

# Death of the Avenging Woman? Exploring the Distinct Filmic Sensibilities of *Pink* (2016) and *Mom* (2017) as Rape-Revenge Films

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## Abstract

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Drawing from Lalitha Gopalan's (1997) analysis of the 1980s "avenging woman films" belonging to the rape-revenge genre, this research explores two films – *Pink* (2016) and *Mom* (2017) along with an ancillary analysis of *Mardaani 2* (2019). It attempts to examine the extent to which these films exhibit and internalize the formulations delineated by Gopalan. The exploration is guided by the following questions – how are scenes of rape/molestation represented in the film and what kind of meanings does this representation generate? Who avenges the rape/molestation central to the narrative and how? What kind of closure does the film secure with the vengeance? In consonance with the crisis of legitimacy of the state, a theme that was dominant in shaping the 'angry young man' and the 'avenging woman' aesthetic, this paper inquires into similar developments occurring in the decade of 2010 and investigates how the melodramatic aesthetic of the aforementioned films negotiates with them, especially when responding to the questions posed above. It also scrutinizes the tussle between the textuality of these films with the dominant formulations of Laura Mulvey (1975), Linda Williams (1987), and Susan Hayward (2000), articulated with respect to women's films and maternal melodramas in Hollywood cinema.

*Keywords:* violence, Hindi cinema, rape-revenge, gender

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## Introduction

The anti-corruption crusade led by Anna Hazare, germinating in the aftermath of a string of corruption scandals that rocked the United Progressive Alliance (UPA) government, followed by the brutal assault, gangrape, and eventual death of *Nirbhaya* in the capital city of New Delhi, produced furore in Indian society in the decade that went by (Anuja & Khanna, 2019; Indian Express, 2017). Along with triggering massive outrage against the government of the day, these developments produced a certain crisis of legitimacy of the state, which re-asserted doubts about the competency of existing office-holders, institutions, and procedures for delivering social justice. It is interesting to note how, in the realm of popular Hindi cinema, action films emerging in this period such as *Singham* (2011), *Rowdy Rathore* (2011), *Singham Returns* (2013), and *Mardaani* (2014) exhibited similar disenchantment with political institutions, carried themes of vigilante justice, and gained immense success at the box office. The conversation around death penalty for rapists, along with a greater pre-occupation with making public spaces safer for women, and a discursive turn towards defining and re-defining terms of women's engagement with society and patriarchy, when located within the larger crisis of legitimacy of the state emerging in this period, informs the aesthetics (and the *excess*) of the rape-revenge films studied in this paper – *Pink* (2016), *Mom* (2017) and briefly *Mardaani 2* (2019). The melodramatic stylisation of these films should be critically examined since it chiefly enables the revelation of contradictions plaguing the systems evoked in these films in a 'spectacular' manner. The emphasis on 'spectacle' emerges out of the argument that popular Hindi cinema "is not concerned with the inner life of the characters on screen; it is concerned with the inner life of the viewer," indicating the pivotal role played by these popular films in engaging with the consciousness of the spectator, providing them with a resolution to the moral conflicts invoked by the films (Nandy, 1981, p. 90).

Drawing from the framework provided by Lalitha Gopalan (1997) in her essay "Avenging Women in Indian Cinema"<sup>1</sup> and the broader understanding of the melodramatic form, this paper dwells into the following areas of inquiry – how is the scene of rape/molestation represented in the set of films inquired into by the paper and what kind of meanings does it generate? Who avenges the rape/molestation central to their narratives and how? What kind of identification do the films generate with the victim of rape/molestation and the entity seeking its revenge? What kind of closure does the film secure with the vengeance? As opposed to the avenging woman

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<sup>1</sup> Avenging woman films are a cluster of action films that emerged in the decade of 1980s, with female star-figures at their helm, which consisted of central female characters avenging personal loss by violently confronting the individual (mostly a male figure) who perpetrated the same. The rape-revenge genre of films, Gopalan's primary concern, is a sub-set of avenging woman films, in which the economy of crime, vengeance and the negotiation of film aesthetics and narrative with the state and spectatorship revolves around the act of rape inflicted on the female protagonist (who, in the films explored by Gopalan, is also the avenging figure).

