



Genre en séries

Cinéma, télévision, médias

16 | 2024

« Femmes fatales », « hommes en crise » ?
Réexaminer les modèles genrés du film noir

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Édition électronique

URL : <https://journals.openedition.org/ges/4529>

DOI : 10.4000/ges.4529

ISSN : 2431-6563

Éditeur

Presses universitaires de Bordeaux

Référence électronique

Debadrita Saha et Ramyani Banerjee, « The urban male protagonist in Indian film noir: A reading of *Bees Saal Baad*, *Woh Kaun Thi?* and *Kuheli* », *Genre en séries* [En ligne], 16 | 2024, mis en ligne le 01 mars 2024, consulté le 04 avril 2024. URL : <http://journals.openedition.org/ges/4529> ; DOI : <https://doi.org/10.4000/ges.4529>

Ce document a été généré automatiquement le 4 avril 2024.



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The urban male protagonist in Indian film noir: A reading of *Bees Saal Baad*, *Woh Kaun Thi?* and *Kuheli*

Le protagoniste masculin urbain du film noir indien : une analyse de Bees Saal Baad, Woh Kaun Thi ? et Kuheli

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Since the authors of the paper are not conversant in French, they took the professional assistance of Partho Das, Assistant Professor (French studies), Amity School of Foreign Languages, Amity University Kolkata, in translating the abstract from English to French.

- 1 This essay does not attempt to trace the origins of Western film noir and its influence on Indian cinema, nor does it attempt to provide an elaborate history of Indian film noir, for it is beyond the scope of this paper. Furthermore, the existing scholarship on both film noir and Indian cinema have attempted time and again to define film noir and its geopolitical boundaries, if there are any. James Naremore (2019: 27) notes that while we cannot identify the first film noir in terms of genre, we can certainly trace the films to which the label got stuck first, thus creating a series of films which adopted the genre elements—namely, the 1930's French films like *Pépé le Moko*, and *Quai des brumes*. In fact, Naremore (2019: 28) asserts that it was the French critics who started identifying certain American or more specifically, Hollywood produced crime-thrillers as film noir, notably *The Maltese Falcon* and *Murder, My Sweet*. Considering Naremore's statements, who demonstrates the fluidity of the geographical origins and reach of film noir, perhaps, we can assert that film noir is more of a genre and artistic expression than a particular product of a particular film industry, a claim that Andrew Spicer also echoes in *A Companion to Film Noir*. Which is why, the question of defining Indian film noir becomes even more convoluted, because it attaches a geopolitical tag to a corpus of movies that emulated and reformulated certain genre elements, and also raises the possibility that non-Western film noir might not be as authentically noir to get the French approval, who were apparently the ones to coin the term.

- 2 Is there any Indian film noir, then? Corey K. Creekmur observes that a certain sense of “critical uncertainty” envelops the assertion of the existence of “Indian film noir” for it is a “historical reclassification” that retrospectively attempts to identify certain films as identical or similar to the Hollywood film noir. We accept this uncertainty, and keeping the unreliable nature of the term in mind, we attempt to analyse Indian crime thrillers with complex plots that bear remarkable similarity to the film noir of the United States.
- 3 However, Lalitha Gopalan provides a much more optimistic view on the possibility of the emergence of film noir in India, although she restricts its geographical ambit to Bombay film industry, ironically named Bollywood. Gopalan’s essay “Bombay Noir” (2005) delves into the city’s unique urban environment and its influence on the noir genre in Indian cinema. Her analysis skilfully intertwines urban studies and film theory, shedding light on the complex relationship between the city’s architecture, social dynamics, and the emergence of a distinctive cinematic style. The work uncovers how Bombay’s labyrinthine streets, diversity, and contradictions serve as a rich backdrop for the dark narratives of crime and corruption in Indian noir films. “Bombay Noir” is a critical piece that deepens our understanding of Mumbai’s role in shaping cinematic narratives.
- 4 When Ranjani Mazumdar (2007: 150) turns her focus to the stories of decline plaguing Bombay, she advances a complementary reading: “[...] the city of ruin emerges to express catastrophe, despair, and permanent crisis” and later, “[...] the spatial topography of dread, decay, and death.” What Mazumdar emphasises is the concept of noir, a genre that has stuck with gangster films since the 1980s. Lalitha Gopalan acknowledges that “Bombay Noir is the name I wish to use to identify the idea that emerges riddled with anachronism from the shadows of Mazumdar’s ‘Bombay Cinema’ and ‘noir’ through a sequence of overlaps and continuous distillation.”
- 5 In order to broaden the scope of Indian film studies, which until now have primarily concentrated on the dominance of Bollywood, Lalitha Gopalan’s work *Cinemas Dark and Slow in Digital India* offers a sustained engagement with contemporary Indian feature films from outside the mainstream, such as *Aaranaya Kaandam* (2010) *I.D.* (2012), *Cosmic Sex* (2013), *Kaul* (2016), *Chauthi Koot* (2015), and *Gaali Beeja* (2015). Gopalan brings together unstudied films that merit critical attention from Bombay cinema, as well as independent productions from Bangalore, Chennai, Delhi, Kolkata, and Trivandrum. This book highlights the arrival of digital technology while remaining fully aware of “the digital” and taking into account the change in the global circulation of cinema and finance through close readings of films and a thorough examination of film style. This simultaneous emphasis on the film narrative and the techno-material circumstances of Indian cinema paints a whole picture of evolving narratives and shifting genres and styles. The book is aimed at scholars of cinema studies and media studies as well as readers who are interested in the present forms that media and mediums are taking.
- 6 Many Indian noir films, many of which were adaptations of Hollywood films, were released in the 1950s and 1960s.¹ Indian film noir has emerged as a compelling cinematic genre that reflects the complexities of urban life, power dynamics, and societal hierarchies. One of its recurring themes is the portrayal of the urban male protagonist, who often serves as a lens through which critical questions about caste, class, and patriarchy in contemporary India are explored. This topic has garnered significant attention from scholars and film enthusiasts alike, prompting a multifaceted

discourse that seeks to decipher whether these portrayals sustain traditional Brahmanical patriarchy or contribute to the dismantling of caste and class hierarchies (Chakravarti 2018). This essay acknowledges the diversity of the existing scholarship and identifies the need for expanding the ambit of “Indian film noir” beyond the Bombay film industry, and the urban metropolis, to bring out the ambivalence of the rural and semi-urban landscapes which are not identical to the dazzling cityscape of Bombay (now Mumbai) but offer equally enchanting avenues for the destabilisation of social order and threats to “hegemonic masculinity.” In this aspect, Imogen Sara Smith’s *In Lonely Places: Film Noir Beyond the City* is an authoritative work of film scholarship and can be referred to for a further understanding of how non-urban noir plays out on the screen.

