

Paper

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## The Reassuring Emergence of the Quasi-*maa* Cop



Rani Mukerji in *Mardani*

### Abstract

Rani Mukherjee in *Mardaani* (2014) and *Mardaani 2* (2019), Tabu in *Drishyam* (2015), *Drishyam 2* (2022), and *Kuttey* (2023) and *Bholaa* (2023); also, if we may include a web series, Raveena Tandon in *Aranyak* (2021), Kareena Kapoor Khan in *The Buckingham Murders* (2023) and Kaajol in *Do Patti* (2024), start an interesting second inning of their careers. Their first inning has been a successful run as glamorous leading ladies for two decades. The actresses are now at an age when Bollywood usually takes its heroines into the ‘*Maa*’ phase, as the heroes continue to dance and sing with much younger actresses. Sometimes, even re-casting the romantic pair as mother-son! Rani, Kareena, Tabu and Kajol have, before ‘graduating’ to *maa*, seem to have for them, this newly created role of police woman. I aim to analyse how these women cops have been characterised at the screenplay level. The women are caring and not afraid to be emotionally involved at a personal level with the victim (usually of abuse/trafficking/sexual violence on children or younger adults). Every police procedural decision is informed by compassion. In the audience’s mind, will this expand into- This is how the police and the state are? Is this image easier and more palatable to accept since it is portrayed by the women desired and adored by audiences? Post-emergency, collective dissent was expressed in Indian Cinema by creating what we later identified as the ‘angry young man.’ Will we only retrospectively see this pattern of the older woman cop character? I argue that this maternalistic cop character directs us towards a quiet acceptance of the ways of law enforcement. She may wield some not-so-official methods, but she does it, as mothers do - For ‘our good.’

“Strategies use *karni hothi toh yahaan nahin aati. Help karne aayi hoon,*” says Jasmeet Bhamra of *The Buckingham Murders* (played by Kareena Kapoor Khan). If she had just been using strategies, she would not have gone out of her way; she wanted to help. When the accused rudely states that cops are all the same, they see only a ‘case,’ a file number, she interrupts his rebuff with, “You know what I see? I see a nineteen-year-old boy who is struggling with his addiction” She is not a policewoman interrogating an accused in the police station. She is the woman who has broken the rules to be allowed to meet a young prisoner from across a fence in the dead of night because time is running out for him. She further confirms her maternal approach to this meeting by saying, “..I see a mother *joh apne bete ki innocence prove karne ke liye sirf ro sakti hai.*” Your mother can only cry, she says, just like she can only helplessly grieve the death of her son. The conversation is shot beautifully, a theatre-like piece, the only movement being facial expressions elegantly captured with light and the shadows of the prison fence. Kareena Kapoor Khan has never looked so lovely, even in her most glamorous roles. She is awkward for a moment after “...*ro sakti hai,*” at the pause, the comma after “I see a father,” as if she has had to fit one more line into this almost- theatre-like dialogue. But she is quickly back to being the efficient cop with the almost-pleading “*mujhe nahin pataa tum kya chupa rahe ho, aur kyu chupa rahe ho*”(I don’t know what you are hiding, and why.” “I just know many lives are at stake, Saquib,” to the almost-threat of “Including yours.”

‘Almost’-Pleading, without losing her dignity, and position of the mature person in

the conversation, the woman who is capable of helping, and more importantly, a woman who wants to help. A woman who Cares. ‘Almost’-threat because she is not threatening to harm him, but warning him of the consequences of his refusal to cooperate. Kapoor-Khan is at the top of her form as she traverses the fluidity between the ‘cooperate with us, or you are going to jail’ and the ‘listen to me, son, I am worried that you will come to harm.” This is ably responded to by the young actor who plays Saquib. Although the scene ends with her lines on their forehead expressing concern, saying, “I just need you to tell me the truth”, the conversation reaches its finale when he breaks down- “What can I do? I cannot think straight—vulnerable and afraid, “*main kya karoon. Mujhe kuch samaj nahi aa raha hai.*”

