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Women and Terrorism: Questions of Representation in Bollywood Cinema

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Abstract

The literature around Indian cinema as a whole, including cinema about terrorism, presents a lack of knowledge about female protagonists in these films. By using the method of textual analysis, this paper explores the representation of women in four Bollywood films about terrorism from the late 1990s and early 2000s — *Dil Se (1992), Fiza (2000), Dhokha (2007),* and *Kurbaan (2009)*. The study explores the relations constructed between men and women on screen, and provides a framework to look at the representation of women in films. The paper argues that women are represented as individuals without agency of their own or agency is only provided once the male figure disappears. In one film out of four, female agency is present (in *Fiza*, 2000) to recover the male figure, but not for the woman's own existence.

Introduction

Cinema, as an art form, allows individuals to be able to record events, create fictitious ones, and have multiple interpretations and perspectives to the same story, creating different meanings from one event (Prysthon, 2016). Films have been made about terrorism both in India and in Hollywood, with an increase in such films after the 9/11 attacks in the United States of America, and the 26/11 attacks in Mumbai, India. Unlike Hollywood films, which have become 'genre films' (in the sense that each film is classified into a different genre and appeals to a specific

group of people), Bollywood films appeal to a diverse audience, and are meant to be seen by the entire country (Srinivas, 2002). With such films having national appeal, films about terrorism help audiences across the country construct a singular opinion with regard to terrorist groups and its members.

In today's world, women have a more significant role in terrorist groups, compared to female participation in such groups earlier (Simon & Tranel, 2011; Harmon & Holmes-Eber, 2014). However, most mainstream media — including films — show the opposite; they depict women as victims of terrorist attacks, rather than as terrorists themselves. Even in Indian cinema, women are often shown as victims and as secondary characters; most Indian films about terrorism have men as the protagonist — with Muslim men acting as terrorist figures (AdulČikaitĖ, 2014). I chose to look at four films where the woman is either the terrorist figure or is closely related to the terrorist figure. The films chosen are *Dil Se* (Kapoor & Ratnam, 1992), *Fiza* (Guha & Mohammad, 2000), *Dhokha* (Bhatt & Bhatt, 2007) and *Kurbaan* (Johar & D'Silva, 2009).

The overarching question is how women protagonists are presented in Bollywood films about terrorism — whether they are granted the same type of agency and freedom as men and whether they share similar goals and ideals as their male counterparts. In this paper, the definition of terrorism is taken from the Terrorist and Disruptive Activities (Prevention) Act (TADA), an Indian anti-terrorism law in effect from 1985 to 1995, which defines terrorism as 'the intent to overawe the Government…or to strike terror in any section of the people…to adversely affect the harmony amongst different sections of the people…in such a manner as to cause death of or injuries of any persons…in order to compel the Government or any other person to abstain from any act is an act of terrorism' (TADA, 1987). Certain arguments have been made that women tend to join terrorist groups either because of misinformation or because of personal reasons, whereas men tend to join for grander political ideals (Davis, 2004; Brunner, 2007). Scholars like Bloom (2005) and Brunner (2007) argue that male terrorists are motivated by religious or national fanaticism, whereas female terrorists have personal motivations.

I chose the films *Dhokha* and *Dil Se* because of the role the women play — the women are terrorists[1]; in the other two films, *Kurbaan* and *Fiza*, the women play roles close to the terrorist figure — in *Kurbaan*, she is the wife, and in *Fiza,* she is the older sister — in these films, the women have a greater sense of agency in relation to the male terrorist figure — their agency is dependent on the male figure.

Though there is a significant amount of research available on Indian terrorist films, there is limited research on the role of female terrorists in Indian films, highlighting a gap in the literature. I begin with a detailed literature review examining earlier arguments about the

[1]Though there are two films with female terrorists, Bollywood cinema about terrorism portrays the man as the terrorist figure – leading to a dearth in films where the woman plays the 'violent' terrorist figure – these two were the only Bollywood films with women as terrorists.

portrayal of terrorists in Indian cinema, particularly female terrorists, or the female secondary character in such terrorist films. The next section will have a detailed textual analysis of 4 Bollywood films (which are *Dil Se, Dhokha, Fiza,* and *Kurbaan*) which will look at the way women are treated in the films — by other women and by their male counterparts. In the last section of the paper I discuss the pattern of female representation in popular Indian cinema about terrorism resulting from the analysis.

Literature Review

The following section revolves around two main ideas – that of cinema and representation and the portrayal of woman as the 'other' in society, which gets reflected in cinema. The aim is to study the representation of women in cinema about terrorism, leading to questions about how women are portrayed, whether their portrayal is different from a male portrayal, and how the history of cinema has affected the way we see female figures on the screen.

History of Cinema

Photography was seen as revolutionary because of its ability to capture reality as it is, rather than have interpretations and representations, like paintings and sculptures; it was seen as more realistic than other forms of art and was able to capture objects and freeze them in place (Allen, 1993). Cinema takes this one step forward and is able to record movement (Allen, 1993). Cameras are now able to create 'realistic' films, making it seem like films were shot on-site, even though this may not technically be true. Cinema was originally popular because of the spectacle of 'attractions' (Gunning, Elsaesser, & Barker, 1990), but by the 1920s, cinema's power of storytelling beginning to be explored, with narratives being used to capture the attention and imagination of the audience.

Srinivas (2002) discusses how Bollywood films are created with audience expectations in mind — these films are meant to be seen by the whole family, rather than by segregated groups. Indian films are typically called 'masala' films because of the presence of every genre in every film, in comparison to Hollywood films, which adhere to a specific genre. The rise of genre films in India is slow, and most popular Bollywood movies tend to be ones that appeal to the entire family and contain elements of almost every genre while still satisfying the Censor Board.

