

Heroism Through Violence: The Changing Moral Economy of Protagonists in New-Age Indian Cinema

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Abstract

The last decade of Indian commercial cinema has witnessed a significant transformation in the moral construction of heroism. Violence, once framed as reactive or morally conflicted, now operates as a central and legitimizing force in the making of the cinematic protagonist. Films such as *KGF* (2018–2022), *Pushpa* (2021), *Salaar* (2023), *Animal* (2023), and *Jawan* (2023) present heroes whose authority, masculinity, and ethical legitimacy are established through stylized, choreographed, and emotionally justified aggression. Violence is not merely instrumental; it is aestheticized, narrativized, and ideologically elevated.

This paper examines how contemporary Indian cinema reconfigures the moral economy of heroism by normalizing violence as a necessary and even redemptive force. Employing a qualitative interpretive framework grounded in representation theory, moral economy (Thompson; Fassin), hegemonic masculinity (Connell), spectacle (Debord), and media psychology (Gerbner; Bandura), the study undertakes narrative and semiotic analysis of selected films.

The findings suggest that new-age Indian cinema constructs a cultural logic in which dominance replaces ethical restraint, trauma justifies aggression, and state institutions are symbolically displaced by the sovereign violent male body. The paper argues that this cinematic shift reflects and reinforces broader socio-political anxieties, contributing to an evolving cultural imagination where heroism is detached from moral accountability and fused with spectacular power.

Keywords

Cinematic violence; Moral economy; Heroism; Hegemonic masculinity; Spectacle; Indian popular cinema; Representation.

Introduction

Violence has always occupied a visible position within Indian popular cinema. From mythological epics to 1970s “angry young man” narratives, aggression has functioned as a narrative response to injustice, corruption, or personal tragedy. However, contemporary Indian cinema particularly post-2015 pan-India blockbusters signals a deeper ideological transformation. Violence is no longer a reluctant tool of justice; it has become the primary language of heroism itself.

Films such as *KGF*, *Pushpa*, *Salaar*, *Animal*, and *Jawan* foreground protagonists whose identities are inseparable from aggression. These characters do not merely wield violence; they embody it. Their legitimacy stems from their capacity to dominate, intimidate, and eliminate opposition. The cinematic apparatus camera angles, lighting, choreography, sound design participates in elevating violence into spectacle. Bloodshed is stylized, choreographed, slowed down, and framed with reverence.

This shift raises urgent questions:

- How has violence become morally acceptable, even desirable, in defining cinematic heroism?
- What ideological work does this aestheticization perform?
- How are audiences emotionally aligned with ethically ambiguous protagonists?
- What broader cultural anxieties does this model of heroism reflect?

This study proposes that contemporary Indian cinema operates within a reconfigured moral economy, a system of cultural justification in which violence is reframed as necessary leadership, protective masculinity, or sovereign justice. The hero is no longer ethically restrained; he is ethically exempt.

This paper situates this phenomenon within cultural studies, film theory, masculinity studies, and media psychology, offering a multi-theoretical interrogation of violence as ideological currency.

Literature Review

The literature review is organized into five interrelated domains:

2.1 Cinematic Violence: From Moral Conflict to Spectacular Power

Scholarly discussions of cinematic violence have historically oscillated between two positions: violence as social reflection and violence as spectacle. Early media research, influenced by Bandura's Social Learning Theory (1977), examined how repeated exposure to media violence shapes behavioural patterns. Gerbner's Cultivation Theory (1998) further argued that consistent portrayals of violence influence viewers' perception of social reality.

However, film studies scholarship, particularly postmodern critiques, shifted focus toward aestheticization. Guy Debord's concept of the "society of the spectacle" (1967) remains foundational in understanding how visual culture transforms social relations into commodified imagery. In the spectacle, violence is detached from ethical consequence and re-presented as visually pleasurable. In the Indian context, scholars such as Ravi Vasudevan (2010) and M. Madhava Prasad (1998) have analyzed how the "angry young man" of 1970s Hindi cinema functioned as a symbolic mediator of post-Emergency political frustration. Violence in those narratives emerged as reactionary directed at corrupt systems.

Contemporary cinema diverges from this model. The new-age protagonist is not primarily reacting; he is asserting. His violence is not reluctant it is intrinsic. Unlike Amitabh Bachchan's morally conflicted vigilante figures, today's heroes exhibit little ethical hesitation.

