Voyeurism, Intrusion and Aggression

The Courtship Narratives of Modern Masala

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Unless otherwise acknowledged in the text, this thesis represents the original work of the author.

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Abstract

The prevalence of rape and sexual violence in India has been the subject of much recent discussion, leading some to question the role of Bollywood film in contributing to narratives of male dominance and normalised sexual violence. Bollywood itself has undergone extensive change in the past two decades, with a realignment of priorities away from the historical mass audience towards a new market dominated by the middle class. This thesis examines the courtship narratives of modern masala films starring Salman Khan, the most successful Bollywood genre in recent years. It argues that male dominance is a consistent theme of courtship, as the hero’s control is solidified in three key ways: through his ability to commit acts of voyeurism and subject the heroine to a controlling male gaze; through his superior mobility and ability to enter the heroine’s personal space; and through his superior physical strength and ability to make the heroine the subject of his physical violence. The films provide a consistent framework for a courtship dominated by male dominance and violence, disciplining modern heroines into traditional patriarchal structures and the traditional structure of hero-dominated masala film. The key finding is that modern masala films normalise and celebrate sexual aggression and male dominance as integral features of courtship.
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Introduction

A rape culture and a dominant cultural text

A series of violent rape cases and widespread anti-rape protests have in recent years brought global attention to issues of women’s rights and sexual violence in India. As rape and sexual violence became common topics of debate, the terms “rape culture” and “rape epidemic” entered mainstream political discourse as frameworks for conceptualising the breadth and depth of sexual violence in the country. One report found that “There were at least 213,585 cases of crimes against women including 22,172 rape cases, 29,795 cases of kidnapping and abduction, and 8,391 cases of dowry deaths in 2010,” while media reports frequently note that the majority of crimes against women go unreported.3

In late 2013 the attention of some in the media turned to Bollywood film and its role in perpetuating patriarchal values.5 Director Farhan Akhtar wrote in India Today that “romantic


wooing has been replaced by a kind of harassment of the heroine,” suggesting that recent Bollywood films may influence the attitudes of audiences towards sexual violence: “Now imagine that this actor is a role model to millions…wouldn’t his fans think this is okay?”6

The concerns of these authors were not new; rather they tapped into concerns about Bollywood’s portrayal of women, gender relations and sexual violence that have been raised since as early as the 1960s. The typical Bollywood hero of that time was dubbed the “Krishna-lover,” in reference to the mischievous Hindu deity’s harassment of girls, and described in evocative prose by Sudhir Kakar:

_The Krishna-lover is physically importunate, what Indian-English will perhaps call the “eve-teasing” hero, whose initial contact with women verges on that of sexual harassment...the Krishna-lover is all over and all around the heroine who is initially annoyed, recalcitrant, and quite unaware of the impact the hero’s phallic intrusiveness has on her...He tries to draw the heroine’s attention by all possible means – aggressive innuendoes and double entendres, suggestive song and dance routines, bobbing up in the most unexpected places to startle and tease her as she goes about her daily life...He is phallus incarnate, with distinct elements of the ‘flasher’ who needs constant reassurance by the woman of his power, intactness, and especially his magical qualities that can transform a cool Amazon into a hot, lusting female. The fantasy is one of the phallus – Shammi Kapoor in his films used his whole body as one – humbling the pride of the unapproachable woman, melting her indifference and unconcern into submission and longing.”7

While academic research on sexual violence in Bollywood films has been sporadic, a number of themes can be identified from this body of work. Perhaps most important is Indian cinema’s role as “a privileged arena for the creation of the erotic,” in which filmgoers observe, discuss, perform and, perhaps most importantly, develop sexuality away from the restrictive confines of the traditional joint family.8 This is particularly important in a society in which

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opportunities for sexual learning are limited and sexual education is often predicated on nationalist models of heteronormative sexuality. Steve Derne, in his ethnographic study of male filmgoers, and Anvita Madan-Bahel, in her sexual health training program, found that Bollywood film played an important role in the development of sexuality among both Indians and diasporic South Asians. Srividya Ramasubramanian and Mary Beth Oliver, reviewing sexual learning literature and applying it to the Indian context, wrote that “exposure to media portrayals of sexually explicit material can have a variety of effects on viewers’ attitudes and behaviors, many of which are causes for concern.” Ramasubramanian and Oliver’s study of ten films from 1997-1999, the latest to look specifically at on-screen portrayals of sexual violence, found that both “severe” (rape and eroticised murder) and “moderate” (all other forms) forms of sexual violence were prevalent, with the former most commonly perpetrated by villains and the latter by heroes.

More broadly, Bollywood’s role in both reflecting and contributing to the development of contemporary Indian cultural values has been widely discussed. Tejaswini Ganti’s interviews with film directors, producers and actors reveal the extent to which the success of a film is taken as a reflection of its ability to accurately represent the prevailing moral attitudes of its time, with filmmakers explaining “hits” and “flops” with reference to the cultural dynamics and family structures portrayed in films. Rosie Thomas notes that Hindi film plots revolve around “a moral disordering to be resolved rather than an enigma to be solved”, while Rajinder Dudrah and Jigna Desai write that “representations of and contestations over the meaning of the modern girl, the modern family and the modern nation are…de rigeur.” In any discussion of morality and popular culture in the Indian context, Bollywood is the logical starting point. Indisputably South Asia’s dominant cultural industry, it exerts a hegemonic influence over smaller South Asian industries.

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12 Ramasubramanian and Oliver, “Portrayals,” 332.
13 Titles of production staff in Bollywood are less clearly defined than in Western cinema, with significant fluidity and overlap between the roles of director, producer, writer and even actor and actress. I follow Tejaswini Ganti’s lead in referring to this collective group as “filmmakers.”
cinemas with its films dubbed or subtitled and played in every Indian state as well as internationally.\textsuperscript{17}

\textbf{A new Bollywood}

Over the last two decades Bollywood has undergone a period of rapid change, paralleling India’s economic growth since the economic liberalization of the early 1990s.\textsuperscript{18} The catalyst was a series of developments in the economic dynamics of the industry, involving new sources of revenue from overseas markets, song and video distribution rights and multiplex (multi-screen) theatres, and new sources of capital in the form of government departments, multinational companies and professionally organised film companies. Of these changes, the “multiplex boom” has been perhaps the most remarkable: the much higher ticket prices at multiplexes mean they provide 35-70\% of a film’s domestic box-office revenue, despite only accounting for 8-10\% of filmgoers.\textsuperscript{19}

The multiplex boom has led to changes in filmmakers’ audience imaginaries and in turn the types of films being produced in Bollywood. Evident in Ganti’s interviews is a class shift in the discourse of filmmakers, who now assert the importance of the middle- and upper-class audiences (“the classes”) at the expense of the working-class audience (“the masses”) which was previously assumed to be the primary market for Hindi film.\textsuperscript{20} The increasing importance of the “classes” audience led first to the development of “multiplex cinema” (also called “niche cinema” and near-synonymous with “genre cinema”) characterised by small budgets, an absence of star actors and experimental themes, and then to changes in popular film as makers of multiplex cinema were reincorporated into the mainstream. While the 1990s were dominated by the star triumvirate of Aamir Khan, Shah Rukh Khan and Salman Khan, the first decade of the new millennium was a period of fluidity and experimentation. Having “liberated themselves


\textsuperscript{19} Ganti, \textit{Producing Bollywood}, 345.

\textsuperscript{20} Ganti, \textit{Producing Bollywood}, 324, 342-3.
conceptually from their own self-imposed audience fictions,” filmmakers moved away from the social and *masala* films that had reigned in the latter decades of the twentieth century, as well as the traditional reliance on male stars as anchors of conception and production, as they responded to the opportunities provided by the growth of the “classes” market.\(^{21}\)

(Re-) Enter Salman Khan

To the filmmakers who had declared the “universal hit” – once Bollywood’s Holy Grail – obsolete, and moved on from making *masala* films aimed at the broadest possible audience, Salman Khan’s sudden resurgence with 2010’s hit film *Dabangg* may have come as something of a surprise.\(^{22}\) The film ushered in three years of box office supremacy for Khan, reviving a career that was already more than two decades old. After *Dabangg*, the most successful Bollywood film of 2010, Khan starred in the two most commercially successful films of each of the next two years, *Ready* and *Bodyguard* in 2011 and *Ek Tha Tiger* and *Dabangg 2* in 2012.\(^{23}\) After a break in 2013, he has returned to the top of the box office charts with *Jai Ho*, which despite falling short of expectations is the most successful film released so far this year.

While some critics have dismissed Khan’s success as being confined to the “masses” – the traditional market for *masala* film – statistics tell a different story. Ormax Media’s Stars India Loves index, which asks Indians to name their two favourite actors, has ranked Khan as India’s most popular star since its inception in 2010.\(^{24}\) Ormax Media’s CEO, Shailesh Kapoor, has attributed Khan’s success to his ability to appeal to diverse audiences across India, and for the majority of the index’s existence Khan been highest ranked by both male and female respondents and in almost all states and territories. As Shailesh Kapoor wrote in 2011, “Even Salman Khan’s worst critics recognize that he is the biggest star in Bollywood today...he is appealing to every

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\(^{23}\) Box office statistics for Bollywood film are notoriously unreliable, as discussed by Ganti, *Producing Bollywood*, 37. The figures used throughout this thesis have been sourced from publicly available databases such as Bollywood Hungama (http://www.bollywoodhungama.com/box-office/top-grossers/) and Box Office India (http://www.boxofficeindia.co.in/category/collections/story-so-far/), and multiple sources have been compared where possible to identify obvious discrepancies. However all statistics should be treated with caution and used only as a guide.

\(^{24}\) The results of the Ormax Stars India Love index are not released publicly but frequent updates are provided by Ormax Media via Twitter (https://twitter.com/OrmaxMedia). For example, on 6 April 2014: “Aamir Khan is no. 1 in Mysore territory (Bangalore). Salman Khan leads in all other markets and audience segments.” Khan is also ranked first on the popular “Bollywood Celebrity Index,” accessed May 13, http://www.india-forums.com/celebrity/bollywood.
single target segment today, equally well. He crosses 50% share amongst males, females, youth, adults, and in each research market.”

The films on which Salman Khan’s recent success has been based are modern updates of the masala style that has historically been almost synonymous with Bollywood film. Rather than a genre in the Western sense, masala films “consist of elements from any or all of the genres” and “draw on all aspects of Indian popular culture…In a loosely knit story one can see big city underworld crime, martial arts fight scenes with exaggerated hitting noises – ‘dishum, dishum’, car stunts, sexy cabaret, elaborate dance sequences with dozens of extras, comedy, romance and family melodrama. The appeal of these films is spectacle, melodrama and affect, and everything is designed to give maximum impact.”

Each of these modern masala films is designed in this vein, but tweaked to suit the sensibilities of the modern audience.

In modern masala, as in its parent genre, the position of the hero is paramount. Each film functions as a celebration of the hero’s ability to act and exert influence in a number of different arenas, as coexisting and interrelated plotlines showcase his role within both domestic and public spheres. Bollywood heroes have historically been seen to embody certain ideas of masculinity, morality and Indian nationalism, making their actions particularly important from a social learning perspective.

The courtship narratives of modern masala

In an effort to explore the attitudes of modern masala film toward male dominance and sexual violence, this thesis examines the courtship narratives of four of Salman Khan’s recent films, Dabangg, Ek Tha Tiger, Ready and Bodyguard. The courtship narrative, through which the hero courts and inevitably marries an irresistibly attractive and apparently unattainable woman, is an integral part of masala film. In proving his ability to successfully act on his desire – while simultaneously overcoming the forces of villainy and disunity in the competing plotlines – the hero justifies his celebrated position at the centre of the filmic universe.

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27 Ramasubramanian and Oliver, “Portrayals,” 334.
28 While a formal marriage is not necessarily depicted, it is always implied.
The analysis that follows relies on a number of at times oversimplified binaries. There are, of course, much more complex and nuanced readings to be made of concepts such as traditional/modern, masculine/feminine and active/passive than those presented below. The binary approach is employed here not purely for reasons of brevity but also because of the way such concepts manifest in the films themselves. At times these films go to unnatural lengths to emphasise the dichotomous characteristics of their subjects, and it is through the adoption of a similar framework that many of their common themes can be best understood. Jyoti Puri reached a similar conclusion in her study of sexual education material, an analogous topic.29

The heroines of these recent films are, like the films themselves, characterised by a complex blend of what may be seen as traditional and modern elements.

At first glance *Dabangg* appears to be the most traditional or mass-targeted film of the four, reviving and lovingly parodying the themes of earlier Bollywood eras.30 Khan plays the role of Chulbul Pandey, a corrupt policeman in a small Indian village, while Sonakshi Sinha plays Rajjo, a demure young woman who accidentally enters Pandey’s life as he lands in her backyard during a wild chase scene. The setting lacks the glitz and glamour that characterises modern Bollywood, and Rajjo is marked as a traditional heroine by the *saris* she wears and the clay pots she sells in the backyard of her home. The film’s modern edge is visible in Pandey’s ability to parody himself as well as the heroes of earlier Bollywood cinema, allowing the film to operate on multiple levels.

*Ek Tha Tiger*, which was highly successful in overseas markets as well as domestically, is a *masala* film stripped of its traditional Indian setting and transplanted into the world of transnational modernity.31 Khan’s character, Tiger, is a Research and Analysis Wing (RAW) spy, while heroine Zoya (Katrina Kaif) works for the rival Pakistani Inter-Services Intelligence (ISI). The two meet in England, and travel to Turkey and Cuba: unlike the popular films of the 1990s, Zoya’s nationality precludes a triumphant return home. In keeping with the setting, Zoya appears from the outset as a modern woman: she studies overseas, speaks fluent English, plays in a band, has a part time job, parties in bars and is willing to confront Tiger about his actions.

