a woman is to have *become* a woman, to compel the body to conform to an historical idea of 'woman,' to induce the body to become a cultural sign, to materialize oneself in obedience to an historically delimited possibility, and to do this as a sustained and repeated corporeal project" (522, emphasis in original). By extension, to be a man is to compel the body to conform to a historic idea of 'man', as is visible in the forced materialisation of cultural and historic markers of masculinity on the bodies of the brothers. Their substitution of cars and other means of transport with horses, cowboy clothing and bulky ornamental jewellery are manifested as identity markers on a threateningly muscular body. The embodiment of masculinity is necessary for the brothers in order to repeat the corporeal project. Butler further states, "That gender reality is created through sustained social performances means that the very notions of an essential sex, a true or abiding masculinity or femininity, are also constituted as part of the strategy by which the performative aspect of gender is concealed" (528). The exaggerated performance of their masculinity by the brothers however seems to unfurl this performative aspect, revealing rather than concealing. The exaggeration brings to surface the festering anxieties, subverting the hegemonic narrative while conforming to it. This paradoxical performance works through an embedding of the comic with the warrior.

The brothers travel from Ranjhore to Mumbai, shamelessly harassing women, getting into brawls, and slapping a police constable, forced to act violently criminal by a desperation to provide proof of them being 'men'. Connell notes, "Violence is a part of a system of domination, but is at the same time a measure of its imperfection. A thoroughly legitimate hierarchy would have less need to intimidate" (84). The anxieties of the hegemonic narrative of masculinity thus reveal themselves since they require constant legitimisation. The brothers function through paradoxes; they are compelled to act as recalcitrants in order to conform. Thus, when they are finally arrested in Mumbai, they celebrate. Their celebration at being thrown into the jail, hence fulfilling the three conditions, reveals the anxiety acting here as a driving force. It is not a celebration of their fulfilment of the conditions, but a relief from the mocking laughter that would now cease. They explain to Jai how

the “entire clan had been laughing at [them]” (*Jaane Tu...*) due to their inability to provide proof of their masculinity. It is the mockery of their ‘inadequate masculinity’ that creates this anxiety, driving them to the extent of acting criminal. The mockery arises out of a failure of the hegemonic martial masculinity. Homi Bhabha’s formulation of colonial mimicry which produces ‘mimic men’ is of interest here. Bhabha notes: “[C]olonial mimicry is the desire for a reformed, recognizable Other, as a subject of a difference that is almost the same, but not quite. Which is to say, that the discourse of mimicry is constructed around an *ambivalence*; in order to be effective, mimicry must continually produce its slippage, its excess, its difference” (126, emphasis in original). Like the mimic man, the brothers mimic the performance of the Rajput warriors, but what is reproduced is the excess. While the brothers do not attempt to mimic the discursive masculinity, their performance arises out of the mockery and ridicule they are subjected to, producing a compensatory act of excess. The mockery here is inverted; the brothers do not mock, but are subjected to mockery, driving them to fulfil the conditions and curtail the ridicule. Mockery thus becomes a function and a tool of the hegemonic discourse itself, threatening its authority, thus revealing its anxieties and compelling the subjects to constantly prove the legitimacy of the narrative. Rendering this anxiety comic with a hyperbolic performance of masculinity by the brothers, the possibility of subtly ridiculing a glorified martial masculinity arises. The film attempts to question this narrative of masculinity, destabilising its legitimacy and authority. However, these openings are sutured shut in the end as Jai too fulfils the three conditions, albeit without a conscious recognition of doing so.

