Article

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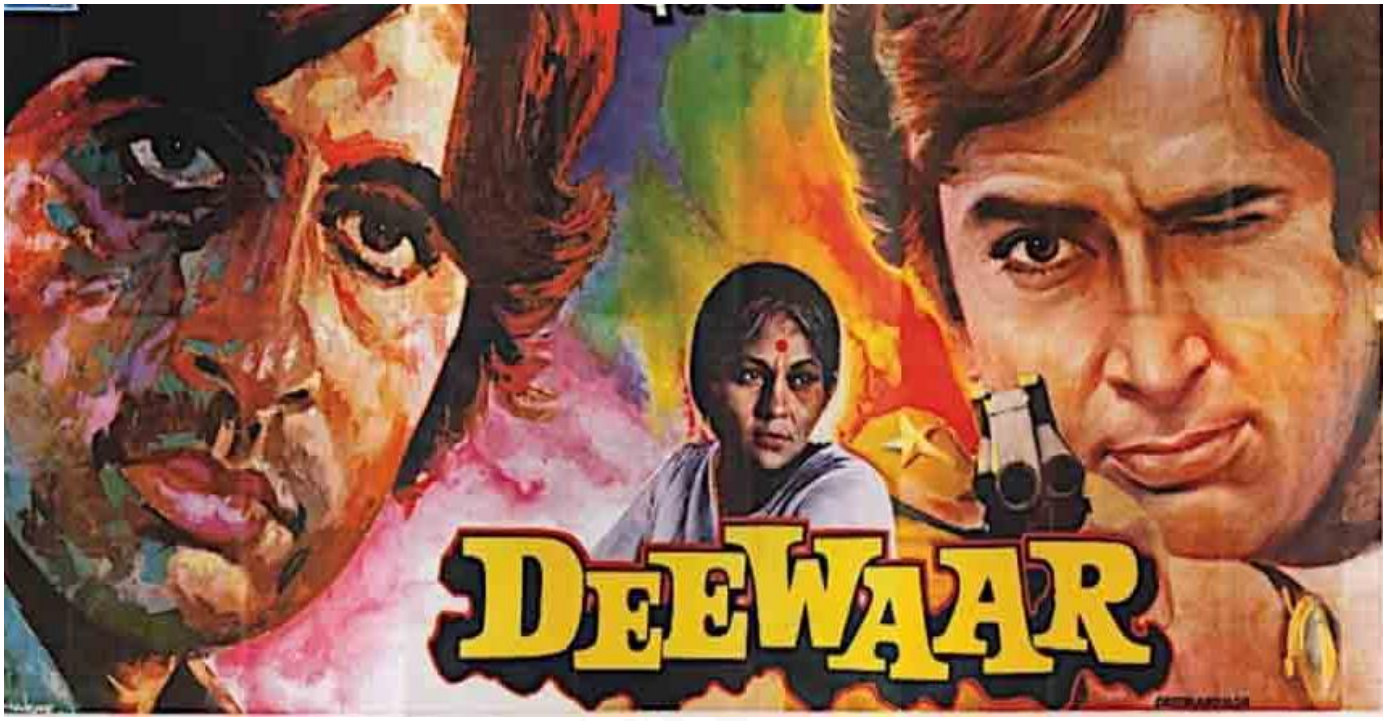
Deewaar: Discourses on Hindi Film Form, Its Modalities, And the Onset of the Angry Young Man Genre



Deewaar (*The Wall*; dir. Yash Chopra, 1975) is the second film in the long list of collaborations that were to follow, between the writer-duo Salim Khan and Javed Akhtar. It followed up on what started with *Zanjeer* (dir. Prakash Mehra, 1973) and expanded on Amitabh Bachchan's on-screen 'Angry Young Man' persona named 'Vijay' (meaning victory). The anger represented the pent-up helplessness of the masses and shaped Vijay's existence - enduring, recalling, resisting, and embodying the socio-political unrest of the 1970s in India; with seething knots ready to explode.

The film starts by establishing Anand Verma as an honest trade union leader (played by Satyen Kappu) with a family of two sons - Ravi and Vijay, and a wife, Sumitra (played by Nirupa Roy). Anand babu leads a protest against a corrupt businessman. But in a melodramatic turn of events, he is forced to accept the prevalent exploitative working conditions against death threats to his family. Consequently, with no knowledge of the threat posed to his family's safety, he is beaten up by fellow laborer-protestors, and is saved from further beating by the intervention of police officers. The khaki uniform here particularly draws attention to itself as a symbol of authority and power, because Anand babu too was wearing a similar uniform of sorts. In the following sequence an injured and bandaged Anand babu; now sporting a white shirt, boards a train and flees the area. The change of attire hints at his loss of respect as a high-principled man in the

society. To make up for his absence, his eldest school going son Vijay unwillingly bears the brunt of the society by being forced into tattooing the phrase "Mera Baap Chor Hain (My father is a thief)" on his forearm.