*Ready*, while heavy with elements of *masala*, is replete with modern themes. The film, shot in Thailand, revolves around the relationship of Prem (Khan) and Sanjana (Asin), who meet

30 *Dabangg*, directed by Abhinav Kashyap (2010; Mumbai: Eros Entertainment, 2010), DVD.
31 *Ek Tha Tiger*, directed by Kabir Khan (2012; Mumbai: Yash Raj Films, 2012), DVD.
after Sanjana runs away from a marriage arranged by her criminal family. Sanjana enters Prem’s life as a modern woman dressed in a traditional costume – her wedding dress. She soon changes into more modern jeans and blouses that mark her as a modern heroine, while her assertive and at times aggressive persona helps her ingratiate herself with Prem’s family. Overturning traditional gender roles, Sanjana moves into Prem’s bedroom and usurps his role within the home.

In each of these films the appearance of the heroine initially poses a threat to the superiority of the hero. In Dabangg the demure Rajjo initially seems unexcited and apprehensive at Pandey’s appearance, bringing into question the traditional ability of Bollywood heroes to marry the girl they desire. In Ek Tha Tiger Zoya’s independence, her role as a spy and her ability to perform martial arts places her, in a simple analysis, on par with the hero of the film. In Ready, Sanjana directly threatens Prem’s supremacy within his own house, as she wins the support of his family with a promise to change Prem, and then to marry him.

As the courtship narrative of each film progresses, however, the heroine loses her markers of modernity as she is disciplined into a more traditional feminine existence by the hero’s control of three important elements of courtship: sight, space and sexual violence. Through this control the hero is able to reassert both his power over the heroine and his centrality to the filmic universe, while the heroine is made docile and subservient. This process is the focus of this thesis, which argues that the courtship narratives of these modern masala films take place within a consistent and carefully constructed framework of male dominance designed to defuse the potential threat posed by the appearance of the modern heroine.

The focus of the first chapter is the hero’s ability to exert power over the heroine through a controlling gaze and at times through acts of voyeurism. Voyeurism has been identified as a prevalent problem and a form of sexual violence both by Indian women and by the recent Criminal Law (Amendment) Act 2013, and its presence in these films is of topical importance. The chapter first discusses the importance of voyeurism and the male gaze in contemporary Indian society, then presents an analysis of voyeuristic acts in each of these films, and ends with a discussion of this analysis and its implications. It argues that the intrinsic importance of the act of looking to the act of filmgoing increases the importance of the hero’s gaze, as it encourages

identification between the hero and the male audience and suggests a way of looking at the heroine which frames the ensuing courtship.

Chapter 2 focuses on the spatial dynamics of courtship, over which the hero exerts almost complete control. In each film the heroine’s mobility is limited by traditional patriarchal structures, preventing her from controlling the space in which the courtship takes place. In contrast, the hero’s mobility appears limitless, as he travels effortlessly between different settings and between the multiple narratives of each film. The disparity of mobility between hero and heroine necessitate and facilitate what is referred to here as a “courtship by intrusion,” as the hero repeatedly appears in the heroine’s life in order to continue his courtship. The courtship by intrusion places the hero in a position of power, as the restricted heroine’s romantic aspirations are dependent on his unpredictable appearances. This chapter also discusses several instances in which the hero intrudes not only into the heroine’s life but also into her personal space, and the ease with which objections to such actions are overcome by the hero and the narrative. The structure of the second chapter is similar to that of the first: the issue of mobility and its correlation with power and violence is introduced, scenes from each of the films are analysed, and their implications are discussed.

Chapter 3 presents a more sinister side of courtship, discussing the constant threat of rape and sexual aggression, constructed through explicit threats as well as implicit cultural signifiers, that overhangs the courtship narratives of each of these films. While the hero’s gaze and mobility are important elements in his control, it is the rape threat that most clearly demonstrates his dominance and allows even the most modern of heroines to be disciplined into the patriarchal structures of Indian society and the masala film.

These three chapters can be seen as a gradual progression through both the chronology of courtship and the seriousness of sexual violence. The voyeurism that is discussed in Chapter 1 features most prominently at the inception of courtship, giving a visual shape to the courtship that follows. Voyeurism, while powerful, cannot on its own consolidate the hero’s control, and as the courtship progresses his mobility becomes increasingly important. Mobility leads to intrusion and at times to unwanted touching, and in both Dabangg and Ek Tha Tiger the heroine is effectively disciplined by these two markers of control. In Ready, however, Sanjana’s refusal to submit to Prem’s gaze or his mobility necessitates an explicit formulation of the rape threat, which can be seen as the last resort of the hero struggling to retain his control. In Dabangg and Ek Tha Tiger
the rape threat, while present, is constructed subtly through cultural signifiers that underscore the hero’s physical superiority without overemphasising it.

The fourth chapter focuses on *Bodyguard*, a film whose courtship narrative differs markedly from those of the first three films. Its heroine, Divya (Kareena Kapoor), is a modern girl living in a strictly patriarchal family: her dress alternates between Indian and Western; she studies at university but only on her father’s strict orders; she visits nightclubs but doesn’t tell her family; she plans to get married and move to London but only if her parents can find a suitable husband. As in the first three films, Divya is constructed as a passive and powerless heroine: she is positioned as an object of the male gaze, shown to be limited in her mobility and subject to a constant threat of rape. The difference here is that the hero, Lovely Singh (Khan), acting out of loyalty to Divya’s father, Sartaj, fails to fill the gap created by her inaction. As Divya falls increasingly in love their relationship spirals out of control, leading Lovely to elope with Divya’s friend Maya and providing a clear demonstration of the dangers of a courtship not led by a dominant hero. In *Bodyguard*, as in the other films, the inevitable resolution restores the traditional order: Lovely eventually returns and the patriarch Sartaj arranges for him to marry a heartbroken Divya. Chapter 4 discusses the development of *Bodyguard’s* courtship, and its relevance to the cultural narratives of the first three films.

Together, the four chapters of this thesis argue that the hero’s control of sight, space and sexual violence provide a framework for courtship that reinforces his centrality and power over the heroine. It is this framework that allows the modern heroine to be incorporated into both the traditional structures of the patriarchal society and the traditional structures of the *masala* film. While the appearance of a modern heroine appears to pose a threat to the hero’s dominance, his control over the visual and spatial dynamics of courtship, and his ability and willingness to reinforce his control with acts of violence, provide a framework through which the threat is defused. Together the four films construct a consistent cultural narrative: a successful courtship can take place only through the traditional structures of patriarchal control, dominated by the hero’s control over sight, space and sexual violence.

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33 *Bodyguard*, directed by Siddique (2011; Mumbai: Reliance Entertainment, 2012.), DVD.
Chapter 1: Voyeurism and the Male Gaze

Voyeurism: a newly recognised threat

By creating the offence of voyeurism in The Criminal Law (Amendment) Act 2013, the Indian government recognised both the harm caused by voyeurism itself and the frequency with which it is linked to other forms of sexual violence.¹ As defined in the Act (Section 354C) the term “voyeurism” refers to the act of "watch[ing] or captur[ing] the image of any woman engaged in a private act in circumstances where she would normally have the expectation of not being observed either by the perpetrator or [subsequent viewers of the captured image]...," and is punished by one to three years’ imprisonment for a first offence and three to seven years for a repeat offence.

While the offence of voyeurism under the new legislation protects women engaged in “private acts,” Indian women regularly complain about the stares that follow them in public spaces. Several ethnographic studies involving South Asian women have found that staring is a common form of harassment experienced by women in both urban and rural contexts, while less formally, numerous newspaper articles and blog posts by Indian women describe the stares that follow them in public spaces with English adjectives such as “lewd,” “lecherous” and “lustful.”²

¹ The Criminal Law (Amendment) Act 2013, Ministry of Law and Justice (Legislative Department), no. 13 of 2013, section 354C. Subsequent citations in-text.
The responses of Indian women who have been subjected to staring in both public and private spaces suggest that the threat posed by voyeurism is multilayered. Firstly, it represents an intrusion into a woman’s personal space and in itself is a form of sexual violence. Secondly, staring takes on an additional level of sinisterness due to its frequent linkage with other forms of sexual violence including rape. In 2013, a group of men in Mumbai gang-raped a girl they had seen walking home from college. One of the rapists spotted the victim on the street and sent a text message to his conspirators, who excused themselves from a card game to join the “hunt” for the “beautiful deer.” Once captured by her rapists’ gaze, the victim was unable to escape: two hours later, she “limped out of a ruined building. She had been raped repeatedly by five men [and] asked by one to re-enact pornographic acts displayed on a cellphone.” 3 Events such as this take place with alarming frequency, leading women to fearfully wonder where a lecherous male gaze might lead.

The ability of men to stare at women – and to convey desire, control and violence through staring – is an important marker of their dominance in India’s patriarchal society.4 It has been argued, most prominently by Laura Mulvey and by Steve Derne and Lisa Jadwin in the Indian context, that films play a role in perpetuating this distinction by promoting gendered ways of seeing.5 Mulvey’s argument is that a “controlling male gaze” is a key component of male power, as women are constructed as images to be looked at and men as “bearer[s] of the look.”6

This chapter analyses the male gaze in Salman Khan’s modern masala films, arguing that each of these films constructs its hero as “bearer of the look” and its heroine as an object of a controlling and voyeuristic male gaze. This distinction is achieved through the voyeuristic actions of the hero as well as camerawork and cultural signifiers that reinforce the hero’s control. Particular attention is given here to the initial meeting of hero and heroine, which provides a visual framework through which the ensuing courtship takes place. This framework encourages the viewer to see the characters as they see each other: the hero as an all-powerful actor and the heroine as an object of desire.

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Courtship by sight: voyeurism in film

While Indian women fear being subjected to the voyeuristic gaze of men, recent Hindi films are replete with examples of voyeurism and celebrations of the hero’s ability to stare at the objectified body of a beautiful heroine. The courtship narratives of both Dabangg and Ek Tha Tiger open with acts of voyeurism, as the hero fixes his eyes on an isolated and defenceless heroine who makes a sudden appearance in his life.

Dabangg’s heroic policeman Chulbul Pandey meets heroine Rajjo during an action scene, as he jumps from the roof of a building and lands in the courtyard of her house. Rajjo is dressing as Pandey lands among a pile of pots, and his first sight is of her back as she fastens her blouse (Figures 1-2). The first sight is marked by a change in the background music from fast and dramatic to slow and romantic as Pandey turns to look at Rajjo, the circumstances of this meeting providing him with an unusually intimate view of both the partially dressed heroine and the inner sanctum of her home. He delays his pursuit of a group of criminals to initiate his courtship of Rajjo, which begins with an assertion of his powerful position:

Pandey: पुलिस वाले हैं मैं। गोलियां चल रही बाहर। यह मैं एक पुलिस। बूलेट्स एक्सट्रा स्टाइल। यह तो हम थे। घर में घरी घरी है।। तुम्हें कुछ हो जाता तो? पत्ता है मैं। कितना दुःख है?

I am a policeman. Bullets are flying outside. You should keep this curtain closed. Thankfully I was here. If something happens to you, then (what)? Do you know how sad I would be?

The first sight of the heroine through the eyes of the hero: partially dressed, unprotected and apprehensive.

A viewer familiar with the patterns of Hindi films understands the significance of the scene: the initial sight of Rajjo, marked by the change in music, establishes her as the object of the hero’s desire and of an inevitably successful courtship. In this important scene, Rajjo’s input is minimal: instead her role is determined – and her fate sealed – by her unwitting appearance as an
object of the hero’s voyeuristic gaze. If there is any remaining doubt as to Rajjo’s role in the film, it evaporates later in the same action sequence, when Rajjo’s sudden appearance is enough to divert Pandey’s attention from a captured criminal, who escapes (Figure 3). This time Pandey’s words bring Rajjo firmly into the narrative, linking her with the escaped criminal as objects of pursuit:

Pandey: There’s always a first time, always a next time. Next time, you too. Next time.

Figure 3

Pandey’s gaze is fixed on Rajjo as his prisoner escapes.

Pandey’s stare in this instance is not voyeuristic, but it is imbued with control. As he begins to appear more frequently in Rajjo’s life, in a series of scenes that take place in quick succession, his controlling gaze features heavily. His control in each of these scenes is highlighted by the position of the camera as well as by a variety of visual signifiers. Large sunglasses bring attention to his eyes and establish a hierarchy of looks, allowing him to look sternly at Rajjo without her meeting his gaze. His police uniform, the presence of other police officers and his police car, symbols of institutionalised power, reinforce his control as he probes into Rajjo’s personal space both with his eyes and his questions.
Pandey stares at Rajjo throughout this interaction, while she avoids meeting his gaze. The large sunglasses make the hero unknowable.

The controlling nature of Pandey’s gaze is evident in the pair’s next meeting (Figures 4-9). Throughout the interaction his eyes remain fixed on Rajjo, from the initial shot in which he is established as the “bearer of the look” to the final shot in which his gaze follows her as she walks away. Pandey’s large sunglasses form a barrier and prevent Rajjo from meeting his eyes as he circles her at a close distance. Pandey asks a series of personal questions while tilting his head into Rajjo’s personal space, causing visible discomfort.