It is ultimately the brothers who fulfil the function of knitting together the narrative of the film by filling in the gaps, revealing to Jai the truth about his father and helping him bring to fruition his destined task, providing the audience with a melodramatic narrative closure. Ravi Vasudevan theorises the role of the comic as one serving the ends of narrative gratification:

However, despite these straightforward performative functions, the comic too may be articulated with the narrative. He is related to the hero as his distorted mirror image, he who has no heroic propensities, whose romantic forays tend to be spurned or farcical. Further, his positioning in a reassuring parallelism to the narrative proper, enshrining as it were the feature of a purely performative entertainment, may also be reinstated in the narrative precisely to serve the ends of narrative gratification. He may be used to correct the imbalances wrought in the narrative, and to bring the hero out of his travails and back on course to accomplish his objectives. (48)

The brothers can be observed fulfilling similar functions, driving Jai back on his course to stop Aditi, the female protagonist, and confess his love, thus reinstating the patriarchal order. They successfully help him get out of prison and on his way to meet Aditi, thus helping correct the imbalances caused due to Jai's transgression of the hegemonic narrative of masculinity, and restoring him as the narrative proper. Jai's use of violence imagines a new construct of masculinity, one informed by the martial narrative of his Rajput lineage enmeshed with the language of independence, self-determination and freedom of choice that a neoliberal subject speaks. The centre is thus replaced by another, with a rearticulation of the desirable masculinity. His ultimate fulfilment of the three conditions and gratification of the narrative of 'winning the girl' can also be seen as an attempt to resolve the conflict between tradition and modernity, a conflict common in post-liberalisation Hindi cinema.

The function of the comic can similarly be seen fulfilled by the character of Amar, Jai's deceased father. While he tries to uphold the narrative of martial masculinity and glorify martyrdom, he too is rendered as a function of comedy. The juxtaposition of the physical markers of masculinity to his alliterative speech constantly rebutted by Savitri undermines his position as a royal warrior, inflecting his function from that of the overbearing patriarch to a helplessly hopeful progenitor. Savitri can be identified as the force of inflection against his narrative of masculinity. The pride that Amar takes in being a martyr is dissolved by Savitri telling him that she would have been happier had he come back alive after "being slapped ten times" (*Jaane Tu...*). She disassembles the pride he associates with being a martyr's widow, preferring a 'coward' alive to a valiant dead. Amar's dialogues too are embedded with alliteration and repetition, rendering them comic. While his performance is that of a fearless warrior, he is betrayed by his speech. He warns Savitri saying, "*Tumhe kya lagta hai, Savitri, ki woh apni parampara se door reh kar, apni parampara ke prati, paramparik nahi rahega?* (What do you think, Savitri, staying away from his traditions, he won't stay traditional towards his traditions?) He proceeds to assert in English that "You can take the Rathore out of Ranjhore, but you cannot take the Ranjhore out of the Rathore". The alliteration and repetition employed in his prophecy is syntactically structured as a tongue twister, bringing out the comic in the warrior. The humour embedded in his speech seems to make him come across as non-serious, diluting the impact of his narrative. His narrative of masculinity is thus implicitly questioned, not just by Savitri's direct rebuttals, but also by his own delivery of a comically infused speech. Amar's anxieties associated with his narrative of masculinity are also revealed. His constant repetition of the fact that Jai is a Rathore from Ranjhore, and his

disapproval of Savitri's indoctrination of non-violence, along with an insecurity of his son not proving himself to be 'a man' reveal the anxieties festering under Amar's narrative of masculinity. Savitri considers this narrative toxic, thus trying to protect Jai from it. She calls the Ranjhore clan "*pagal, sirfire, hinsak, mard*" (mad, out-of-their-heads, violent men). The distaste she conveys by her emphasis of the word *mard* (men) along with the pause before it connotes her association of their understanding of bravery, valiance, and necessary violence with a toxic masculinity. This is the noxious martial masculinity that she wants to run away from, preventing her son from coming into contact with this narrative. The traces nevertheless continue to haunt them, catching up with them in the end. The comics thus serve dual functions, of revealing anxieties of the hegemonic masculinity and of driving the protagonist towards the fulfilment of his narrative objective.

The film thus can be said to succeed in its attempts to contest and subvert the traces from previous hegemonic masculinities. Through the tools employed as traces of a space attempted to be forgotten, *Jaane Tu...* addresses the discursive narrative of masculinity while attempting subtle subversions. Embedding the comic within the martial, it reinscribes the understanding of masculinity and its performance, contesting and destabilising the narrative.

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