Scholars studying recent South Indian blockbusters note a shift toward mythic masculinity and stylized brutality (Srinivas, 2013; Kaur & Sinha, 2020). Violence is choreographed as ritual, transforming the hero into a quasi-mythological figure.

Thus, the scholarship indicates an evolution:



Reactive
Violence

Assertive
Violence

Spectacular
Sovereignty

2.2 Moral Economy: Reframing Legitimacy

The concept of moral economy originates in E.P. Thompson's (1971) work on eighteenth-century English food riots, where he argued that communities operated within shared norms about economic justice. Didier Fassin (2009) later expanded the concept to analyze contemporary ethical justifications within political systems.

Applied to cinema, moral economy refers to the cultural negotiation of what kinds of violence are considered legitimate.

Earlier cinematic moral economies required justification: injustice, oppression, or revenge.

Contemporary films alter this calibration. Violence is normalized through emotional framing: familial betrayal (*Animal*), maternal sacrifice (*KGF*), systemic corruption (*Jawan*), caste or class humiliation (*Pushpa*).

The key shift lies in proportionality. Violence is no longer proportional to injustice; it is excessive and spectacular. Yet audiences accept it because the narrative redefines excess as strength.

Scholars such as Giroux (2001) argue that media cultures increasingly normalize aggression as problem-solving. In the Indian context, post-liberalization cinema reflects anxieties about authority, national security, and masculine identity (Dwyer, 2014). Violence becomes symbolic reassurance. Thus, the moral economy shifts from ethical deliberation to affective justification.

2.3 Representation and Ideological Encoding

Stuart Hall's (1997) representation theory posits that media constructs meaning through systems of signs. Violence is not self-evident; it is encoded with meaning through cinematic techniques.

In contemporary Indian cinema:

- Low-angle shots construct dominance
- Slow-motion sequences sacralize aggression
- Background scores mythologize brutality
- Dialogues frame violence as destiny

Roland Barthes' concept of myth (1972) is relevant here. The violent hero becomes mythic naturalized as inevitable and necessary. Violence loses its historical contingency and becomes cultural destiny. This encoding process neutralizes moral ambiguity. When the hero's brutality is accompanied by emotionally stirring music and applause-inducing dialogue, spectators are guided toward admiration rather than critique.

Representation thus functions ideologically; it redefines aggression as virtue.

2.4 Hegemonic Masculinity and Hypermasculine Sovereignty

R.W. Connell's (1995) theory of hegemonic masculinity describes culturally exalted forms of masculinity that legitimize male dominance. Contemporary Indian blockbusters amplify hypermasculine tropes:

- Muscular physiques
- Emotional suppression
- Territorial control
- Father-son conflict
- Protection of women as justification for violence

Scholars like Rachel Dwyer (2014) and Prasad (1998) have noted how Hindi cinema historically balanced romantic sensitivity with masculine assertion. The new-age protagonist tilts decisively toward authoritarian masculinity.

Films such as *Animal* intensify paternal validation as narrative core. Masculinity is constructed as wounded pride transformed into violent reclamation. The hero's brutality becomes proof of devotion. This suggests a cultural anxiety around masculine identity in contemporary India, possibly linked to shifting gender roles, economic pressures, and political rhetoric valorising strength.

The cinematic body becomes sovereign. Law and state institutions are weakened or corrupt; justice resides in the hero's physical dominance.

2.5 Audience Identification and Media Psychology

Bandura's Social Learning Theory suggests that viewers may imitate rewarded behaviour. When cinematic violence is rewarded through victory, admiration, or romantic validation it reinforces identification.

Gerbner's cultivation theory suggests that consistent exposure shapes perception of reality. Repeated portrayals of violent heroism may normalize dominance as leadership.

However, contemporary scholarship complicates the passive audience model. Cultural studies perspectives (Hall, 1980) argue that audiences negotiate meaning. Yet, even negotiated readings occur within structured encoding.

The emotional architecture of film trauma backstories, maternal devotion, nationalist rhetoric preconditions empathy. Viewers are not merely observing violence; they are emotionally invested in its success.

Thus, cinematic violence becomes morally contagious through affective alignment.