- 7 One key aspect of this research revolves around the examination of the urban male protagonist’s character traits and behaviours. While critics like Uma Chakravarti argue that these characters often perpetuate existing norms and hierarchies, showcasing upper-caste, privileged males as heroes, others like R. Agarwal (*Changing roles of women in Indian cinema. Humanities, Arts and Social Sciences Studies*, 14[2], 145–160) contend that they can be vehicles for subversion. Characters like the troubled detective in *C.I.D* (1956) or the morally ambiguous protagonist in *Baazi* (1951) and *Jaal* (1952) challenge conventional stereotypes, thereby questioning established power structures.
- 8 Moreover, scholars like Benazir Manzar and Aju Aravind have delved into the narrative choices and socio-political contexts that inform these films. The urban landscape serves as a symbolic battleground where the protagonist’s struggles mirror larger societal conflicts. The exploration of dark alleys, corrupt systems, and moral dilemmas can be seen as allegories for the pervasive issues of caste discrimination and class divides in India. This contextualization underscores the potential for film noir to engage in social critique and provoke meaningful discussions.
- 9 The female characters in these narratives also play a pivotal role in shaping the discourse. Their agency, representation, and interactions with the male protagonist are scrutinised for signs of empowerment or reinforcement of patriarchy. However, scholars like Afreen Khan highlight instances where they challenge traditional roles and expectations.
- 10 Additionally, the reception of these films by audiences is a critical aspect of this research. How do viewers perceive and interpret the urban male protagonist? Are they critical of his actions and attitudes, or do they embrace him as a reflection of their own experiences and desires? As Ronie Parciack notes, audience responses provide valuable insights into the broader impact of these cinematic representations on society.
- 11 Many of the elements of Hollywood film noir were frequently featured in a series of popular Hindi and regional films, almost all of which were set in (then) contemporary Bombay, or, some other urban cityscape, including heroes who straddle the line between legal and illegal activity. Such behaviour is emulative of their American counterparts, these are men who are street-smart but can discreetly negotiate swanky nightclubs featuring alluring femme fatale (often explicitly Westernised through signifiers such as clothing, smoking, gambling and alcohol-consumptions). However, Indian noir did shift the locale to non-urban landscapes as well, romanticising them in order to establish the central conflict in the narrative as a clash between Western modernity and Indian tradition. In fact, the films analysed in this essay highlight the

perils of Westernisation, which can apparently corrupt the morality of the upper-caste, upper-class hero and threaten the patriarchal hierarchy.

- 12 One of the hallmark characteristics of films noirs are the lighting scheme they deploy: low-key lighting with sharp light/dark contrasts and dramatic shadow patterning—a technique known as *chiaroscuro* (a term adopted from Renaissance painting). By all accounts, noir lighting, also known as expressionist lighting, which reduces the blinding effect of the fill light to produce shadows and increase the range of black to white, is largely a cinematographer's style, and to see noir in Bombay cinema is to look for this style. Characters' faces may be partially or completely concealed by darkness, which is unusual in Hollywood. Many people regard black-and-white photography to be one of the most important aspects of classic noir filmmaking. Low-angle, wide-angle, and skewed, or Dutch angle, shots are also popular in film noir. Shots of persons reflected in one or more mirrors, shots through curved or frosted glass, or shots through other distorting objects are all typical disorientation methods in film noir. The storylines in films noirs are notoriously intricate, frequently using flashbacks and other editing methods that break and obscure the narrative flow. It is also a common technique to use flashbacks to tell the main story. Almost every film noir has a crime, generally murder; in addition to the standard-issue avarice, jealousy is a common criminal motivation. The most common, but far from dominant, basic plot is a criminal investigation conducted by a private eye, a police detective (sometimes acting alone), or a concerned amateur. Other common plots involve the protagonists in heists or con games, or in murderous conspiracies, often involving adulterous affairs. Betrayals and double-crosses are common plot elements, as are false suspicions and accusations of crime.
- 13 The three films we are about to analyse here are a curious blend of Gothic and film noir. Vijay Mishra (2017: 177) defines the Gothic noir as characterised by “deep, ominous shadows that exposed a character's inner turmoil and sense of alienation from the world”, “the alienated and doomed anti-hero, and the invocation of an earlier, darker, age”. If so, then all the films analysed here can be collectively grouped into Gothic noir. For the central character, or the main protagonist finds himself alienated from the ancient Gothic setting he steps into, after his return from a sleek, urban metropolis. Encountered with the uncanny in the form of a castle or a mysterious village setting, he is forced to face his own repressed desires—desires that will be his doom. The transgressions that take place inside the mansion are against the order of law and society, and by drawing the protagonist into its mystery, it will threaten the sanity of the protagonist and attempt to annihilate him. It is the protagonist's urban, upper-middle-class values that will come to his aid to fight against the abject of the mansion—the inexplicable mysteries and the dangerous seduction that awaits him in the non-urban Gothic.
- 14 Caste and class play important roles in shaping the masculinity of the heroes of Indian noir. They are Western-educated, wealthy, and usually the voice of reason in an otherwise inexplicable web of puzzles. Fair-skinned, handsome, and upper caste, they aim to instil law and order within the domain of the abject—that lies beyond their control. Caste, as a rigid social system has been deeply entrenched in the fabric of Indian society as a whole, with four social groups—Brahmins, Kshatriyas, Vaishyas and Shudras forming the four varnas, while the avarnas are generally marginalised as untouchable, or Dalits Inter-caste relations used to be strictly regulated and prohibited

in most cases, in order to preserve the purity of blood. In some ways, it resembled the racist segregation in most Western societies. Prior to the advent of World War II, social mobility within castes was virtually impossible and while the upper-castes got access to most social privileges, including the basic amenities as well as higher education, the Dalits were alienated from getting access to such amenities. The social upheaval that came with the Second World War threatened the rigour of such class hierarchy and posed the possibility of inter-caste miscegenation, something as equally abhorred in India as racial miscegenation. A large part of the mystery and consequential anxiety in the three Indian noir films to be analysed stems from the fear of destruction of the caste hierarchy. As Deshpande (2007: 97) summarises, in “male-centred Hindi cinema, the hero remained young, fair, handsome, eligible, romantic, mother-fixated, upper-caste, north-Indian and preferably rich”. This is an accurate portrayal of the male heroes in the two Hindi films taken up here—*Bees Saal Baad* (Biren Naug, 1962), and *Woh Kaun Thi?* (Raj Khosla, 1964)—and also in the case of the regional film in Bengali, *Kuheli* (1971)—the hero, Shankar Roy, a zamindar or a landlord fitting the aforementioned description to the T. These honourable men, unlike the cynical Western noir hero, find themselves trapped in a kind of morbid dream-like setting, which blurs the distinction between truth and fiction, and threatens the upper-class and upper-caste values they embody.