The camera pans as it follows Rajjo home.
The next scene involving the two opens with another voyeuristic shot, setting Rajjo up as a vulnerable target as she walks home along a crowded street (Figures 10-1). The camera operates from the perspective of a bystander, panning to follow Rajjo and occasionally interrupted by other people and objects. The voyeuristic camera highlights the weakness of a nervous-looking Rajjo, while a police car parked outside her house signifies Pandey’s presence and his power. The scene has elements of violence and intrusion, but the focus here is on the gaze: as Pandey insists on paying Rajjo for two clay pots he has broken, he holds a 500 rupee note at eye level, forcing Rajjo to meet his stare (Figure 12). His sunglasses preserve the hierarchy of looks and make this an uneven exchange, and by the end of this scene his dominance is clearly established, allowing him to take off his sunglasses as he watches Rajjo makes her clay pots (Figures 13-7). The camera juxtaposes the still, staring Pandey with Rajjo, who performs a series of dramatic gestures and appears to be operating her pottery wheel primarily for his pleasure. Pandey’s superior height accentuated as Rajjo kneels, the camera showing her from the same high angle enjoyed by Rajjo. His control now firmly established, she avoids meeting his gaze.
With Pandey’s control firmly established, tension suddenly gives way to love as the song “Tere Mast Mast Do Nain” (“Your Intoxicating Two Eyes”) begins. The song is an explicit celebration of the act of looking and its relationship with love, a connection that is made clear both by the lyrics and visual devices such as a neon heart that reflects off Pandey’s sunglasses as he looks at Rajjo (Figure 18). Pandey is shown gazing at Rajjo in a variety of different settings, as the lyrics attribute the developing romance to Pandey’s insistent stare and Rajjo’s intoxicating, alluring eyes (Figure 19):

They keep staring at you day and night
Your eyes are like a home to mine
Your intoxicating two eyes
Have stolen the peace of my heart

“Tere Mast Mast Do Nain”, song from Dabangg
Pandey’s sunglasses return during the song, masking his now vulnerable eyes as he falls in love and succumbs to the desires of his heart (Figures 20-1). Thus a moment of potential weakness is turned into one of invulnerability, the sunglasses preserving the established hierarchy even as he stares lovingly into Rajjo’s eyes. While the lyrics of “Tere Mast Mast Do Nain” are sung by both male and female playback singers, and thus by both hero and heroine, their voices differ in similar ways to their gazes: male singer Rahat Fateh Ali Khan’s voice contains more authority than that of female singer Shreya Goshal, whose high pitch and timbre recall Lata Mangeshkar and plays a similar feminising role to that of the 20th century’s hegemonic voice. While both characters are afforded the ability to look and to sing, the hero’s gaze and voice are imbued with a level of control that is absent from the heroine’s.

In each of these scenes the way in which Pandey looks at Rajjo establishes his control. While she is only occasionally and fleetingly able to meet his gaze, he stares at her constantly, as if his sight allows access to her inner thoughts and feelings. It is tempting to see Pandey’s probing stare as a substitute phallus, denoting power, control and desire as it intrudes into her feelings and her personal space. In each of the above scenes the act of sight is linked clearly to the progression of a courtship carried out on the hero’s terms. By the end of the song “Tere Mast Mast Do Nain”

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7 “Playback singers” are the singers whose voices feature in Bollywood films; the characters, while appearing to sing, are almost always miming to the recorded track.
Pandey’s desire and dominance, as well as Rajjo’s willing submission, have been established primarily through sight and through their respective ways of looking.

The relationship of Tiger and Zoya in *Ek Tha Tiger* also begins with an act of voyeurism. Sent to an English college to investigate an Indian professor, Tiger, a Research and Analysis Wing (RAW) spy, enters the professor’s house and finds Zoya, who has a part-time job as the professor’s housekeeper, vacuuming to loud music. Transfixed by the scene before him, Tiger stops and stares at Zoya as she dances with the vacuum cleaner. As in *Dabangg*, the camera cuts between close-ups of Tiger’s face and shots of Zoya, who is shown from the hero’s perspective and framed by an internal doorway that creates a voyeuristic feeling (Figures 22-5).

![Figure 22](image1.png) ![Figure 23](image2.png)

![Figure 24](image3.png) ![Figure 25](image4.png)

*Voyeurism begins the courtship narrative of Zoya and Tiger*

While *Dabangg’s* Rajjo remained silent in the face of Pandey’s voyeurism, Zoya is a more modern heroine unwilling to silently endure harassment. This becomes clear when she turns to find him staring, and shouts at him in English:

Zoya: You really can’t be here!
Tiger: Hey, I’m sorry! Relax! I didn’t mean to-
Zoya: Will you please leave!

Zoya’s anger has the potential to threaten Tiger’s control of the situation, but it is quickly nullified by a combination of camera work and sound. Firstly, the camera – still operating from
Tiger’s point of view – goes into slow motion, allowing the viewer an extended look of Zoya in a relaxed shirt and tight pants as she walks towards Tiger. Secondly, her words are drowned out by the authoritative voice of Tiger’s boss, which suddenly plays as a voiceover. Instead of hearing Zoya’s screams the viewer hears her being introduced by Tiger’s boss, indicating that her appearance was anticipated by Tiger and thus does not threaten his control. Zoya’s objections are belatedly heard as the voiceover finishes, by which point Tiger is already on his way out the door, reducing the conflict to a brief moment.

As the courtship continues, the voyeuristic circumstances of its inception are forgotten. After being chased out of the house by Zoya, Tiger simply retreats to a bench outside the professor’s house and waits for her to emerge. When she does emerge she forgives Tiger, tries unsuccessfully to find him a hotel (he refuses the rooms that are available in order to spend more time with her), and eventually arranges for him to stay in her friend’s vacant room. As the day ends the two are shown flirting and preparing a meal together, their initial conflict quickly left behind.

While the tension caused by the initial act of voyeurism is in both cases forgotten or overcome by the narrative, the ability of a probing stare to initiate a successful courtship is remembered and celebrated in song. In Dabangg, the song “Tere Mast Mast Do Nain,” described above, is followed by another, “Chori Kiya Re Jiya,” (“You Stole My Heart”) which again emphasises the importance of the gaze to the initial interaction:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>सच्ची सच्ची तेरी नज़रें एक दर्पण</th>
<th>Truly, Truly, your eyes are a mirror</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>देदे मन की यह खबरें एक पल चिन</td>
<td>In a moment they give the news of your mind</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>अधरों ने कुछ न कहा रे</td>
<td>The lips said nothing</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>नयनों ने कह दिया</td>
<td>The eyes said (everything)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>तुलने तौ पल भर में चोरी किया रे जिया मोरा जिया</td>
<td>In just a moment you stole my heart, my heart</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>तुलने तौ पल भर में चोरी किया रे जिया मोरा पिया</td>
<td>In just a moment you also stole my heart, my love</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

“Chori Kiya Re Jiya,” song from Dabangg

Similarly, the song “Banjara Banjara,” (“Wanderer, Wanderer”) which occurs later in Ek Tha Tiger, pinpoints the first sight – Tiger’s view of Zoya’s back as she danced with the vacuum cleaner – as the moment from which the love story developed:
Wanderer, Wanderer
My heart is a wanderer
Since the time I saw her
My heart, my heart is a wanderer
My heart wanders to her tune

“Banjara Banjara,” song from *Ek Tha Tiger*

The choreography that accompanies each of these songs reinforces the message offered by the lyrics, highlighting the importance of the hero’s gaze to the developing love story. “Banjara Banjara,” which marks an important point in *Ek Tha Tiger’s* unfolding narrative as the first time both characters are shown together in an overtly romantic way, is dominated by Tiger’s gaze as he consistently stares at Zoya. The song begins as the pair separate after practicing a dance together: Zoya is shown in slow-motion and her laugh amplified to demonstrate the effect she is having on Tiger as he falls in love. The camera cuts to show a marching band, and as Tiger appears the band parts to allow him (and the viewer) a view of Zoya, who is playing bagpipes in a short tartan skirt. The camera cuts away from Tiger’s face to show Zoya as he sees her: a series of close-ups which begin at her feet and finally include her face. As he strides towards her, singing about the effect she has had on his heart, the camera cuts repeatedly between close-ups of Tiger’s captivated face and a range of shots of Zoya, who responds to his stare by striking a series of poses (Figures 26-30). At several points in the song Tiger is shown either staring at Zoya from afar or appearing next to her to look more closely at her face and body (Figures 31-7).

With the camera operating from Tiger’s perspective, the viewer shares his control as Zoya’s body is dissected and displayed as a series of disconnected parts. Disparity is evident as Tiger reshapes the image of Zoya and shares it with the viewer, while neither she nor the camera is able to control him: when he does look towards the camera he is in fact looking past it at Zoya. The song’s choreography clearly celebrates the lead characters’ actions, the bagpipes and hockey costumes giving way to a festival atmosphere and a large crowd of dancers equipped with extravagant costumes, streamers, balloons and flowers. The backdrop provides a clear visual sanction for Tiger’s controlling gaze as it continues to follow Zoya.
Stills from “Banjara Banjara:” The camera work gives a visual shape to courtship
Through the presence of celebratory songs such as “Tere Mast Mast Do Nain” and “Banjara Banjara” both Dabangg and Ek Tha Tiger retroactively legitimise the hero’s voyeurism as the opening act of courtship. In doing so they also sanction the act of looking and the viewer’s complicity in the voyeurism of both hero and camera.

The controlling male gaze

While the above section examined instances of voyeurism involving the hero and heroine, the establishment of a controlling male gaze is not dependent on the presence of a male gaze within the narrative. In Ready, Prem initially avoids looking at Sanjana, upset at her sudden appearance in his life. Yet his unwillingness to stare at Sanjana is negated by screen work that suggests to the viewer, if not to Prem, that she is a legitimate object of the gaze.

The film’s first shot of Sanjana shows only her feet as she runs, late at night, down a dimly lit street (Figure 40). Dramatic music plays, suggesting a chase, and after focusing on her feet for several seconds the camera tilts up to reveal a blur of colour and jewellery and then the face of Sanjana, dressed as a bride and struggling to stay ahead of a chasing group of men (who we later learn are her relatives) (Figure 41). The tension created by this opening follows Sanjana until she suddenly arrives at an airport terminal, and seconds later in Prem’s life as she sees him holding a sign and waiting for a visitor, Pooja.

Sanjana’s entrance is designed for visual effect
The entrance of Sanjana, the modern heroine who has escaped from her traditional family and an arranged marriage, is designed for maximum effect. Her wedding dress marks her as a spectacle both on the dimly lit street and then in the otherwise drab surrounds of the airport, where she walks assertively to Prem and his uncle and introduces herself as Pooja (Figures 42-43). Both Prem, in this scene, and Sanjana, in the ensuing scene at Prem’s house, draw attention to her exotic appearance:

Prem: ये शादी के वस्त्रों में क्यूं?
Why are you in these wedding clothes?
Sanjana: तुम्हें क्या लगा? अमेरिका से टू पीस बिकिनी पेहेनके आती?
What did you think? That I’d come from America wearing a two-piece bikini?

Sanjana: वह क्या कहता? लड़की सबसे ज्यादा खूबसूरती शादी के जोड़े में लगती है। तो मैंने अपने आप से बोला: Pooja, don’t take a chance.⁹ अगर सबको इम्प्रेस करना है तो दुल्हन मढ़के जाओ!
What's that they say? A girl always seems most beautiful in her wedding dress. So I said to myself, Pooja, don't take a chance. If you need to impress everyone, then go decorated as a bride!

As in *Dabangg* and *Ek Tha Tiger*, *Ready*’s soundtrack legitimises scopophilia - the act of deriving sexual pleasure from looking – and encourages the viewer to enjoy the spectacle offered by the film’s female characters. The best example is the item song “Character Dheela” (“Loose Character”), featuring Prem and debutante item girl Zarine Khan. The song’s dance moves and costumes parody earlier Bollywood films while the racy lyrics celebrate the fun of rapid-fire relationships and the interchangeability of female characters. As in *Tere Mast Mast Do Nain* both the male and female characters have a voice: the difference here, as in most item songs, is that the female character is not the heroine but an item girl, a stand-in who functions as an explicit object of the male gaze. While the lyrics below appear to suggest that both women and men can gain pleasure from having multiple sexual partners, the presence of the hero demonstrates that only the heroine is interchangeable. One verse shows the hero surrounded by similar-looking and

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⁹ Code switching between Hindi and English is a feature of Bollywood film. In this thesis individual English words incorporated into Hindi (or Hinglish) clauses are presented in Devanagari script, while complete English clauses are rendered in Roman script.
seemingly fungible women, while the lyrics reduce Munni and Sheela, famous characters from earlier item songs, to interchangeable commodities devoid of any personality or uniqueness. The song is extradiegetic and plays no role in narrative development; its aim is to titillate and entertain the audience, which is encouraged to consume its delights:

The point is to drink it up
This youth is juicy
What difference does it make if in your arms
There is Munni, or there is Sheela?

“Character Dheela,” song from Ready

Prem’s bulging eyes highlight the pleasure on offer as Zarine Khan plays the role of a charmed snake.

The controlling nature of Prem’s gaze is clear throughout Character Dheela, most obviously when he takes on the role of snake charmer and Zarine Khan that of the charmed snake, her movements following those of the hero’s clarinet (Figures 42-3). The image provides a visual metaphor for the courtship to come, a modern being disciplined and directed by an ancient and phallic Indian tradition. As Zarine Khan dances Prem’s eyes bulge outwards, drawing attention to the act of looking and encouraging the viewer to join him in taking scopophilic pleasure from her movements. A later verse focuses more explicitly on the act of looking, suggesting that the hero gains pleasure from looking at different women, and that the audience may obtain similar pleasure from viewing different films and enjoying the sight of their female stars:

The fun is in just one look
Who looks at a pretty face
Again and again and again?