Transitional Observation:

Existing scholarship on violence, masculinity, and spectacle provides strong theoretical grounding. However, limited work directly interrogates the changing moral economy of heroism in contemporary Indian cinema as a distinct phenomenon.

This paper seeks to fill that gap by synthesizing moral economy theory, representation studies, and masculinity scholarship to argue that violence has transitioned from narrative device to ideological foundation of heroism.

Research Methodology:

This study is anchored in an interpretivist and critical-cultural epistemological framework. It proceeds from the assumption that cinematic texts are not neutral reflections of reality but structured sites of ideological production. The objective is not to determine whether violence causes behavioral imitation, but to examine how violence is symbolically constructed, morally negotiated, and culturally legitimized within contemporary Indian commercial cinema. The research therefore prioritizes meaning-making, representational coding, and narrative architecture over quantification. The methodological design draws upon qualitative textual analysis, integrating narrative analysis, semiotic analysis, and ideological critique. This triangulated approach enables a multi-layered reading of cinematic texts. Narrative analysis allows for examination of character arcs, moral positioning, conflict escalation, and resolution patterns. It identifies how aggression is introduced, justified, and rewarded within story structures. Semiotic analysis decodes visual and auditory signifiers: camera placement, lighting, color grading, costume, choreography, editing pace, dialogue framing, and background score that elevate violence from action to spectacle. Ideological critique situates these representational strategies within broader cultural and socio-political contexts.

The interpretive methodology is particularly justified because violence in these films operates less as measurable frequency and more as symbolic performance. A purely quantitative content analysis would count violent acts but would fail to capture how aggression is framed as ethical necessity or heroic destiny. The concern of this study is not “how much violence,” but “how violence means.” Thus, the qualitative approach aligns with Stuart Hall’s encoding/decoding framework, where texts are analyzed as structured representations that position audiences toward preferred readings.

The sample selection follows purposive sampling criteria. The films chosen are *KGF: Chapter 1 & 2*, *Pushpa: The Rise*, *Salaar*, *Animal*, and *Jawan* represent high-grossing, widely circulated pan-India productions released between 2018 and 2023. They were selected based on four criteria: the centrality of violence to protagonist identity; the aesthetic stylization of aggression; strong emphasis on masculine authority; and significant commercial and cultural impact. These films are not statistically representative of all Indian cinema, but they are symbolically representative of dominant trends in blockbuster storytelling.

Each film was viewed multiple times across different analytical stages. The first viewing focused on narrative structure and character arcs. The second viewing concentrated on cinematic techniques and representational codes. Subsequent viewings identified recurring motifs such as paternal trauma, class humiliation, sovereign masculinity, and institutional collapse. Scenes of climactic violence were analyzed frame-by-frame to examine camera movement, editing rhythm, music escalation, and audience alignment cues.

The research design also incorporates comparative thematic analysis. Rather than treating each film as isolated text, the study identifies cross-textual patterns that reveal broader ideological recalibrations. For instance, in all selected films, legal institutions appear ineffective, corrupt, or irrelevant. Justice is privatized. Authority is embodied in the male protagonist’s physical capacity. This recurring pattern signals a transformation not merely in narrative preference but in cultural imagination.

Validity in qualitative research rests on coherence, theoretical grounding, and transparency of interpretive logic. The study ensures validity by consistently linking textual observations to established theoretical frameworks: moral economy (Thompson; Fassin), hegemonic masculinity (Connell), spectacle (Debord), and representation (Hall). Rather than imposing theory externally, the analysis demonstrates how cinematic evidence substantiates theoretical claims.

The limitations of the study are acknowledged. The research does not incorporate audience reception analysis, nor does it conduct interviews with filmmakers. Its focus remains on textual construction. However, this limitation is methodologically deliberate, as the aim is to decode representational ideology rather than audience psychology empirically.

Analysis

The analysis reveals that violence in contemporary Indian blockbuster cinema functions simultaneously as narrative engine, aesthetic spectacle, and ideological instrument. Across the selected films, aggression is neither episodic nor morally conflicted; it is foundational to the protagonist's identity.

In *KGF*, Rocky's ascent from poverty to dominance is narratively tied to maternal promise and class resentment. However, the magnitude of violence exceeds the narrative justification. The film constructs a mythic register through sepia filters, operatic music, and slow-motion procession shots that transform the protagonist into legend. Violence becomes rite of passage. The camera frequently adopts low-angle framing, enlarging Rocky's physical presence and rendering opponents visually inferior. The mise-en-scène resembles epic myth rather than contemporary realism. This mythologization displaces ethical inquiry. The question is not whether Rocky should wield violence, but whether he can wield it more spectacularly than his adversaries.

