Article
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Deconstructing Heroism in *Kantara*: Between Paradoxes of Masculinity, Power, and Cultural Celebration

Abstract

This article examines the constructions and deconstructions of heroism and *Kantara*'s (Shetty, 2022) complex and often paradoxical portrayal of masculinity, power, and violence. Drawing on masculinity studies and feminist film theory, I analyse the protagonist Shiva and his male counterparts to reveal how masculinity is performed, negotiated and potentially subverted in performing power and violence. I argue that *Kantara*'s heroism functions less as a virtue than as a mechanism for asserting the masculine self, oscillating between valorising traditional masculinity and normalising violence and sexual predation, moral ambiguity and divine sanction. I contend that Shetty's tripartite role in the film as the filmmaker, actor, and character facilitates a tripartite male gaze which reveals deeply ingrained misogynistic undercurrents and a convoluted negotiation of hegemonic masculinity. By deconstructing the film's sadomasochistic hero archetype, I interrogate how *Kantara*'s diegetic and profilmic spaces reflect broader societal contradictions around heroism and masculinity in a heteronormative setup in contemporary Indian cinema.

Keywords: *Kantara*, heroism, masculinity, violence, male gaze, feminist film theory

Introduction

When decoding the ontologies of representational politics on screen and their relationship with gender and identity in popular texts, contemporary discourse seems to be significantly cleaved into two. Much of the readings of the much-lauded Rishabh Shetty-directed Kannada film *Kantara* (2022) reveal a shift toward its ecocentric being in contemplating the systematically marginalised Indigenous cultures of the Global South. The other set, although significantly less explored, caves towards its celebration of toxic masculinist traditions. While all is well regarding the film's "Indigenous" essentialist standpoint, there indeed underlies an ensemble of problematics exploiting *Kantara*'s diegetic and profilmic space that has gone past scholarly engagement.

As it is widely known that *Kantara* (Shetty, 2022) harbours the Indigenous tale-telling of the Tulu Nadu in Karnataka, beneath its celebratory narrative and the excruciating screams that outline the sonic constraints of the screen, I attempt to take apart the film's salient yet unnoticed paradoxical portrayal of masculinist traditions of sadomasochistic heroes and their translation into easily missed misogynist undercurrents that potentially plague the neoliberal consumer's psyche regardless. Interestingly, Basu and Tripathi (2023) render interpreting the film from a feminist perspective as reductionist and problematic, as they argue that criticism of female characters' sexist representations in *Kantara* (Shetty, 2022) does not necessarily make it a celebration of aggressive masculinity. I find their argument compelling in a way that perfectly contradicts itself. Their interpretation stems from a skewed Orientalist lens that stereotypes Indigenous tribal cultures as exempt from modern critical analysis, dismissing *Kantara*'s innate representational issues as merely "Indigenous" idiosyncrasies. This study seeks to challenge such simplistic

formulations and dissect the theorisations inherent in gendered discourses of socio-historical power dynamics in the heteronormative setup of *Kantara*.

The Myth of the Hero

It is no surprise that Indian cinema, with its penchant for exaggerated archetypes, has long revelled in the romanticisation of angry male protagonists, who, despite their infuriating dispositions, manage to captivate audiences with their raw intensity and rebellious spirit—from Ranbir Kapoor in *Animal* (Vanga, 2023), Rocky in *KGF: Chapter 2* (Neel, 2022), Vijay Deverakonda in *Arjun Reddy* (Vanga, 2017) to Shahid Kapoor in *Kabir Singh* (Vanga, 2019). However, *Kantara*'s (Shetty, 2022) Shiva, while undeniably charismatic, is steeped in contradictions that ultimately snitch at his portrayal as a hero. Despite its nearly-blinding visual opulence and a compelling "Indigenous" narrative, *Kantara* (Shetty, 2022), written, directed by, and starring Rishabh Shetty as a deeply flawed, morally ambiguous protagonist, Shiva, ultimately succumbs to the archetypal allure of the invincible angry young man, which, although at first glance appears to defy this very conventional trope, really is representative of the mass commercial *masala* template that beckons serious reengineering of late.