Detective Jasmeet Bhamra’s maternal protective care is extended to the accused. Only she sees his vulnerability. Her compassion towards Saquib is especially commendable because she has suffered a tragic loss at the hands of a young man whose profile is almost identical to the present accused. *Buckingham Murders*(2023) does not wait for carefully placed flashback snippets to tell us about the tragedy that had befallen Jasmeet Bhamra. The film begins with her remembering her dead child. As soon as the first title appears, we hear his voice, first off-screen, and then actually see the child. The sentencing of the man who killed her son in a mindless shooting is shown right away. As he is being led away, the murderer says “sorry” to her. Distraught and angry, she charges towards him and begins punching him in the face. She is introduced to us, not as a cop (although we know she is one, by her

location in the courtroom) but as a bereaved mother.

In *Drishyam* (2015), the woman cop is the biological mother of the victim. Sticking to its project as being an Ajay Devgan movie, the script focuses on him and is well into the narrative when we see IG Deshmukh (played by Tabu) for the first time in the 58th minute of this 105-minute film that is almost precisely at the midpoint. “Vijay, Sam was the son of the Inspector General of Goa police,” reveals Nandini, Vijay’s wife, exactly a minute before. So, when Meera Deshmukh appears on screen at the very next moment, although she is in full uniform- the scene is set at the police station. Despite the lighting and background music signals a typical Bollywood ‘entry of a strong hero,’ we are aware that we are looking at a mother whose son has been killed. Is that why we are expected not to mind the plight of the two men whose torture she is supervising? And that she orders that the families of the two witnesses be held in custody and their arms and legs broken if they lied in court? Although the character herself does not yet know that her son is dead!

This is her usual behaviour at the police station. Yet, we accept it because the script tells us she is an aggrieved mother! The other characters continue to remind us. At a scene showing a senior officer briefing his team, the missing person is described as “IG *ka eklauta beta*.” IG Deshmukh’s one and only son. Inspector Gaitonde remarks that to charge someone for murder, there should be a body. Even as she is issuing instructions as a police officer, Meera flinches at the word ‘Body’ and at the very next line with “You do not worry about protocol, Gaitonde,” she is back,

as it were, in uniform. Keeping with the script’s tendency, Meera herself restates the obvious., “I am not losing courage, Mahesh.” She tells her husband. “But what can I do? *Main ek Maa bhi hoon.*” I am also a mother. Later, this statement turns its head to ‘You also are a mother,’ while she questions Nandini! “You must understand my pain. *Tum bhi ek Maa ho.*” If you cringe at lines like these and condemn the torture and threats inflicted upon a child, brace yourself for the even more on-the-nose *Drishyam 2* (2022). While *Drishyam* (2015), directed by the late Nishikant Kamat, is a pretty watchable and engaging film, its sequel makes you wish they could have let sleeping dogs lie. That seven years have lapsed, is declared by the mother of the murdered boy, in case we forgot.

“I am his mother! Let alone seven, I cannot forget even after seven hundred years!” Ex-IG Meera Deshmukh reminds us. As the excellent actress, Tabu tries in vain to rescue the script from its many flaws, especially in the main ‘project’ of reiterating that she is a grieving mother, not just an ex-cop. In a scene her brisk police-woman manner of asking to see the forensic report quickly changes when she reacts to the words ‘cause of death’, very much as a mother.

*Do Patti* (2024) does not put the woman cop at the centre of the narrative. One feels that Kajol’s talent, screen presence and star status are underutilised. However, one common thing among all these films comes into play in *Do Patti*, too—the presentation of the woman cop as motherly. The script does not have a child attached to the woman cop. Still, Inspector Vidya Jyoti Kanwar comes on the screen to a scene of attempted murder, not as a cop responding to an emergency call, but

eyes filled to the brim with unshed tears, an expression very characteristic of the actress Kaajol, is full of concern, anxiety, and care as she approaches the victim, and puts a soothing hand on the younger woman's shoulder. "*Chupp.*" Her shutting up the accused in lock-up only underlines her indignation.