- 15 Winfried Fluck (2001: 401) notes that in the American tradition of film noir, there is a “self-reliant outlaw hero” who is a “disillusioned and thereby (authentic) individualist whose guilt consists in a certain moral ambiguity”. We see the depiction of such an individualist hero suffering from a moral ambiguity in *Kuheli* by Tarun Majumdar, where the protagonist, Shankar Roy is torn by the guilt of the supposed murder of his wife by himself and is haunted by his wife’s apparition which makes him delusional and convinced that he was the reason for his wife’s untimely demise. The femme fatale here becomes the apparition of the deceased wife, seductive yet appalling—beckoning the husband to come to her but also warning about the consequences if he is provoked by her. The hero’s gradual derangement into insanity is evoked by means of expressionist chiaroscuro cinematography, and melodramatic acting, where the characters are frequently unnerved by sudden jumpscare, and apparently paranormal occurrences. In all three films, there is a direct appeal to the emotions of the audiences, by showing most female characters to be pathetically helpless and the men to be epitomes of egotistical yet idealistic masculinity, craving and fighting for power, under the facade of preserving traditional values.

***Kuheli* (trans. The Haze)**

- 16 Shankar Ray, the upper-caste Kayastha male protagonist of the film is shown to be disillusioned with the urban world of metropolitan Kolkata, who attempted to find marital bliss with his newly-wedded wife, Aparna, in the mansion of Nijhumgarh (literal translation : the bleak fort), but got his hopes shattered when his wife was killed by an unknown assassin, and he was brought to justice for the murder. After the trial, despite being acquitted due to lack of evidence, he keeps himself and his daughter confined to the castle, away from civilised society, his only connection to the outer world is the servants and a family physician. Shankar Roy is the stereotypical portraiture of what Lisa Hordnes (2022) terms as the “anti-social loners” of the film

noir genre who are “subject to existential angst”. Hordnes also notes that the male protagonist of film noir gets tangled up in a world of crime, and has an interest in the erotic. Applying Hordnes’s statement to the film, we can suggest that it is precisely Shankar’s interest in the erotic, his unfulfilled sexual passions is that gets him further embroiled into danger. The erotic for him poses the realm of uncanny, and the irrational embodied by the spectral the femme fatale who will destroy his sanity, and thereby, his masculinity.

- 17 The apparition that Shankar sees, which he thinks is his deceased wife, not only brings forth his repressed guilt for having failed to protect her but also his inability to decipher the mystery of her sudden hysteric fits and occasional bouts of depression. As an orphan who was adopted by the former landlord of the mansion of Nijhumgarh, and made the heir after his death, Shankar craves for a nurturing presence in his life, an urge that stems from his “infantile fixation of tender feelings upon the mother” (Freud 1910: 235). It ought to be noted here that despite being bequeathed with the estate of his adoptive guardian, Shankar’s legitimacy as the heir and owner of the estate has always been resisted by Satyacharan, thus putting his patriarchal authority into question, and making him doubt his masculinity. In his love for his wife, Aparna, and her post-death memories, he quits “his active position as masculine subject” by willingly setting himself in thrall to the loved object (Krutnik 2001[1991]: 84). A brief excerpt of the movie will help establish this statement.
- 18 The supposed apparition of Aparna is said to haunt Nijhumgarh, beckoning her daughter to reunite with her in the afterworld. Shankar, who is already wrecked with guilt for his wife’s death, engages in a frenzied search to seek out Aparna, and ask for forgiveness from her. One night, when Ranu, his daughter is missing and is believed to have wandered out to meet her deceased mother, Shankar attempts to find her, but in the process, he is unable to maintain his sanity, and shrieking “Aparna” thrice he trembles and falls unconscious. The employment of scenes highlighting Shankar on the verge of insanity, combined with the superstitious beliefs about his dead wife’s vengeful soul demonstrates a hybridity of horror with noir, reflecting on the influence of classic horror movie tropes such as paranoia, jumpscars, premonition of doom, and most importantly, the uncertainty of darkness as formative elements in the establishment of film noir as a recognised genre. Tilted, jarring camera angles, and extreme close-ups of Shankar’s face, capturing his fleeting expressions of curiosity, horror and grief, intensified by the interplay of strange highlights and uncanny shadows on his visage, show his gradual descent into madness, and the impact of the guilt of his wife’s accidental death on his psyche.
- 19 Shankar’s masculinity is thus engulfed by the apparition of the femme fatale figure—Aparna, who is trying to seduce Shankar to his death. He indulges in a masochistic discourse where his craving for Aparna reduces him to a half-insane man with no control over his property as the landlord and manipulated by the servants. Such kind of self-abnegation destabilises his masculine authority, and the responsibilities he has to perform as the lord of the mansion and the father of Ranu are thwarted. Indeed, Shankar can rarely take any decision on his own, and it is the governess figure, Sheba Mitra, who performs the role of the detective—inspecting the root cause of such haunting in the house and trying to pinpoint the source of corruptive danger that abounds in the house. Sheba guides Shankar and counsels him back to normalcy, and the film underpins the sexual tension between them, with Shankar wishing to recreate

romantic bliss with this nurturing figure, possibly to remind himself of the love he received from his former wife. *Kuheli*, therefore, is characterised by a crucial aspect of film noir, which Richard Dyer (1998: 115) describes as being “characterised by a certain anxiety over the existence and definition of masculinity and normality”. For instance, in his scuffle with Satyacharan, an escaped convict who tries to usurp the property of Nijhumgarh, Shankar Roy tries to establish his masculine authority by accusing the escaped prisoner and fraternal cousin Satyacharan of different crimes, and asking him to lower his voice for he is an absconding criminal. However, Satyacharan retorts back by blaming Shankar to be a waif, who thieved and manipulated his way into Satyacharan’s father’s inheritance. Ultimately, he accuses Shankar of murdering his own wife with a revolver,—the last straw of accusation that destabilises Shankar’s masculinity. Trapped within the memories of his wife’s miserable death, the visions of her apparitions, and the constant realisation that he is not the biological primogenitor to the mansion and its lordship, Shankar becomes an existential male protagonist, whose masculinity is threatened by his wife at first, his nemesis Satyacharan, and then the female governess figure who takes up the role of a detective, and guides Shankar to sanity². His anxiety is located in his inability to discover his first wife’s secret, who despite her loving nature, would succumb to occasional bouts of hysteria and depression. Aparna has constantly told him “I am not what you think I am” (Majumdar, 1971) and his inability to decipher her sexuality and her secret marks her subjectivity. As long as Shankar is under the delusion that he has been manipulated into a dubious marriage and that he has failed to protect his wife from her seemingly mysterious past, he stays implicated as the criminal, with guilt marking his subjectivity. Fluck (2001: 383) notes,

In film noir, the crime is no longer committed by a “professional” criminal but by an “ordinary” citizen who is drawn—or appears to have been drawn—into crime by accident or some strange, unforeseen combination of factors. This transformation of the citizen into a criminal raises the question of guilt, which, in turn, raises the question of the subject’s accountability for the crime he or she has committed.

