

## Film Review

### Masculinity, Toxicity, Value, and Film

*Roots of Love*. Directed by Harjant Gill, produced by PSBT, Tilotama Productions, 2011, 26 minutes, color, <https://vimeo.com/17477281>

*Mardistan (Macholand)*. Directed by Harjant Gill, produced by PSBT, Tilotama Productions, 2014, 28 minutes, color, <https://vimeo.com/120182667>

*Sent Away Boys*. Directed by Harjant Gill, produced by PSBT, Tilotama Productions, 2016, 45 minutes, color, <https://vimeo.com/153447836> (password: punjab)

Arjun Shankar

University of Pennsylvania

Inheritance in the male line by way of patronymic legitimacy, indirectly sustaining the complex lines of class-formation, is, for example, a case where the money-form, and that of the ego-form in the dialectic of the phallus, support each other and lend the subject the attributes of class- and gender-identity.

Gayatri Spivak, "Scattered Speculations on the Question of Value"

In *Mardistan*, the second of Harjant Gill's three films on masculinity in India, the brilliant feminist scholar and activist Nivedita Menon says, "Young men grow up learning to be entitled vis-à-vis all women and younger men...but they also see themselves as responsible in ways that constrict their own life choices." For her, this is one of the tragic consequences of life in a toxically patriarchal Indian society: young men unable to live out dreams that do not fit what they are expected to be.

When I reflect upon these remarks, I cannot help but think of my own family, especially my mother, who reared me and my sister for the past twenty years with the help of only her own mother. Every once in a while, I will receive an ominous text message from her, something to the effect of, "You should be here helping me." It's a text that on its surface is seemingly harmless, the wistful expression of love from a mother who misses her son.

I feel her concern. And I begin to worry for myself, letting a sense of guilt and/or shame drift over me as I

start to experience pieces of my life as somehow letting her down. And in these moments of anxiety, I resent my mother; I feel angry that she continues to constrict my life choices. Sometimes, it manifests in producing my own version of toxic masculinity, in fear, anxiety, control, and aggression that I work hard to rid myself of.

But, of course, even as I feel these feelings, I know that it is not my mother's fault. She, too, is a by-product of a system that lets, indeed *hopes*, widowed (and divorced) women will leave the system and fend for themselves, that sees male success through the eyes of heterosexual marriage and economic mobility, that sees non-conformance to Hindu orthodoxy as a moral deviation (which, while carrying similar inflections, is quite different from the Sikh Punjabi version Gill focuses on in his films). I see us both, myself and my mother, as produced in this same system of oppression, fighting from very different positions while constantly being confused about who exactly we are fighting against or for.

The problem, especially with regard to *desi* masculinity, is one of culturally situated (but globally circulating) regimes of patriarchal value. Even in the oldest anthropological definition of value, we recognize that values are deeply ideological since they are "ideas about what we *ought* to want" (Kluckhohn in Graeber 2001, 3). The *ought*, here, is incredibly important because it reflects the distance between *what we actually want* and *what we think we should want* based on our position in society. The *ought* creates all that affective intensity; all that *toxicity* that many *desi* men, from an incredibly diverse set of religions, classes, castes, and sexualities, are trying to find a way to purge. It is why feminism is a must for everybody (Hooks 2000) and why Spivak's timeless quote on *phallus value* begins this essay.

The word *toxicity* is an especially apt term for the diseases reproduced by patriarchy-through-value, evoking the deep scars imposed from birth on men, both physically and mentally, and recalling the brutal damage wrought on women's bodies and *every* transgressive body, quite literally reproducing an environmental crisis of malignant violence in which all of the humans involved are deeply damaged.

But the societal toxin is also a problem of methodological ethics: *How do we represent patriarchal*

*toxicity? Who do we show?* Do we show masculinity in its most toxic form, or do we approach the question differently, opening up avenues for those watching to see the negotiations that men struggle with as they seek to change? In these three films, Gill's answer is clearly the latter. His characters are not just the by-product of a system of patriarchy that they uncritically reproduce. Instead, they are men who push viewers to see the smallest cracks in the edifice that is male supremacy in the post-liberalization Indian state. We see how these men embody these toxicities, in their eyes, skin, hands, and hair, and we see them all try to expunge this toxicity from their bodies, sometimes without success, but always with great courage.

And perhaps this is also a commentary on what film, ethnographic film especially, can do that text simply cannot. We are able to capture all that embodied affective intensity that comes with this personal/political crisis while also invoking the complicated historical, cultural, gendered, religious, quantum entanglements therein. Each of Gill's three films—*Roots of Love* (2011), *Mardistan* (2014), and *Sent Away Boys* (2016)—provides a different glimpse into Indian masculinity and its complex entanglements, with a focus on Sikhs in the Punjab region.