Set in a fictional village of Dakshina Kannada, *Kantara* (Shetty, 2022) essentially centres on a land dispute entwining the lives of Shiva, who is at daggers drawn with a duty-bound forest officer, Murali and the greedy feudal lord, Devendra Suttooru. The film's temporal scheme hurries from 1847 to 1970 to arrive at Shiva's microcosmic world in 1990. As the story goes, a wandering king bargains a sacred stone that would warrant him peace and prosperity for a vast expanse of land, which he bestows upon the local inhabitants. A century later, this land has evolved into a village steeped in tradition yet grappling with modernity and the conflicting aspirations of its inhabitants and the state. The arrival of a determined yet abrasive forest officer, Murali, clashes with the villagers' cherished customs, while Devendra, the landlord, camouflaged as a benevolent patriarch, harbours hidden ambitions for the tribal land. Through a series of seemingly quotidian vignettes—familial squabbles, encounters with law enforcement, and burgeoning *angromance*[1]—Shetty constructs the rustic world of Shiva, surrounded by a pack of less pious and more inveterate fellows—men guzzling arrack with the fervour of athletes, their mouth stained with tobacco, eyes glazed with the smoke of cannabis, and incessantly harassing women. However, beneath the surface of his heroism lies an uninspired soul who now unknowingly awaits divine intervention to guard the Indigenous land.

In Shiva himself, one finds the beating, testosterone-addled heart of *Kantara*'s (Shetty, 2022) problematic core, for he oscillates between being a village troublemaker and demigod-in-waiting. As a force of raw, untamed aggression, Shiva emerges with a dramatic Kambala race; his muscular frame, exaggerated physical prowess, and fierce dominance are established through a series of hyper-masculine displays—whether it is in winning the mud-soaked buffalo race, cockfights, or overpowering even seasoned opponents in gratuitous physical combats, thus, immediately cementing him as a valiant, almost invincible figure. This exemplifies what Schrock and Schwalbe (2009) term "manhood acts"—designed to "claim membership in the privileged gender group", "elicit deference", and "resist exploitation". For instance, while Shiva's greed for money and power is well-established through several exchanges with the local landlord, Devendra, for whom he grows up to be a ruffian on hire, his penchant for inflicting violence becomes explicit in several of his confrontations with Murali who attempts to curtail the annual *Bhoota Kola*[2] celebrations, both inebriated and armed with guns. Later, during the police force encroaching upon the village land, Shiva alone takes down hundreds of men, as if in a maniacal display of Herculean rage.

However, though introduced as a four-time *Kambala*[3] champion, Shiva's over-the-top, triumphant persona and athletic prowess are deprived of any exposition or substantive backstory that would traditionally underscore such outlandish abilities. Instead, the viewer is expected to uncritically accept Shiva's propensity for physical aggression, sadism and violence as a natural extension of his character or, instead, a problem-

solving mechanism with little to no exploration of its psychological or social ramifications. Despite Shetty's insistence on constructing Shiva as a larger-than-life hero, his triumphs, however, are lacklustre; his abilities are neither developed nor explained; they exist in the diegetic universe, which is mainly symptomatic of Shetty's conspicuous reluctance to construct solid character arcs, instead opting for a fantastical depiction of masculinity that is at odds with the film's purportedly realistic setting. Such spectacles of male power, as Gopinath and Sundar (2020) note in their work on masculinities in South Asia, reinforce patriarchal ideologies that equate masculinity with brute strength, aggression, and a disregard for rules or fair play.

Figure 1: Shiva channels his raw and unbridled energy, with his aggressive stance leaping into action, at the Kola fair, as the crowd watches in awe.