- 20 *Kuheli* then becomes a successful film noir in the sense that it revolves around the enigma of Shankar’s wife’s mysterious death/murder, and the vision of her apparition haunting Shankar and the entire mansion. The usage of lighting is very crucial in the sense that Shankar prior to his wife’s death is shown in bright white backdrops, clean-shaven, and radiant in high-key lighting to convey his state of marital bliss. After his wife dies, Shankar is most presented against dark, or semi-dark backdrops barely illuminated by low-key lighting, his hair and beard unkempt, and a vacant look pervades his eyes. Biswajit’s emotive acting often bordering on the theatrical, faithfully portrays the hero’s fast degradation into derangement over his confusion over reality and fiction. His moral ambiguity is tested by his guilt, which becomes the central force of the story. Through the use of flashbacks in the narration of his past to the governess Sheba Mitra, in an attempt to vilify himself from the accusations levelled upon him, he tries to provide a subjective view to his apparent crime and to re-establish his authority as the patriarch. *Kuheli* then belongs to that sub-set of film noir which “attempts to do justice to individuals who have become guilty (or seem to have done so)” (Fluck, 2001:390). While it ultimately emerges, that Shankar is not the killer but a sympathetic character manipulated for his good nature, the fact that he was playing with a revolver, a phallic symbol, with his wife, implicates him partly in her death—his inability to decipher had made his first wife the Other to his patriarchal self. “At a symbolic level”,

therefore, Aparna is “a supernatural force that threatens to feminize the estate and the patriarch, by challenging patriarchal order and heterosexuality” (Pons, 2017: 74).

- 21 However, the resistance to patriarchy is not concrete or completely executed in this film, as it turns out that Shankar’s wife and her sister, who will become his second wife, a sort of femme fatale dancer, were both puppets in the hands of the family physician of Shankar. The real culprit, the doctor embodies more of a class struggle within patriarchy, and the women, despite their attempts to establish their individuality, become pawns in this strife for legal ownership of property. Since Shankar is the waif figure, who was adopted by the former landlord, his class status is put into question, despite his upper-caste surname. Furthermore, the allegations made by Satyacharan that Shankar had married a courtesan figure hailing from a dubious caste and class lineage had further exacerbated the caste anxiety, making Shankar embark on an investigative quest to unravel Aparna’s past, harbouring suspicions that he has been duped into a dishonourable marriage. His final triumph over the treacherous doctor is an establishment of not only a happy ending of social security but also the existing norms of an upper-caste ruler.

Woh Kaun Thi?: frayed realities, castrated heroes, and fatal Angel(s) in the House

- 22 *Woh Kaun Thi?* captures the spirit of the macabre and the Gothic right from the first scene through the indelible shot sequence of an enigmatic, ethereal woman dressed in white standing by the side of the road. Like *Kuheli*, *Woh Kaun Thi?* employs three common tropes of Western film noir the mistaken identity of doppelgangers, the femme fatale versus the Angel in the House, and the hegemonically masculine hero who is resolved to uncover the identity of the mysterious female, and, the enigma of female sexuality.
- 23 The film is based on the noir genre of filmmaking, with dark shots, obscure camera angles, a “fantastique” mystical progression of the story, and a dark depiction of events. In its opening sequence, the film establishes an acute sense of paranoia, in the encounter between the hero Dr. Anand (Manoj Kumar) and the femme fatale figure, draped in white and waiting for the hero to escort her to the strangest destination possible amid a torrential downpour—a graveyard. Anand is later shown to be driven by an inner weakness that makes her susceptible to the charms of this unknown, mysterious young woman. His flamboyant personality and his successful career as a doctor makes him an eligible bachelor, as the film implies through showing him as constantly courted by numerous female suitors. Ever since the revelation that Anand can inherit his uncle’s property upon sound evidence of his mental stability, the events take a sinister turn for him, and the initial normalcy of a prosperous career and a comforting personal life, in which he is grounded, is gradually destroyed as he begins witnessing visions the veracity of which he cannot prove to others. Being lured by a femme fatale, and having visions like graveyard gates automatically opening in front of him, hearing snatches of seductive ditties about emotional pain from within the graveyard, being called to a dilapidated mansion by a strange caller to attend to a dying patient only to discover that it is the same white-clad woman, and to discover even further that the mansion is deserted—all of these can be labelled as hallucinations to establish that Anand has inherited the strain of mental instability that ran in his

bloodline. His girlfriend Seema does not believe him in the first place—the first sign hinting that he will be a victim of circumstances. To quote Fluck (2001: 393), “the real trouble for the characters starts when, one day, they encounter a woman whose appearance strikes their imagination like lightning”. Indeed, Dr. Anand meets the femme fatale figure on a rainy night, and there are frequent flashes of lightning while he enquires her about her identity and destination. Even more crucial is her self-identification as “Koi Nahi” (“No one”). By concealing her name, the unknown woman achieves two important aspects as regards to masculinity in film noir: (1) by resisting being named, or identified, she resists the patriarchal control over herself, which Dr. Anand tries to project, situating himself in the role of a saviour who has to rescue a damsel in “apparent” distress from the heavy downpour, and (2) she becomes a projection of male fantasies, yet castrates him. Isabel Fraile Murlanch (1996: 105) remarks that no women in film noir can escape being scrutinised and classified by the males, which rings true in this case, for Dr. Anand, the hero, is constantly asking questions to pinpoint a definitive identity for this woman in white. However, she retorts by saying that she will allow herself to be escorted by him to her destination only if he stops asking questions. If for noir men, the obsession with naming is “an attempt to impose coherence and order” on the women around them, then the absence of naming “creates unbearable confusion in the patriarchal system” (Murlanch, 1996: 108). Significantly, once she enters Dr. Anand’s car, she can clearly visualise the route, while Anand finds it difficult to navigate the route amidst the torrential rain. His remarks, “*tum dekh sakte ho? rasta toh bilkul dikhai nahi deta*” (“How can you see clearly when the road is not visible at all”) might apparently be a question of a surprised individual, but as the conversation proceeds, it reveals his deep-seated anxiety as the man, who is unable to prove his mettle to a woman as the knight in the shining armour. For him, this mysterious woman who can see in the dark amidst harsh weather is “a reality to which he cannot attach a tidy, clear, label” (Murlanch, 1996: 108). He cannot preserve his autonomy in the beginning of the film, both sexually and mentally, and he is constantly haunted by whether the female he saw was real, or a figment of his imagination.