A trite device that is supposed to convince us of her motherly nature is a caged pet "orphaned" rabbit under her table at the police station! Like all not-so-great screenplays, instead of revealing more about the protagonist gradually throughout the narrative, a quick exposition right at the beginning tells us all we need to know about her past, her marital status, and her parents, all aided by direct questions asked by or some information revealed by a colleague. It is established that she is a stickler for protocol. Her senior officer tells her she is not promoted to a higher rank. "You follow the rules so much. No one can follow you." This is established, for, in the end, she will transform into someone who realises that not rules but justice is important. This senior cop also says her name aloud and tells us the meaning of that name! Vidya means knowledgeable, and Jyoti means Light! She is called VJ for short. Is this a tribute to the angry young Mr. Bachchan who played characters called Vijay in twenty films? Maybe her violent streak is also established by telling us that she struck her fiancée's head with a heavy object!

The plot tells us of twin sisters. Keeping with the age-old tropes, one is docile and 'good,' the other bold and confident. When the protectiveness of the 'bad' sister is revealed, it is discovered that she had staged a scene to trap the husband of the docile sister, who is a quiet victim of domestic violence.

Inspector Vidya Jyothi makes remarks such as, "These women! What a story they made up! They have manipulated us into turning a case of domestic abuse into manslaughter." These could be misconstrued as the usual nature of such cases—that 'clever' women 'trap' innocent husbands. There is enough talk, as it is, by men's groups about 498A being 'used' by women to put their husbands behind bars for no reason. More care should have been taken while writing these lines, especially when they are to be said by an authority, a woman police inspector.

Coming back to the *Do Patti* script's tendency to refer to Bollywood, at that exposition about her character, the colleague tells us how VJ did not spare even her brother and was responsible for his arrest and incarceration. A reminder of Vijay's mother in *Deewaar* (1975)- May your hands not tremble when you must pull the trigger, she tells her younger son Ravi. Ravi ultimately shoots his brother, but anyone who has seen *Deewaar* knows that Ravi is a mere extension of Ma, the mother character. His function is the execution of her sense of justice. Even more directly, an iconic 'Mother' – Radha of *Mother India* (1957) shoots her son while he is abducting a woman from the village. Mother India. Radha of *Mother India* is so iconic that she is almost an archetype for *Ma* characters that came later.

Raising the woman cop to the even higher plane of Mythology is the last fight sequence in *Kuttey* (2023). Lovely, the daughter of a dreaded gangster, is trapped, surrounded by cops. Police officer Poonam Sandhu, 'Pammi' (Tabu) walks towards her. "When your father worked in Byculla, you used to shit and piss in my lap." You were an



infant, and I knew your father well. In short, “obey.” Lower your gun, she requests. Repeats, shouting this time and breaking the impasse. Soon, Lovely’s boyfriend, Danish, gets shot in the crossfire. There is a visible softening of Pammi’s face as she puts down her gun and hugs Lovely. We are shocked when, even as the younger woman is still in her embrace, Officer Poonam Sandhu shoots point-blank and kills Lovely!

*“For she is the world creatrix, ever mother, ever virgin. She encompasses the encompassing, nourishes the nourishing, and is the life of everything that lives. She is also the death of everything that dies. The whole round of existence is accomplished within her sway, from birth through adolescence, maturity, and senescence to the grave. She is the womb, the tomb, the sow that eats her farrow. Thus, she unites the “good” and the “bad,” exhibiting the two modes of the remembered mother, not as personal only but as universal. The devotee is expected to contemplate the two with equal equanimity.”* (Campbell, 1993)

Like this devotee, is the audience supposed to extend a similar equanimity towards the nurturing and harsh methods of the woman cop? The title of the film *Mardaani* (2014) can be translated as ‘Masculine’, but the femininity of Senior Inspector Shivani Roy is emphasised in the film's opening scenes by her traditional Bengali saree complete with *Sindoor* and bangles. That she is not merely in plain clothes, we know later, as we see her usually clad in trousers and shirts, but this undercover get-up is presented. Hence, we see her as an ordinary woman—her conversations with colleagues on their way to a raid about the

well-being of their children. Speaking of studies, she remembers something and makes a call home. We hear her talking to her niece, who calls her ‘Mavshi’ (Marathi, the word for mother’s sister). Hindi word ‘*Maasi*’ – Like Mother.