Female Involvement in Terrorist Groups

In arguments about female involvement in terrorism, certain ones paint the woman in one particular colour, rather than look at various factors that could have affected her choice to join and stay in a terrorist group. Joyce Davis (2004) argues that most debates construct the female terrorist as the oppressed Arab woman, in contrast to the free, rational, Western woman. In her

argument, she defines a terrorist as an Oriental 'Other', and women are forced to commit acts of terrorism because of the oppressive patriarchal structure. Another scholar, Mia Bloom, argues that women join terrorist groups for personal reasons, either to avenge a personal loss, redeem the family name, or try and level the patriarchal societies they live in (2005).

Adrienne Tranel and Rita Simon, two scholars and criminologists, wrote about the female presence in terrorist organizations, and how, in most organizations, women form a large bulk of the population (2011). They also argue that one of the main reasons that women join terrorist groups is personal — because women have been marginalized by society either as rape or sexual abuse victims, they join the organization as a way to achieve redemption, or to save the family from embarrassment. This argument ties to Bloom's (2005) argument about women joining for personal, rather than political reasons. Women tend to evade capture because women plan meticulously and are seen as less threatening and less dangerous than men; women are also seen as less suspicious, allowing them easier access into certain areas (Simon & Tranel, 2011).

However, mainstream media portrays terrorist groups as male-dominated organizations, with women playing subordinate or secondary characters rather than protagonist figures. Women are either portrayed as ignorant and kept in the dark, or pressurized to agree with the man's goals and ideas, and forced to join the group. In reality, some terrorist organizations function very differently — with men and women having equal value, and with women often in higher positions of leadership and authority (Simon & Tranel, 2011).

The Portrayal of the 'Other' in Indian Cinema

Indian cinema began (post-1910) with the portrayal of gods and mythologies, with Dadasaheb Phalke making films about Krishna and his stories by 1913 (Dutt, 2018). Indian cinema then grew to depict the independent nation, and under Nehru's rule made films that supported the government (Deprez, 2013). One major 'other' figure in Indian cultural history (which has also been translated to Indian mainstream media, including cinema) is the woman. According to the ancient legal text, the Manusmriti, women were seen and treated as material goods, and belonged to the men in their family who owned them and were responsible for their actions (Chakravarti, 1993). By looking at documents like the Manusmriti, it is easy to see a history of female oppression that continues to this day, with women continually being portrayed as the 'other' to the male upper-caste, heteronormative Hindu 'self' (Chakravarti, 1993). Hindi movies tend to be male-oriented, and films with a female protagonist are rare. In more contemporary times, Bollywood films portray women according to a specific ideal[2]; women are either portrayed as idealistic and virtuous, or lustful and demonic (Sherafat, 2014). It is easy to see that most

[2] This ideal is specified in terms of culture, religion, tradition, and perception of women by men, generated in part by mythology —in the Ramayana, Sita, Ram's wife, is seen as the ultimate ideal – a pure, chaste woman that is willing to prove her purity by walking through fire for him, and is willing to sacrifice everything for his comfort (Sherafat, 2014).

Bollywood films place the male at the centre, and the female must adhere to specific societal norms, or be seen as ‘rebellious’ and an outcast (Sherafat, 2014).

Research Design

The methodology used for this study is textual analysis. As defined by McKee (2003), textual analysis is “a way for researchers to gather information about how human beings make sense of the world” (p. 01). The nature of textual analysis is to take a close look at the various ‘signs’ generated by primary texts (including films), and how each ‘sign’ carries a particular meaning. The nature of data collected is audio-visual; by working with film, various factors will be taken into consideration, including the use of the camera, the use of sound (of dialogue and music), and the use of the narrative to describe a particular perspective, and how such perspectives can be received by the general audience.

For this research paper, the primary texts include the aforementioned Indian films, namely *Dil Se, Dhokha, Fiza,* and *Kurbaan*. Textual analysis involves breaking the texts down to its signs, or units of meaning. Therefore, when it comes to studying films as texts, the image is studied – form as well as content will be analysed to derive meaning from the films. The form is studied by looking at the frame of each shot, the camera angle and placement, the different sounds and music used to evoke different emotions, and any editing techniques used. The content of the films is studied by looking at the narrative, the setting, and the interactions between the protagonist, the antagonist, and other members of the film. While studying the content of these films, subtitles are used and I will refer to subtitles and translations in the paper. Though subtitles are used, I have knowledge of Indian society through lived experience and therefore it is possible to take a closer look at the cultural context and nuances in the films. The films are viewed on streaming platforms — Netflix India, Amazon Prime India, or Veoh — with English subtitles.

Analysis

The films discussed in the paper all revolve around the theme of terrorism, and each one has a female protagonist that either plays the role of the terrorist or is closely related to the terrorist figure. In the films *Dil Se* and *Dhokha*, the woman plays the terrorist figure – whereas, in *Fiza* and *Kurbaan*, the woman is close to the terrorist figure. Through this analysis, I will look at how women make certain choices and how they are bound by the groups they belong to — whether their agency is dependent on the male figure; whether as terrorist figures themselves they are given some freedom of choice; whether their motivations are similar to their male counterparts.

Summary of *Kurbaan*

The film discusses the lives of Muslim terrorists in a suburban neighbourhood in America, how their operations work, and how members are recruited and trained for specific directives, by taking a look at a specific story — between Avantika (a Hindu university professor) and Ehsaan (a Muslim terrorist figure under the guise of a university professor). The film is about the romance and subsequent betrayal between Ehsaan and Avantika — he is secretly a member of a terrorist group that functions in New York and married Avantika in order to enter the United States on her visa. She discovers their secret and is trapped inside the house by Ehsaan. She must depend on Riyaaz, a man who wishes to avenge his girlfriend's death (as a result of the terrorist attack on a plane that she was on). Together, she and Riyaaz are able to uncover their latest plot and take the terrorist organization down. The final plan is to target certain subway stations, and Ehsaan ends up sacrificing his life to prevent Avantika from getting hurt, thereby redeeming himself (to a certain extent) in her eyes. The film ends with the terrorists defeated, and Avantika surviving.