- 24 The hero’s attraction towards the femme fatale figure is also motivated by the subtextual urge for dichotomising between the docile traditional Indian woman (in the model of the archetypal Angel in the House or Madonnaesque domesticated women) as personified by the unknown female figure, and the Westernised, assertive, openly provocative girlfriend—Seema. From the very appearance of Seema, we see her as discrediting Manoj Kumar’s experiences as his hallucinations. She rather chides him for being so chivalric in his demeanour that he gives a lift to every woman in his car. Not surprisingly, her presence in the film is cut short by her fatal death. For, the Indian film noir cannot depict a woman who openly disobeys the chivalric codes of patriarchy and dominates the man without being subjugated by him. On the other hand, the femme fatale, despite her mysterious aura, submits to the male hero to a certain extent, alluring him, but also seeking protection so as to nurture his male ego. Furthermore, she is clad in a white saree, and not a gown, and not very provocatively, like Dr. Anand’s girlfriend, so she seems to establish the authenticity of traditional Indian values even when her mission is to destroy the male hero. Frank Krutnik (2001 [1991]: 43) notes that the books from which noir films were adapted did “set up an opposition between the male as the language user, and the woman as erotic object, as a glorified

body of awesome excitation (which poses its own dangers, of overwhelming male rationality)”.

- 25 Anand’s desire for the woman is evident in his description of her appearance, for he is the man who desires, and the one who can describe; the correct place of the woman is to service his desires (for sex, for the demonstration of his prowess). Here, prowess indicates guiding the woman to her destination, and Dr. Anand does the job faithfully by offering to drop her off on a rainy night, even though he does not know where she intends to go. Crucially, Sadhana, who plays the femme fatale in *Woh Kaun Thi?*, is made to appear in a manner that fits the enigmatic Woman in White trope popularised by Wilkie Collins’s novel of the same name—“quiet and self-controlled, a little melancholy and a little touched by suspicion” (Collins 1996 [1860]: 21). In the opening sequence, where Anand first meets the woman in white (played by Sadhana), she speaks cryptically, giving encoded messages about the impending doom like, “Jahan mujhe jana hai, wahan tum nahi pauchate” (“You can’t take me where I want to go”), or “raste bohot hai, magar tum nahi Ja sakte” (“There are many ways, but you can’t go there”)—all these messages subliminally code the impending threat to the masculinity of our urban male protagonist, whose faculty of reason and logic will not work against the irrational and the sublime. The use of lighting in this sequence serves to amplify the threat, exposing the vulnerability of Dr. Anand. Noir males often tend to attach themselves to fatal women through over-idealisation. It is this over-idealisation that leads to Dr. Anand’s doom—him being framed as mentally unstable, and thereby, deprived of his inheritance. The villain, Ramesh has employed the femme fatale to overwhelm the rationality of Dr. Anand, by making her the object of his desire—on being enchanted by the femme fatale, Dr. Anand experiences “problematic sacrifice of his ‘licit’ masculine identity and motive power” (Krutnik (2001 [1991]:84).
- 26 *Woh Kaun Thi?* then belongs to the “paranoid man films” as described by Krutnik (2001 [1991]: 131)—films or “melodramas specifically and overwhelmingly concerned with the problems besetting masculine identity and meaning”. The songs “Lag Ja Gale” or “Naina Barse” heighten the emotional appeal and show the masculine realm of rationality as unstable, as the hero struggles to break out of the spell of the femme fatale, but fails. In “Lag Ja gale”, he is held in a trance, spellbound, wondering about the identity of the woman, who he finds irresistible, yet repulsive. His paranoia is further heightened by the fact that his girlfriend is killed with a cyanide injection and he has to marry a woman who looks exactly like the femme fatale figure. His frantic queries “*bolti kyun nahi kaun ho tum?*” (“Why don’t you tell me who you are?”) to his bride on their wedding night reflects “a deep distrust in male-female relations and a concurrent male paranoia” (Fluck, 2001: 394). The femme fatale, who Dr. Anand thinks to be an apparition, a spectre of sorts, becomes a product of reality as well as his imaginary construct. As Forster Hirsch (1981: 157) notes, “all of noir’s fatal women seem to move in a dream-like landscape”. Khosla’s employment of noir elements in the cinematography requires critical attention again, especially in the dual manner in which he picturises the hero and the heroine during the song sequences—in both the songs, the camera zooms in on Anand with soft, low-key lighting, taking extreme close-ups of his changing facial expressions, from incredulous disbelief to suspicion to frustration, while Sadhana is captured from a distance, in direct, undiffused light, creating the impression of an unattainable presence—a mask-like beauty that is limited

only to the surface, and the psyche is impenetrable, making her immensely alluring, but also equally enigmatic.

- 27 Such duality of enigma and attainability is exploited again when Anand discovers that he has married a woman Sandhya, who is a doppelganger of that unnamed woman in white. Anand says that he is tempted to touch the woman who he thinks is his wife (later it turns out the femme fatale had duped him yet again), yet can't because a veil stops him. Her sexuality poses the danger of castration to him, the danger of making him lose his masculinity, literally and symbolically by rendering him mentally unstable. Through the death of his girlfriend Seema via cyanide poisoning, and his frequent encountering of supernatural events like unexplained human presence at an abandoned mansion, witnessing unmanned boats and hearing snatches of melancholic songs from the most unexpected of places, he is uprooted from whatever he considers stable and dependable. Seema's murder has dragged him into a world of crime and his moral values are constantly questioned and thwarted. His urge to explore his wife's sexuality is a microcosm for his urge to find some stable ground on which he can rebuild his life, as he says repeatedly "mujhe kuch samajh mein nahi aata, Sandhya, main kya karoon, kya na karoon" (I don't understand anything, Sandhya—what to do and what not to). The doppelganger trope further complicates the sexual dimension and the confusion of the hero regarding his sexual morality. He detests the femme fatale in his life when she is within the space of his home, the *oikos*, and domesticated, for there she merely nurses his male ego and does not challenge him sexually. When he sees his wife/the inexplicable femme fatale in the polis, it is usually in a dream-like setting, which brings out the "phantasmagoric quality of the object of desire" (Fluck, 2001: 393)³. In one of the footnotes to his essay, "Crime, Guilt and Subjectivity in Film Noir", Winfried Fluck (2001: 393) notes that there is a "theatrical dimension" to the appearance of the femme fatale, a "magic spectacle", which we argue, is deliberately attempted to bewilder the male protagonist, for the magical, surreal aura of the woman will resist being deciphered by his rational mind. It is this deliberate bewilderment of the hero that occurs in the scenes with the song sequence, "Lag Ja Gale" (Embrace Me), where the mysterious woman (who Anand presumes to be his wife) appears seductively dressed in pearls and chiffon drapes, heavily made-up, her eyes alluring, and her voice lilting with the pleasure of union with the hero as she sings "lag ja gaale ke phir yeh haseen raat ho na ho" (embrace me, for this enchanting night might not come again)⁴. Towards the end of the song, they unite for a brief moment, drenched in rain, the low angle shot and the high-key diffused lighting bathing them in vulnerable normalcy, germinating the hope for positive developments in Anand's marital life, only for the woman to disappear again when he takes her to the mansion—making him question his perception of reality once again. He is left standing in the shadows, alone in the mansion, with the plaintive howls of a fox entering his ears, as if to signify his terror at his stability, and masculinity being encroached upon by the inexplicable feminine presence, hinting towards his symbolic castration.