*Roots of Love* pivots on the character of Gurkarpal Singh, who has decided to cut his hair and stop wearing his turban. For Sikh men, letting one's hair grow is the deepest embodiment of one's faith, a symbol that God's human creation is perfect and should not be mutilated by the vagaries of human egoism. To cut one's hair within this familial-religious context is, quite literally, a trauma, resulting in tears, anger, and loss of identity. If we doubted this fact, Gurkarpal's mother puts an exclamation point on the depth of this transgression, likening the cutting of a Sikh man's hair to "committing murder." *Roots* takes us beyond the family into the cultural shifts that have produced this anxiety over hair cutting, trying to situate it within popular global visual regimes regarding Sikh men and the Sikh turban. Jaswinder Singh, an activist for the Turban Pride Movement, explains that the Sikh turban has become associated with terror in the post-9/11 era, a stereotypic image that makes Sikh youth anxious about this religious tradition. At the same time, Sikh men are caricatured in contemporary Bollywood film—as the sidekick, comedic relief—which has, in Singh's words, turned being Sikh "into a joke." It's no wonder, he reasons, Sikh youth are no longer proud to be Sikh.

But lest we think *Roots* is a story only of religious change, we *cannot* forget the familial structure that produces the intense anxieties that Gurkarpal Singh feels when he cuts his hair. Gill continuously returns to the

deeply problematic relationship between father and son that mediates how Gurkarpal Singh can live. Even as they sit together at the end of the film, there is hyper-masculine hardness in Gurkarpal's father, a certainty that the son has committed a crime that uncomfortably frames the family scene. The son is meant to be afraid of his father, and this fear is meant to keep him in line, forcing obedience to the patriarchal norms set forth as religious doctrine. That his son has decided to protest these norms by cutting his hair is the gravest of sins, and the son is no longer considered Sikh at all: by giving up this single practice, Gurkarpal is divested of the right to lay claim to *any* of the many practices and identities associated with being Sikh. The thought makes Gurkarpal's mother cry, overwhelmed by the loss of her son, who was truly her son only as long as he was Sikh.

This context is also why watching a Sikh man finally have his hair cut in a barbershop on-screen is so powerful and painful. We watch him stare at himself as his locks fall to the floor and, one scene later, watch him affectionately comb his newly cut hair. He tells us he feels a sense of pride in his look, an empowerment he did not have before. But we also know that he is fighting a battle each time he performs this act, continuously forced to reason against what *he ought to be* even as he knows what it is he wants. Perhaps this is why we should not be surprised that Gurkarpal partakes in a compromise, wearing his turban while he is home with his family and freeing himself of the turban as soon as he leaves back to the United States. This splitting of identity is one example of how past and present are divided, allowing everyone in the family to bury the problematics of their cultural worlds in the safety of their nostalgia for the slowly receding past.

*Mardistan* takes a more focused dive into the violence wrought by societally produced ideas of Indian masculinity. Gill's primary agenda in this film is to force viewers to reflect upon the systems of patriarchy and male supremacy that create the conditions for gender inequality and the many forms of violence that have resulted. One cannot merely eliminate the perpetrators of the grossest version of male violence, as was the example after the Delhi gang rape, and expect the problem to vanish when the reasons for these types of violence are embedded in the everyday male aggressions reproduced within structures of institutional power, one example of which is schools. In graphic detail, Aman-deep, a journalist and activist who attended a military school in India, describes the violence wrought by older boys on younger boys, who are sodomized as part of a ritualized show of hypermasculinity. The alpha male, as he describes, links manliness with guns, the penis, penetration, controlling, and overpowering those who

are weaker. In this context, one is given only the choice of perpetrator or victim. If a man inhabits the former position, he can consider himself a “hero,” but if one so happens to inhabit the latter position, his honor is forever lost. The institution of marriage does similar work, pigeonholing men who do not fit into roles to which they never aspired. Take, for example, Dhananjay, a social worker and an LGBT activist, who tells us that he contemplated suicide on many occasions because he could not accept that he was gay. Even now, as he has become an activist fighting for gay rights, constantly bombarded with assaults by those who are threatened by this transgression of gendered society, he cannot quite move beyond what he ought to have been as a man and the responsibilities associated with that position. We hear his voice crack as he explains that “society has tied him to women.” This is why he cannot leave his wife even though he is constantly faced with the fact that he “cannot perform like a real man,” making it impossible for him to be what he ought to be.