The curtailing of independence by the male figure

The film Kurbaan is interesting because it differs from typical Bollywood films in two major ways. Firstly, the film is a genre film, in the sense that this film is purely dramatic and action-filled, and does not satisfy the requirements to be a 'masala' film. Secondly, the film contains very few musical numbers — once the plot has been established (once Avantika and Ehsaan move to New York), there are no musical numbers anymore. The film opens with Ehsaan and Avantika and establishes their relationship in the very beginning. After Avantika receives her offer letter from NYU, Ehsaan offers to "give everything up" for her, shattering the 'normal' idea that women give up their careers for men and that a woman must adhere to the man's plan. Here, Avantika is still the protagonist, with Ehsaan following her lead. Avantika is overjoyed, and the two of them fly to New York. The film focuses on Avantika's journey, building her up as the protagonist of the film.

When Avantika and Ehsaan first move in, they are greeted warmly by the neighbours, Salma (played by Nauheed Cyrusi) and Haqil (played by Asheesh Kapur), and are invited to dinner. At dinner, Avantika is sent to the kitchen where the other wives sit, while Ehsaan dines with the men in the living room. Ehsaan is able to get along well with the other Muslim men, but Avantika sticks out like a sore thumb – being the only woman in a (body-hugging) dress with her hair down, while the others are covered from head to toe and seem much soberer in comparison. Here, you can see the difference between the Muslim 'Other' and the Self – Avantika is free and independent (in comparison to the other women), and the women are constrained by their clothing, their traditions, and their husbands, to adhere to a specific lifestyle. The other women are either wary of or curious about Avantika and her (seemingly exotic) lifestyle, with Salma showing the greatest interest in Avantika's freedom.

In the next scene, Salma rushes to Avantika's house to ask her to pass a message to Rehana (played by Dia Mirza) because she recognizes the difference between Avantika and the others, and sees her as a connection to the outside world. Avantika, being independent, is allowed to move freely between the public and the private — between inside the house and outside – a privilege not granted to the other women. Salma, however, is visibly restricted — Nasreen Appa (the wife of the leader of the community, played by Kirron Kher) shows up at the door looking for Salma, and tries to soothe Avantika's fears, and takes Salma away. Appa, too, recognizes Avantika's freedom, and tries to provide a rational explanation for Salma's behaviour, but still takes Salma away — solidifying the fact that though Avantika is free, she is the exception; Salma still belongs to her husband and must remain indoors and by his side. Here, we see the differing relationships between Avantika and the others in the community. Avantika then approaches Rehana in an attempt to secure Salma's safety, but Rehana brushes her problems off with her grander concerns — Rehana does not have time to deal with private affairs when her decisions affect the public. Rehana, like Avantika, is allowed to access the public, and Rehana prefers to occupy the public domain. Avantika, on the other hand, is still trying to balance the two aspects and is trying to deal with private, domestic affairs in public. Here, we see Avantika and Rehana enjoy their agency, furthering the normalcy behind women being independent. However, Rehana dies in a terrorist attack — Avantika is now the sole woman (we see in the film) with any sense of agency.

Avantika then discovers that her husband is part of the terrorist plot that resulted in Rehana's death. Now that she has discovered their secret, Ehsaan and the other group members forcibly capture her and trap her in her house. Earlier, she was innocent and unaware, allowing her to maintain her freedom (though independent, she was not seen as a threat, so her agency was not in danger), but once she discovered their plots, she was quickly overpowered and captured. It is at this moment that the film fully realizes the story; Ehsaan's betrayal is kept hidden from Avantika and the audience, resulting in a shocking plot twist. Avantika goes from free and independent to being placed under house arrest. She is now forced to be accompanied by the other women at all times, is not allowed out of the house, and is forced to wear a hijab while she's outside, to blend in with the other women. Her agency is challenged and her independence is curtailed; she is no longer allowed to access the public. Though the group wants to kill her (to get rid of any liabilities), Ehsaan wishes to keep her alive because she is pregnant — she is not allowed to escape through death; she is kept alive because she carries Ehsaan's child[3]. She soon discovers that Ehsaan lost a wife and child in Afghanistan because of attacks committed by the US government, providing Ehsaan with a (possible) justification for his anger and vengeance. Though his reasons may be personal, he continues to make political decisions — furthermore, unlike female terrorists, his body is not violated, and he is allowed to survive and continue

[3] Here, she is kept alive because she is seen as valuable; Ehsaan needs her alive because she carries his child — she is seen as worthy because of her reproductive potential, and not for her own self — this also explains why Ehsaan is adamant to keep her alive though the rest of the group sees her as a liability.

contributing to the group. The film here has an interesting take; rather than portray terrorists as mindless villains, they are allowed to explain (and even attempt to justify) their violence and rage against the entire country. Though Avantika is now trapped, she manages to work with Riyaaz to help defeat the terrorist group. Riyaaz now acts as a part of the group, allowing Avantika to pass on inside information to him without getting caught. Together, they are able to work together — Avantika from within, and Riyaaz on the outer front. Here, we still see her maintain her agency in rebellious ways – she exerts her own influence over the terrorist group[4], to a certain extent. She is able to gather the relevant information because she has learnt to sneak around the house and evade capture.