***Bees Saal Baad* (trans. Twenty Years Later): situating noir at the intersection of caste, class and gender violence**

- 28 Loosely adapted from Arthur Conan Doyle's (1902) *The Hound of the Baskervilles*, *Bees Saal Baad* maintains the class antagonism as inherent in the original myth of the Baskervilles hound—the tyrannical feudal lord killed by his own monstrous hound which he had sent to capture his escaped prey, the daughter of a serf—, but also heightens it by reducing the time frame, and also eliminating the hound. In this adapted version, the plot verges on a rape-revenge tragedy, the villain, Ramlal, a serf, being the avenger of his daughter's oppression and rape by the hero's grandfather, the landlord Thakur—whose English counterpart, or original inspiration is Lord Hugo Baskerville.
- 29 If American film noir came out of a period of “intense class struggle in Hollywood and the nation as a whole and represent certain left attitudes” (Broe 2003: 22), film noir in India tried attempting to propagate capitalist propaganda veiled as democratic egalitarian outlook through its text, trying to preserve the class hierarchy while placating the working class with some superficial solutions for its oppression and deprivation of basic rights⁵. Post-World War II Indian noir tried to re-establish the old Indian values of class and caste hierarchy in the face of Western influence and upheaval of existing traditions, characterised by social mobility and nihilism that threatened to destroy the old feudal society⁶. Crucially, the film's locale is shifted from the city to the country, in an attempt to restore the Romanticism and Orientalism that characterised the representation of India as the ideal land of noble values. Corey K Creekmur's (2014: 187) statement on the socio-political context of Indian film noir becomes pertinent in this aspect: “[...] the postwar ennui that underlies the darkest Hollywood film noir (so often noted by scholars attempting to explain the genre's social origins) and the semi-official, nationalist optimism of India in the wake of independence under the influence of Nehruvian progress are starkly opposed.” Hence, Kumar Vijay Singh, despite his Western education, attire and cynicism towards the myth of fatality that surrounds his ancestry, is drawn towards the optimistic Radha, the Indian version of Beryl Stapleton from *The Hound of the Baskervilles*. Unlike Beryl, Radha is unmarried and is of cheerful disposition, and her concern towards Kumar Vijay Singh's welfare, her attempts to warn him of his impending danger are laced with love, and the film hints towards a happy ending through the union of these two people.
- 30 The rural setting, therefore, becomes a site of romantic optimism, for the refuge of the noir male protagonist from the disillusionment of urban Western influence. The corruption and sexual exploitation that characterises the relationship between the landlord Thakurs and their serfs have to be salvaged by the noir hero in this case, by posing a respectable marriage offer for the serf woman Radha. Unlike his mercenary, and typically corrupt, aggressively masculinist grandfather, Thakur, Vijay does not wish to take advantage of Radha sexually, but attempts to court her into a marital union. In her analysis of the characterisation of Henry Baskerville in *The Hound of the Baskervilles*, Yumna Siddiqui (2006: 237) notes that “heirs to the Baskerville estate” who “return from abroad” are desirable because they attempt to “resuscitate a traditional order dominated by landed gentry” in a benevolent manner, like a true “genteel colonial” as opposed to “degenerate aristocrats”. Vijay Singh is then a “genteel

colonial” as opposed to his “degenerate aristocrats” of ancestors—his grandfather and uncle who exploited the serfs and the women of the serf households.

- 31 Yet, such optimism is overshadowed by a powerful environment of anxiety and doom, and restlessness, adhering to the true character of noir. The ambiguity of moral values is characterised by a murky atmosphere within the haveli (mansion) where the Thakurs reside. The huge painting of the serf woman whose exploitation by the hero’s grandfather destroyed the hero’s family serves as an ominous warning to the hero of the sickness of greed and corruption that underlies the landscape which he has come to inhabit. He is the sole representative of the aristocratic bourgeoisie in the village and is viewed in a hostile manner by most other villagers, for he reminds them of a legacy of casteist and classist exploitation. It is only when he resolves the mystery of his ancestors’ deaths that he can emerge out of the alienation that he is forced into and assimilate himself within the social fabric of the village as the benevolent patriarch: who marries a serf, and does not exploit his subordinates but is kind to them.
- 32 *Bees Saal Baad* removes the presence of the legendary hound from the film, instead, making it more Orientalised by incorporating the mysterious ambience of ghungroos (dancing anklets) that the hero and the rest of the village hears every night, and by incorporating a romantic song the real intention behind which is revealed only in the climax. The song, “*Kahin Deep jale, kahin dil*” (“The lamp burns somewhere, somewhere the heart is aflame”) adds to the paranoia of the hero and his frustration with his inability to discover the face behind the siren-like voice, which is heard frequently at the site of the death of his ancestors. Despite the incredibly romantic lyrics (“*piya der na kaar, aa mil*” / “o my beloved, don’t tarry but come, unite with me”), and the subtle warning that the song projects (“*dushman hain yahan hazaron ke*” / “here thousands of enemies are lurking”), the song is heard only at night, and the sound of the ghungroos further complicate the identity of the singer, culminating into the myth that it is the dead serf girl who beckons the Thakur men and lures them with the song and the sound of the anklets.
- 33 Biren Naug, the director, however, keeps the original flavour of the Doyle novel alive by keeping the landscape intact with minimum changes. The film is set in Chandangarh, a fictional village that is as enigmatic and foggy and slimy as the bogs of Dartmoor. There are cliffs and meadows, but also, relatively little influence of Western civilisational advancements, especially with no electricity. Earthen lamps and lanterns are the only sources of light when darkness enshrouds this village and represent the superstitious mindset of the villagers and the monstrous conspiracy against the lives of the Thakur clan that takes place in the village. In contrast, the daytime is a setting of happy optimism, where the hero safely courts the heroine without any fear for his life, and his Western attire and mannerism sync quite well with the typically Indian rural attire of Radha, the village girl. Our hero’s acculturation takes place on two levels: one, he comes to appreciate the simplicity of the villagers like Radha and decides to settle there, two, he decides to uplift their condition as their landlord, and his Western education with the touch of rationality, he hopes, will ultimately help him survive the curse of untimely and unnatural death that has befallen his clan, and thereby establish him again as the lawful ruler of this landscape. His courting of Radha, while motivated by admiration for her simplicity, is also a political move in the sense that marrying Radha will help legitimise his stay among the villagers. The Western urban values that he has brought to the village has only served to estrange him from his rural

subordinates and gain Radha's love, thereby her uncle, Ramlal, the local *vaidya* (doctor specialising in Ayurveda)'s support will help him in his mission of modernising the village.