films of the rape-revenge genre, explored by Lalitha Gopalan (1997), where sexual violence inflicted on the victim was necessarily rape, the films explored in this paper – *Pink* (2016), *Mom* (2017), and, limitedly, *Mardaani 2* (2019) – diffuse the nature of the same to include molestation as well. This paper argues that visuals of rape and molestation occupy a lesser focus in the films examined compared to rape-revenge films of the 1980s. Within this scheme, both rape and molestation serve as narrative interjections which are instrumental in shifting the points of identification, transforming the motivations of characters in the story world, and displacing the onus of action and affective interpellation of the spectator onto the revenge of the act. However, the visual of sexual violence is not lost completely. The gruesomeness of it (mostly rape), depicted through words or visuals of the victim after the act, elucidates its unspeakable nature and taps into the collective memory of the violent nature of *Nirbhaya*'s gang rape – while also de-eroticizing the victim of the film. In a film like *Pink* (2016), the choice of inflicting the violence of molestation on its victim, considering the way it has been operationalised, must itself be read as an act of de-eroticization. Given that in lieu of Gopalan's aforementioned framework, both rape and molestation are theorized to play the same function within the films explored, both can be included within the "rape-revenge" genre of films. The vengeance in each film explored by this research is not secured by the victim herself but by a character whose individual psyche and its trajectory becomes the central focus of the film. In this way, identification is also created with the avenging figure, who may or may not be a woman.

This paper also argues that there cannot be a singular sense-image of the rape-revenge genre that uniformly emblemizes all films belonging to it. Special attention needs to be paid to the different modalities of aesthetic and narrative stylizations of different films and the way they imagine and re-articulate the genre. For example, a court-room drama does not challenge the hegemony of the state in delivering justice and thus, re-defines the terms "revenge" and "vengeance" to mean attaining justice through the process of law. Here justice is sought not by physical annihilation, but by proving to the court that a victim has been wronged. Thus, *Pink* (2016) does not challenge the hegemony of the state in delivering justice, but seeks justice by preventing its characters from getting wrongfully convicted by proving that one of them was molested. The film, concomitantly plays the social function of challenging the dogmatic contradictions of patriarchy in the way it de-legitimizes women's agency to consent. *Mom* (2017), being a maternal melodrama with the connotations of the mother as a national allegory, reveals the inability of the state to seek justice for her daughter who has been raped, and transforms the suffering of the mother into a divine mission to seek vengeance outside the bounds of the state by killing the perpetrators.

Both films significantly symptomize the public discourse that gathered steam after the gangrape of *Nirbhaya*, with *Mom* representing a disenchantment with courts and the due process of law in serving justice, and *Pink* challenging traditional social rationalization of rape, which hinges on

victim shaming, by positing that each woman has the right to give and withdraw consent, irrespective of occupation and lifestyle.

### **From where does the Avenging Woman derive her anger?**

Victimhood exists at the core of melodrama – an aesthetic and performative form that emerges with the French Revolution and the rise of the bourgeois class. Given the emergence of the individual “as the crucial vehicle of ethical and experiential truth”, the melodramatic form loads the personality with political and social meaning, while externalizing, through excess, “desires, fears ... (that) operate independently of rational explanation” (Vasudevan, 2010; Gledhill, 1987, p. 31). These desires and fears are placed within the broader conflict of “innocent and evil,” giving these political metonyms and their characteristics an ethical expression (Gledhill, 1987, p. 31).

This conflict between innocent and evil emerges from, and gives further impetus to the idea posited by Peter Brooks (1976), that melodrama must produce a “moral occult” at a time when “the traditional imperatives of truth and ethics have been violently thrown into question, yet where the promulgation of truth and ethics ... is of immediate, daily, political concern” (as cited in Singer, 2001, p. 134). Therefore, emerging concomitantly with the decline of feudalism, the melodramatic form plays a critical role in rationalising the newly established bourgeois social order. However, it does not reproduce this order uncritically. By siding with the powerless, it ends up revealing contradictions of the existing system and thus, differentiates itself from a certain kind of realism that seeks to prohibit this revelation (Gledhill, 1987, p. 21). This characteristic of melodrama is instrumental in producing moral polarisations that reveal the contradictions of patriarchy, i.e., the positioning and characterisation of women within its schema, and creates room for highlighting the failure of the state in securing justice for the victim in rape-revenge films.