Pushpa similarly situates aggression within humiliation, yet it converts rebellion into charisma. The protagonist's defiance of hierarchical insult is emotionally resonant. However, rather than interrogating structural injustice, the film personalizes power. Fight sequences are choreographed to emphasize swagger, bodily rhythm, and stylized gestures. The recurring motif of Pushpa adjusting his shoulder becomes symbolic assertion of masculine selfhood. Violence here is performative identity. It produces recognition.

In *Salaar*, aggression assumes ritualistic intensity. Monumental set designs and militaristic choreography evoke a quasi-feudal order. Silence intensifies menace; the protagonist speaks less but acts decisively. Institutional structures appear secondary to clan loyalty. Violence is framed as sacred duty. The aesthetic restraint: muted colors, shadow-heavy lighting imbues brutality with solemnity rather than chaos. The hero becomes sovereign executor of justice outside state apparatus.

Animal marks a psychological intensification. The protagonist's aggression is anchored in paternal yearning. Emotional neglect becomes catalyst for hypermasculine overcompensation. Yet the film refuses to morally condemn his excess. Graphic violence is paired with intimate emotional scenes, creating oscillation between vulnerability and brutality. This juxtaposition complicates viewer response but does not destabilize admiration. The film invites empathy even while showcasing moral extremity. Trauma functions as ethical insulation.

In *Jawan*, vigilantism is framed through social justice rhetoric. Corruption and institutional betrayal justify extrajudicial action. However, the scale of destruction and stylization of combat elevate spectacle above critique. The protagonist embodies corrective authority. The visual grammar: mass choreography, synchronized action, emphatic background score constructs violence as orchestrated righteousness.

Across all texts, institutions such as police, judiciary, and political systems are either corrupt or ineffective. This consistent displacement suggests privatization of justice. Authority migrates from system to body. The hero's physical capacity becomes moral instrument. This recalibration aligns with Connell's concept of hegemonic masculinity, where dominance legitimizes leadership.

Furthermore, the aestheticization of bloodshed reduces moral discomfort. Violence is stylized through slow motion, rhythmic editing, and dramatic soundscapes. The sensory pleasure of spectacle overrides ethical pause. Debord's spectacle is evident: brutality becomes consumable visual excess. The moral economy thus shifts from proportional justice to emotional absolutism. Aggression is justified not through legal reasoning but through affective narrative. The spectator's identification is secured before moral evaluation can intervene.

Discussion

The findings suggest the emergence of a reconfigured moral economy in which violence is reframed as necessity and leadership as dominance. Emotional engineering plays a critical role in this recalibration. Trauma narratives, familial devotion, and systemic corruption serve as ethical pre-justifications. Spectacle neutralizes discomfort. Excess replaces proportionality.

This shift reflects broader socio-political currents. Public discourse increasingly valorizes strength, decisiveness, and muscular nationalism. Economic precarity and gender anxieties may further amplify the appeal of hypermasculine figures who restore order through force. Cinema both reflects and reinforces these currents, producing a feedback loop between cultural imagination and visual representation.

The displacement of institutional justice by individual sovereignty is particularly significant. The hero becomes parallel state authority, embodying law rather than submitting to it. This transformation signals not merely aesthetic change but ideological negotiation.

Conclusion

Contemporary Indian cinema demonstrates a profound transformation in the moral construction of heroism. Violence has transitioned from reactive instrument to ideological foundation. Through narrative framing, aesthetic stylization, and emotional justification, aggression is normalized as legitimate leadership. Heroism becomes detached from ethical restraint and fused with dominance, spectacle, and masculine sovereignty.

This recalibration of moral economy has implications beyond cinematic analysis. As popular culture shapes collective imagination, the normalization of spectacular violence influences cultural perceptions of authority and justice. Critical engagement with these representations is therefore essential.

The study contributes to scholarship on cinematic violence, masculinity, and representation by situating contemporary Indian blockbusters within a broader ideological framework. Future research may extend this inquiry to audience reception studies or comparative cross-cultural analysis.

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