- 34 Kumar Vijay Singh is the urban hero of this investigative thriller. He is not the cynical detective either, but the romantic, all-powerful hero who smokes cigarettes as frequently as he blinks, takes his pistol every time he goes out at night, dauntlessly investigates the mysterious apparitions, silhouettes and soundscapes he encounters, but is gentle and courteous with women, and charms them with his proclamations of love. His invulnerability is further heightened by the fact that he is paired with a woman who is not a *femme fatale*, rather the opposite—she is the angelic paragon of beauty and happiness, and her gentle, docile disposition does not challenge the hero's masculinity, but strengthens it. The only danger she poses to the hero is through her connection to the villain—the murderer Ramlal is her uncle, and it is her sister who was raped by the hero's grandfather. Ramlal's suspicions about the relationship between Vijay and Radha are justified in this aspect, as there are dangerous parallels between the upper-caste Vijay's courting of the lower-caste Radha and his grandfather's courting of Radha's sister—the sexual and caste hierarchy is clearly skewed and Vijay, being the descendant of his lecherous grandfather, and experiencing sexual liberation abroad, might try to exploit Radha for his own sexual and economic interests. Ramlal, the Dalit avenger of the injustice meted out to his daughter, attempts to dissuade his niece from falling into the trap of a psycho-sexual exploitative relationship which the landlord-serf equation embodies for him. However, the film thwarts the rise of the caste proletariat by showing the upper-caste, upper-class bourgeoisie protagonist, the hero Vijay to be the harbinger of benevolent caste hierarchy, where he will rule his caste and class subordinates with love and goodwill, and the serfs will regain their faith in his legitimacy as the upper-class, upper-caste lord, the first step towards consolidating which is made possible by making Radha fall in love with Vijay and attempt to protect him from the murderer, both before and after the revelation.

Final remarks

- 35 It is the fantasy-laden imagination of the three male heroes and their desire for the sexually provocative and alluring spectral presence of the haunting women that drives them to their doom. The *Femme Fatales*, or the orchestrating villains who puppeteer such fatal women, manipulate aspect of the male psychology to emasculate the hero. Both Sandhya Ray in *Kuheli* and Sadhana in *Woh Kaun Thi?* are actresses who fulfil the norm of acting like a temptress: they embody a “dreamlike otherness” in their acting, and “perform them in a cryptic stylized manner, sleepwalking through masculine nightmares” (Hirsch, 1981: 171).⁷
- 36 In all the three noirs, paranoia plays an important role in questioning male subjectivity. All the three men are trapped in the interstitial space between truth and fiction, between dream and reality, and between emotion and rationality. In the words of Krutnik (2001 [1991]: 180), their “tough” masculinity is an almost impossible ideal to be attained, and which can be attained only through a constant struggle—struggle with the enemy, or perhaps, one's imagination. Such tough masculinity is a performance that always has to be performed to perfection—even the slightest lack in the effort can

lead to a crack in the facade of the tough guy or hero image, and cause the femme fatale to penetrate and emasculate the male protagonist by rendering him mentally unstable.⁸

- 37 To sum up, then, the gendered analysis of the three Indian noirs from the perspective of class and caste-based hierarchy reveals the privileged position of the male protagonists in these films, which cocoons them from the cynicism that characterises the subjectivity of the Western film noir hero. The heroes are not depicted in shades of grey, or with any dubious streak of immorality in their characters, but the entire narrative is a trajectory of their quest to uplift themselves from the ignominy of misleading slanders on their image. As representatives of the Indian bourgeoisie, they intend to reform the Indian society, but also to preserve some traditions concerning the hierarchy of class, caste and women. The Western ideals of modernity which they emulate from colonial education at the beginning of the cinematic narratives are sufficiently Indianised in the course of their character development, and their final redemption is made possible through their adoption of the Indian value system, a move which accounted for the mass appeal of these films in India. Ultimately, in their aim to preserve the privilege of hierarchy, the male protagonists of Indian noir fail to address the underlying question behind the violence that destabilises their life in the first place—the question of exploitation and marginalisation on the basis of caste, class and gender. In conclusion, the study of the urban male protagonist in Indian film noir is an evolving field of research. It encapsulates the complexities of contemporary Indian society, where deep-rooted hierarchies and changing dynamics intersect. The exploration of these themes continues to shed light on the intricate relationship between cinema, society, and power dynamics in India, making it a captivating subject for scholarly inquiry and cultural analysis.

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NOTES

1. The most iconic noir stories depict people trapped in unfavourable situations (which, in general, they did not cause but are responsible for exacerbating), struggling against a random, uncaring fate, and frequently ruined.

2. Shankar Roy from *Kuheli* is another name in the long line of “hero-figures” that abounded in 1940’s crime thrillers. Despite being made in 1971, his characterisation is a faithful tribute to male protagonists of “noir tough thrillers” “who manifest one form or another of ‘problematized’—eroded or unstable masculinity”.

3. Dr. Anand is the archetype of the orthodox representative of patriarchal masculinity, whose masculinity is threatened the moment he faces a reality which he cannot decipher or clearly label or categorise. Furthermore, he can accept the presence of this the mysterious woman in white only as long as she is an enigma to him, a site for his fantasies and not a reality he has to spend his daily life with. For, his bride, Sandhya, despite being the dead ringer of the femme fatale, possesses none of the mysterious aura of her doppelganger, nor does she challenge his masculinity, but is submissive. Winfried Fluck cites *Double Indemnity* (1944) and *The Postman Always Rings Twice* (1946) to demonstrate how the protagonist’s first encounter with the seductive heroine acts as their incentive for getting involved in a world of undeciphered mysteries. However, while Fluck emphasises the “scantly clad” feminine presence in Hollywood or Western noir, in Indian film noir the seduction effect is achieved through dressing the heroine up in chiffon sarees—a timeless garment that maintains the appropriate modicum of Indian values of “samskara” (modesty) and retains the allure through the provocative semi-transparent fabric and the figure-hugging drapes. Bollywood neo-noir musicals and romances such as *Mr. India* (1987), *Mohra* (1994) and *Baazigar* (1993) have heavily utilised the trope of the chiffon-clad alluring heroine drenched in rain as either pivotal plot points or entertaining song and dance numbers.

4. *Woh Kaun Thi?*, therefore, belongs to the “bourgeois noir” genre as described by Fluck, where the respectable citizen, by letting his guard down for one moment—here, conversing with the unknown woman and escorting her, leads to his fatal loss of self-control—and thereby disastrous results—he is about to be disinherited.