If the heart has a photo frame
Why would the photo there be the same?
Just like a calendar
It changes each and every day!

“Character Dheela,” song from Ready.

While Sanjana does not appear in “Character Dheela” the song celebrates Prem’s ability to charm, stare at and control numerous beautiful women. Thus his later unwillingness to subject Sanjana to a controlling gaze cannot be interpreted as a sign of weakness but only of disinterest. Similarly, the manner of Sanjana’s introduction emphasises first her vulnerability and then her position as an object of the male gaze. Throughout the initial meeting Sanjana’s wedding dress provides a reminder of the tenuousness of her situation and the ease with which she could be returned to the patriarchal family from which she has escaped. The result is the construction of a powerful, seeing hero and a vulnerable, looked-at heroine, despite the absence of a controlling or voyeuristic gaze within the narrative.

Implications of the hero’s gaze: encouraging voyeurism and scopophilia

In each of these films the moment of the heroine’s introduction is characterised by the creation of a gendered binary that establishes the hero’s position as the “bearer of the look”, in contrast to the heroine who exists as image and whose appearance is “coded for strong visual and erotic impact”. These initial moments are important as they establish a visual framework through which each courtship is subsequently framed.

The presence of voyeurism in the initial meetings of two of these films is particularly important. The courtship narratives of each film begin with and are subsequently framed by acts – committed by the hero in Dabangg and Ek Tha Tiger and by the camera in all three films – that would likely be considered illegal under current legislation. Rather than being condemned, however, this harmful activity is legitimised by the ease with which objections are overcome and by the eventual and inevitable success of the courtship. Rather than an act of sexual harassment, voyeurism is portrayed as a legitimate act that can begin a celebrated love story, and the position of voyeur is shown to be the natural viewpoint of the spectator.

While voyeurism occurs at the initial moment of courtship in *Dabangg* and *Ek Tha Tiger*, a controlling male gaze is prominent in each film and throughout each courtship narrative. The patterns of looking described above, in which the heroine is frequently shown from the perspective of the hero while the hero is made unknowable by his impassive stare and large sunglasses, continue to frame each courtship and are evident in many of the scenes discussed in the next two chapters.

The portrayal of women as objects of a controlling male gaze has implications for audience participation and reception. By showing the heroine from the point of view of the controlling hero, films encourage viewers to identify with the hero and join him in viewing the heroine as an object of desire. Derne and Jadwin’s ethnographic study from the 1990s found that “the male audience derives scopophilic pleasure from looking at on-screen women and that this dynamic encourages the objectification of women that bolsters male power.” Despite the changes that have taken place in the intervening years, it is likely that a similar dynamic would result from the on-screen images discussed in this chapter.

It is important to note that the bearer of a controlling gaze need not be male themselves, as female spectators are conditioned by texts and culture to temporarily adopt a male gaze for the purpose of viewing on-screen women as the male audience sees them, and the creators of texts intend for them to be seen. In his study of Indian television commercials, Abhik Roy found that beauty products aimed to appeal to Indian women by encouraging women to see themselves as they are seen by men. In this way filmic images can also encourage unhealthy self-objectification among women who are encouraged to see the male gaze as the default.

Derne and Jadwin, while finding that “Hindi films position male viewers to gaze at on-screen women,” also noted that men were more likely to see “Westernised” women as legitimate objects of their gaze than “distinctively Indian”. In these films the actions of neither hero nor camera reflect or respect such a distinction. While *Dabangg*’s Rajjo is clearly the most traditionally Indian heroine, she is not spared from a controlling or voyeuristic gaze. In fact,

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12 Derne and Jadwin, “Male Hindi Filmgoers’ Gaze,” 266.
16 Derne and Jadwin, “Male Hindi Filmgoers’ Gaze,” 258.
Pandey has more success than either Tiger or Prem in disciplining Rajjo into submission through his powerful gaze. If any distinction is to be found, it is in the heroine’s responses to such acts, rather than in the acts themselves.

The hero’s ability to perform acts of voyeurism and to subject the heroine to a controlling male gaze form, at the initial moment of courtship, the first layer of male dominance through which the modern heroine is brought under control by the hero. As courtship continues, the hero’s control over the courtship’s spatial dynamics and his ability to inflict sexual violence reinforce the gendered binary established through the dynamics of sight.
Chapter 2: Space and Courtship

Mobility, power, patriarchy and violence

Mobility is an important marker of power in India’s patriarchal society. Dominant cultural values, informed by nationalist discourse, suggest that public space is the natural domain of men, while the proper place of women is in the home.\(^1\) In recent years, as the number of women working outside the home has gradually increased, middle- and upper-class Indian women have begun to stress the importance of outside work to their independence and to any progression towards gender equality.\(^2\) The increasing presence of women in public spaces has created sporadic conflict, has been linked to increasing levels of sexual violence, and has led to the advent of quasi-domestic spaces such as women-only taxis, autorickshaws and train carriages designed to facilitate the unrestricted movement of women through public spaces that remain dominated by men.\(^3\)

Despite these changes, women remain vulnerable to sexual harassment and violence in public spaces. Studies and anecdotal evidence suggests that stalking is a frequent concern of Indian women.\(^4\) Along with voyeurism, stalking was expressly criminalised in The Criminal Law (Amendment) Act 2013 (Section 354D), which defined it as following and contacting, or attempting to contact, a woman “to foster personal interaction repeatedly despite a clear indication of disinterest by such woman.”\(^5\)

Karuppannan Jaishankar and Puthisigamani Kosalai’s study of stalking victims in South India indicates that stalking can take on a number of diverse forms.\(^6\) While some victims reported being followed in public spaces, others reported that their stalkers had called them repeatedly, harassed their friends, waited outside their homes or colleges, broken into their homes, spread rumours or sent unsolicited letters. As Jaishankar and Kosalai note, stalking is hard to prove, as it

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5. The Act also provides a definition for electronic stalking, which is not relevant here.
“often involves no more than the targeted repetition of ostensibly ordinary behaviours.” The connection between mobility, male dominance and sexual violence is complex and multi-layered: the increasing mobility of Indian women makes them subject to stalking in public spaces, while the relatively limitless mobility enjoyed by Indian men provides opportunities for harassment and violence that at times extend into the private spaces of women.

Restrictions on female mobility are prominent in Salman Khan’s modern masala films, and are part of the male-dominated framework of courtship through which the modern heroine is disciplined into a traditional gender role. This chapter analyses the spatial dynamics of courtship, arguing that courtship is characterised by a disparity in mobility that reinforces the hero’s control. Rajjo lives a confined existence Dabangg, while the heroines of Ready and Ek Tha Tiger initially appear independent and mobile but are reincorporated into traditional power structures as the hero asserts his control over the developing courtship. In each film the gendered binary of mobile hero and restricted heroine is eventually made clear by the heroine’s capture and the creation of a prisoner-rescuer situation which reduces the heroine to a position of passivity as a remembered object of the hero’s desire.

**Courtship by intrusion: the spatial dynamics of on-screen courtship**

The courtship narratives of each of these films are spatially characterised by a disparity in mobility as a boundless hero is contrasted with a restricted heroine, a gendered binary analogous to that of the looking hero and the looked-at heroine. In some films the contrast is clear, while in others it is more subtle, or becomes stronger over time as the hero gradually asserts his influence over courtship. In each case the heroine’s confinement limits her contribution to narrative development, placing the hero in a position of power while also ensuring that the majority of each courtship takes place in the heroine’s personal space. The heroine’s restricted existence necessitates what could be called a “courtship by intrusion,” as the hero repeatedly enters her life and at times her personal space in order to progress the courtship towards its eventual conclusion.

The courtship of Pandey and Rajjo in Dabangg takes place almost exclusively in the private spaces of the heroine. As described in Chapter 1, the pair meets as Pandey lands in Rajjo’s backyard during a dramatic chase scene. This represents the first intrusion: it is followed

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by Pandey’s intrusion into Rajjo’s personal space as he interrogates her on the street, making her visibly uncomfortable, and then by several scenes in which he arrives at her house (Figures 44, 48-9). With the courtship narrative mainly confined to Rajjo’s house, the relationship is reliant on Pandey’s whims: he arrives to progress the courtship as and when he chooses, surprising Rajjo with each of his appearances.

The police car features throughout Dabangg, signifying mobility, power and prestige

Pandey’s mobility is highlighted throughout the film by his police car, a literal signifier of his ability to travel seamlessly between the romance of the courtship narrative and the corruption and violence of the film’s other plotlines (Figures 44-51). He is shown repeatedly in and
alongside the car as he travels between his home, the street, his numerous missions and Rajjo’s home. The police car links power and mobility; by contrast, the powerless Rajjo appears only in the courtship narrative, within which she is spatially limited to her home, the nearby street and a well from which she collects water.

Pandey’s police car and the prestige it signifies become vital as he accelerates the courtship and brings it to its eventual conclusion. After establishing his power through his mobility and controlling gaze in the scenes discussed in Chapter 1, he visits Rajjo at her house and explains that he wishes to marry her. After Rajjo declines, explaining that her first duty is to her burdensome father, Pandey demonstrates his power over events with a stern lecture that leads directly to the suicide of her father. Pandey and his police car appear twice more: first he arrives at her father’s funeral, where he watches her from afar, and then at her home, where he states to Rajjo and her fellow mourners that he will now be her husband (Figures 47-9). In this scene he assumes both responsibility for and control over Rajjo, clearing out her mourning relatives and inviting himself into her home, while she remains sullen and unable to speak: consent is implied only by her seemingly reluctant co-operation.

In contrast, Rajjo’s confinement limits her opportunities throughout the film: in her first meeting with Pandey, she explains that she is unmarried as her father has not been looking for a suitable husband. Rajjo is not portrayed as having the ability to leave the strict confines of her home in order to find a husband or further her opportunities. Instead she waits passively at home, and the arrival of Pandey – an uncomfortable and potentially dangerous intrusion into her personal space – becomes her only hope of escape. Her restricted mobility directly necessitates Pandey’s repeated intrusions.

*Ek Tha Tiger*’s Zoya is initially presented as a modern heroine in control of her own mobility. Studying at a college in England, playing in a band and working as a housekeeper for an Indian professor, Zoya appears to be independent and capable of influencing the development of courtship. In the opening exchanges she is seen in a variety of settings: the professor’s house, a bar, her bedroom, a dance hall and a park at which she and Tiger share a date. Tiger’s mobility is still on display – he enters the professor’s house to find her dancing, he appears at a dance hall where she is practicing, and scales a series of pipes to arrive at her bedroom window while her back is turned (Figures 52-3) – but it is not the clear marker of dominance that it is in *Dabangg.*
As the film progresses, however, Zoya’s apparent independence is revealed to be a ruse. It is an act of intrusion that reveals the truth, as Tiger enters the professor’s house through a window and finds Zoya downloading secret files. Zoya’s threat – that of the *femme fatale* – is at once uncovered and defeated, as Tiger holds a gun to her head. While the revelation of Zoya’s identity adds a layer of intrigue to her character, it shatters the myth of independence that was initially a feature of her character: Zoya’s actions are no longer hers but those of her sinister male handlers, her mobility not a sign of her individual freedom but in fact a symptom of their control.

After stripping Zoya of her façade, Tiger is able to exert strict control over a courtship that now falls back on the traditional patterns of female restriction and male intrusion. Hearing that Zoya is in Istanbul for a United Nations conference, he decides to attend and finds her dressed in traditional feminine clothes and surrounded by male delegates. After following her from the conference he climbs into her taxi, taking control as he tells the taxi driver where to go. Suddenly traditional dynamics are in the ascendancy: Zoya claims that a relationship is impossible, while Tiger promises to fight off the forces of disunity and make it a reality. Their meeting at the conference leads to a song, “Saiyaara,” (Planet), the lyrics of which celebrate their developing love while acknowledging its difficulties. The accompanying shots show both characters looking emotional as they reflect on the meeting, but a disparity of mobility is evident: the passive Zoya returns to her hotel room and sits idly on her bed, while the active Tiger walks by the vast Bosphorus Strait and looks out from the deck of a ferry.

This phase of courtship ends as Tiger and Zoya escape their respective handlers and elope to Cuba. Before the elopement takes place, an important scene again brings mobility to the fore as Zoya, who is in charge of planning their escape, secretly meets with her Pakistani handlers. The scene should pose a threat, but Tiger is a step ahead: already following Zoya’s handlers, he listens to their meeting with Zoya and decides that he can still trust her. While it is Zoya’s plan
that takes them to Cuba, Tiger’s intrusion into this meeting demonstrates that he remains in control and that the trust he places in Zoya is informed, rather than blind.

In *Ready*, mobility is one of the key markers of control throughout the courtship, which takes place in three distinct spaces. At the beginning of the film it is Sanjana, the assertive heroine, who performs the act of intrusion, dislodging Prem from his physical space as she moves in to his bedroom. The first phase of courtship takes place in Prem’s house, under the auspices of his family, and the highly unusual spatial dynamics correlate with Sanjana’s relatively high level of control. Even when Prem threatens Sanjana – a scene discussed in Chapter 3 – he is unable to break the bond between her and his parents and reverse the influence she is having on his family.

In response to Sanjana’s control, Prem moves their relationship to a jungle setting in which his actions are no longer moderated by his family or by the rules of society. It is his car that allows him to do so, after he tricks Sanjana into accompanying him to the airport. The scenes which take place in this jungle setting, also discussed in Chapter 3, are characterised by sexual aggression as Prem gradually asserts his control over Sanjana.

