

*Chidananda Dasgupta Memorial Competition 2021: Certificate of Merit***Ankita Rathour*****No One Killed Jessica and Aesthetics of Bollywood's Dead Girl****No One Killed Jessica* (Hindi, 2011) By- Raj Kumar Gupta

Through this essay, I initiate the much-needed but overlooked discourse on the framing of the dead girl in Hindi cinema through Raj Kumar Gupta's 2011 film *No One Killed Jessica*. I show how the aesthetical choices displace the dead from the cinematic center. Jessica Lal, the titular dead girl, exists within the bounds of simplified beauty. Flashbacks mostly bring her back replaced as someone else's memory where slow-motion camera movements cast Jessica as happy, young, and exuding ethereal femininity. Underexplored as an individual with agency, she makes an almost-dead entry in the film. A female journalist's voice-over introduces Jessica within political-national rhetoric. Though not dead yet, Jessica eventually transforms into an "incident that would change the face of politics and power in Delhi." With a premonition of her death's national importance, the next scene places her as a victim of violence through a two am phone call. Dilip, a friend calls Sabrina, her sister and says, "Jessica has hurt herself." She is shot in her head. However, Dilip displaces the verb "shot" with the less threatening, "hurt." The sentence centralizes Jessica's death without a perpetrator. It signals a self-inflicted injury creating a false possibility of her recovery. Not foregrounding the perpetrator makes the crime appear as if truly no one killed Jessica. It thus makes Sabrina rebuff the incident as a non-serious "usual" one.

As a viewer, our gaze immediately aligns with that of Sabrina in the opening scene, following her in a crowded hospital of anxious friends, reporters, and police (See Fig 1) 1. The dying girl is important, but her proximity to death displaces her and situates Sabrina at the center of the story. Jessica's displacement is already triggered by the fact that she is dying and is compounded after she is actually dead. Sabrina's potential as a living future drives the plot further. A medium shot captures Sabrina entering the hospital and then zooms out to a third person positioning showing Dilip and her in conversation about the events of the night.² The camera situates Jessica for a detached viewership even before her physical appearance in the film. The viewer's knowledge of the violent attack precedes any personhood that Jessica may have. Shifting alignments of the spectator's gaze assist her narrational removal. Aligned with the camera in this scene, viewers start engaging with the dead girl as the police or a journalist would— an outsider analyzing a criminal case. The analytical priority of an outsider strengthens a non-emotional viewership of Jessica even though grief-struck family and friends establish an emotional setting. The hegemonical legal and media perspectives that surround a crime shape one's way of seeing the dead girl on screen. Since the film is based on a real case, the pre-knowledge of Jessica's death affects the viewership of the dead girl too. Jessica Lal's murder has been discussed in the media since 1999. Jessica's death on-screen is thus an expectation. The film introduces the dead girl as the absent center, whereas her living sister, Sabrina, becomes the main catalyst of the plot.



The director's choice of camera techniques only accentuates Jessica's narrational displacement through her physical displacement in the flashback. When

shot, she falls, and blood splatters in the air. The violence immediately pushes Jessica out of the camera frame (See Fig 2).



Her friend, Vikram, tries to dodge the gunshot with another witness in the blurred background. Both claim most screen space with only a few strands of Jessica's hair thrust in the right corner. Jessica falls face down in a slow-motion close-up shot. The slow movement sharply reduces the immediacy of the violence, capturing her as a fragile and delicate dying girl.³ The technique captures the dying girl with a sensuality that encourages romanticized spectatorship. It reduces the actual impact of violence on screen catering to the mainstream Bollywood tradition of prioritizing entertainment over realism. The same slow-motion brings her back at the end of the movie dressed in a sunny yellow dress—a beautiful, delicate, and breezy reminder of her femininity.⁴

After Jessica falls to the ground, the audience's gaze aligns with her only for few seconds. However, this alignment does not centralize Jessica as the victim of a violent act. It rather presents her sensually with her fragility and beauty intact. An elevated shot shows the blood on her right temple slowly spreading under her head over the clean white stage (See Figs 3 and 4).



The bullet wound is invisible in both images. Her right temple has some blood in the second image, but the rest of her face is clean with no clear sign of a gunshot wound. Jessica's spotless face stays with the spectators, the violence of her death displaced. Her clean white shirt and the white floor are symbolic of

her aesthetically pleasing and peaceful death. She looks somewhat hurt but not dead. Capturing Jessica as hurt, not dead. The image carries a certain motion within itself as it places her with her lips apart as if she is saying something or singing a song. She is hung between life and death. The images altogether introduce her death but mark her as not dead enough. The hint of motion intensifies the overall sensuality of the dead girl situating her in what Laura Mulvey calls a suspended animation. The physical displacement continues when an overhead shot shows five men looking down at her lifeless body. As the viewer follows the director's camera; their gaze aligns with the male gaze.⁵ One cannot see Jessica clearly and then looks at her via the men, distancing oneself further from the dead girl (See Fig 5).