Far from adhering to conventional heroic archetypes, his actions often veer into an ethically dubious territory at best and outright criminal at worst. From voyeuristic exploits under the pretext of romance and sleazy comic reliefs to his complicity in unethical acts, including the landlord's infidelities and unprompted hunting (which the film detests), Shiva's unhinged conduct is inconsistent with the nature of heroism and moral compass of the narrative itself. Nevertheless, many are quick to contend that *Kantara*'s (Shetty, 2022) Shiva is no ordinary hero but, embodied in him is a quintessential "alpha male" rooting him in the socio-cultural context of a rural Karnataka village of the 1990s, who flagrantly flout societal norms, and is a rule-breaker (Basu & Tripathi, 2023), but little does it do to challenge or deconstruct these problematic acts celebrated as expressions of hegemonic masculinity, which the film paradoxically construes as heroic. Shiva, as brash, unrefined, and lacking discernible emotional depth or vulnerability, is quickly established through his initial interactions with Leela (featuring Sapthami Gowda), his long-gone childhood friend turned resplendent village belle and love interest, which are far from romantic but predatory. His actions—stalking, harassing, and objectifying her— emblematic of his toxic masculinity, are disguised as courtship rituals, a trope that the film dangerously normalises. In one scene, Shiva's unsolicited advances culminate in an act of public humiliation for Leela, which the film later trivialises as mere playful banter, which we will return to in the subsequent section. Her traditional attire, though seemingly modest, is often manipulated to reveal glimpses of skin as Shiva registers his possessive and rather dominant nature in erotic displays of his untamed libido, reducing her role to merely that of a(n) (un)willing participant in his sensual escapades. In a particularly egregious outburst, his conduct toward Leela, as he brutally hits her after she serves him food following the forest officer's enforced village-land-fencing episode, exposes a rather scathing and unyielding anger that borders on outright misogyny.

Beyond the robust veneer of *Kantara* (Shetty, 2022), one might be tempted to overlook the rampant indulgence in substance abuse, which makes way for its male characters' insolence and inconsequential

debauchery. Tobacco consumption is featured in 38 scenes in just over two hours, totalling 26 minutes and 43 seconds. Shiva himself participates in 24 of them, spanning a staggering 22 minutes and 33 seconds, which accounts for nearly 90% of the total tobacco-related screen time. Habitual smoking simultaneously unfolds in nine scenes, totalling nine minutes and five seconds. Alcohol is similarly glorified in fourteen scenes, totalling 11 minutes and 11 seconds, with Shiva himself featured in eight of them, amounting to 6 minutes and 38 seconds (Vignesh & Sundararaman, 2023). This repeated normalisation, even glorification of substance abuse, unmet with significant ramifications, suggests what Tejaswini Ganti (2004) identifies as a tendency in Indian cinema to exoticise and essentialize rural spaces and identities, often at the cost of nuanced character development.

In retrospect, deeper ideological issues glaringly surface as one navigates the treacherous waters of Shetty's overt reliance on mythical, spiritual underpinnings to mask Shiva's character arc or lack thereof. While both Shiva's name and his dwelling, a treehouse which he refers to as Kailash, allude to the Hindu deity—Lord Shiva and his abode, Mount Kailash, the parallels between this Shiva and the deity merely end at nomenclature and superficial analogies. Unlike Lord Shiva, while outwardly presented as a protective masculine figure, the protagonist is instead depicted as violent, self-serving, and devoid of accountability. His physical prowess is celebrated, and his actions—ranging from substance abuse and bullying to sexual harassment—are not just excused but rendered inconsequential and ultimately rewarded; his disregard for others is painted as a roguish charm, together culminating in Shiva's transcendence to a demigod in the penultimate scene, where, he obliterates the scheming Devendra in a showdown, thus protecting the land bequeathed to the natives.

While it is certainly valid for a narrative to explore complex, flawed, and morally ambiguous characters, *Kantara* (Shetty, 2022) crosses a line by glorifying and legitimizing Shiva's problematic masculinity despite his numerous transgressions. Yet, this abrupt metamorphosis, rupturing any semblance of a coherent arc and laying bare the film's ideological faultlines, remains noticeably devoid of moral introspection or constructive redemption. Particularly troubling is how Shetty arbitrarily equates Shiva, a man characterized by his engagement in morally reprehensible acts, with divine symbolism. Shiva dons a *rudraksh mala*, resides in Kailash, and is ultimately rewarded with divine recognition of Daiva—this narrative decision, while appearing more make-believe than consequential, dangerously conflates divine sanction with moral rectitude, therefore, implying that Shiva's flaws are not impediments but integral to his heroism; that toxic masculinity is a pathway to greatness in a congratulatory culture.