While a dominant strand of scholarship on classical Hollywood cinema often looks at the female figure as the “castrated other” (Mulvey, 1975) or posits that women’s films produce only “transgressive pleasures” for the female spectator (Hayward, 2000), or notes that maternal melodramas “devalue and debase the actual figure of the mother while sanctifying the institution of motherhood” (Williams, 1987, p. 300), the way Hindi cinema addresses questions of the afflicted and violated woman, especially in some of the rape-revenge films explored in this paper, poses a challenge to these formulations. This is primarily because the public nature of subjectivity in a melodrama, when contextualized into the representation of women in popular Hindi films, results in the linkage of the central female characters of these films to national imaginations – making certain female characters, such as Radhain *Mother India* (1957), for example, powerful and decisive in playing their symbolic function (Vasudevan, 2010, p. 43; Thomas, 1989).

The female figure in Hindi cinema is governed by structural conflicts occurring at the level of national consciousness. Madhav Prasad (1998) sheds light on how the guardianship of a woman, in a post-colonial Indian state that is yet to transition into modernity, is contested between the “modern authority of the state”, tasked with safeguarding the individual rights and human dignity of the woman, and the “pre-modern authority of the feudal family”, which metonymizes the woman into a conservative national/cultural imagination and subjects her to a hierarchized communal control (p. 91). While the hero in feudal family romances guards the woman by directly confronting the villains, carving an authoritarian space for himself with the delayed entry of the police during fight sequences, avenging woman films, functioning within the rape-revenge genre, utilize incompetency of the police and other state institutions in a different way.

A crisis in the legitimacy of the state reflects the failure of the modern state in rendering justice. In the case of avenging woman films of the rape-revenge genre, the failure to secure gender justice leads to a disenchantment with its processes and institutions. In the films examined by Lalitha Gopalan (1997), the female protagonists at the receiving end of rape are a police officer (*Zakhmi Aurat*, 1988), a beauty queen (*Insaaf ka Tarazu*, 1980) and a teacher (*Pratighat*, 1987) – all of whom inhabit spaces and occupations located in the public sphere, and are failed by the state in protecting this modernising impulse (of the characters and the nation). The rape of these characters, Gopalan (1997) argues, invokes provisionally erotic sensibilities in the male spectator, for rape is represented through camera withdrawal, oscillation between visuals of rape and violence, disrobing etc, which are then offset by a revenge plot that allows for the “avenging woman narrative [to] proceed on a transgressive vigilante path, incit[ing] masculine anxiety about the phallic female” (p. 52), also resulting in the (temporary) revelation of “anxieties between patriarchy and the state” before “reeling in the authority of the state” to secure punishment (p. 53).

Films examined in this paper respond to the described frameworks of knowledge interestingly. Not only is the agency of the victim in seeking revenge against her own perpetrator displaced, but the very representation of rape and molestation takes a form that de-eroticises the victim and narrativises the process, while the unspeakable nature of the violence manifests in the gory descriptions or visuals of the event or the victim. In a film like *Mom*, the rape of the daughter and the inability of the law to punish the perpetrators, wounds the mother (metonymising the nation), who challenges the authority of the state by seeking justice from outside its bounds. In *Pink*, on the other hand, justice is attained from within the bounds of law, where the avenging figure (who also gets stationed as the father figure to the women) must protect its protagonists from wrongful conviction by drawing attention of the court towards the molestation of one of them, while also asserting her right to consent. Such an attainment of justice produces the path for the film to play its social function – challenging patriarchy at the dogmatic level in the way it de-legitimises

women's right to consent. The rest of the paper is devoted to an analysis of *Mom* and *Pink*, along with an ancillary analysis of *Mardaani 2*.