The entire plot is about Inspector Shivani’s hunting down of a criminal to expose and break a human trafficking network that kidnaps and forces underage girls into prostitution. The plot escalates when Pyaari, a child rescued from the street in a previous operation and presently lodged in a state-run home for street children, is kidnapped. In fact, in the 37<sup>th</sup> minute of the film, in a phone conversation, when the criminal offers bribes that she refuses, he asks her what she wants. “*Bola na, Pyaari waapas de.*” Didn’t I tell you? I want Pyaari back. In that one line, as if throwing caution about professionalism to the wind, Inspector Shivani shows that while she is very seriously pursuing those who perpetrate atrocious violence on young girls in general, what drives her at this present moment is her anxiety about and care for Pyaari. “*Meri beti jaisi hai.*” Pyaari is like my daughter, the cop says, even while addressing the villain as ‘junior.’ When she calls the hardened criminal “under-19 team *ke* 12<sup>th</sup> man”, on the other side of the phone conversation, we see an affectionate smile on the face of this fierce and ruthless young man. Towards Pyaari, towards all the other victims, even the villain(!), Inspector Shivani Roy is Like a mother.

A confession- Director Pradeep Sarkar’s characterisation of Shivani, the nature of the horrific crime, and the age of the victims perhaps convinced this writer, at least

during the screening, to suspend two anxieties. One was about the *'mardaani'* masculine image. Is it necessary for women to imitate the manners and aggression of men to be seen as strong? The second one was about the ending. The allowing of a mob to take over. Street justice. While it is not right to jettison these two important points, the engrossed audience is convinced (Or manipulated?) by the script.

The last sequence, melodrama and all seems to make meaning. Bollywood repeatedly quotes the mythologies it has created and then announces a new Mythology. Get up, she tells him. Let us see, *mard bannke kaise chadhta hai tu*. He told her a while ago that men climb on top of women, and women merely look up at them. Look up at me and scream, he had said.

Just as the last pre-climax fight is about to begin, Shivani (Rani Mukherjee) shuts a door and tells Karan the criminal. "On the other side of the door lies your freedom. Between the door and you, I am here. Kill me and walk out." Another locked door. Another space ideal for almost demarcated as a 'fight' area. I will take the key from your pocket and walk out of the door said Vijay (Amitabh Bachchan) in *Deewaar* (1975)—the angry young man in a denim shirt. Cut to Rani here, also dressed in a denim shirt. Rani Mukherji is physically at her best as Inspector Shivani Roy, beating up the child trafficker.

She has, throughout the film, had to walk the same road that the angry young man has walked before her. This might be criticised. But this, because scripts are not yet offering new ways, was the only known path. But wait a minute, the script is doing something. She is taking off that shirt. From

now on, she does not need the mask, the robes of the angry young man. A woman taking on a man who has been very cruel to young, vulnerable girls. You said you climb up on women, didn't you, Shivani asks. Okay, let's see what you have got. She fights him alone. And definitely comes out on top.

This is a woman's fight. The audience accepts and applauds the somewhat problematic ending because they see the fight as a woman's, a mother's fight, a mother's way of administering justice.

I re-watched these eight mainstream Bollywood films and a web series, this time in quick succession to confirm the presence of a pattern. It's not a great cinema. There is nothing special about them except that they have been made for large-scale popular consumption. The screenplays carry all the elements that are supposed to have a Pan-Indian mass appeal. It is the most commercial, popular cinema and has often been the initiator of social discourse among the common people in India. I thought I would look at this kind of cinema to identify a pattern that may connect to the socio-political reality of our present times.

Nine women cops. Beyond their role in the plot and solving the crime, care has been taken to present these characters as women. Their primary location is not the police station but the home. A homemaker first. Even if she may not be good at it, Aranyak's Kasturi Dogra is being instructed in cooking and corrected by her daughter when we first see her. From her husband's snide remarks, we learn that she has applied for a leave of absence from work to support her daughter through a vital exam year. "It is not only for our daughter that I have taken leave," Kasturi

says. Upon finding a new piece of lingerie, that she has bought, her husband hurls a cruel insult at her “Do you think one year of holiday is going to make you a combination of ideal mother, master chef and Sunny Leone?” (The last being the name of a successful porn star). Kasturi is hurt.