In an interview with *India Today*,[4] Rishab Shetty's attempt to rationalise Shiva as "flawed", "not a typical hero", who is filled with rage and "rawness", and whose intention is "not right", falls flat when scrutinised against how the narrative portrays Shiva, leaving him trapped in a liminal space between antihero and misguided protagonist; he is more an actor within a patriarchal framework than a heroic figure in the traditional sense. What then constitutes a hero? One cannot help but draw parallels to Joseph Campbell's Monomyth (1949). Much unlike the classical hero, who is often defined not merely by physical strength or the capacity for violence but by their ethical stance, moral courage, commitment to justice and the ability to inspire positive change—Shiva's portrayal is steeped in forced heroism, a constructed illusion predicated on mythological symbolism and dated notions of masculinity that valorise aggression, physical dominance, and phallic entitlement. He does not seek spiritual wisdom that guides him to navigate crises and ensure his transference into the special world, where the demigod resurrects him. His journey towards catharsis is mere showmanship, not substantive personal or spiritual evolution. With motivations largely reactionary and momentary impulses that undermine his stature as a "hero", his exaggerated feats are driven primarily by personal vendettas and a desire for dominance rather than any higher ethical calling or communal responsibility. Lacking the introspection and moral complexity that might align him with more progressive,

nuanced depictions of heroism, he, instead, is toxic masculinity personified—a swaggering avatar of aggression, entitlement, and misplaced pride.

The Case of the Gaze

Kantara's (Shetty, 2022) visual rhetoric, heavily imbued with palpable Machiavellian manoeuvres of voyeurism and scopophilic fetishism, beckons us to scrutinize how Shetty's directorial gaze manifests itself through the character of Shiva, for it is Shetty's self-referential tale in a masala mystical packaging which, if not truly, at least partly is, in its attempt, uncannily original. Often teetering on the precipice of a potent leitmotif, Shiva's gaze encapsulates a phantasmagoric force that transcends mere observation and ventures into visceral, almost primal, desire. In the early scenes of the Kola festival, as an inebriated Shiva moves through the crowd, the world around him blurs as his gaze fixates on Leela. While this is all that is known of Leela, this cinematographic choice, reminiscent of what Doane (1989) calls the "apparatus of looks," constructs Leela as the central object of desire for Shiva and the camera itself. The slow-motion effect stretches time, allowing the audience to indulge in prolonged visual consumption of Leela's body, mirroring Shiva's phantasmic gaze. On the other hand, Leela is a figure of grace and accomplishment, having completed her training to become a forest guard, a marker of her competence and autonomy. However, this autonomy is quickly tarnished as Shiva, intoxicated not just by the local brew but by the masculine privilege that allows him to leer, stalk, and eventually trail her with a predatory persistence, his eyes filled not with admiration but a toxic blend of desire and phallic entitlement and his visage, contorted in an awkward rictus of exaggerated physical responses—tongue protruding, drooling—becomes a grotesque caricature of hedonistic masculinity unbound, more so, signifying an almost animalistic desire (Barma, 2024). This spectacle of unbridled lust, far from being an isolated incident, permeates the film's visual scheme, with even other characters like the landlord partaking in this voyeuristic feast as he encounters Leela at the festival, being the object of Shiva's gaze, thus suggesting a communal male spectatorship that objectifies Leela.