## Analysis

### ***Mom* (2017) – Director: Ravi Udyawar**

A maternal melodrama situated within the rape-revenge genre, *Mom* is the story of Devki (played by Sridevi) avenging the rape of her step-daughter Arya (Sajal Ali) using extra-judicial means after courts fail to convict any of her rapists through trial. This paper aims to read this film as a challenge to the generalized application of the dominant formulations of women's films in Hollywood, and maternal melodramas, to popular Hindi films, as well as a challenge posed to the dominant formulations of avenging woman films as delineated by Gopalan (1997).

The film opens with a medium-shot of Devki's (Sridevi) back, heading towards a classroom, producing for the audience a point of focalization with whom it enters into the story world. Within the classroom, the camera places the audience with students, making them participate in looking at Devki as a figure of authority or admiration – an argument accentuated by the placement of the camera, at multiple points in the scene, at a position and angle which elevates Devki (producing the *Darsanic gaze*<sup>2</sup>). Such moments are recurringly placed in the film at later points as well.

The smooth conduct of the classroom is disturbed by an event that gives the viewer greater insight into dynamics of the characters of the story-world. Arya is seen expressing romantic admiration for Vidyut, while Mohit, who is seen looking at Arya lasciviously, sends her obscene material on her phone. This scene presents an interesting point of subjectification as Vidyut, favorably looked upon by Arya, is seen by the audience through a POV shot from the latter's lenses while Mohit and his lustful gaze are only presented via a medium shot of his face – not only producing moral polarities, but also creating a point of identification for the viewer, which will be instrumental in condemning Arya's rape.

The fact that Arya is Devki's step daughter is only established at a family dinner when the former, with great emphasis and resentment, refers to Devki as "ma'am," hinting at their inability to integrate into a mother-daughter relationship – a closure that is only secured at the end. A close up of Arya's face, laced with tears in a subsequent conversation with her father, is a critical melodramatic interjection in the film, for it not only occurs at a time when her father is leaving

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<sup>2</sup> Madhav Prasad (1998) defines Darsana as a "practice (that) signifies a mediated bringing to (god's) presence of the subject, who, by being seen by the divine image, comes to be included in the order instituted and supported by that divinity" (p. 75). The Darsanic gaze, thus, is a devotional gaze of the spectator directed at hero of the feudal family romance film who exists at the helm of the "extra-filmic hierarchic community", to which the spectator is amenable only by symbolic identification (p. 76).

the house for a considerable period (the loss or absence of any paternal figure is continued narrative trope in avenging woman films), but also hints at the discomforting co-existence of Devki and Arya in the house from this point onwards. However, *Mom* is an interesting maternal melodrama, because it is not restricted to the confines of the home – challenging the dominant understanding of women’s films where conflicts are staged and resolved within the space of the home. In fact, almost all melodramatic ruptures in *Mom* occur in an external environment or in a public space.

## **Rape**

The scene of rape acts as a rupture, though not an unexpected one. It occurs when Arya visits Charles Deewan’s (one of the rapists’) birthday party despite Devki’s reservations. The representation of rape is one of the critical elements studied by this research paper.

Arya is lifted by five men and thrown into a car. By shooting the sequence from a position behind the backs of men who have surrounded Arya and pinned her to the seat, the viewer is only given a distorted view of the developments in the car. While scenes of rape in the rape-revenge films of the 1980s, often oscillated between the act of rape and alternate visuals, creating room for eroticization (Gopalan, 1997), in *Mom* the movement of the car is captured as an aerial shot, backed by mildly horrifying music and a setting that is quiet and empty, evoking a sense of numbness within the audience. This sequence lasts for about a minute, after which the camera pans closer to the car, followed by the dumping of Arya into a sewer – rendering the visual of a bruised face and breasts floating above the sewage water. Followed by her admission to the hospital, Arya is shown, via a close-up, covered in plasters, oxygen mask, and other medical equipment. Such a representation of gore is further escalated in *Mardaani 2* (2019), where details of the act are recounted through descriptions of bruises and lacerations and visuals of the same being inflicted on the victim through flashbacks. The purpose of such interjections is de-eroticising the victim and invoking anger within the audience by likening the details of rape in these films to those faced by *Nirbhaya* herself. From the occurrence of rape, Arya starts receding into the margins of the film, while Latika (the victim in *Mardaani 2*), dies – creating room for shifting the agency of revenge.