As in *Ek Tha Tiger*, Prem and Sanjana’s courtship eventually returns to more traditional patterns of restriction and intrusion after Sanjana’s recapture by her criminal family. Her recapture ushers in the film’s interval, splitting the narrative neatly in two: in the first half of the film, Sanjana is a strong and mobile heroine who poses a threat to Prem’s supremacy, while in the second half she becomes the passive object of a more traditional courtship that relies on the hero’s intrusion. While Prem is unwilling to involve himself with the initially strong heroine, he falls in love after her recapture as she is reduced to a more passive role and reincorporated into the patriarchal structures from which she had initially escaped.

A final marker of mobility consistent across all three films is the hero’s control of motorised vehicles. Pandey frequently appears in his police car, as mentioned above, while both Prem and Tiger are shown driving cars and riding motorcycles. In contrast, only Zoya is shown in control of any sort of motorised vehicle: an aeroplane, during a highly dramatic escape from a group of RAW agents. While the ability to fly an aeroplane would ordinarily suggest an impressive level of mobility and control, Zoya is acting on the orders of the preoccupied Tiger as he shoots at the RAW agents and performs death-defying stunts on a motorcycle. Any potential threat posed by Zoya’s ability in this scene is nullified by the juxtaposition of Zoya, who looks
nervously back at Tiger, and Tiger, who is in full control of both his vehicle and the situation (Figure 54-7).

Figure 54  
While Zoya flies the aeroplane, Tiger remains in control of the situation  

Figure 55  

Figure 56  

Figure 57  

The prisoner-rescuer scenario

In each film the distinction between the mobile hero and the restricted heroine reaches its peak in the final stage of courtship, as the creation of a prisoner-rescuer scenario reduces the heroine to the passive role of waiting to be rescued by the heroic male. Just as the male gaze is strongest at the courtship’s inception, it is the prisoner-rescuer scenario at its climax that most clearly and unavoidably establishes the superiority of male mobility.

The prisoner-rescuer scenario takes on different forms in each film. Its most literal iteration is in *Ek Tha Tiger*, when Zoya and Tiger’s Cuban vacation is interrupted by the sudden reappearance of their respective spy agencies. A long chase leads to Zoya’s capture, while Tiger watches her being led away and begins to plan her escape (Figures 58-9). In an ensuing scene, as Zoya attempts to fight off her handlers, a close up of her handcuffed arm underscores the weakness of her position (Figures 60-1).
In *Ready* the prisoner-rescuer scenario results from Sanjana’s recapture by her criminal family, as discussed above, in a scene in which male power is evident (Figures 62-3). The moment of recapture is revealing, as Prem appears willing to let Sanjana return to her family. As her family arrives and she pleads for help, Prem takes advantage of the situation by complimenting her dress and then forcefully kissing her on the forehead. When Sanjana pushes Prem away and runs to her family he appears unperturbed, turning and waving as she is driven away. Prem’s willingness to allow Sanjana to be reincorporated into her patriarchal family, against her wishes, is reflective of the control he stands to gain from her confinement.

In *Dabangg* an analogous situation is created by the death of Rajjo’s father, who commits suicide to allow Rajjo to marry unencumbered. His death leaves her stranded, without a male
presence for protection or authority. Rajjo is shown sobbing, alone and powerless as she waits for her inevitable rescue by Pandey (Figure 64).

Figure 64

Rajjo is distraught before being rescued by Pandey

In each film the creation of a prisoner-rescuer situation gives the hero complete control over the final stage of courtship. Intrusion becomes the hero’s only means of continuing courtship, as fulfilment of his desires becomes dependent on his ability to enter the heroine’s personal space by a combination of tact and force.

In each case the hero, spurred into action by his memory of the heroine’s beauty, succeeds in rescuing the captive heroine. In Dabangg his police car signifies his importance as he arrives at Rajjo’s house, dismissed her mourning relatives and and affirms his position as her fiancée. In Ready the rescue takes a complex form, involving Prem’s entire family and backed up at important moments by physical violence. In Ek Tha Tiger Tiger draws on his famed reputation to trick his RAW colleagues into helping him recapture Zoya, before betraying them in a dramatic and violent action scene and escaping with the heroine. In each case the hero’s mobility is the key to the heroine’s successful recapture, marking his control as the relationship reaches its culmination.

In her captive position, the heroine is never portrayed as having the option to escape her surroundings and chase the hero. In fact, she is not portrayed at all, appearing only when her passive existence coincides with the hero’s acts of intrusion. No longer able to directly influence the developing courtship, she waits for the hero’s appearance which appears to be the only way
out of her predicament. She affects his actions only by her presence in his memory as an object of desire, making her chances of salvation dependent on her earlier attempts to appear sexually desirable.

**The implications of spatial disparity**

The evidence presented above suggests that mobility is an important marker of male dominance that contributes to the hero’s control over both the heroine and the courtship narrative. While some films initially portray modern and mobile heroines, their mobility is gradually reduced, and its threat defused, as the hero asserts his control over courtship. Just as their initial independence marks Zoya and Sanjana as modern heroines, their inevitable reincorporation into traditionally restrictive patriarchal structures, either by the actions of the hero or through the structural elements of film, demonstrates the persistent dominance of those structures. While the hero is shown exerting his influence in a variety of spaces, the heroine plays no role outside her interactions with the hero.

The prominence afforded to constructions of mobility in each of these films is reflective of the attitudes of male filmgoers, for whom restrictions on female mobility are a constant preoccupation. In his research Derne found that “filmgoers’ focus on women’s traditional household roles” contributed to a wider construction of “differences between men and women that bolster male dominance in India today.” This distinction has been incorporated into the courtship narratives of each of these films, with a heroine’s restricted mobility contributing to her desirability as a partner. Somewhat paradoxically, restrictions ostensibly designed to protect the heroine from sexual harassment and aggression necessitate a courtship by intrusion as the hero’s ability to further the courtship becomes dependent on his ability to forcefully enter the private space of the heroine.

The dynamics of the courtship by intrusion place the hero in full control of the courtship narrative. The hero chooses the time and circumstances of their meetings, coming in and out of the heroine’s life as his whims demand. Lacking control over her own mobility, the heroine’s influence on the narrative is limited: her consent is implied, rather than explicit, and the evident apprehension and discomfort that at times results from the hero’s acts of intrusion does not discourage him from repeating them. Each act is justified by its contribution to narrative development and eventually by the celebrated success of the courtship.
The disparity of mobility evident in these films reflects is closely related to the gendered binary of looks discussed in Chapter 1. While the hero’s control of sight is most evident at the initial moment of courtship, his control of space becomes clearest as the courtship nears its climax, when the heroine is captured by forces representing male power and reduced to a position of passivity. At times the related elements of sight and space clearly interact: when Tiger follows Zoya through a crowded market, his mobility and controlling gaze combine to keep her in his sight and establish his control. Similarly Dabangg is replete with instances of Pandey intruding into Rajjo’s life in order to subject her to a controlling or voyeuristic gaze: in fact, as discussed in Chapter 1, his gaze itself represents a form of intrusion.

Together, the hero’s control over the visual and spatial dynamics of courtship present the heroine with a challenge that is difficult, but not yet impossible, to overcome. While Rajjo and Zoya are effectively disciplined into submission by acts of intrusion and voyeurism, Sanjana resists the hero’s dominance. It is her resistance that makes her the target of the most explicit and sustained display of sexual aggression, discussed in the next chapter, as Prem exerts his control over the modern heroine through the final and most impenetrable element of male dominance.
Chapter 3: Sexual Aggression in Courtship

Rape: a constant threat

With the recent series of highly publicised rape cases, the term “rape culture” has attained prominence as a way of describing and theorising the prevalence of rape in Indian culture. As define by the editors of Transforming a Rape Culture, a rape culture is:

a complex set of beliefs that encourages male sexual aggression and supports violence against women. It is a society where violence is seen as sexy and sexuality as violent. In a rape culture, women perceive a continuum of threatened violence that ranges from sexual remarks to sexual touching to rape itself. A rape culture condones physical and emotional terrorism against women as the norm.¹

In Indian society, the “continuum of threatened violence” reinforces patriarchal dominance and limits the ability of women to enjoy the same opportunities as men. The rape threat follows women throughout all spheres of life: rape occurs in public spaces, in institutional settings such as police stations and workplaces, and within the home.²

In Salman Khan’s modern masala films, the constant threat of rape is the final element of male dominance that most decisively reinforces the hero’s power over the heroine and seals her submission to a traditional relationship. Constructed through a combination of explicit threats and more subtle cultural signifiers, the constant threat of rape hangs over the courtship narrative of each film and solidifies the hero’s control. Rather than being challenged or condemned, the threat of rape and sexual aggression is normalised and at times glorified as an integral part of courtship.

Courtship by force: the rape threat in Ready and Dabangg

Throughout the first two chapters of this thesis, Ready’s heroine Sanjana best resisted the efforts of male characters to limit her influence. An assertive woman, recently returned from studying in America, Sanjana is the most modern of the three heroines discussed so far. It is this

¹ Emilie Buchwald, Pamela R. Fletcher, and Martha Roth, introduction to Transforming a Rape Culture, ed. Emilie Buchwald, Pamela R. Fletcher, and Martha Roth (Minneapolis: Milkweed, 1993), vii.
modernity, and the threat that her strong presence poses to the traditional structures of male dominance, that makes her the target of the most explicit and sustained acts of sexual aggression.

The genesis for what becomes a protracted struggle for control between Sanjana and Prem can be seen in a short exchange that takes place during their first meeting. As the pair turns to leave the airport, where Sanjana has appeared unexpectedly in Prem’s life, she places her hand on top of his in an inversion of traditional gender roles (Figure 65). Unwilling to tolerate Sanjana’s leadership of the situation, Prem attempts – using both hands – to regain the controlling position (Figure 66). Both acts are highlighted by the camera, and Sanjana’s forceful objection to the latter sets up their ongoing conflict:

Sanjana: ओ हो हो हो एक्स्क्रेस्स भी! सिचुएशन का एडवांज़ मत लो! And don’t you dare touch me! Oh ho ho ho ho excuse me! Don’t take advantage of the situation! And don’t you dare touch me!

Prem’s attempt to assert his physical dominance is highlighted by the camera and prompts a strong rebuke from Sanjana

The response of the male characters in this scene is typically dismissive of female objections to harassment and sexual violence, as will become evident throughout this chapter. Through his use of the words kamini (“bitchy”) and khurraat (“shrew”), Prem’s uncle invokes a gendered discourse and attributes Sanjana’s objection to undesirable feminine traits rather than any legitimate grievance:

Prem’s uncle: वाह! खुराट, प्लस कमीनी, प्लस होनहार…इससे अच्छा क्या मांगता? सोच! घर में एक युग्म खुराट और एक ओल्ड खुराट! और दोनों पे बेटिंग होगी की सबसे बड़ी खुराट कौन! तेरी चाही और इसकी बहुत ज़मेगी। Wow! Shrewd, plus bitchy, plus talented…Could you have asked for anything better than this? Think! One young shrew and one old shrew in the house. And there’ll be betting on both of
them for who can be the biggest shrew!
Your aunt and her will really gel.

Sensing the threat posed by Sanjana’s confident presence, Prem immediately begins a campaign of sexual aggression aimed at reasserting both his centrality to his family, his relationship with Sanjana and the film itself. The protracted display of aggression is one of the central features of the film, taking place over twenty minutes, and ends only after Sanjana’s recapture by her criminal family and reincorporation into their traditional patriarchal structure. Foregrounding the danger that follows, Prem’s opening threat suggests that not even the most famous tools of modernity will be able to save Sanjana from his aggression.

Prem: मैं, रहना है तो गेस्टरूम में रहना। कला ऐसा
गायच कर दूर कि गूगल डॉट कॉम भी तुम्हें
दूर न पाएगा। Madam, if you need to stay then stay in
the guest room. Otherwise I’ll make you
disappear so that even google.com won’t
be able to find you.

When Sanjana remains defiant, Prem’s response is predictable within the framework of male-dominated courtship. In another appeal to violence and physical superiority he enters his bedroom, where Sanjana is sleeping, through a window and holds a knife over her head (Figures 67-8). The knife signifies the phallic threat and only the unexpected realisation of Sanjana’s beauty, as she lies prone in bed, stops Prem from using it:

Prem: कोई तो रोक लो। है तो सर से पॉंट तक वन
पीस। कोई तो सर से पॉंट तक वन
पीस। Prem, control your mind. माइंड को तो कंट्रोल कर
कर। Prem, control your mind. I will control my mind but she– With the
आम मिकस्क शकल वाली की तो– चीखंगी
आम मिकस्क शकल वाली की तो– चीखंगी
चिल्लाएगी तो यह रामपुरी सायक तुम्हें सीधा श्री
राम के पास भेज दे! appearance of bananas mixed with
deficient mangoes– If you scream and
shout then this Rampuri knife could
send you to Lord Ram himself!
Sanjana: तुम सिज्जाशन का एडवांटेज लेने आयो?
You came to take advantage of the
situation?
Prem: सिज्जाशन? एडवांटेज? फिर से? अगर किसी को
Situation? Advantage? Again? Even if
someone is not in the mood then she will say these words and force him to think about it...You will snatch away my peace. You will snatch away my room. If you have not left by tomorrow morning then I swear on Baba Rampuri I will snatch away your breath!