Each of these women has a multi-faceted personality with an intricate personal side equally, if not more important than their uniformed self. This uniformed self, even when at work, is revealing more about or resolving problems in her personal life. The clues she finds are not only pointing to solving the case at hand in the plot but also happen to complete the blank spaces in her own story- a personal tragedy in her past, for example, the murder of a son in *Buckingham Murders*, which in *Aranyak* is extended to the male cop Angad Malik who is her colleague- he has lost a son, but it is she who is the visible mother figure; it is her daughter who is vulnerable and presently, in danger.

These women's primary, closest, and most important relationship is with a child. There is no romance, almost the inviolability of the virgin mother. In *Mardaani*, the stalking antagonist's flirtatious tone approaches desire. Still, he is quickly put in his place when Shivani calls him 'junior' and talks to him as if he is a kid. The desire, even if it exists on his part, is converted to oedipal, therefore wrong.

She can be seen only as an object of fear and respect, never desire. Non-possessable. Beautiful in a brilliant way. Solitary, stately and determined. Her personality indicates something beyond the ability to solve a crime or catch a criminal. An ineluctability that will ensure justice, that

perpetrators of violence, especially violence inflicted on children, will not be able to avoid or escape.

Apart from personal tragedies, the work lives of all these characters are fraught with betrayals, lies, suspension orders, delayed promotions, unfair suspension from service, and always the hanging sword of impending dismissal. This is quite in keeping in line with the struggles and discrimination faced by women members of the police force. Also, this means she operates from a grey zone; her position is precarious. She is within the formal structure of the force yet without much support from it.

Okay, these actresses who were a great success at the leading roles they played in commercially successful films are playing the role of a policewoman. So what? Why do I say this is 'reassuring'?

As a child, I had been amused to hear Amitabh Bachchan calling Rakhee Gulzar 'Mummy' in *Shakti* (1982). Amused then, angry now. That a forty-year-old male actor was playing the son of his thirty-five-year-old co-star, nobody had stopped to think that less than a year before *Shakti*, audiences had seen them opposite each other in *Bemisaal* (1981) and were still humming the most romantic songs picturised on the romantic pair in *Kabhie Kabhie* (1976), and in between the beautiful love stories between characters played by these two actors in *Trishul* (1978) and *Kala Patthar* (1979).

The extension of the 'young hero' phase for male stars is closely connected to the shortening of the leading lady phase for female stars. The only next step available seemed to be the role of the mother. And whose mother? Mummy of her erstwhile

leading man! In the case of this particular star, a five-year difference is nothing since Rohini Hattangady, his screen mother in *Agneepath* (1990), was eight years younger than him. There are many examples. The most iconic mother from *Mother India* (1957) and her two screen sons, Rajendra Kumar and Sunil Dutt, were all twenty-eight years old while filming the classic.

In a scene-within-a-scene in *Dirty Picture* (2011), the actor Naseeruddin Shah, playing an ageing actor, Surya Kant, gives a banal (“mother, your son has passed the exam with a first rank” etc.) shot with his screen mother. After ‘cut,’ he turns to the actress and says how convincing she is as his mom. In the very next scene, he meets a woman film journalist. “This is new,” she remarks to Surya Kant, “It was just yesterday that Lalita was your leading lady, and there were even rumours linking the two of you. Now you have made her a mother!”

“A heroine’s life is like an elected government,” he retorts, “For the first five years, it’s ‘party-time, then just ‘support’”. Bollywood is itself, then, aware of this discrepancy between the career spans of male and female lead actors.

This set of films seems to be an important intervention in a pre-destined trajectory. The actresses Tabu (53), Raveena (52), Kaajol (50), Rani (46) and Kareena (44) have all crossed the age Rakhee was when she played mother to her former romantic co-star Mr Bachchan in *Shakti*. Rather ominous for their careers, considering that despite the politically correct feminism of Bollywood, certain basics, like the ageism-gender link, never change. So, I am reassured by this new phase for the Indian film actress of an age

previously considered suitable for the mother role. Being relegated to mother of the hero would have been a permanent casting – an actress who has played mother to the hero can rarely be a heroine again.