## **Revenge**

The motivation to take revenge outside the institutional process of law, as is the narrative trope dominantly followed in avenging woman films, can be causally understood by two events. First, the inability of the judiciary and failure of the law to send the culprits to jail. The trial in *Mom* is presented as a discontinuous placement of sequences that oscillate between a chain of testimonials that weaken Arya’s case (note the similarities with N. Chandra’s *Insaaf ka Tarazu* (1980)) and Arya’s depleting condition at the hospital, producing a combination of pathos and

anger or resentment. The second causal explanation, further accentuating the production of the aforementioned emotions within the viewer, can be located in a conversation situated prior to the commencement of the trial. Devki and Anand (her husband, played by Adan Sidiqqi) are seated by Arya's bed, when Devki urges Arya to identify the perpetrators and testify against them in court. Arya, visibly disgusted by Devki's suggestion, responds by saying – "Do you know what they were screaming?", the camera briefly captures both her and Devki, before closing in further on Arya's bruised face, "*apni maa ko bula* (Call your mom)," as she starts sobbing uncontrollably. The camera then pans onto Devki, reproducing her, once again, at an elevated position. This scene presents a crucial moment in the narrative for the act of rape, in the light of this discovery, cannot be restricted to have wounded Arya alone – it is an attack on Devki and the idea of motherhood – producing grounds for shifting the agency of revenge from Arya to Devki.

This leads to the occurrence of an affectively loaded conversation that makes the film's adoption of vigilante justice seem favourable. At this point, Devki has decided to seek the help of private detective DK (played by Nawazuddin Sidiqqi) in charting an extra-judicial course for seeking revenge. They meet discreetly at a metro station in Delhi and engage in a loaded exchange of dialogues, evaluating the moral content of such a plan. Seeing Devki worried about the idea of seeking justice of her own accord, DK says, "Have faith in Lord Shiva, he will set everything straight." The camera remains panned on Devki for a few seconds, as the background score intensifies further. "God can't be everywhere, Mr. DK," says Devki. "I know. That is why he created mothers," says DK, emphatically, with the camera recreating the *Darsanic* gaze by placing DK at an elevated position.

This scene yields the most crucial point of examination; it chisels out the predictability of a conflict between the sacred duty of the mother and constitutional duty of law and police, alluding to the broad tussle between feudalism and the bourgeois state in occupying the meta-language of the filmic text. The film resolves the crisis of the moral ambiguity of the revenge plot even before the act of revenge is carried out. This closure is achieved by justifying every action of Devki, henceforth, as being sanctioned by a higher, spiritual entity exerting its agency through Devki as a vessel. If one of the chief functions of melodrama is to create a "moral occult", as posited by Peter Brooks (1976), then such instances of crises in the legitimacy of the state provide the ripest conditions for such an occult to be created. While Lalitha Gopalan (1997) notes that the possibility of seeking revenge beyond the confines of law is a "transgressive" fantasy for the avenging figure, *Mom* ensures that this possibility is actualized and is sacredly (thus, morally) sanctioned.

The reception of the film either criticizes or celebrates its focus on Sridevi, holding it responsible for either furthering "Bollywood clichés" (see Vetticad, 2018; Gupta, 2017) or attributing her performance to the "soul" and the "expression" of the film (see Bhattacharya, 2017; Chatterjee,

2019). However, at a more fundamental level, analysing the film through the economy of stardom reveals that its challenge to the dominant formulations of women's films in classical Hollywood cinema and its function as a melodrama in highlighting societal and institutional decay is rendered possible only because of the presence of Sridevi as a star figure, which allows the avenging figure to go beyond realistic limitations of attaining justice. In fact, the angry young man films of the 1970s narratively integrated "star-value" into themselves, accumulating as much of the star personality as possible by characterizing the star as "a mobilizer, demonstrating superhuman qualities and assuming a power that transformed the others who occupied the same terrain into spectators" (Prasad, 1998, p. 122; Vitali, 2008; 189). *Mom* too draws its impulse from this use of star-value (actress Sridevi as Devki), adding to it the feudal logic of admiration. The grounds for shifting the agency of revenge from the girls to Deepak Sehgal in *Pink* are also laid down by the star-value of Amitabh Bachchan, which then influence the aesthetics of the film.