Figure 67

Figure 68

Sanjana is shocked and scared as Prem conveys his threat

The development of this scene shows that Prem’s violence is a response to Sanjana’s assertiveness, not to her presence alone. Initially lying prone and asleep, she poses no threat to his dominance and is no longer a necessary target of his aggression. When she wakes up and begins to speak, however, he again becomes threatening, his voice rising as he blames her objections for his violent or sexual thoughts (Prem’s words contain some ambiguity, but are undoubtedly threatening). As he delivers his final threat Sanjana screams and closes her eyes, and when they reopen he has vanished. Prem’s concerned relatives arrive to check on Sanjana, and at the urging of Prem – who appears to have just woken up – everyone agrees that Sanjana must have been dreaming. As soon as the relatives leave, however, Sanjana turns to find Prem lying in her bed and holding a knife toward her. As he leaves the bed and stands over Sanjana, Prem reiterates the gravity of his threat:

Prem: ज़िंदगी में तीन चीज़ कभी अंदरएस्ट्रिमेट मत करना: I, me, and myself. Now you only bloody decide, तुम्हें इस घर में घरी में आना है या इस घर से अर्थी पर निकलना है। There are three things in life you can never underestimate: I, me and myself. Now you only bloody decide whether you should come to this house in a palanquin, or leave from this house on
As Prem stands over Sanjana and repeatedly thrusts his dagger toward her the phallic threat is clearly on display (Figures 69-70). Each thrust is accompanied by a sound effect of a knife scraping against stone and a menacing scream from Prem, with Sanjana’s whimpering heard between them. Again, however, his intimidation fails to have the desired effect. The next day Sanjana visits the temple with Prem’s family, earning their praise, and continues to mock him in front of them. At this point an uncle brings Prem’s attention to the threat of emasculation presented by Sanjana, and Prem responds by vowing to take control.

Becoming more evident with each scene is Prem’s willingness to continue escalating his violence until the modern heroine can be disciplined into a more traditional gender role. Faced with the now inescapable threat of emasculation, and spurred into action by his uncle’s warning, he now intensifies his aggression by kidnapping Sanjana and creating a situation of complete control. It is his superior mobility – manifested in his ownership of a car – that creates the opportunity for abduction: after tricking Sanjana into accompanying him to the airport, where he says a parcel is waiting for her from America, he instead drives into the jungle (Figures 71-2). Sanjana’s fear is evident on her face and heard as a voiceover, followed by Prem’s response (Figures 73-4). The phrase *lene aur dene* (“to give and take”) refers to marriage, and by using it Prem reminds Sanjana of a particularly threatening aspect of India’s rape culture: forced marriages between rapists and their victims.

Sanjana: एयरपोर्ट के लिए लेफ्ट जाना था। पर इसने तो राइट टर्न ले लिया है। कहीं यह जंगल में जाके मेरे साथ- 

He had to go left to go the airport. But he has taken a right turn. He might go with me into the jungle and-

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3 An *arthi* is a wooden stretcher used to carry dead bodies to the site of cremation.
Prem: बिना कुछ किये लेने के देने पड़ रहे हैं। Without doing anything I am turning the tables on you (literally “giving in order to take”). If by chance I did do something then I would have to both give and take.

As Prem drives the car, his control of space and sexual aggression, two markers of male dominance, combine to place him in a position of control. Leaving the road, Prem and Sanjana enter a liminal space – the jungle – in which the rules of society no longer apply and Prem’s physical superiority becomes increasingly important. The fear evident on Sanjana’s face reflects this fact, and the series of scenes that take place in the jungle setting feature a strong focus on gender roles. To begin with, Sanjana tries to curb Prem’s control by taking the keys from the ignition and flinging them from Prem’s convertible. This apparently causes the steering wheel to lock, although there is some suggestion that the “failure” of the steering is contrived by Prem to scare Sanjana. As in the earlier scene in his bedroom, he directly blames their predicament on her deviance from a traditional gender role:

Prem: तुम औरत हो या क्या हो? Are you a woman or what?
Sanjana? औरत हूँ! I am a woman!
Prem? औरत हो तो औरतों की तरह चाबी यहाँ पर रखा करो! If you’re a woman, then be womanly and leave the keys here!
In the jungle setting, dominated by the spectre of rape, each of Sanjana’s attempts to assert her independence instead strengthen Prem’s control. Taking the keys forces Prem to brake suddenly, causing Sanjana to fly through the air and land in a tree overhanging a deep ravine. Prem finds her hanging from the tree, but instead of immediately rescuing her decides to take advantage of this position by first mocking her choice of words and then forcing her into another discussion about the appropriateness of his earlier transgressions and her responses (Figure 75). Evident in this dialogue is one of the features of Prem’s aggression: his ability to combine it with humour. His constant joking and smiling allows him to appear likeable, despite the unsavoury nature of his actions.

Sanjana: टांग दो।

Prem: आलरेडी टांग! और कितना टांग दूँ?

Sanjana: मेरा मतलब है अपना पैर दो!

Prem: पैर? मर्द और औरत पैर में अच्छे लगते हैं। लेकिन पैर लगाना घोर अपमान होगा।...मैं आपको एक हाथ से बचा ज़रूर सकता हूँ।

Sanjana: लो बूस्लेस, उस हाथ को यूस करो! मेरी कमर पकड़ो और मुझे खींच दो!

Prem: न न, कमर नहीं। फिर आपको होगी “एडवांटेज एडवांटेज।” वैसे आप की कमर- कमर-

Sanjana: मेरी कमर जाए भाइ मे! जहाँ पकड़ना है पकड़ लो जो करना है कर लो लेकिन पलीज़ बचाओ!

Prem: न न, न होगी। खुद तू चुनो...मेरी सूटकेस।

Sanjana: तो बूस्लेस, उस हाथ को यूस करो! मेरी कमर पकड़ो और मुझे खींच दो!

Prem: न न, कमर नहीं। फिर आपको होगी “एडवांटेज एडवांटेज।” वैसे आप की कमर- कमर-

Sanjana: मेरी कमर जाए भाइ मे! जहाँ पकड़ना है पकड़ लो जो करना है कर लो लेकिन पलीज़ बचाओ!

Prem: In that case, मेरे पास आ जाओ मेरी सूटकेस।

In that case, come to me, my suitcase!
This is the moment on which the courtship pivots, as Sanjana’s first act of submission leads directly into Prem’s first display of love. By refusing to save Sanjana until she agrees not to object to his actions, Prem takes advantage of his position of complete control. When Sanjana assents to his touching, the dynamics of the courtship suddenly shift. The background music that plays as the pair embrace highlights the importance of the transition that has just taken place, while Prem for the first time acknowledges his developing attraction. Still in a position of power as he holds Sanjana over the ravine, he links sexual aggression with love and jokingly threatens her with both (Figure 76):

Prem: देखो मैं धर्म, डिस्ट्रंजें से एंड्वांजर्ज ले सिंह हो। अगर इस से ज्यादा करीब आए तो गोंड प्रीम के दोनों हाथ छोड़के तुम्हें लिप्त जाएगा। और दोनों ही लिप्त जाएंगे।

Look madam, you are taking advantage of my disadvantage. If you come any closer than this I promise to god I’ll let go of both my hands and hug you. And both of us will be done for.

Prem is in control both before and after rescuing Sanjana

Prem’s campaign of aggression is justified at each turn by the narrative developments it facilitates. The next scene shows Prem and Sanjana sitting by a campfire as they prepare to spend the night in the jungle, the darkness and flickering light exacerbating the sense of lawlessness created by the jungle setting. Prem bores Sanjana by continuing his earlier conversation about touching, again linking her stubbornness to her gender. As she withdraws from the conversation and turns away to sleep, Prem’s threats follow her and lead to instant reward, her driver’s licence falling from her pocket and revealing to Prem her true identity (Figures 77-8).  

4 Until this point Prem has been unaware that Sanjana is not Pooja, the woman he initially intended to collect from the airport. However the confusion is not a major part of the plot until this moment, when it is suddenly revealed by Prem’s harassment. That is, it is not her duplicity which is driving Prem’s violence.
Prem: देखो ऐसा करने मरके सो मत कुछ कुछ होता …Look, don’t lie on your side, things happen.5 By the way, your jeans fit well. Cover them up.

Figure 77

Prem laughs as a terrified Sanjana self-consciously adjusts her clothes. The viewer shares his voyeuristic view.

As Prem continues to subject Sanjana to acts and threats of violence, it is tempting to see him falling in love with his own power. He takes obvious pleasure from his ability to scare her, frequently laughing and smiling at her discomfort, and interspersing his aggression with humour. It is perhaps for this reason – as well as an obvious desire to make his control absolute – that he continues his campaign of aggression for so long. In the next scene he holds Sanjana over a cliff and delivers a final violent threat (Figures 79-80):

Prem: अरे देखो खाई कितनी गहरी है। Look at how deep the valley is.
Sanjana: प्रेम! Prem!
Prem: यहाँ से सिर्फ आवाज वापस आती है। आदमी नहीं। Only voices come back from here. Not people.

Figure 79

The viewer shares Prem’s powerful position as he holds Sanjana over a cliff, solidifying his dominance.

Figure 80

5 The phrase kuch kuch literally means “something”, but often carries a sexual connotation and is used euphemistically for a variety of sexual words and concepts. Here Prem implies that he may be aroused by Sanjana lying on her side, showing the outline of her body.
As Prem’s violent campaign comes to an end it is quickly followed by two scenes which refocus the viewer’s attention on his more positive role as Sanjana’s protector. The first occurs in the jungle setting as Prem saves Sanjana from a sudden attack by a man who is later revealed to be working for her father. This attack is immediately followed by the introduction of the comedian character Mr Lehri, a passing motorist who offers a lift and bombards Sanjana with a series of clearly inappropriate comments and gestures. As Ashis Nandy has noted, “Sometimes violence is neutralised by comic interludes or by the inclusion of a more comic version of the violence.” Mr Lehri’s appearance performs this function, providing Prem with an opportunity to showcase his quick wit and reinforce his moral superiority as he defuses the comedian character’s hyperbolic harassment. Together the two scenes divert the viewer’s attention from Prem’s earlier aggression and refocus it on the more positive aspects of his character. In doing so they soften the films’ transformation from the liminal space of the jungle back to the regulated world of society, and when Prem and Sanjana finally return to his house they appear to his family as sudden friends and future lovers. The events that took place in the jungle are no longer referenced or discussed.

Prem’s explicit formulation of the rape threat in the scenes described above is the most extreme response to the challenge of the modern heroine. In Dabangg, the threat to Pandey’s control comes not from Rajjo’s independence – she is a traditionally restricted heroine and disciplined by the hierarchy of looks discussed in Chapter 1 – but from her initial reluctance to enter a relationship, which challenges the hero’s traditional ability to marry the woman on whom he fixes his desirous gaze. Dabangg relies on cultural signifiers to provide an alternate formulation of the same overhanging threat, screen work and song combining to establish the constant potential for sexual violence.

Pandey’s job as a policeman, his police car and uniform are all signifiers of the phallic threat in a country in which custodial rape is a frequent occurrence. In one important scene Pandey uses his position of power to draw Rajjo into the police station after arresting her father on an apparently fake rape allegation. The police station plays a similar role to the jungle setting

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above, providing a privileged space in which Pandey is free to perform acts of aggression without any fear of repercussion. In this case Pandey takes advantage of his power over Rajjo by offering a 1000 rupee reward to any officer who can make her smile. What follows is a series of rude jokes and suggestive comments by a succession of police officers as well as Rajjo’s father, who takes his place along gender lines on the side of the policemen (Figures 81-4).

Rajjo’s isolation could not be more complete – she is surrounded by men either directly participating in or enjoying her humiliation, including her father.

Rajjo’s isolation in a male space is highlighted throughout this scene and the ensuing song “Humka Peeni Hai” (“I need to drink”). Throughout the song, which celebrates guns, drunkenness and muscles and likens the lust for a woman’s eyes to alcoholism, Rajjo’s powerless is highlighted as she is shown surrounded by several hundred men (Figures 85-6). The threat of rape looms large over Rajjo, the presence of weapons and alcohol additional signifiers of sexual aggression. The powerful machinery of the police force, often blamed for its role in perpetuating patriarchal values and facilitating and perpetrating rape, is portrayed as exclusively male and firmly on Pandey’s side in his courtship.
Rajjo is uncomfortable surrounded by alcohol, guns and drunken men

The ease with which Pandey creates and then dissolves the case against Rajjo’s father – with reference to specific legislation – adds to the overhanging threat by demonstrating the power he and his institution hold over the perpetrators and victims of rape. In a later scene, in which Pandey discusses marriage with Rajjo’s father, he again draws attention, albeit jokingly, to his ability to commit acts of aggression and to the institutional structures that endorse it:

Rajjo’s father: खुश रखेगे मेरी बेटी को?
Pandey: न न। मारेगे पीटेंगे चलाएंगे और उसके बाद दहेज मांगे तुमसे।
Will you keep my daughter happy?
No, no. I’ll beat her, batter her, manipulate her, and after that I’ll demand dowry from you.

The different ways in which the threat of rape is constructed in each of these films highlights the pervasiveness of the rape culture which exists both in Indian society and in Salman Khan’s modern masala. In Ready, the rape threat is constructed outside the traditional structures of society in a series of scenes made possible by the hero’s control of mobility. In Dabangg, however, it is those same societal structures and the institution of the police force that allow for the rape threat’s construction. Taking the films together, the result is the creation of a filmic world in which women are threatened, isolated and ultimately made powerless both within and without the structures that are ostensibly designed to protect them.
The threat of redirected violence

In Maine Pyar Kiya Prem ends a physical workout by punching a punching bag. To emphasise how the violence could be directed at the modest heroine, the film shows the heroine’s head snapping back each time Prem punches the punching bag.⁸

In the above quote, Derne and Jadwin discuss the threat of redirected violence in the film that, a quarter of a century ago, launched Salman Khan’s career. Despite the numerous changes that have taken place in the intervening years, the same device is employed in each of these films to demonstrate the potential for the hero, if provoked, to redirect his celebrated violence toward the heroine. The threat of redirected violence adds to the overhanging spectre of rape evident in the above section. Two illustrative examples are provided here, from Ek Tha Tiger and Dabangg, preceded by a brief discussion of violence in Ek Tha Tiger, which plays an important role in establishing Tiger’s superiority in the absence of an explicitly constructed threat of rape.