This role as a policewoman, however, keeps possibilities open. Yes, it is rather limited, and all the actresses in what I called the ‘second inning’ seem to be playing a cop! While it is not ideal, it’s certainly better than many other kinds of roles that would be possible for this age group- scripts with a woman of a certain age ‘finding herself’ through starting to work, or as in *Bridges of Madison County* (1995) or closer home, *Paroma* (1985), having an affair with a stranger, incidentally in both films, a photographer (so he ‘saw’ her differently?), as if we are all just one orgasm away from a raised consciousness! These kinds of ‘feminine,’ rather self-absorbed narratives were all very well for Feminism in film 101, but now one is bothered by their lack of context to social reality outside the personal. This writer is reassured by these women cops who, within the limitations of the bandwidth of popular cinema, fight against social evils and melodramatically scoop down upon malevolent monsters, all this even as the actresses playing them are battling off-screen the tumultuousness of middle age. The reassurance for the actresses is the possibility of interesting, non-supporting roles after their leading lady stint.

However, the reassurance I thought about, or rather feared when I said The Reassuring emergence of the quasi-*maa* cop, was the subminimal messaging that is sent out from all these films. All of us know that incidents of police brutality do happen. A few



have even been reported in the press. How does mainstream Indian Cinema protest, criticise or respond to this in any other way? We have many cop movies, of course. At best, they merely valorise the uninformed; at worst, they glorify police brutality. Trying to recollect an instance of critique, one film that comes to mind off-hand is *Maachis* (1996). Surprisingly, recently, I saw a fleeting acknowledgement. Based on our perception of Bollywood action films, this film was very unlikely. *Jigra* (2024). In the last pre-climax, almost unpalatable prison escape, Officer Landa overpowers the three innocent young men; he places his knee on the neck of one of them. A Reminder of the Minneapolis policeman Derek Michael Chauvin's knee on the neck of George Perry Floyd, who kept saying, "I can't breathe" Yes, *Jigra*, just an acknowledgement, just a reference. However, one still noticed it and hoped many more audience members would do so. By and large, our films do not criticise police procedures, as the script has moved the audience towards being invested in the hurt caused to someone and the protagonist's hero's battle to restore equilibrium.

The hero that came to mind when I saw a pattern in these caring women cop characters was the Angry Young Man. A lot has been written about the creation of this character. After *Zanjeer* (1973), when the concerns and, along with it, the protagonist, moved to the city. Coming from a troubled and impoverished background, the young man negotiated with the urban space on his terms. And survived. Recently, our memory of this character and how he was constructed was rekindled by a documentary about the now-split writer partnership of Salim Khan

and Javed Akhtar, who created this persona. The documentary pays tribute to them by saying affectionately that they are the Angry Young Men. The original source of the name is The Angry Young Men, a literary movement against class hierarchy by a group of British writers such as Kingsley Amis and John Osborne in the fifties. When Sir Laurence Olivier acted in the play *The Entertainer* (1957), the group achieved fame and recognition. *The Entertainer* was John Osborne's second play. He was all of twenty-seven when he was lauded as the Angry Young Man after his first play, *Look Back in Anger*. The term was later used for a group of filmmakers in the sixties, but it slowly faded out in the West. Our Bollywood is like that. It receives inspiration from ideas and tropes and music, everything from everywhere, makes that inspiration its own and creates something equally good, or sometimes even greater, and we love it. One only feels a slight pang when one forgets the source or is unaware of it because someone at the point of entry of that idea or that term did not acknowledge it. But that is another story.

We now know that the Salim-Javed Angry Young Man was accepted, looked up to, and inspired Indians in the seventies because after the euphoria of independence in the fifties, the spirit of nation-building in the sixties, a discomfort was beginning to set in. Industrialisation had created a new migrated working class, and factors too varied to list here led to a repressed rage. A repression which could be relieved, at least in fantasy. An imagined vent to anger was provided by identifying with the angry young man. All this we saw at the end of the decade of the angry young man's reign at the box office. Time-

bound social phenomena are often seen only in hindsight.