Later, she regains a sense of agency by taking advantage of Ehsaan's carelessness; he is busy and overworked, so she is able to gather information in a discreet manner. Because she is side-lined, her existence is ignored, allowing her to eavesdrop on conversations — she still maintains a shred of her agency as a rebellious response against Ehsaan and the terrorist group. Avantika also capitalizes on her femininity and manages to lure Ehsaan into bed with her in order to tire him out so she can search his office for clues. With Riyaaz desperate for information, Avantika uses something that is still left at her disposal – her sex appeal. Here, Avantika tries to reinstate her individuality and her agency by taking matters into her own hands, and even uses her femininity to assure her of her individuality. Though the organization does try to keep her passive and subdued, Avantika does what she must to ensure the freedom and safety of others.

Towards the end of the film, Avantika is in the subway with the other women, while Riyaaz teams up with police forces to try and stop the terrorist plot. Riyaaz is able to find Bhaijaan (the group leader) and Ehsaan. After Bhaijaan reveals the fact that there are bombs hidden in the women's bags, Riyaaz and Ehsaan scour the stations to look for them. Ehsaan manages to find Avantika and defuses the bomb, before dying. Avantika is heartbroken yet again because Ehsaan defusing the bomb was another act of kindness and compassion towards her, and he was killed before Avantika could (theoretically) forgive him. Avantika is finally free to regain her sense of agency; she is no longer under the control of the terrorist organization. However, her agency is tainted – she is pregnant and must live with the knowledge of Ehsaan's past and his relation to her and her child. Though the film portrays Avantika as independent, she is still forced to resort to asking for help from Riyaaz, who portrays himself as the dominant, public figure — he is allowed to move through the group and in public because he is a man, and therefore privy to the group in a way that Avantika will never be. Her public appearance is that of a soft, smart woman who is intellectual rather than physically dominant, whereas the men are portrayed as stronger, bigger, and more physically present. Through the movie, Avantika's identity was subsumed by her husband's, only for her individuality to surface after his death, implying that Avantika would

[4] Though she must still resort to Riyaaz's (a male figure) help – her agency is not fully established; she must work in tandem with a male figure, and cannot have influence on her own.

not be able to escape unless the controlling influence (i.e. her husband Ehsaan) is to permanently disappear.

Summary of *Dil Se*

The story revolves around the romance between Amarkant Varma (played by Shah Rukh Khan) and Moina (played by Manisha Koirala) who calls herself Meghna (she gives him a false name to hide her identity). Amarkant works as a news reporter and air jockey and, on an assignment to celebrate fifty years of Independence, he visits Lumding in Assam to interview citizens. He meets her once more at Lumding (they originally catch a glimpse of each other at an empty train station), but she claims not to remember him and ignores him. He talks about her on the radio that night, and she tells him that she is married the next day. Soon after, he gets beaten unconscious by her so-called 'brothers'. He meets her again while on the bus, and they are forced to pretend that they are married; she disappears while he sleeps. He sees her once again in Delhi when she approaches him to ask him for a job in All-India Radio. Though he is in love with Meghna, he agrees to an arranged marriage and marries Preeti Nair (played by Preity Zinta). It is revealed that Meghna is really Moina, and belongs to a Liberationists group; she is a suicide bomber and her target is the Republic Day parade in New Delhi. While Meghna/Moina is in Delhi, eyewitness claims place Amarkant at the scene of a terrorist consuming cyanide, making him the prime suspect. Amarkant follows Moina to the Republic Day parade and discovers that she is a suicide bomber. Moina reveals the fact that the Army destroyed her village and that she got raped, she now seeks revenge. Amarkant convinces her against this, and hugs her as the bomb explodes, away from the parade. The film ends with the two of them dying in the resulting explosion; Amarkant sacrifices his life to protect the nation and he ends up dying for his love at the same time, ending this romantic story.

The 'trapped' female terrorist figure

Though director Mani Ratnam's earlier films (*Roja* and *Bombay*) were commercial successes,*Dil Se* failed at the Indian box office[5]— with a budget of 11 crores, it made only 4 crores during its first week across India ("Box Office India"). Its soundtrack, however, was extremely popular, allowing Ratnam to discuss ideas of the State and minority relations though the film was not commercially successful (Kabir, 2003). The narratives created by the film and by the soundtrack are disjointed; according to Howard Mezey, Mani Ratnam uses the conventional Bollywood narrative to try and represent overlapping questions of political violence and the appropriation of the female body (Mezey, 2018). The narrative is constructed as a love story between Amarkant and Moina, set against the backdrop of terrorism (Sreedevi & Ravi,

[5] The film was a success internationally, and made most of its money in the international box offices ("Box Office India")

2007). The plot of *Dil Se* mirrors a real-life attack on former Indian Prime Minister RajivGandhi[6] committed by Dhanu, a member of The Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) suicide squad. In the film, Meghnais forced to be a suicide bomber and attack the Republic Day Parade. Though Dhanu was also suggested to have been a victim of abuse, the narrative constructed around Dhanu after her death portrays her as a more masculine figure, with larger, grander concerns; Meghna's grievances, on the other hand, are highly personal, and her political grievances are side-lined. Dhanu's act of assassination was one of direct agency — it is noted that Dhanu's vest was outfitted with two switches; one for arming the device to pretend accidental explosions, and one to detonate the device (Mezey, 2018). In Dil Se, however, Ratnam's imagination of Meghna is one without agency; Meghna is passive in both political violence and romance; Meghna yields to Amar's passionate embrace and passively awaits the detonation, rather than try and remove the vest or save herself. One argument made by Dagmar Hellmann-Rajanayagam is that the LTTE recruit women to fight for the motherland; women join the LTTE not because they have been banished by the family or because of sexual abuse; rather, they join to fight (2008). According to this, Meghna is not a suicide bomber but someone who is convinced that her only value lies in sacrificing herself for a political message.