The Structure of The Wall

The film's structure not only pits the proletarian class struggle against capitalistic exploitation but also forebodes the National Emergency of 1975. The excess-laden melodrama inherent in the structure finds a suitable outlet through the music, while oscillating between the familial/national and the nonfamilial/anti-national registers. The drama pits a grown-up Vijay (played by Bachchan) with links to the underworld against a grown-up Ravi (played by Shashi Kapoor), wearing his father's lost khaki uniform (respect) as a police officer; while their mother (serving as a representative of the mother nation) is torn apart between her familial love for her sons and her social/ethical responsibility to the superior moral societal order. Among the brothers, Ravi is the one with the 'khaki uniform', vested with the authority to be just/righteous; while Vijay is the one getting his hands dirty. Ravi gets the honor and acclaim, while Vijay gets the humiliation and ultimately, death. Ravi pays a heavy price only through Vijay's death, but is ironically also rewarded a medal of honor for the same.

Deewaar, is arguably a "product of bricolage"[1] i.e., the unconscious blending of multiple genres in a unified composition. Rosie Thomas argues that the visual aesthetics of the film can be read through the "garish kitsch"[2] lens of traditional Hindi film villainy – featuring dazzling lights, vivid colours, and the overtly sensual spectacle. While some foreign genres such as 'kung fu' (through the fight sequences) and 'Hollywood thriller' (through the presence of smoky bars, the dimly lit, shadow cityscape, car headlamps on a rainy night, and abandoned hangars and warehouses) also find resonances. The city of Bombay (now called Mumbai) when read through the 'film noir' lens, serves as a witness to - anxiety, loneliness, alienation, fraud, hard-boiled disdain, and masculine angst. Subsequently, the film can also be read as a 'social,' keeping in mind the familial/national and the nonfamilial/anti-national conflict register; where the melodramatic 'moral occult'[3]is invariably tipped towards the socially just and righteous domain.

The Vijay Phenomenon & Bachchan's Stardom

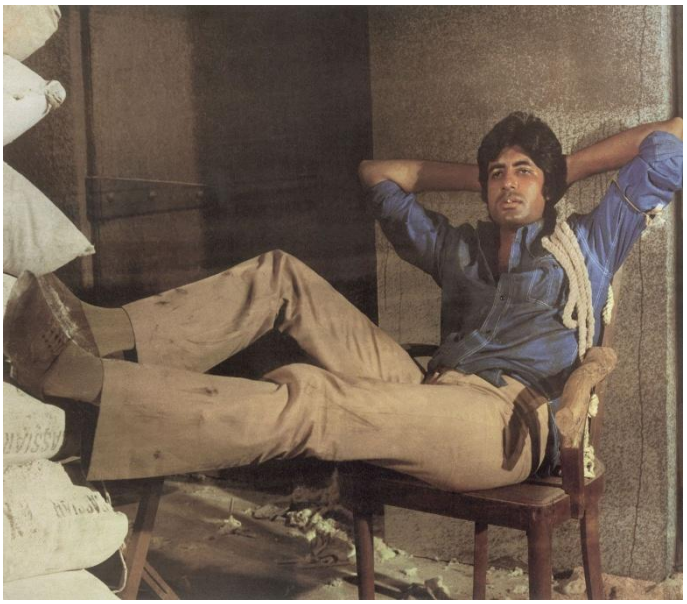
Vijay introduced "a new kind of masculinity" in the 1970s, replete with

[1] Madhava Prasad, "Genre Mixing as Creative Fabrication." *BioScope: South Asian Screen Studies* 2, no. 1 (2011): 71. https://10.1177/097492761000200106.

[2] Rosie Thomas, "Melodrama and the Negotiation of Morality in Mainstream Hindi Film," in *Consuming Modernity: Public Culture in a South Asian World*, ed Carol A. Breckenridge (University of Minnesota Press, 1995), 173.

[3] Peter Brooks, "The Melodramatic Imagination," in *The Melodramatic Imagination: Balzac, Henry James, Melodrama, and the Mode of Excess* (Yale University Press, 1976), 5.

muscular endurance, confidence, machismo, intelligence, and wit.[4] Bachchan rose to prominence as the stunt king when the action genre was gaining prominence in the industry. The term "complete actor," was frequently used in the industry to characterise him.[5]