Will this new character- The woman cop characterised as a benevolent, compassionate mother figure, also be seen by us as a pattern only retrospectively? A motherly cop who might not adhere to rules of police procedure, but only for the greater good, for justice. She may seem irrational, but only because she is ‘thinking from her heart’.

It is, of course, taking the law into one’s own hands, but when the hand is maternal, it becomes delivering justice, doing the right thing. On a lighter note, can the hand that rocks the cradle rule the world?

We recalled the phenomenon films featuring *The Angry Young Man*. What was the role of the police in those films? The jocular question that was asked of those films- “Why do the police always arrive late?” is, in fact, an excellent observation. The police force is the state’s apparatus of law enforcement. The unique aspect of the angry young man was that he was an anti-hero, an outcast, a marginalised man turned rebel. He had raised his voice and fists against the powerful people who oppress and torture the weaker and vulnerable people in society. The justice had to be meted by him, without the help of the government machinery, outside the purview of the state. The *khaki* uniform is an allegorical representation of the state. Justice was delivered by the angry young man in a kind of grey zone that lay just outside law but within the realm of a ‘higher’ justice, before the uniforms arrived.

What I called the precarious position our woman cop’s job is in allows her this grey zone. If the uniform police represent the state, then, in *Mardaani* and *Do Patti*, is the state

itself complicit in the ‘unconventional’ administering of justice?

The difference between these roles and earlier women cop portrayals in Indian cinema is that unlike melodramatic representation of feminist resistance (as in ‘revenge’ or vigilante films) or inspirational as in a serial *Udaan* (which resulted in young women aspiring to be cops), these character sketches are quite simply ontological. This is how Indian women cops are. Caring, maternal. In the audience’s mind, will this expand into- This is how the police are, how the state is? Is this image easier and more palatable to accept as the women portray it as desired and adored by audiences?

Does that make encounters and mob justice acceptable to the audience, which shows that this was done for a noble purpose by a benevolent, maternal figure? Procedures that are not to be protested against? Accepted like mother’s tough love, which is, after all, ‘for our good’?

Coming back to the problematic yet applauded ending of *Mardaani*. The thoroughly battered villain makes a last-ditch show of bravado. This is India, he says. I have friends in high places. You arrest me, and they will have me out in no time. Tired after her battle and seeing the truth of his words, Shivani is angry. They will save you If you reach the police station. What will you do then, he challenges her. Will you do an ‘encounter’ killing? Will you, a cop, kill me in front of people? “Yes, this is India,” Shivani retorts, “Here, when a mob of enraged people take the law into their own hands, it is not murder, it is Public Outrage.” and calmly walks out.

While watching, it might be satisfying to audiences who might applaud as a song interspersed with a hymn to the mother goddess playing in the background. However, our rational side knows this is wrong. That mob justice is a violation of law. Why are the lyrics of the songs even problematic? “*Aaj se, abse aan meri main tumko naa chhoone doongi.*” (I will not allow you to breach my dignity.). Next comes the problematic, potentially even dangerous line, “*Jaan ko chhahe chalni kardo maan ko naa choone doongi.*” (You may kill me, but I will not allow you to touch my honour. Now this is precisely the kind of rhetoric that leads to the suicides of rape victims. They do not think of rape as any other bodily harm, like, say, an accident, where rapid recovery and rehabilitation should be the aim of the affected individual. The trauma of rape is thought of as an injury to not just the body but

to something abstract called *izzat*, honour. The euphemism for rape in older Bollywood films – *Izzat Lootna*- to have one’s honour stolen has done enough harm. This song, which says I would rather die than allow my honour to be breached, is condemnable, to say the least.

Mob justice is a violation of human rights. We know it is deplorable. However, in the dark of the theatre, the audience seems to have no doubts that this is the best punishment for the human trafficker. The camera has drawn the audience’s attention to one of the girls in the group who is all set to trample the perpetrator to death. Pyaari, the survivor of unspeakable violence. The audience had seen the glimmer of hope in Pyaari’s eyes when Inspector Shivani arrived to rescue her. Pyaari, the wounded child, gasped out the word “*Mavshi.*” “*Maasi.*” Like Mother.

Quotation on page 5-6

J. Campbell, *The Hero with a Thousand Faces*, Fontana Press, 1993.

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