The film begins with Amarkant at the train station and sees a woman underneath a blanket (who is later established as Meghna (aka Moina)), the lead and the romantic interest is established in the very beginning. Amarkant works as a news reporter and radio jockey; his profession allows him to go to the North East of India and he is able to interview a wide range of people, from ordinary citizens to extremist chiefs. He manages to find her again (she leaves the train station without interacting with him); at this point in the story, the focus is on the potential romance between the two main characters; she is unwilling to speak to him, and manages to avoid having conversations with him. At one point, she lies and tells him that she is married – this is the first glimpse Amarkant (and the audience) get into her character; so far, even her name has not been revealed. Amarkant and Meghna end up on the same bus at Leh; when it breaks down that evening, Meghna pretends to be married to Amarkant (to avoid questions from the others). She spends time with Amarkant, speaks to him, reveals her (false) name (Meghna), and once he falls asleep, slips away. The film is constructed as a love story between Meghna and Amarkant, set in the backdrop of terrorism and questions of the nation.

Throughout the film, Meghna is portrayed as enigmatic, mysterious, and always out of reach. During the conversation, Meghna refuses to reveal anything about herself or her future; she admits that she envies his 'laughter and zest for life', and also says that she does not have time for a relationship with him. Through this interaction, it can be suggested that had Meghna not had other 'duties' (that she sees as necessary), she would be willing to pursue a relationship with him. The next morning, Amarkant wakes up to find out that Meghna has already left. Amarkant,

[6] The attack being the assassination of Rajiv Gandhi at the hands of the LTTE (Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam) suicide bomber, Dhanu (aka Thenmozhi Rajaratnam).

haunted by her face, returns to Delhi and agrees to an arranged marriage to a Keralite woman named Preeti Nair. Ratnam uses the relationship between Amarkant and Meghna to highlight the breakdown of relations between the Centre and the 'troubled' north-eastern states — the film establishes the deteriorating relationship between the Centre and the north-eastern states through Amarkant's conversations with the people in Assam, and this is reflected in Amarkant's chase after the elusive Meghna — he can never have a stable relationship with Meghna. He also uses the relationship between Amarkant and Preeti to highlight the unity of the nation; Preeti is shown to be comfortable with North Indian traditions, despite being a Keralite woman.

It is later revealed that Meghna is secretly a part of a terrorist cell and is a suicide bomber. Because she now belongs to the cell, she is unable to get a happy ending (unlike Preeti, who is 'freer' because she is able to imagine her own future). Surprisingly, Amarkant once again bumps into Meghna in Delhi, when she approaches him for a job at the All India Radio (AIR). It is revealed to the audience that she moves to Delhi in order to attend the Republic Day Parade and asks for a job at AIR so she can attend the parade without any questions asked. Meghna also stays at Amarkant's house with a friend (and her backup) Meeta (it is later revealed that she stays with him to avoid questions from the CBI). Though Meghna is unwilling to stay in Amarkant's house and attract the CBI's attention, Meeta brings her attention back to the task at hand; to the revolution, and to the attack that Meghna must commit. Based on eyewitness claims (from those who saw Amarkant chase the man down, who then consumed a cyanide pill), Amarkant is now the prime suspect of a terrorist group, because the man he chased down was a terrorist. Amarkant questions Meghna, and Meghna reveals that her name is actually Moina, and that the reason she is doing this is because the Indian Army destroyed her village, raped her sister, and implies that she was also raped by army soldiers while she was in the Northeast. The audience is finally provided with some explanation as to why Meghna/Moina joins the terrorist cell. However, Ratnam constructs her as a victim *only*; her justification is purely personal, she has no political grievances against the State. When she mourns the loss of her 'brother' (the man who got caught by the police and swallowed a cyanide pill), the group leader commands her to stop mourning the martyr – she is not allowed to show emotions and distract herself from her mission; the group leader forcibly subdues her and orders her to control her emotional reaction. She is reluctant to perform the mission and wishes to live a life with Amarkant but must do what she is told — not because she has a political goal to believe in, but because she now has no other option. She is not allowed to show her sadness, yet all of her actions are based on her internal feelings. Though she is the suicide bomber, she is not allowed any agency; she is controlled by the terrorist group. To the audience and to Amarkant, Meghna's past is revealed, but not her present motivation, thoughts and ideas. One argument by Mezey is that though the audience is privy to the grievances held by radical groups, Meghna's political commitments are reduced to her bodily identity — she does not voice any specific political grievances, but is construed as a victim of rape (Mezey, 2018). She is seen either as a romantic object or as a suicide bomber with no other option but to perform her so-called 'duty'. Throughout the film, Meghna's body is seen as a

spectacle; her body is seen (and introduced to us) through Amarkant's eyes; however, we know that her goal is to blow herself up, resulting in us seeing her with 'grotesque' fascination, rather than as a source of political grievance (Mezey, 2018. The film ends with Amarkant meeting Meghna (away from the Republic Day Parade, the two of them are secluded), and tries to convince her to stop the attack. Like a typical Bollywood hero, he believes that love will solve her problems and that she must forget her past and move on with him. Though Meghna tries to refuse, Amarkant manages to convince her not to attack the Republic Day Parade; however, Meghna is not recovered as the love interest; the film ends with Amarkant embracing Meghna, and the two of them dying as the vest explodes – the explosion, though filling the screen, is contained – no one else gets hurt.

There have been different criticisms about the ending of *Dil Se*; the film is either seen as a warning about India's national fragility (where she argues that if minority groups are not allowed self-expression, the centre itself will suffer) (Kabir, 2003); Another interpretation of the film could be seen as an affirmation of ideologies that continue to reaffirm the centre — the urban Hindu male (represented by Amarkant) ends up saving the country and dying for his love at the same time(Mezey, 2018). Amarkant here is reiterated as the 'hero' figure who sacrifices his life for his country; Meghna resigns herself to her fate but allows Amarkant to prevent her from carrying out her mission — though she is unwilling to carry out the mission in the first place, she lets herself die because she has no other recourse. She cannot imagine a future for herself and passively accepts her own death.