5. *Bees Saal Baad* places a major emphasis on the subjects that were discussed in Bollywood during the 1950s and 1960s. The most notable of these is definitely the Indianisation of popular horror-thrillers or detective fiction by English writers—for example, the fundamental influence behind *Bees Saal Baad* was Arthur Conan Doyle’s *The Hound of Baskervilles*, despite the fact that the storylines were distinct. This takes us to another distinguishing element of Indian cinema noir: the story’s key character is an unreliable narrator. A narrator must misreport, misread, disvalue, underreport, under-interpret, or under-evaluate in order to be untrustworthy.

6. This leads us to the post-Partition of India production of cinematic narratives where the delinquency of the femme fatale figure has to be justified by demonstrating a traumatic childhood, usually due to forced migration as refugees, or displacement due to changed socio-economic conditions. In *Kuheli*, for instance, Aparna loses her family as a child and is raised in hard conditions somewhere else. However, one theme stands out: the lady must have had a terrible or mysterious history while being reared somewhere else, only to return and expose the reality as an unexpected climax. For a long time, the 1947 division served as a backdrop or explanation for a variety of films released in the 1950s and 1960s, including thrillers, mystery stories, and dramas. The heroes were, in fact, the personification of a typical rich Indian son, adopting the style against the backdrop of newly-independent India, and their attempts to integrate the enigmatic heroines into mainstream society is reflective of the bhadralok or upper-middle class upper-caste Hindu male anxiety about status quo and purity of lineage.

7. In all three films, the femme fatales are projections of the male desire, and imagination, of male fantasies and apprehensive tendencies, usually stemming from a repressed or sublimated fear of symbolic castration through feminisation. Be it Shankar’s deceased wife in *Kuheli*, the Woman in White in *Woh Kaun Thi?*, or the supposed apparition of the dead girl avenging her rape-murder in *Bees Saal Baad*, their subjectivity is appropriated by the male imagination. In fact, the observation that Winfried Fluck (2001: 394) makes regarding the role of the male protagonist’s imaginary perception in film noir becomes pertinent in the case of all the three heroes discussed

here: “The power (and hold) of the femme fatale over the main character derives from the fact that she is an imaginary construct so that an important part of the suspense derives from the question whether and how the main character will be able to liberate himself from the hold of his own imaginary.”

8. This can happen on purpose or as a result of a miscommunication, and we see it in a variety of ways in crime and suspense novels. There’s no disputing that this suspenseful mystery novel employs an unreliable narrator. For example, the protagonist feels perplexed and terrified when confronted with a perplexing issue, and no one else can recall what is going on. In most cases, the major protagonist in Indian noir is a wealthy young man who returns to his family home years later—only to discover strange things surrounding him. Suspense is frequently maintained as a plot element. The soundtrack, camera angles, thick shadows, and unexpected plot twists can all be used to achieve this. The protagonist is frequently the focus of the plot as he tries to solve the crime or problem by piecing together facts and situations, obtaining evidence, questioning witnesses, and tracking down a culprit. He isn’t a detective, but he has a sharp intellect and isn’t afraid to take risks that could result in his losing his life or injuring himself.

RÉSUMÉS

Cet article analyse la caractérisation du protagoniste masculin dans trois films noirs indiens : *Bees Saal Baad* (Biren Naug, 1962), *Woh Kaun Thi ?* (Raj Khosla, 1964) et *Kuheli* (Tarun Majumdar, 1971). Les films noirs indiens des années 1960 et 1970 se distinguent des films noirs hollywoodiens classiques par leurs dénouements heureux, et par leur recherche d’un équilibre entre les valeurs traditionnelles indiennes – notamment l’austérité – et le glamour occidental. Dans sa volonté de véhiculer un message optimiste susceptible attirer les masses, le film noir indien glorifie le protagoniste masculin, qui perd ainsi son ambiguïté pour se transformer en un patriarce « Adarsh » (idéal) capable de rétablir la paix et l’harmonie au sein de la famille indienne, et de sauver le patriarcat indien de la femme fatale occidentalisée et décadente – une figure suspecte aux yeux du patriarcat brahmanique de classe supérieure dans le contexte de libération sexuelle et socio-économique inaugurée par les deux guerres mondiales. Situés au cœur de ce conflit entre modernité et tradition, les héros – Shankar Roy de *Kuheli*, Kumar Vijay Singh de *Bees Saal Baad* et Dr. Anand de *Woh Kaun Thi ?* – retournent dans leur pays natal avec une mission, tels des hérauts des Lumières venus éclairer la communauté « ignorante » pétrie d’illusions et de superstitions. Si leur masculinité est alors mise à l’épreuve par des phénomènes irrationnels, ils résolvent finalement le mystère qui les tourmente, eux et les communautés, renforçant ainsi le trope du réformateur culturel bienveillant qui sauve du « cœur des ténèbres » kurzien les indigènes sauvages et ignorants.

The paper seeks to analyse the characterisation of the “hero” or the male protagonist in three Indian film noirs: *Bees Saal Baad* (Biren Naug, 1962), *Woh Kaun Thi?* (Raj Khosla, 1964), and *Kuheli* (Tarun Majumdar, 1971). The Indian film noir of the 1960s and 1970s is distinct from the classical Hollywood film noir in the sense it emphasises on a happy resolution of the events that culminate in the climax, and an emphasis on the balance between traditional Indian values of austerity and Western glamour. In its quest to establish an optimistic message to attract the masses, Indian film noir glorified the male protagonist, transforming him from a character with multiple shades of grey to the “Adarsh” (ideal) male patriarch who would restore peace and

harmony within the Indian family, and save the core of Indian patriarchy from the Westernised, decadent femme fatale—a figure that the upper-class Brahmanical patriarchy had been suspicious after the two World Wars ushered in a new era of sexual and socio-economic liberation. Situated between this ever-present tussle of modernity and tradition, the heroes—Shankar Roy from *Kuheli*, Kumar Vijay Singh from *Bees Saal Baad*, and Dr Anand from *Woh Kaun Thi?*, return to their ancestral homes with a mission, thus acting as the fuel the subtext of being the harbingers of Enlightenment to the “ignorant” community shrouded in delusions and superstitions, and experience anxiety regarding their fragile masculinity upon encountering phenomena that are beyond the limits of rationality. Ultimately, they do solve the mystery that plagues them and the communities, thereby reinforcing the trope of the benevolent cultural reformer who rescues the savage and ignorant natives from the Kurzian “heart of darkness.”

INDEX

Mots-clés : film noir, classes, castes, masculinité, superstitions, paranoïa, patriarcat brahmanique, femme fatale

Keywords : film noir, class, caste, masculinity, superstitions, paranoia, Brahmanical patriarchy, femme fatale

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