Vinay Lal has argued that "the Amitabh persona is the quintessential outsider of the ghetto."[6] Vijay's character being a hero of the tortured and an alienated, rebellious, & anti-authoritarian loner assembles tremendous resonance among the masses who were denied access to land, education, and employment. Coming to think of it, *Deewaar* is a film replete with elements of a mafia/gangster film, with the central character too being none other than Vijay. Arguably, the Hindi mafia films made later, owe a lot to *Deewaar* - be it the chase sequences, gold heists, or the black money distribution networks running through the Bombay ports and the concomitant fights at the docks; it has it all. It is almost a gangster film about a gangster, operating within a melodramatic mode of representation. The 'physicality' (action in the fight sequences) along with the 'body' performing them are often terms associated with B films. Here, they have been incorporated in an otherwise A-film. Bachchan's meteoric transformation from being the hero of the non-diegetic masses, to an industrial hero of the silver screen has attracted the attention of various star studies projects. This also calls attention to the democratisation of the space of cinema theatres - where anyone irrespective of caste or class could purchase a ticket to a film. The Vijay phenomenon was for the masses, especially aimed at the proletariat working class, and not the middle class.

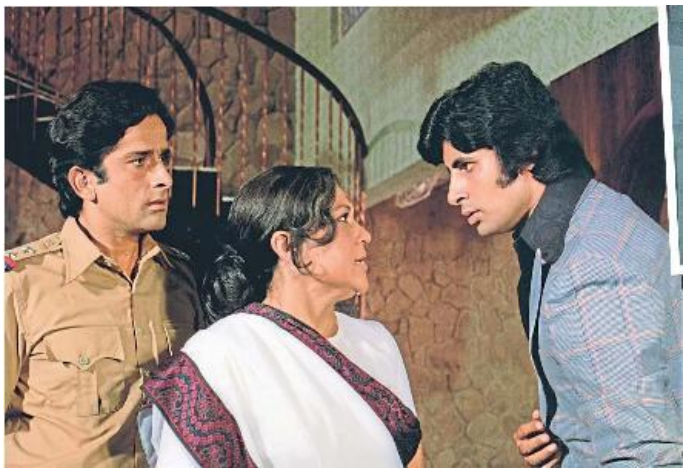
Vijay does all sorts of 'objectionable' things according to the civil society's moral order. He considers his father a coward, has an affair with a prostitute, and amasses immense 'black wealth' as the head of Bombay's most feared smuggling gang. The melodramatic mode singles him out as a victim of the circumstances, justifying his actions as what had to be done. Yet, he is good at heart, and claims responsibility for looking after his mother, brother and later, his pregnant girlfriend Anita (played by Parveen Babi). Interestingly, there seems to be a virtue-shift taking place for facilitating the formation of a family unit between Anita, and Vijay. After Anita confesses to Vijay that she

[4] Jyotika Virdi, "Deewar/Wall (1975): Fact, Fiction, and the Making of a Superstar," in *Global Bollywood*, ed Anandam P. Kavoori and Aswin Punathambekar (New York University Press, 2008), 232.

[5] See Ranjani Mazumder, "The Cult of the Angry Young Man" *Open The Magazine*, October 7, 2022, https://openthemagazine.com/cover-stories/the-cult-of-the-angry-young-man.

[6] Vinay Lal, "The Impossibility of the Outsider in the Modern Hindi Film," in *The Secret Politics of our Desires: Innocence, Culpability and Indian Popular Cinema,* ed. Ashis Nandy (Oxford University Press, 1998), 239.

is pregnant, Vijay decides to walk away from crime, confess his crimes to the police and seek forgiveness from his family. He does so, so that none of Vijay's future sons is forced to tattoo that he is the son of a thief. However, the attempts at 'resacralisation' are thwarted, and both are fatally punished.[7]



Speaking of families, Vijay seems to be on the verge of being 'othered' and expelled from his place in the family; thereby putting at stake Vijay's relationship with his mother. In an emotionally charged sequence of confrontation between the brothers about the separating 'wall' between them, Savitri and Ravi agree to leave Vijay in his flat alone. Savitri charges Vijay for having imprinted the fact on her forehead (albeit metaphorically) that, "Uska Beta ek Chor Hain (her son is a thief)." Vijay confesses that all his wrongdoings were done for her, and his wealth, bungalow, car all belong to her; to which she replies "Don't try to buy your mother." I shall return to Vijay and his mother in a bit.

There's one other thing that serves an integral role in Vijay's character arc - a badge, numbered '786'. Back when Vijay had not yet embarked on a life of crime, he used to work as a dockyard laborer wearing this identity badge. One of his seniors there, named Rahim Chacha told him that 786 was an auspicious number in Islam; meaning 'Bismillah' (in the name of Allah). It turns out that 786 is the sum of all the numerical values of each Arabic letter; having a certain sense of 'wholeness' ascribed to it. The badge later turns out to be lucky for Vijay, and protects him from death. It is only towards the end of the film, that while he is chased by his younger brother Ravi, he loses his badge and dies from the bullet shot wounds. Elsewhere, Lal talks of a desire of returning to a state of wholeness. He argues that a dying Vijay resting his head on his mother's lap at the temple is driven by Vijay's desire to unite with his mother, to "return to the womb."[8]