The unwitting focal point of this masculine obsession, Leela, is ensnared in a web of sartorial manipulation. After the community feast, she is depicted wearing her saree in a manner that takes on an unnatural configuration, exposing her midriff and navel, which strays from her initial appearance at the festival in a well-pinned saree. This calculated wardrobe malfunction serves as a visual synecdoche for the broader objectification at play, reducing Leela to a collection of eroticised body parts rather than a fully realized character. The camera, an extension of Shetty's directorial vision, now lingers on Leela's unnaturally exposed midriff, which serves no narrative purpose beyond pacifying the male gaze, both within and beyond the diegetic world. Shiva follows her with the single-mindedness of a hunter, finally cornering her in a secluded spot as he confronts her, his words dripping with false bravado: "You might have completed your training," he taunts, "No need to act haughty with me!" The language here is crucial—haughty—an expression, often loaded with gendered connotations, reflects the discomfort with female agency, an attempt to belittle and contain it.

What follows is an act of transgression—Shiva's gaze lowers to her waist, his hands following suit, driven by his absurd fantasies, and eventually, in a moment of grotesque audacity, smugly pinches her waist, a crude assertion of male dominance over female bodies that he immediately diminishes by fleeing the scene and assuming that his actions, however vile, will be received with little more than a wince and a wink. The act itself, a violation of Leela's bodily autonomy, is framed not as a transgression but as a mischievous gag. The camera zooms in on the point of contact, the bare waist. Shetty's directorial choice emphasizing the tactile nature of this encounter foregrounds the "active/male and passive/female", constructing multilayered identifications that are premised on a "triple-look" system: "that of the camera as it records the prolific event that of the audience as it watches the final product, and that of the characters at each other within the screen

illusion" (Mulvey, 1975). However, I take a step further and point at a phenomenon simultaneously unfolding, especially introspecting Shetty's tripartite role here as director, actor, and character from a feminist lens that further exploits this visual economy of gaze. One could deduce that the male gaze here unfolds through a complex tripartite prism, forging a labyrinthine network of gazes that traverse the boundaries between authorial intent and subconscious biases, character perspective and directorial vision, both within and beyond the profilmic space. As Mulvey (1975) famously posited, the male gaze in cinema constructs women as passive objects of erotic spectacle for male viewers' pleasure. Therefore, this gaze, in *Kantara* (Shetty, 2022), is not merely confined to a singular character or perspective but is refracted through multiple lenses, creating what we might term a "tripartite male gaze" —first, Shetty-as-director orchestrates the visual narrative, governing the camera's movement and editing choices that fragment and fetishize the female body; as the actor, he physically enacts the characters' gaze; and as Shiva within the diegesis, he becomes the vessel through which this gaze is narratively justified. This tripartite involvement coalesces into a recursive loop of looking—the director gazing through the actor as the character gazes—leaving the audience complicit in its "scopic regime" that privileges male visual pleasure (Metz, 1982).

Figure 2: Shiva's gaze, lingering on the liquor bottle, equals the lecherous desire he casts upon Leela's body, commodifying her. In his eyes, both are objects of unrestrained lust.

The morning following the festival, Shiva's anxiety about potential retribution is seemingly palpable when Leela and her father arrive at his doorstep, likely due to the previous night's assault at the festival. Rampa's retelling of Shiva's assault on their friend Bulla, wherein he describes Shiva's pinching Leela in a place "too scandalous to show or speak of," is rife with unintentional irony. Shrouded in a taboo that is verbally acknowledged yet visually depicted, the act becomes a paradox, where the unspeakable is rendered visible for both the characters and the audience. The ensuing dialogue between Rampa and Bulla, suffused with sexual innuendo and double entendre, reveals the director's intention to exploit this voyeuristic pleasure, implicating the audience to partake in the same. While the audience is primed for a reckoning, Leela's father, far from embodying a protective paternal figure, devolves into a farcical display of patriarchal complicity. Instead of chastising, one witnesses him casually dispelling Shiva's lechery with a jesting remark—"I did the same at your age" although alluding to the fight that ensued between Shiva and the forest officer Murali—reflects deep-seated misogyny that dismisses male predation as mere sinister exuberance; his nonchalance, deeply symptomatic of a legacy of normalised harassment, a tradition passed down like an heirloom, too sanitised for

the violence it signifies—as a valorised rite of passage, a badge of masculinity. Shiva, now empowered by complicity, asserting his dominance, relegates Leela's father to the back seat of the motorbike, positioning Leela between himself and the older man. The image is loaded with symbolic weight, as Leela is physically and metaphorically sandwiched between two embodiments of patriarchy.