Her dead body is not set for "anything other than passive spectator[ship]" as Laura Mulvey has propounded. Next comes extreme close-up shots of the men placing them as plot carriers of a Jessica's story. Jessica serves as an introduction and is later recalled through less than a minute-long flashback as a constant reminder of a dead girl who was once full of life. She serves no other purpose beyond her death and its memory.

In the present, too, the perspectives of the dead girl remain underexplored. A hospital van transports Jessica to another hospital in an attempt to save her. Sabrina sits right beside her sister who is laid on a stretcher. The close-up clearly focuses on Sabrina while Jessica is blurry. The blur signifies the ultimate displacement as the dead girl cannot be represented on the screen fully. She can only be talked about through those who are alive and have the power of speech over her. One can argue that the choice of blurring Jessica in this scene is a part of the emotional distancing that Dilip's phone call pointed to. One

must not look at a violent death directly as it still unsettles an average Bollywood cinema-lover. To respect the mass viewership, violent deaths on screen, especially women's are often blurred out or shot in slow motion, like Jessica's.⁶ Dispersing the intensity of gendered violence on screen is a protective mechanism for the audience. The average Bollywood viewer demands entertainment or inspiration without much discomfort.⁷ Nevertheless, the blur marks the amalgamation of the viewer's gaze with Sabrina—Jessica's sister. Much of the later film becomes more about Sabrina as the new victimized survivor who takes the command as the living character. This living character fulfils the narrative priority of critiquing the Indian capital city, New Delhi, and the power politics within it.

The scene is nonetheless subversive as it centralizes a female gaze through Sabrina and subverts the earlier male gaze in Vikram's flashback. Sabrina's gaze becomes the audience's gaze and it creates a quick moment of empathy towards the dead girl. But a blurry Jessica hardly makes a good case for the continuation of that empathetic moment. At that moment, the viewers' looking is split as one empathizes with Sabrina looking at her sister. Viewers look at Sabrina looking at Jessica just as the men were looking at her when she was shot. The

displacement continues and intensifies though Sabrina displacing the dead girl can be argued to be a positive case as it replaces another female character as the plot enhancer—still better than men driving a dead girl's story forward (See Fig 6).



Such displacement techniques around a dead girl act as necessary tools of familiarity— (re) constructing her for the dominant community and for the public so that they can (re) define her according to their shared beliefs and values. That is why even though *No One Killed Jessica* does a commendable job of representing Jessica's story via two female protagonists, it does so by adhering to the dictates of heteronormative familiarization. A better dead girl story would imagine her as a complex individual capable of existing in contrast to the dominant cultural eliefs. It would explore a dead girl as a living girl first for a better gender-conscious viewership.

1 References to images provided in the article.

2 a camera shot in which the subject is in the middle and some of the backgrounds are visible too.

3 While slow motion in violent movies in Hollywood was to present violence realistically (Gunning for a new slow motion: The 45-degree shutter and the representation of violence by Stacey Peebles), in Bollywood, it has been often used to encourage a sense of displacement or distanced viewership.

4 Bollywood has often used slow-motion techniques to convey a sense of intimacy and emotional engagement. "Dance Musicalization: Proposing a choreomusicological approach to Hindi film song-and-dance sequences" by Usha Iyer and "Hai (I) Bollywood!" by Dhruv Krishna Goyal specifically talk about the use of slow-motion to enhance intimate spectatorship. Goyal argues that slow-motion was catered towards enhancing entertainment and certain escapism. In song and dance sequences, these slow motions encourage emotional

engagement. They create a separate space for exploration of desires (<https://www.oprahmag.com/entertainment/a33396048/what-is-Bollywood/>). In action and violent scenes, they enhance the stylistic aspects to create a neat aesthetic

5 Further Reading: Mulvey, Laura. Visual and Other Pleasures. Springer, 1989.

6 Mainstream Bollywood films have notoriously portrayed dead women beautified, sexualized, or free from any markings of death. For ex-Madhumati (1956) shows Madhu jumping off her death from a distance or as in Ramsay Brothers horror films, dead women are always beautiful even when killed by a monster. Slow-motion caters to that aesthetic.

7 To explore an average Bollywood viewer, one must begin by (re) visiting Rasa theory as propounded by Bhattanayak and Abhinavagupta. Rasa theory explains the importance of heightened facial expressions to express “bhav” (emotions) in Marathi theaters, which were a stylistic mechanism to provide light-hearted entertainment to the audience—without encouraging distress. Bollywood began by infusing those theater principles with its film production. Further readings: Parciack, Ronie. Popular Hindi cinema: Aesthetic formations of the seen and unseen. Routledge, 2016 and “Theorizing Spectatorship” in Ganti, Tejaswini. Producing Bollywood: Inside the contemporary Hindi film industry. Duke University Press, 2012

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