The 'womb' here is associated with notions of comfort, peace, and contentment. Lal expands on what K. Chandrashekhar refers to, as the moment when "the umbilical cord is restored."[9]

Vijay in fact claims that he couldn't sleep ever since Savitri had left his place, and wants to fall asleep on her lap for one last time. Further, it may be argued that the wholeness associated with the badge may have served a crucial purpose in uniting him with his family - mother and brother. Although, Vijay in his dying moments, in a way unites with his mother. *Deewaar* could be read as Salim-Javed's revised take on the film Mother India, where the mother becomes one with the legal and moral order (of the mother nation) when she approves action

[7] Brooks, "The Melodramatic Imagination," 17.
[8] Lal, "The Impossibility of the Outsider in the Modern Hindi Film," 239.
[9] Lal, "The Impossibility of the Outsider in the Modern Hindi Film," 240.

against her son's misdeeds. However, in case of *Deewaar*, the mother understandably has her reservations about the just and righteous moral order, and thus possibly is hesitant to encourage action against Vijay.

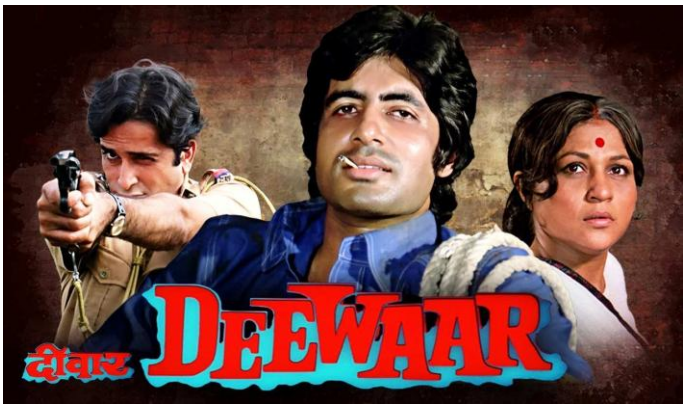
The Spatial Politics of Bombay

Lastly, it becomes crucial to look at Bombay as a site. Vijay, Ravi, and his mother along with many others arrive at the city, after being humiliated and cold-shouldered by the neighbours (as a consequence of Anand babu's actions) in their former residential town. The Bombay docks are both the site of employment for labourers (migrant or otherwise), as well as exploitation. There's the modernist promise of prosperity ensuring a directly proportional quality of life with amassed wealth, as well as the threat of alienation, ostracization, collapse of the family unit and, lastly, death. The train serving as the vehicle of modernity - snatches Anand babu from his family, and brings the rest of the family to the city. The train also brings about the death of Anand Babu.

There's also a spatial contrast with respect to societal power and hierarchy at play. Savitri is shown to work as a labourer at a construction site of a high-rise building. While the following scene establishes the space under a bridge, where the two brothers and their mother spend several nights throughout their childhood. Later in the film, a grown-up Vijay after being hired by Daavar, looks down at a particular pavement on Bombay's marine drive from his office in a high-rise building. He is reminded of his arrival in the city with his mother and brother, walking down the same pavement. Additionally, the temple serves as a point where the three of them meet, but from there Vijay and Ravi walk their separate paths. It mirrors how during the childhood days of Vijay and Ravi, the bridge served as the meeting point for the family, as well as the point from which the brothers had started walking on separate paths.

Another noteworthy thing about establishing Bombay as the site of arrival, is it never takes place formally through any of the railway stations. It happens via a zoom-in to a calendar at the family's previous residence (the image on the calendar being that of the Bombay marine drive) with a subsequent match cut to their arrival. Arguably, the family unit is compromised whenever there's an established place of residence involved. The family unit was first compromised when they lived in an 'established house' in a town. The family triad attains a temporary yet relative level of stability when they live under the bridge, and later in a simple house. But the moment Vijay shows his mother the expensive house he has bought with Davar's reward money, Ravi rushes in to break the news of him being selected for the 3-month police training programme. Eventually as discussed above, Savitri and Ravi leave Vijay alone in his flat,

and the family unit is once again compromised.



Lastly, Vijay dies at the temple resting his head on her mother's lap. After his death and a closeup of Ravi seeing this from afar, the camera zooms out to capture Savitri being looked at from a point beyond any of them. It is possibly the point of view of the supreme social order, looking down at her.

To conclude things, the father's actions defined the family's place of residence, it was Vijay who had to take matters in his own hands in a certain way, it was Ravi that enforced action against Vijay on behalf of the social order. But *Deewaar* might be analysed as a text in flux, probes into the role of the mother (vis-à-vis the mother nation), and poses questions as to what should the father have done, and why the son of the old retired teacher (played by AK Hangal) was forced into stealing bread for his family, and so on.

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