The subsequent scene shows Devki walking amidst copious cloth of red and orange colours fluttering around her, externalizing the emotions of anger and also signifying the visual of a deified entity. In the revenge sequences (one castration-led death and two murders) her body is presented as resigned i.e., sans any makeup visibly present in initial sequences of the film and she is draped in clothing that does not accentuate her (conventionally defined) femininity but keeps it neutral. For example, in the sequence where Devki sneaks into Charles Deewan's house to poison him, she is shown wearing tracks and a sporting jacket. The donning of androgenous clothing is a visible trope across rape-revenge films and interestingly, features in the climax of Sridevi's own film *Sherni* (Lioness) (1988), and can also be noted in *Mardaani 2*. Even in sequences where Devki is seen wearing dresses, their colours are dull, supplementing the resignation of her body. Not only does this reflect the occurrence of trauma but also remarks motherhood as an ascetic-like virtue.

The climax of *Mom* features a fight sequence between Sajjan Singh (the last rapist alive and free) and Inspector Mathew Francis (Akshaye Khanna), at the end of which Devki gains control of a gun and threatens to shoot Sajjan but Inspector Francis is seen relentlessly persuading her against the same. Mathew Francis, a signifier of the institution and the process of law, ends up subordinating to and supplementing the emotive and spiritual mission of the mother by providing Devki with his own gun to shoot the rapist. Hesitant to shoot Sajjan Singh in the beginning, the sequence is emotionally loaded, chaotic, and unrealistically elongated, with Francis asking Devki to shoot Sajjan, as the latter begs for mercy. The intensity of this sequence, heightened by escalating music, rapid oscillations, and characters screaming at each other, can be read as an externalization of the various conflicts that seem to have plagued Devki from within. However, all these conflicts are resolved the moment Arya, stationed behind a tree, having heard the recitation of the entire story of Devki's revenge, reveals herself and shouts "Mom". This moment also harks back to the incident of rape, reminding Devki of the singularity of her mission – vengeance (also recovering rape as a narrative interjection to be called back upon). Devki is

immediately triggered into firing the gun, with the camera positioned on the side of Sajjan Singh, presenting Devki at an elevated position, as a “phallic female”.

*Mom* poses a challenge to the dominant formulations in the literature surrounding women’s films and the specific themes of maternal melodrama, as articulated by Linda Williams (1987), who postulates that a mother is either debased or made to sacrifice her integrity for those of her daughter. As this paper has repeatedly noted, Devki is projected throughout this film, as a figure of admiration and adulation. One does not locate the presence of any devaluation of motherhood, rather, as evidenced by the foregoing analysis, motherhood is sacralised and is accorded primacy over the state in seeking retributive justice. However, the duality between the two authorities, while having played out clearly in *Mom*, gets complicated in *Mardaani 2*, where Shivani Shivaji Roy (Rani Mukherjee), the avenging figure and a police officer, is found lashing the rapist, in the company of a female politician, on the streets in the film’s climax on the night of Diwali. Ambiguous about the primacy of the state and court proceedings in delivering justice and closing the film, such an ending serves a cathartic purpose to the vigilante sensibilities of the spectator. The last shot finds Shivani seated at the steps of a house, teary-eyed, with a painting of Goddess *Durga* positioned behind her, not only recovering the courageous female from a protagonist whom the film celebrates as masculine, but also finding harmony between her spiritual duty to fight evil and her social duty to dispense justice.