Ek Tha Tiger’s Zoya, a Pakistani spy, poses a unique threat to male dominance through her knowledge of martial arts and her own ability to inflict violence. However this threat is neutralised within the narrative by two essential features of Tiger’s character that together symbolise his superior control over violence. The first is his pistol, a phallic signifier as well as a tool of power, which he carries constantly and uses on numerous occasions (Figures 87-8). The second is his ability and willingness to kill, showcased as early as the opening scene when he executes a fellow spy who is collaborating with the ISI (Figure 87). Lacking these vital markers of power, Zoya remains reliant on Tiger for physical protection despite her knowledge of martial arts. Constantly contrasted with Tiger’s superior power, Zoya’s strength is no longer a threat: instead, it becomes a compliment to his and provides support for his murderous aggression.

Figure 87

Tiger’s pistol is highly symbolic, representing his possession of a phallus, his control over violence, and his willingness to kill

Figure 88

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In two separate scenes Tiger demonstrates his willingness to redirect his aggression toward Zoya, threatening her with his pistol and in doing so solidifying his control of courtship. The most important example follows his discovery of her identity as a Pakistani spy: as he holds the gun to her head he forcefully frisks her and then interrogates her for over four minutes. Tiger eventually fires his gun as the film pauses for its interval, leaving the audience to wonder if Tiger has actually killed Zoya (Figures 89-90).

Figure 89

Figure 90

*The interval interrupts the narrative as Tiger fires his gun, leaving the audience to wonder whether Zoya is still alive.*

After the interval – but in the same scene – Tiger again demonstrates his willingness to kill by strangling one of Zoya’s friends, a fellow Pakistani spy who had attacked him. It is here that the device identified by Derne and Jadwin is most obvious: as the killing is carried out the camera cuts repeatedly between a strong and calm-looking Tiger, the choking spy and a shocked Zoya, who feels the pain of Prem’s violence through the proxy of her friend (Figures 91-94).

Tiger’s pointed demonstration of his willingness to kill has the desired effect of disciplining Zoya into a more traditional gender role. When she reappears after the interval she no longer bears the markings of modernity and is instead surrounded by older men and clad in the clothes of a traditional South Asian woman (Figures 95-96). As discussed in Chapter 2, the courtship reverts to traditional gender roles as the independent Zoya is suddenly restricted, first by her resurgent handlers and secondly by her capture.
Tiger demonstrates his power, looking impassively at Zoya as he strangles her friend. After the interval Zoya appears in Pakistani dress.

In *Dabangg*, the threat of redirected violence is evident when Pandey kills a villain by impaling his head on a metal spike. In this case the camera cuts rapidly from Pandey’s face to show the villain’s head under Pandey’s boot, then a shocked and gasping Rajjo, before returning to the hero who stares impassively at the camera (Figures 97-100). Again it is Rajjo, rather than the murdered villain, whose pain is highlighted, the camera drawing her into the world of the hero’s violence and in doing so magnifying her powerlessness.
Camera work includes Rajjo as a victim of Pandey’s celebrated violence.

With the hero’s ability to direct sexual aggression toward the heroine established, his muscles – which have played a celebrated role throughout Salman Khan’s career – become signifiers of the same threat. Displays of muscularity are an intrinsic part of Hindi film, and muscles are prominent symbols of male power, patriarchy and the nationalistic Indian body. In these films the hero’s muscles are the subject of frequent close ups, and shirtless sequences are worked into the plot of each film, providing reminder of his physical strength and thus his power over other characters, including the heroine (Figures 101-2).

The hero’s muscles in Dabangg and Ready.

Similarly present, and playing a similar role, is a proliferation of phallic imagery. Pelvic thrusting is a common dance move that celebrates the hero’s ability to act on his sexual desire,

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while in *Ready* the interval is ushered in by Prem’s unusual response to Sanjana’s recapture, as he turns to urinate on a haystack (Figures 103-4). Such images reinforce the male domination of the filmic space and the heroine’s isolation within it.

*The phallus is highlighted in Dabangg, Ready and Ek Tha Tiger*

Finally, the hero’s physical domination is made complete by his ability to disregard the heroine’s objections. The scenes discussed above have already provided numerous examples, but a final scene from *Ready* neatly encapsulates the hero’s ability to manipulate the heroine’s objections into opportunities for the progression of courtship. The scene takes place during Sanjana’s effective imprisonment at her family’s house, after Prem concocts a complex plan to gain access to her and then attempts to hold her during a brief moment alone, prompting a typically strong response (Figure 107):

Sanjana: प्रेम! एडवांटेज लेने के लिए सिचुएशन तो है नहीं! Prem! This is not the situation for taking advantage!

Prem: अच्छा? तो फिर वादा करों की रात को मिलेगी और एडवांटेज यह एडवांटेज लेना दोगी मुझे। Yeah? Then promise me that you'll meet me at night and let me take each and every advantage.

Sanjana: प्रेम! Prem!
Prem tries to hold Sanjana, and turns her anger into affection

Here, as in many of the above scenes, the heroine’s strong objection is trivialised and instantly overcome. Sanjana pushes Prem, who falls dramatically backwards, causing Sanjana to climb on top of him as she checks that he is unhurt (Figure 108-9). With the camera’s cooperation, Sanjana’s anger is assuaged and then reshaped as a display of affection that highlights her feminine sensitivity (Figure 110).

It is the overhanging threat of sexual aggression that more than anything prevents the heroines of modern masala from complaining about their treatment at the hands of the hero. While Sanjana, Zoya and Rajjo frequently appear upset or uncomfortable at the hero’s actions, they find no institutional support for their grievances. The only recipient of the heroine’s complaints or melodramatic displays of discomfort is the hero himself, who is able to disregard them and continue his courtship without any change to his attitude or behaviour. In such cases the full extent of the hero’s dominance is laid bare, as is the heroine’s isolation in a world incontrovertibly dominated by male power.

**An impenetrable layer of dominance**

The overhanging threat of rape and sexual aggression adds a final, impenetrable layer of male dominance to the courtship narratives of modern masala. While a determined heroine such as Ready’s Sanjana may avoid being disciplined into docility by the hero’s gaze and patriarchal
constrictions on her mobility, even she must eventually succumb to the threat of sexual aggression which solidifies the hero’s control.

The frequency with which sexual aggression is portrayed in the courtship narratives of these films may mark a new development by filmmakers faced with the challenge of responding to the appearance of the modern heroine. Ramasubramanian and Oliver’s study of ten Bollywood films from 1997-1999 found that “serious sexual violence” (rape, murder and threats thereof), while present, was rarely committed by heroes. This chapter shows that, despite the increasing attention given to sexual violence and women’s rights in mainstream public discourse, modern masala incorporates not only “moderate sexual violence” such as eve teasing and harassment (as found by Ramasubramanian and Oliver) but also threats of murder and rape into its courtship narratives.

The construction of the overhanging rape threat builds upon the other forms of male dominance discussed earlier in this thesis. By demonstrating the existence of the threat, films add a layer of sinisterness to the hero’s acts of voyeurism and intrusion. The hero’s gaze is not dangerous merely because it is uncomfortable or unwanted: his ability to control the camera and dissect the heroine’s body is reflective of his ability to do the same with a knife. Similarly, the threat of sexual aggression gives a sinister edge to the hero’s acts of intrusion, reminding the viewer of the speed with which seemingly harmless acts of courtship can become violent displays of dominance. His ability to look at her as and when he wants, and visit her as and when he wants, become symbols of a greater threat: his ability to use force to act on his sexual desires.

At times the connection between the three forms of male dominance is clearly displayed. When Pandey threatens to slap Rajjo if she does not take the money he is offering, his aggressive threat forces her to meet and submit to a controlling gaze. When Prem stands over Sanjana with a knife as she sleeps, intrusion becomes a clear pathway to sexual aggression. When Tiger scales a series of pipes to appear at Zoya’s window, he demonstrates both his strength and the mobility it provides.

Notably, the film that features the most explicit demonstrations of sexual aggression, Ready, also features the most modern heroine. Prem’s campaign of violence can be seen as a response to the threat posed by the assertive Sanjana, a last resort after her resistance to the male gaze and the spatial restrictions placed on her by her patriarchal family. Sexual aggression

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10 Ramasubramanian and Oliver, “Portrayals,” 333.
becomes Prem’s main tool of control, disciplining Sanjana back into a traditional framework to which she was initially unwilling to submit. The campaign of violence described in this chapter allows Prem to regain control of both sight and space: in the final scene, Sanjana again appears in her wedding regalia and looks away coyly as Prem disrobes and exposes his powerful muscles.

Pandey and Tiger, after more successfully gaining control over their heroines through the dynamics of sight and space, have no need to resort to the level of sexual aggression carried out by Prem. Nonetheless, Dabangg and Ek Tha Tiger construct the rape threat as an additional layer of male dominance that reinforces the hero’s supremacy. In Dabangg Pandey’s aggression leads to Rajjo’s acquiescence, while Tiger’s in Ek Tha Tiger nullifies the threat posed by Zoya’s command of martial arts. Both these films rely heavily on cultural signifiers and screen work, rather than direct threats of sexual aggression, to emphasise the hero’s ability to escalate dominance into violence or redirect his violence away from other characters and towards the heroine.

The overhanging threat of rape performs the same role in modern masala film as it does in Indian society, contributing to an on-screen rape culture in which “violence is seen as sexy and sexuality as violent.” Its construction provides the final, impenetrable piece of a complex framework through which the heroine’s contribution to courtship is limited and the hero’s dominance is assured. While the hero’s control of sight and space may effectively limit the heroine’s independence, the threat of aggression most clearly places the hero in control. By constructing an overhanging threat of sexual aggression these modern masala films suggest that sexual aggression is never far away, and can be summoned by the hero to overcome any threats caused by the heroine’s independence or even disinterest. Thus the filmic universe and the heroine’s position within it are defined by the existence of a rape culture akin to that that exists in Indian society, with “physical and emotional terrorism against women” condoned as the norm.

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11 Buchwald, Fletcher and Roth, introduction, vii.  
12 Buchwald, Fletcher and Roth, introduction, vii.
Chapter 4: Bodyguard: a Film without a Courtship

The first three chapters of this thesis have argued that Salman Khan’s modern masala films share a common approach to courtship, constructing a framework of male dominance through which the modern heroine is disciplined into the patriarchal structures of Indian society and masala film. This chapter examines a fourth successful film, Bodyguard, whose courtship narrative is dominated not by a strong hero but by the lack of one. While Prem, Pandey and Tiger take control of their respective courtships and shape them to meet their own ends, Bodyguard’s Lovely Singh dutifully avoids taking a leadership role in his relationship with the film’s heroine Divya (Kareena Kapoor). The film provides a counterpoint to the three discussed above, demonstrating the potential consequences of a courtship that takes place outside the control of a dominant hero. As in Dabangg, Ready and Ek Tha Tiger, elements of sight, space and sexual violence work together to restrict the heroine’s influence, preventing her from carrying out a successful courtship even in the absence of a controlling hero.

Bodyguard’s hero, Lovely Singh, is similar to Prem, Pandey and Tiger in most ways. He is a strong, quick witted and capable of inflicting violence where necessary, and exerts control over sight and space. Sunglasses shield his eyes as he uses them to control his environment, constantly aware of potential threats to himself or his clients. His mobility is emphasised in one of the film’s initial scenes, in which he jumps on, off and between moving trains as he rushes to break up a secret smuggling ring and rescue a container of kidnapped girls (Figures 111-2).

Lovely’s mobility is not limited by train timetables

Lovely Singh is also in control of violence, participating in several action scenes which emphasise his power compared to the film’s other male characters. The film’s title track emphasises his physical qualities, the camera providing low angle shots and close ups of his dancing biceps as the lyrics celebrate his strength (Figure 113-6):
Divya is similarly constructed as a passive and highly feminine heroine. As in *Ready*, the absence of a controlling male gaze within the narrative – Lovely’s duty as her bodyguard prevents him from seeing her as an object of desire – is overcome by camerawork that establishes her as a legitimate object of voyeurism and a controlling gaze. Her initial appearance is in a photo given to Lovely by his boss, Bindra, as he explains the assignment. Bindra initially confuses the photo with that of Katrina Kaif, a star actress known for her willingness to wear revealing clothing, which he apparently carries for voyeuristic pleasure. There is confusion as Lovely identifies the photo as Kaif and offers to tear it up – demonstrating the power of the two men over the female image – before returning it to his boss to be used once more as an object of pleasure.

As in the three films above, this scene establishes a gendered hierarchy of looks, with the active male characters able to subject the captured female to a controlling gaze. Divya, already made passive by her absence from the scene, is further objectified by the confusion of her and Katrina Kaif, whose explicit role in both this scene and the film (she appears in an item number)
is as an object of the gaze and of scopophilic pleasure. To make the connection clearer, Lovely’s boss hums the tune to “Sheela ki Javani” (“The Youthful Sheela”), a famous item song which established Katrina Kaif’s reputation as a leading Bollywood sex symbol. In a later scene, as Lovely travels to Divya’s home to begin his assignment, he again looks at her photo, which is stored in his wallet. Close ups of Lovely’s hands show how easily they manipulate Divya’s image, which sits alongside his credit cards and cash as if it were another tradeable commodity (Figures 117-8).