The youngest of these characters is Tarun, a boy who has moved from a village to the city in order to attend college. Tarun is in a constant state of love-anxiety, trying as he might to find a woman who will love him as “his mother does.” Tarun is frustrated by his inability to find such a woman, a problem that he blames on media portrayals of masculinity that show what women “really want”: the booze-money-manly body symbolized by figures such as Punjabi rapper and producer Yo Yo Honey Singh. His inadequacy is partly shaped by his migration from the village, as he embodies values that seem antiquated in relation to the cosmopolitan pressures that have become the hegemonic cultural hallmark of Indian cities. No matter how much he tries to change his dress and sense of style, to speak in English and change his accent, he will never achieve the form of masculinity that will deliver him the love he believes he deserves.

The rural-urban-global nexus is also the backdrop of *Sent Away Boys*, the final film in Gill’s trilogy, which focuses on the women who are left behind in the wake of male migrations abroad. We are confronted with movement from the very first scene, a handheld shot of airport goodbyes between family members. The shooting technique contrasts sharply with the meticulously framed still shots that are Gill’s general aesthetic preference. The jostling, unfocused camera foreshadows the destabilizing force of these travels away from home. The central character is a woman nearly 80 years old who sits alone bemoaning the loss of her three sons, the youngest of whom has left for the United States after his wife’s family encouraged him to do so. “We protested since he is the only one we’ve got,” she says, her words

stripped of their emotion, “[but] they managed to drag him along.”

As is Gill’s primary method, he situates the story of this woman in a longer history, in this case that of agrarian crisis and global aspiration in India. One scholar takes us back to the Green Revolution of the 1960s, a moment of technological advancement that brought momentary prosperity to Indian farmers, before turning to post-liberalization Indian agricultural policies of the 1980s that reduced agricultural subsidies and have systematically made agricultural life less and less profitable. At the same time, masculine imagination sees an elsewhere—the UK and US—in which they might be treated better and find prosperity (an imagination that Gill makes sure to specify is caste derived: US/UK aspiration are more likely for jats, whereas the Middle East is a more likely aspiration for dalits in India). For the men in this story, mobility is situated at the nexus of horizontal mobility (physical movement) and vertical mobility (economic success), which one of the men sums up as “without dollars we are failures” (also see Salazar 2010). We are reminded that male aspiration is always constrained by such responsibilities, that freedom of movement is no freedom at all when they are only able to live out dreams that fit into their expected responsibilities.

At the same time, the mother is heartbroken and resentful that she has been left behind: even if male aspiration has taken them far afield of the family home, *she has really been the one sent away*. Home is more like exile when those who were supposed to stay and take care of her no longer stay by her side. We come full circle in the final scenes, her son coming home for the briefest of stays, hugging his weeping mother as he arrives and within a few weeks hugging her again as he travels back to the airport. What she is left with, just as all the other figures in Gill’s films, is nostalgia, covering herself in what ought to have been but can no longer be. In her final scene, she says, “I don’t want anyone to disrespect my body. Don’t call my son for the funeral. Just inform him after the cremation that your mother has passed away. Don’t let my corpse languish awaiting his return. He can attend the ceremony afterwards. Just let me go with dignity....” As we are watching her son leave, we can’t help but wonder whether he ought to want what he wants. Shouldn’t he want to stay with his mother? Shouldn’t he be willing to sacrifice for his village community? Is there not an inherent masculine selfishness in his negligence of his home?

These acts of masculine negotiation are, lest we forget, deeply imbricated with the massive changes wrought by that overused term *globalization*: migration, economic liberalization, agrarian decay, familial change, and quantum entanglement destabilizing the

safely patriarchal constructs that we have inherited and leaving us, men and women alike, scrambling to find our footing in the reconfigured forms that male supremacy takes. Kirby argues, “Nostalgia works to protect the masculine subject by burying his true foundations, re-membering the world by cutting it off from ‘the threshold of flesh’” (2011, 116). Patriarchal negotiations function at this threshold, a painful and futile process of pretending that our history of violent oppression is somehow in the past, not tied to the flesh of our current bodies as global processes reconfigure our social world. In cutting off our past from our present, in refusing to see how it continues to play out in how our bodies function, we block any possibility of a new ethical future. In other words, the struggle for a different future begins with an acknowledgment of our past: seeing that past enmeshed in our flesh and slowly scraping that toxicity off, layer by layer, act by act, as those men in Gill’s

films seek to do, and leaving nostalgia behind in order to consider anew the question of what men ought to want.

## References

- Graeber, David. 2001. *Toward an Anthropological Theory of Value*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Hooks, Bell. 2000. *Feminism Is for Everybody: Passionate Politics*. London: Pluto Press.
- Kirby, Vicki. 2011. *Quantum Anthropologies: Life at Large*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press.
- Salazar, Noel. 2010. “Towards an Anthropology of Cultural Mobilities.” *Journal of Migration and Culture* 1(1): 53–68.
- Spivak, Gayatri. 1985. “Scattered Speculations on the Question of Value.” *Diacritics* 15(4): 73–93.