Shiva's gaze is omnipresent, a relentless and predatory force that haunts Leela. Shiva, then, is no hero; instead, he is the cinematic epitome of voyeurism, as he describes women as prey and as motorbikes "that men ride over", the act of sexual intercourse as "fuelling the tank of the motorbike with petrol", and himself as a "hunter". Even when Shiva drives Leela and her father on his motorbike, his gaze lingers on her through the rearview mirror. This act of gazing is not a mere visual exercise; it is a manifestation of the power dynamics at play, where Shiva, as the bearer of the look, holds power over Leela's "to-be-looked-at-ness" (Mulvey, 1975), who is rendered powerless under its scrutiny, thus reflecting a disturbing trend of objectification that reduces Leela to a prey to be ogled, touched, and ultimately conquered. The landlord, the helm of patriarchy in the village, too, is complicit in this spectacle of male entitlement. When petitioned by Shiva for a job as the forest guard for Leela, the landlord mirrors this exact predatory gaze, lingering and assessing, interrupted only by Shiva's possessive declaration of his claim over Leela, "He is gazing at my prey" (in an inner monologue)—revealing the ingrained dehumanization and commodification at the core of the film's portrayal of women—Leela is not an autonomous individual, but a prey to be hunted, a mere trophy to be contested over by men in the sport of toxic masculinity.

As the narrative progresses, Shiva's gaze is not limited to public spaces; it pervades even private moments, as he voyeuristically watches Leela bathe through a hole in the wall, yet another account that echoes classical cinema's tradition of female fetishistic scopophilia (Doane, 1989; Mulvey, 1975), for the act of Leela being watched unawares does not only lessen the power dynamics at play; rather, it underscores her vulnerability within a male-privileging setup that policies and controls women's bodies. The hole through which Shiva gazes becomes a symbolic tool of this panoptic surveillance, reinforcing the idea that women are perpetually under scrutiny, whether they are aware of it or not. Nevertheless, this act of peeping is treated not as a violation of Leela's privacy but celebrated unabashedly as a "naughty" romantic gag, thus trivializing serious issues surrounding consent and privacy besides normalizing voyeurism.

Figure 3: Hidden in the shadows, Shiva's voyeuristic gaze invades Leela's private moment as he watches her bathe. His intrusive stare strips away her dignity, turning her vulnerability into an object of his silent perversion, unseen yet fully aware of the violation he commits.

In another instance, after fleeing from his hideout, Shiva finds Leela skinning fish, her body crouched low to the ground, her saree arranged to reveal parts of her thigh. Shiva, leaning casually against a pillar, smoking a cigarette, directs his lewd gaze on her body, which, besides objectifying Leela, also positions her as submissive in the visual hierarchy of the scene. His gaze trails her movement, lingering suggestively on her posterior as she cooks. Once again, we witness a meta-textual moment: this gaze is not just Shiva's but that of the actor performing the act and the director, Shetty, who implicates the viewer to share in his act of

voyeurism. Shiva asserts his dominance through a series of regressive acts—he forcibly grabs her by the arm, pinches her waist, pulls her hair, and bites her neck, all gestures of "angromance"—culminating in a suggestive act of copulation. Thus, Shiva's acts of dominance and the film's narrative structure itself consistently undermine her autonomy and celebrate male aggression as a marker of virility and male conquest. This is where his decision as the auteur blurs the line between artistic choice, character perspective, and directorial gaze, raising questions about authorial intent, creative necessity, and narrative excess, echoing Robert Stam's (2000) theorisation that the auteur theory, while problematic, reminds us that films are not anonymous products but rather the creations of specific individuals (auteurs).