Summary of Dhokha

The film revolves around the life of Zaid Ahmed Khan (played by Muzammil Ibrahim), a Muslim police officer in Bombay, married to Sara Khan (played by Tulip Joshi). A suicide bomber attacks a local country club, and 20 people are injured. After a few hours, it is discovered that Zaid's wife, Sara, was the one who attacked the club — her body was found with injuries similar to those of suicide bombers. Zaid is originally questioned (he is also harassed on the street and suspended from the force) but soon released when the police realize that he has no information about the case. Zaid initially believed that his wife was innocent, and was used as a scapegoat by the police. He then gets a DVD that shows his wife standing in front of a terrorist organization's flag, holding an assault rifle, and accepting her fate as a martyr, a soldier of war. Conflicted, Zaid approaches her grandfather, Saeed (played by Anupam Kher), who reveals that earlier, Sara's father was captured by the police on grounds of suspicion of terrorist activities, was killed by the police, and that the murder was covered up and unreported. When they try to report this crime, Saeed, Sara, and Daanish (her brother) are forced to sign a statement saying they would not file a case. Upon refusing to do so, the inspector forcefully takes nude photos of Sara to humiliate her; Saeed agrees to sign the statement, but the inspector still rapes Sara. After this, Sara and Daanish begin meeting a *Maulvi* (named Fareedi) who convinces them to join the

jihadi movement and lay down their lives. Sara is the first one to join, and her brother is suspected to follow her. Zaid manages to track her brother down before he commits his next attack. Zaid is able to get through to Daanish, who agrees not to attack the crowded train station. The film ends with the two of them achieving justice — the corrupt inspector is arrested and jailed for his crimes, and Zaid is reinstated in the police force.

The inherent absence of the female terrorist figure

This film is interesting from the perspective of female agency because the female protagonist (Zaid's wife) is absent at the beginning of the movie — the audience is only exposed to Sara through Zaid's memories and fantasy song sequences — In the very beginning, it is established that Zaid is Muslim; when someone offers him a drink, he refuses, saying that you cannot get a devout Muslim to take a drink. The conflict is established early in the film — it is believed that an attack on a country club was carried out by Muslims, which sparked a religious fight between Muslims and Hindus. A few hours after the crime, the audience discovers that Zaid's wife has injuries similar to those of suicide bombers, placing her as the prime suspect. Earlier in the film, Sara is absent as she had 'taken a trip to Pune with her friends'; later, she becomes the prime suspect of the attack, explaining her absence. The head of the Anti-Terrorist Squad, Raj Mehta (played by Gulshan Grover), accuses Zaid of being her partner, and demands more information, but is unable to get any worthwhile data from him. Meanwhile, Zaid has become the target of hate crimes — he is seen as a "corrupting" figure in the police force simply because he is Muslim; indeed, people shout slogans in public, crying that no one can trust the spouse of a national traitor.

The climax of the conflict that Zaid must deal with revolves around conflicting images of his wife — that of his own experiences versus the recording of her with an assault rifle. He must reconcile his memories of her with what he saw on the television screen. What Sara herself was going through is still unexplored; she is not given a voice to express her own thoughts and feelings; her actions are explained for her, removing her sense of agency. Because she is dead, all of her actions are examined without context, and there is still no justification for her actions. Since there is no *jihadi* group or political organization that has accepted the responsibility for these attacks, there is no clear political grievance that she wishes to speak out against — rather, her actions are seen as irrational, or mindless. The narrative of the film revolves around Zaid; though she is the terrorist figure, Sara is side-lined — she is literally 'absent', and is seen as a source of pain for Zaid, a narrative plot to allow the male character to grow.

The film soon reveals Sara's history (through Saeed, the grandfather), before she met Zaid – Sara was raped by the police inspector in order to establish dominance over the family and prevent them from asking more about her father and filing a missing person's report. Sara and her brother Daanish begin visiting *Maulvi* Fareedi out of a sense of loss of control. Fareedi convinces them

to lay down their lives for the cause, arguing that the State should be punished for what happened to Sara. Zaid is horrified by his wife's past, but also has a reason for her behaviour — she joined the terrorist cell for personal, rather than political reasons. Similar to *Dil Se*, the woman is forced into a life of terrorism because of physical (particularly sexual) abuse committed on her body by the State (here, it's the police force – in *Dil Se*, the Army acts as the oppressor). Here, she is reduced to a victim, to one seeking revenge. When Zaid tries to speak to the *Maulvi*, he is threatened by his so-called 'followers'; Zaid tries to speak to him about the immorality of destroying innocent lives and accuses him of being the reason that his wife joined the terrorist cell, thereby ascribing her decision to an authoritative male figure (though this can seem like a justification, it also robs her of any agency), but the *Maulvi* rebuffs him, saying that Muslims have suffered at the hands of Hindus for too long and have not received justice, making it his (and her) job to try and mete justice out. The film ends on a positive note for Zaid and Daanish, with the corrupt inspector getting sent to prison; justice is served to the family and to Sara's memory. The film revolves around Zaid and his struggle for justice and social harmony; he is the protagonist in this narrative and is targeted by the public because of Sara's actions. Nandini (Zaid's ex-girlfriend), too, plays a small role in this story; she provides emotional support to Zaid, but initially tries to pull Zaid away from Sara and her crime, arguing that Zaid is more important. Zaid, on the other hand, is the active force in the film — he is able to go around, speak to others, investigate the crime, come up with a logical conclusion, and is able to deliver justice to the oppressed.