Divya is objectified even before she appears as a character

Divya is finally introduced as a character in a scene that bears several of the hallmarks of female objectification and clearly establishes her as a passive object of voyeurism and the controlling male gaze of the viewer, if not the hero.¹ After a telephone conversation between her father and Lovely in which an imminent threat to her life is discussed, the camera cuts to show Divya cloaked in steam as she emerges from a shower in a pink dressing gown (Figure 119). It then follows her as she performs a stereotypically feminine routine: first choosing her clothes, then her accessories, then moving a full-length mirror into place, then applying makeup, then posing in front of the mirror (and the camera), and finally drying her hair (Figures 120-4).² As in a shampoo or cosmetics commercial, the camera’s gaze is voyeuristic, gazing into Divya’s personal space as she performs a routine that would normally be carried out in private and hidden from the male gaze. As in those commercials, the “underlying message [is] that a woman’s job [is] to be an attractive sexual object” with her body “packaged and displayed for the pleasure of the ‘male’ viewers.”³ Divya is passive and silent throughout the scene, her actions focused

inward on her own body and accompanied by soft music, while the camera moves relentlessly around her, intermittently focusing on different body parts to provide the viewer with a highly sexualised experience. The scene establishes her as a beautiful and delicate heroine in need of protection: after doing so the narrative leaves the bedroom and returns to the more active – that is, male – world where men are fighting to protect her.

As well as establishing Divya as a passive object of a male gaze, this scene emphasises the importance of the domestic space as her natural environment. The intrusion of the camera into this space allows a hyperfeminine heroine – passive, objectified, restricted and vulnerable – to be constructed before she has any opportunity to speak or display her personality.

As in the three films above, Divya’s restricted mobility forms a major part of her identity. It is the reason for Lovely’s presence, as her father Sartaj will not allow her to leave the home without the accompaniment of a strong male figure. While Divya tries repeatedly to escape Lovely’s presence, she is unable to compete with his omniscient gaze and boundless mobility: in
one scene he follows her into a female bathroom. Divya’s mobility is limited by her father to two spaces: her home and her college. One is the traditional space of Indian women, where she is assumed to be safe; the other is a typical space of modern Indian women, where she is assumed to be in mortal danger.

As in the above films, Divya is subject to a constant threat of sexual aggression. In this case, however, the threat comes not from the hero but from Ranjan Mahtre, a dangerous villain who is apparently attempting to kill her. Mahtre’s presence justifies her father’s strict controls, as each time she obeys his orders – first by visiting a nightclub, and later by planning to elope with Lovely – she is immediately attacked. After the first attack Lovely is rebuked by Sartaj in a conversation that involves four male elders but not the heroine herself. In this conversation Divya is objectified as her father’s most valuable possession, and the importance of male restrictions on her mobility is stressed (Figure 125):

Sartaj: तुम दिव्या को क्लब लेखर गए क्या?
Lovely: मालिक, दिव्या मैडम और उनके दोस्त–
Sartaj: देखिये। अगर वोह नहीं मानती तो तुम मुझे फोन कर सकते थे।
Lovely: गलती हो गयी मालिक।
Sartaj: … (talking to lovely’s boss) भाई मैं बाप हूँ। चिता तो मुझे है, लेकिन इसपर भरोसा भी है। अगर भरोसा न होता यकीन न होता तो अपनी बेशकीमत चीज इसके हवाले क्यों किया होता?
Lovely: मालिक?
Sartaj: हम्म्?
Lovely: कालेज खत्म होती दिव्या मैडम को आप तक सही-सलामत पुंजा देंगा। यह मेरा वादा है।

Why did you take Divya to the club?
Sir, Divya madam and her friends–
Look. If she didn't agree then you could have phoned me.
It was a mistake, sir.
… (talking to lovely’s boss) Brother, I am a father. I am worried. But I also trust him. If I didn’t trust him or if I wasn’t sure then why would I surrender my valuable possession to him?
Sir?
Hmm?
When college is finished I will deliver Divya madam safe and sound to you. This is my promise.
As in the three films above, the gendered binary constructed in *Bodyguard* suggests that the hero is the natural agent of courtship. Divya is constructed as attractive, restricted and vulnerable – key elements of desirability for a heroine – and Lovely as capable of exerting control of any situation. Unlike those films, however, *Bodyguard’s* hero fails to take control of the developing courtship narrative.

The complication arises from Lovely’s loyalty to Divya’s father, Sartaj, who had saved Lovely’s life as a child. His loyalty and his job as Divya’s protector prevent him from seeing her as potential partner even as she falls madly in love with him, his allegiance to traditional structures outweighing the heroine’s allure. Instead a strange sexual tension develops as the viewer waits for Lovely to notice Divya’s presence and make her an object of his desire.

In the absence of a strong male, Divya attempts to invert traditional gender roles and take control of her relationship with Lovely. Her efforts are revealing for what they suggest about a courtship not led by a dominant male. At first, she plans not to win his heart but to change his appearance: the makeover is the natural space of the female character, and she succeeds by calling him repeatedly and pretending to be a secret admirer. Once it is complete, however, she quickly falls in love and at the same time loses control of the situation.

As Divya begins to fall in love with Lovely, she inadvertently finds herself responsible for the development of courtship. This places her outside her comfort zone and her traditional gender role, and the situation quickly descends into chaos as Lovely falls in love with Divya’s
alias, Chhaya, instead of with Divya herself. While Divya prepares to elope with Lovely and Lovely prepares to elope with Chhaya, Sartaj comes to know of their respective plans and accuses Lovely of trying to steal his daughter. To save Lovely’s life, Divya’s friend Maya claims to be Chhaya and Sartaj allows the two to leave together.

Thus the heroine-led courtship ends in disaster for the heroine, who is left alone and unwanted while Lovely and Maya marry and Maya gives birth to a son. Divya’s control of courtship ends with the creation of an extended prisoner-rescuer situation analogous to the above films, as she is rendered captive by Lovely’s disappearance and spends several years alone in her father’s house waiting for the hero to return.

The circumstances of Lovely’s eventual return, following Maya’s death, provide no justification for Divya’s actions. Instead his return can be seen as a second courtship, distinct from Divya’s earlier failed attempt, which provides a model of a more traditional – and therefore more successful – relationship. It is marked first by Lovely’s mobility as he catches a train to Divya and Sartaj’s village and is driven in a convoy of cars to their house. There it takes on a traditional tone as Lovely touches Sartaj’s feet, sits before him and talks deferentially about his current situation.

When Divya enters, close to tears, the ongoing anguish of her failed courtship is clearly displayed on her face. The outgoing college student who appeared earlier in the film has been replaced by a sad and lonely woman, her life now defined by her inability – or, more accurately, her father’s inability (as he explains) – to find a suitable husband. As Lovely discovers that Divya is unmarried a sound effect denotes shock, and the male characters’ facial expressions show pity for her predicament. Divya looks away, unable to meet the hero’s gaze.

Lovely and Divya’s eventual union is a result not of love but of his unwavering devotion and her eventual submission to the film’s patriarch, Sartaj. Divya plays only a peripheral role as the union is arranged by the three important male characters: Maya and Lovely’s son makes the initial suggestion, Sartaj provides his support and Lovely accepts, out of devotion to Sartaj rather than love for his daughter. Divya is also sidelined by the camera, which cuts thirteen times between Lovely and Sartaj as the marriage is arranged. In the eventual resolution of this complicated courtship narrative, the modern heroine is virtually gifted to the hero, achieving her initial desires only after suppressing them and submitting to the same patriarchal structures that she initially fought to escape.
Thus the story of Divya and Lovely, while differing substantially from the more conventional love stories of the films above, reinforces the same cultural narrative: in the age of modernity, a successful courtship must still be led by a strong hero and moderated by the institutions of patriarchy and male dominance. In the absence of strong male leadership a courtship cannot succeed, despite the heroine’s best efforts. The proper course of action for a sexually desirous heroine, therefore, is submission.

The markers of power discussed in the first three chapters – sight, space and sexual violence – play important roles in *Bodyguard*, despite the absence of a controlling male presence in courtship. Firstly, as described above, the voyeuristic gaze of the camera, the restrictive presence of Divya’s father and the constant threat posed by Ranjan Mahtre emphasise Divya’s passivity and lack of influence over narrative development. Secondly, Lovely’s inability to subject Divya to a controlling male gaze, acts of intrusion or sexual aggression symptomizes his lack of desire. Had the desire been present, it is likely that those elements would have come to the fore, and the courtship would have had a more successful outcome.

*Bodyguard* suggests two alternatives to its failed courtship. Firstly, if Divya had not fallen in love with Lovely she would have been married to a man in London, as Sartaj initially intended. Secondly, if Lovely had been aware of her desire and asserted control over their courtship – through sight, intrusion and sexual aggression – he may have prevented her heartbreak. It does not suggest any potential for a successful courtship to take place outside of the traditional patriarchal structures which initially keep Lovely and Divya apart and eventually bring them together.

At first glance a unique courtship narrative, a closer analysis shows that Lovely and Divya’s courtship in fact takes place within same framework of male dominance that characterises each of Salman Khan’s modern *masala* films. In fact, the patriarchal framework is perhaps even stronger in this film than in the three discussed above, as the camera, the heroine’s restrictive father and a band of dangerous villains successfully discipline her into a traditional gender role without any input from the famed hero. While Divya’s courtship ends in chaos, Lovely’s return restores the moral order and provides a model for courtship that predictably emphasizes the importance of female submission to traditional patriarchal structures.
**Conclusion**

The excessive celebration of modernity that is *Ready’s* dénouement struggles to hide, or perhaps even brings attention to, the underlying triumph of tradition. As the feuding sides of Sanjana’s family come together for the first time to celebrate her “love marriage” to Prem – the first in their family – a traditional institution is reconstituted and redisplayed as the modern. While Sanjana entered the courtship narrative as a modern heroine uncomfortable in a traditional costume, here she is at home in the markers of tradition, a nose ring and mehendi added to her dress as she waits off stage, smiles coyly and avoids meeting the hero’s gaze. In celebrating Prem as a modern hero, the final scene provides an inadvertent reminder of the transformation that has taken place: it was initially Sanjana, not Prem, who was marked by modernity; it was Sanjana, not Prem, who promised to usurp traditional family dynamics; it was Sanjana, not Prem, who sought and was willing to chase a different way of life.

![Sanjana’s wedding represents the triumph of tradition](image)

Sanjana’s eventual acquiescence and reincorporation into the same patriarchal power structures she had initially attempted to escape marks the triumph of tradition over the threat of modernity. That is not to say that modernity has no place in these films; rather, it is only once the superiority of tradition is established that modernity can be celebrated and freely performed. Prem’s gift to Sanjana’s family was not modernity itself – Sanjana already offered that – but a way to defuse the threat of modernity and reincorporate it into the existing order. Thus the
celebration of modernity comes as the connection between two patriarchal families is solidified through the time-honoured ceremony that turns a daughter into a wife (Figure 126).

Like the other films of modern *masala*, *Ready’s* courtship narrative was regulated throughout by a framework of male dominance that restricts the role of the heroine and emphasises the place of the hero at the centre of the filmic universe. As this thesis has demonstrated, the hero’s dominance is established, highlighted and continually reinforced through his control of three integral elements of the courtship narrative: sight, space and sexual violence.

Each layer of male dominance is in itself complex and exists on a range of registers. This thesis has shown how layers of dominance are constructed through shot construction, dialogue, setting, sound and song as well as narrative development. The hero’s actions, while often providing a clear demonstration of male dominance within the narrative, are not essential to its construction: even in the absence of a strong male, as in *Bodyguard*, the strength of this framework of dominance prevents a heroine from leading a courtship to a successful conclusion.

One striking feature of these films is the lack of criticism of the framework of male dominance, even when its construction involves graphic displays of sexual aggression. Within the world of modern *masala* heroines are provided with no institutional or societal support through which they may seek redress. Instead their objections to acts of voyeurism, intrusion and sexual aggression are raised and resolved within the confines of the hero-heroine relationship itself, with inevitable results. Throughout each film the camera includes the viewer in the hero’s campaign of dominance, with the heroine consistently shown from his controlling viewpoint. In this way films encourage viewers to share in the sexual thrill created by the hero’s actions and power and to respond emotionally rather than critically.

This thesis opened with the suggestions of Indian film critics and columnists that Bollywood films, as the predominant cultural text of contemporary India, may play a role in perpetuating patriarchal values and normalising acts of aggression against women. This analysis of the courtship narratives of Salman Khan’s modern *masala* films appears to support such an assertion, with implications for both male and female audiences. While male viewers may be encouraged replicate the voyeuristic, intrusive and aggressive acts of their heroes, female viewers may also internalise narratives that encourage them to see such acts as acceptable and at times even commendable. While it is impossible to make any definitive claims from textual analysis
about the effect of film on audiences, it can be said with some confidence that these films are not drivers of progressive change. Instead they portray and celebrate the ongoing dominance of – to fall back on the same binaries that the films themselves make unavoidable – the hero over the heroine, the male over the female and the traditional over the modern.

In the absence of detailed market research to inform their audience imaginaries, Bollywood filmmakers have historically relied on box office data to provide a retrospective measure of the national zeitgeist. It is tempting here, after analysing four highly successful films, to attempt a similar interpretation. In offering a framework through which the modern can be combined with and successfully reincorporated into the traditional, the courtship narratives of modern *masala* may appeal to the anxieties of a society which, despite increasingly rapid change, remains highly patriarchal and thus apprehensive about the emergence of the modern woman.
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