Murali, the forest officer, introduces another dimension of the male gaze—one intertwined with state authority and violence. His brutal treatment of villagers and his drinking on duty exemplify "hegemonic masculinity" (Connell & Messerschmidt, 2005), with his gaze not one of sexual desire but of power and domination, reflecting broader societal structures of oppression. In other instances, the landlord, Devendra, a celebrated figure of power and reverence in the village, further introduces elements of class privilege into the matrix of the male gaze in *Kantara* (Shetty, 2022) as he sexualises the housemaid (predominantly from a lower-class) and engages in extramarital affairs with her. So does Rampa, Shiva's old philanderer friend and confidant, representing a form of complicit masculinity that reinforces and normalises "gazing" at women. His gaze at Leela's waist and his excitement about Shiva's sexual encounters with her demonstrate "homosocial enactment," where men perform masculinity for other men's approval (Kimmel, 2016). Rampa's voyeuristic tendencies, as he gazes at women bathing and engages with them in rampant flagrante delicto, further manifest the film's pervasive culture of male entitlement and female objectification. His actions, though exceeding narrative necessity and framed as comedic, normalize a deeply problematic behaviour that not only infringes on women's privacy and bodily autonomy but, more so, reflects Shetty's extremely problematic internalised Orientalist gaze that views tribal communities as bastions of polyamory and sexual permissiveness – a representation that feeds into the colonial narrative of the "savage" Other (Shohat & Stam, 2014). Nevertheless, these male characters play out their hegemonic ideals as they signify their masculine selves through acts of heavy drinking, aggressive posturing, violence, sexual conquests, joking, verbal jousting, sexist talk, and even sexualisation and harassment of women (Schrock & Schwalbe, 2009).

Of the Forgotten Ones

A significant lacuna in *Kantara*'s (Shetty, 2022) analysis of power structures is the conspicuous absence of gendered dynamics. Predominantly male-centric, the narrative neglects to explore the contributions and experiences of women—both from lower and upper castes—to the overarching power relations. Unlike their male counterparts, as ghostly apparitions, women haunt the periphery of *Kantara*'s (Shetty, 2022) masculine fever dream. Leela, Shiva's romantic interest, manifests the perfect canvas upon which to project male fantasy—simultaneously desirable and disposable. Her existence orbits around the gravitational pull of Shiva's masculinity, her own wants and needs, mere asteroids in his cosmic journey. Leela's material world is susceptible to manipulation by masculine figures like Shiva and Murali in her personal and professional affairs, where men monopolise power.

From her introduction through a voyeuristic male gaze to the film's denouement, despite being the first educated woman in the village and having secured a job as a forest guard, Leela is systematically stripped of agency, her character arc flattened into a two-dimensional caricature of love and submission in both her public and private personas. For instance, when Shiva pinches her waist without consent, her momentary anger is quickly undermined by her inexplicable romantic attraction towards him, which is neither explored as a complex psychological journey nor allowed any substantial narrative weight. Leela, who gives in to his brutish

advances and is coaxed to give up her hard-earned job to fan his ego, is now a fallen woman and punching bag, all rolled into one convenient package for the male gaze to unwrap at its leisure.

Shiva's mother, Kamala, is rendered as little more than a nagging soundtrack to her son's heroics—a frustrated crone, her agency eroded like shoreline against the relentless tide of male-centred storytelling. Kamala's sporadic outbursts, her helplessness in resisting the state's encroachment on the village land, and her subsequent punishment by the police only serve to reinforce her status as a victim of both patriarchal and institutional oppression without ever granting her the narrative space to emerge as a resilient figure. She exists in liminality, neither a fully realised character nor a complete non-entity, but rather a convenient plot device to be deployed when the narrative demands maternal chiding.

Perhaps most telling is the film's depiction of the landlord's wife, Ammakkha, whose silent acquiescence manifests a deeper, more insidious narrative of the "subaltern woman," whose voice is systematically silenced by patriarchal structures. A mute spectator of her husband's indiscretions, Ammakkha actively participates in the politics of invisibility, where the absence of voice becomes a form of violence in itself. Her eyes, heavy with the load of betrayal she endures, lurk on the periphery of her gilded cage-like palace, becoming the locus of a narrative that refuses to acknowledge her pain, instead normalising her passivity as if it were a natural state of being, whose identity is entirely subsumed within her husband's moral decay. In her silence, this character becomes a cypher for the film's larger failure to engage critically with the complexities of female experience in Indigenous Tulu society.