Summary of Fiza

The film revolves around the lives of a young Muslim man named Amaan (played by Hrithik Roshan) and his sister, Fiza (played by Karishma Kapoor). The film takes place immediately after the 1993 riots in Bombay, where Amaan gets attacked on the street and runs away. While he is away, he ends up killing three people (in self-defense), and fearing for his future, ends up joining a terrorist cell. Six years have passed and Amaan is still 'missing'; Fiza has graduated from college and is attempting to look for a job. While she roams the streets of Bombay, she sees Amaan climb into an autorickshaw. Desperate to look for her brother, she seeks the help of a police officer; she then publishes a report in the newspaper, garnering media attention. Her friend (and future love interest) Anirudh points out a terrorist figure with a resemblance to Amaan in Rajasthan; Fiza then journeys (on her own) to Rajasthan — after finding Amaan, she convinces him to return home once more. However, Amaan is unhappy in Bombay. He feels lost and troubled, and is unable to settle into 'normal' life after his stint with the terrorist cell. Any attempts by his mother or his sister to get life back to normal falls flat, and he eventually gets arrested by the police for the murders he committed six years ago. He escapes their grasp and returns to the cell leader (Murad Khan) and asks to be able to return. Murad Khan gives him an important assignment — the assassination of two important political figures, Mr. Singh and Mr. Sayeed. After the assassination, the group was commanded to kill Amaan; he manages to escape

and runs to an abandoned train station. Fiza tries to convince him to return home; the film ends with the sounds of police officers running to the train station while Amaan convinces Fiza to kill him, arguing that he would rather die a dignified death than be killed at the hands of the police, which is seen as a part of the State, and is therefore the enemy.

Female agency exists to reinstate the male figure

Fiza is an interesting film because of the very issues it tackles, along with the way the female protagonist is structured. The director, Khalid Mohammad, was previously a film critic and decided to try his hand with Bollywood cinema with this film. He approaches the idea of the Bombay riots and the religious conflict through a new perspective — that of the woman. The film begins with the image of Amaan, but with the voice of Fiza. It is Fiza who provides the audience with details about Amaan; she defines him and attributes certain characteristics to him, rather than him defining himself. She is initially established as the protagonist in the film — in the initial sequences, Amaan runs out into the street in the middle of the night to help his Muslim 'brothers' in a fight; he gets injured in the process and runs away. With Amaan no longer a part of the household, Fiza must step up and provide for her and her mother. Accordingly, she is allowed to go to college and get educated (with her father's savings), assumes the role of responsibility of the household (including taking care of her mother) and even looks for a job (six years have passed — Fiza believes her brother is no more, but her mother still retains hope). She is portrayed as an angry, stubborn young woman (parallel to the idea of the 'angry young man'[7] that was popular in Bollywood films in the 1970s and 1980s), one that is stubborn and determined to have her way, one who wants justice for her family and is willing to use her own voice and intellect to achieve her goal. In the household, she is the commanding voice; she is also the voice of reason. Between the other female characters (like her college friend, Gitanjali, or Amaan's love interest, Shehnaz), Fiza is able to act calm and rational through the film. When she sees her brother in Bombay, she tries to pawn her jewels and get money to look for him — rather than doubt her own senses, or brush it away as imagination, she actively works on what she saw; she contacts a police investigator and is willing to bribe him for more information. Here, Fiza treads the line between independent young woman and one that breaks societal norms; she is still seen as 'good', as 'pure', as a smart woman who refuses to act on her sexuality. She stands her ground against the police inspector, potential employer, a high-level politician, and the hooligans on the street. She almost always wears a salwar kameez[8], in order to portray that she is a traditional woman in tune with her culture. She attempts to get her story

[7] The 'angry young man' is a description of the depiction of a hero in the Bollywood films of the 1970s — beginning with *Zanjeer* in 1973 which portrayed the hero (Amitabh Bachchan) as an angry, disillusioned man who wished to get revenge on injustice and on atrocities; contrary to earlier films that focused on love stories between the hero and the female lead (Narcisa, 2019).

[8] In one scene, Fiza is seen to be wearing black leather pants and a leather sweater — in the narrative, Gitanjali convinces her to 'dress up' and meet her potential love-interest, Anirudh, in order to build on the romantic tension between her and Anirudh. It is the only scene in which Fiza is seen in 'western' clothes.

published in the newspaper to get media attention about where her brother is; rather than defer to a man, she approaches the newspaper editor herself. When the editor initially denies her request, she makes a heartfelt plea about the importance of family. Here, she reinstates the idea of a 'traditional' woman that values the importance of family — she places her familial (and domestic) needs over everything else, including the search for a job. Even with newfound media attention, she retains her fierce individuality. When asked to attend Shehnaz's wedding (to another man; she could not 'wait' for Amaan any longer), Fiza has a conversation with the politician, Mr Sayeed. During this conversation, he tries to dissuade her from looking for her brother, claiming that she will create unrest and dissidence because of her actions. Fiza retorts that it is her right to look for her brother, and ensure that he comes back home. Again, Fiza is portrayed as the stubborn young woman who is determined to get justice for her family. After this sequence, Anirudh informs her of her brother's whereabouts in Rajasthan (as a terrorist figure); rather than ask for Anirudh's help, she journeys to Rajasthan alone. She spots Amaan in a village; though she has managed to find her brother, she does not let go of her own independence; she convinces him to come back home with her and join the family once more. Here, familial values — and his sister's stubbornness — trump Amaan's sense of achieving justice for the oppressed; he agrees to go home with her and relinquishes his weapon. In the first half, we see that she maintains her agency in the face of everyone else in society; she is alone in her search and is capable of completing her goal and does not need to rely on a male figure.

In the second half of the film, Amaan has returned to Bombay and life continues. Fiza attempts to look for a job, but the employer tries to suggest that she will get the job if she performs a sexual favour. Furious, Fiza storms out, adamant that she will get a job through fair means — without resorting to her sexuality, without compromising her traditional values. With the return of Amaan, the story shifts to his perspective; Fiza returns to the role of 'dutiful daughter'; she continues to make sure Amaan is alright, and accepts her future role as a wife (when asked about marriage, she accepts the fact that she will get married, maintaining the portrayal of a dutiful woman who understands her familial duties). However, Amaan soon slips into old habits; he longs for his earlier life in Rajasthan, and wishes to re-join the terrorist cell. He trains hard for this, and promises Murad Khan that the 'special assignment' will be completed. Though Fiza tries to dissuade him from this, he refuses to take her opinion into consideration, and trains anyway. Here, we see that Fiza has lost her influence over him[9]. When Amaan commits the political assassination, Fiza runs onto the scene to look for her troubled brother. The film ends with Amaan at the abandoned railway station with Fiza — he entrusts Fiza to take his life, rather

[9] Earlier in the film, Fiza is the one who convinces him to leave the terrorist group and return home; one reading could be that he is outside his sphere and has lost control, allowing himself to be guided by Fiza. Now, he disregards her thoughts and continues with his actions — now that he has been reinstated at home, he no longer needs his sister's guidance, and works towards his own 'grander' goals.

than be captured by the police force. Fiza unwillingly obliges[10]; the final scene of the film is Fiza bent over her brother's body while the police surround the two of them.

This film has an interesting take on the idea of agency and mobility of the female figure; though others try to discourage Fiza from looking for her brother, she takes the responsibility on her own shoulders and sets out to look for him, rather than passively wait for him to return. This agency is granted because there is no male figure in the house, Fiza is the only one allowed to walk through the streets (her mother is established as domestic and domicile; she prays for her son's return, but does not seek him out). However, this sense of agency ends when she finds her brother and brings him home — her role is fulfilled, and there is no need for her independence any more. Fiza is imbued with agency for a limited period of time — long enough for her to reunite the family and reinstate the male figure. Though Amaan is the younger brother, once he returns home, he is reinstated as the figure of authority within the household. Fiza accepts responsibility once Amaan grants it to her; she is the secondary figure. Here, Amaan's return to the home should establish him as the authoritative figure, but he grants Fiza domestic power. Though the film begins with her voice and her description of Amaan (producing his image for the audience), her place within the household is still below Amaan, as he is the one to grant her power; though she is the one who rescued him, she is still dependent on him.

Conclusion

Though the four films have differing narratives and differing representations of women, there is a discernible pattern that is present. In each film, the woman's agency is restricted or robbed from her in some way; be it by a dominating male figure (*Kurbaan)*, sexual abuse (resulting in a turn to violence that she cannot escape from, in *Dil Se and Dhokha* where the woman is the terrorist), and in one case, the woman is granted agency (*Fiza)* but solely to retrieve the lost male figure — this agency is not permanent, but is used for a so-called 'larger' purpose – reinstating the male figure within the family.

In the film, *Kurbaan*, the female protagonist is constructed as a victim of her husband's organization and is forced to navigate new spaces in order to protect herself and ensure that the organization's plans are foiled. In the film, *Dil Se*, on the other hand, the woman is the terrorist figure; yet, she still has no agency. The film can also be seen as a love story between Amarkant and Meghna, yet Meghna is not allowed to pursue this because she has prior 'duties' to a terrorist cell — duties that she is forced to uphold, for her backing out is no longer a viable (or even possible) option. In the films, the female protagonists are not allowed as much agency as the men; in *Kurbaan*, she is forced into submission against her will because of her husband's deceit; in *Dil Se*, she is forced into submission because of an attack by the Indian Army, and she must

[10] In the first half, Fiza is able to convince him of leaving the terrorist group even after she heard his story; now, she is unable to convince him to stay alive, and agrees to his final wish, rather than exert her influence.

now take revenge — there is no other recourse for her. Despite the fact that Avantika is a victim of the terrorist group and Meghna belongs to the terrorist group, both women have their agency revoked, and are forced to act against their will. The terrorist figure in *Dhokha* is also a woman, and commits the crime for similar reasons — she is a victim of rape (like Meghna). They function on the principle of revenge — since they had atrocious crimes committed on their body by the State, they too will commit atrocious crimes against the State. The female terrorists (as portrayed in these films) are resigned to their fate and to their early end; rather than try and fight it or look for viable solutions, they passively accept their role and the consequences that come with it. In the film *Fiza*, however, the female figure seems different from the others — she is the only female protagonist with agency, and with the ability to move around. Fiza is allowed to walk in public — though many try to discourage her, she refuses to comply and takes matters into her own hands. Once the goal (retrieving her brother) is accomplished, she goes back into the role of the passive, secondary female figure, implying that she was granted agency solely to retrieve the male figure.

In each of these films, the narrative takes an individual story and paints the characters with broad brushstrokes, making it easier to generalize one story to a larger, national audience. Therefore, the female leads, though contextually different, are all represented in a similar manner; classifying female terrorists as women with horrific, abusive crimes committed against them, with personal motives like revenge being more important than larger political ideals (as seen in *Dil Se* and *Dhokha*). Often, the woman is constructed in a one-dimensional manner; her behaviour is explained through the lens of the crime alone; she does not have a larger political ideal; she does not try to stay alive to achieve a political goal or justice in some form, but to exact revenge on State institutions for crimes committed against her body. Each of these films discuss terrorism in a different setting — be it in the suburbs of New York where ‘terrorism’ takes on an international definition (rather than citizens trying to harm the State, here, the logic works between different countries), or in the streets of Delhi and Bombay, where the conflict is more localized. Despite the differing narratives and contexts, the female leads are painted with the same brush — either they are subservient to the male figure and must adhere to certain norms established by the male authority, or their purpose is to re-establish the man.

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