Figure 4: Amakkha's quiet, distant presence lurks in the shadows of her husband, Devendra's reflection in the foreground. The distance and unspoken tension between them are poignantly symptomatic of the hauntingly peripheral, blurred existence of women in Kantara, overshadowed by their dominant male counterparts.

Reflective of the director's somewhat reductionist gaze on the Indigenous community, *Kantara*'s (Shetty, 2022) women are denigrated as one-dimensional, passive, regressive, and voiceless figures, lacking agency and moral consciousness in their uncritical depiction as participants in casual sexual encounters with men, which not only misrepresents Tulu culture; it is a profound disservice to the complexities of these women. The narrative does not allow them the depth nor the dignity of full-fledged characters; instead, they are miniaturised into mere bodies that exist only to satisfy the desires of the men around them. This reductionist approach to female characterisation is not only dehumanizing but also feeds into harmful stereotypes that paint Indigenous tribal communities as morally deficient and uncivilised, which Ella Shohat

and Robert Stam (2014) identify as the "colonialist gaze" in cinema, where Indigenous cultures are exoticised and eroticised for the consumption of a dominant culture audience.

Conclusion

It would only be fair to note that *Kantara* (Shetty, 2022) thus constructs a patriarchal imaginary that aligns with Connell's (1995) conceptualisation of hegemonic masculinity, where the final face of power is a benevolent yet omnipresent masculine hegemon whose authority is unchallenged and whose control over women is normalised. As mesmerising as the film's Bhoota Kola and Kambala performances are, these elements, alongside the evocative background music and vibrant visual palette, cannot obscure the film's deeper representational flaws, particularly its problematic depictions of masculinity and female agency (or lack thereof). *Kantara* (Shetty, 2022), therefore, can be read as a paradoxical text that superficially embraces Indigenous spiritual-cultural traditions while simultaneously repackaging the narrative of a quintessential macho man—destined to prevail and be rewarded regardless of his moral failings—into a mystical, folkloric mould, wherein the cinematic apparatus—to borrow Metz's (1982) psychoanalytic framework—functions as a mirror that reflects not merely the diegetic world but also the unconscious desires and anxieties of both the auteur and the spectator. The "tripartite male gaze", far from being a mere unintentional narrative-aesthetic device, then becomes a political act that reifies patriarchal power structures and perpetuates a "colonialist gaze," exoticising and eroticising Indigenous cultures as not mere a site where demigods reign, but, at large, and ironically, a breeding ground for Indigenous tribesmen who engage in extramarital affairs, objectify Indigenous women, and reduce them to voiceless, passive entities, thereby positioning them as secondary or even tertiary in their existence. In this sense, *Kantara* (Shetty, 2022) is not so distinct from other blockbuster Indian films such as *Animal* (Vanga, 2023) or *KGF: Chapter 2* (Neel, 2022), where the celebration of toxic masculinity and misogyny is similarly unchallenged, thus, revealing a troubling continuity in the portrayal of gender and power within contemporary Indian cinema.

Notes

[1] I borrow from Viswamohan and Chaudhuri (2020) to refer to Shiva's angry romance with Leela as a performance of toxic masculinity.

[2] A traditional folk dance and ritual theatre form practised in coastal Karnataka, India, particularly in the districts of Dakshina Kannada, Udupi, and Shimoga, that honours the spirits (Bhootas) of ancestors, gods, and goddesses.

[3] Popular traditional buffalo racing sport in coastal Karnataka, India, particularly in Dakshina Kannada, Udupi, and Mangalore districts.

[4] See https://www.indiatoday.in/movies/regional-cinema/story/rishab-shetty-says-shiva-and-leelas-love-story-is-raw-not-like-a-colourful-bollywood-song-exclusive-2286209-2022-10-17

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