### ***Pink* (2016) – Director: Aniruddha Roy Chowdary**

Centred primarily in a court trial, *Pink* is narratively focused towards weighing the truth-value of allegations of attempt to murder against Minal (Tapsee Pannu), who in turn alleges her accuser of molestation and justifies her violent action against him as self-defense. This research notes evident aesthetic and narrative differences between *Pink* and other films in the avenging woman genre and argues that its function is not to reveal the crisis in the legitimacy of state institutions, but to explore and resolve dogmatic contradictions of patriarchy; it does not seek justice by physically annihilating the perpetrator, but by saving the women from conviction by bringing to judicial recognition the violation of Minal’s consent by her perpetrator, Rajveer.

The film begins with sounds of a conversation held over drinks, placed during the rolling credits, at the end of which, a few women decide to take their leave, but the men insist that they stay for another round. The initial visuals of the film oscillate between a group of men and women, riding in two different cabs, in a disturbed mood, conveyed through an intense background score and rapid cutting of shots between the two camps. It is evident that something violent has occurred, given that a man is clearly shown bleeding from his face, followed by conversations around the possibility of a police case.

An unsettling use of the camera is persistent throughout the initial scenes of the film. Even in the domestic space of both groups, the camera disturbs the stability of the frame by constant movement and close-ups. *Pink* presents an unusual opening for any film belonging to the genre, for, if one keeps prior discussions around the film aside, the viewer finds no stable point of identification in these initial segments, a position ideally occupied by the avenging woman. Such a choice also establishes the lack of control of anyone over the narrative. Shifting focal points are escalated further when an unnamed old man (Amitabh Bachchan) is seen taking a stroll at the nearby park. The viewer sees him looking at Minal in the park and staring at their residential complex, followed by an encounter with Falak (Kriti Kulhari) in the market.

Uncertainties surrounding the circumstances of the female characters, also engraved in their moods, are externalized onto city spaces. A brief song about the same, with the lyrics “Why did the dusk bring the darkness?” “Why is there no hope in life?” “There is negativity all around” is the background to shots of several bustling spaces of the city, alternating with private moments of the three female characters — Minal, Falak, and Andrea (Andrea Tariang), allegorically raising questions surrounding the placement of women in spaces differentiated by modernity.

It is only gradually that the film accesses the spaces inhabited by these women, opening up modes for identification and engagement. The interaction between Falak and Javed, the threats sent over to Andrea, Minal, and Kasturilal (landlord), a phone conversation with Rajveer Singh (man with the bleeding eye in the first scene), and, most importantly, the molestation of Minal, are scenes which produce loaded meanings, giving an insight into the recurrently invoked ideas of “decent women”, entirely articulated by character-agents outside the locus of control of the women i.e., the men, police officers, Falak’s boss, and Javed, who allege, in one way or another, that these women lack “character”.

### **Molestation**

One of the significant ways in which *Pink* differentiates itself from other films in the genre is by mellowing the very nature of violence committed against its female character(s). *Mom*, along with *Mardaani 2* not only presented sexual violence in the form of rape, but also stylised the effects of the act in an excessively gruesome manner. This gruesomeness, as noted earlier, aids the process of de-eroticisation, which also requires the act of rape to be suggestively presented, using methods such as aerial shots (in *Mom*) and rapid flashbacks (in *Mardaani 2*). *Pink*, however, restricts this violence to molestation alone. This restriction must itself be read as an effort towards securing the de-eroticisation of the victim and narrativisation of sexual violence.

There are two instances of molestation, both inflicted on Minal, that are central to the narrative. First is the act that occurs before the formal opening of the film. The sense of disturbance, trouble, and the unsettling atmosphere, elucidated in the foregoing section is a product of this

event. The entire court trial is based on adjudicating the truthfulness of the commission of this act. Therefore, by placing it off-screen, only to be presented hazily during rolling credits, *Pink* de-spectacularises this event, de-eroticises Minal and confines the event to serving as the main trigger to the entire narrative of the film.

The second case of molestation, presented on screen, plays the function of creating identification with Deepak Sehgal (Amitabh Bachchan). When Minal is grabbed and shoved into the car, where the men involved in the first (at this point, alleged) act of molestation are seated, they physically harass and molest her. As Deepak Sehgal was present around the vicinity from which Minal was abducted, he becomes significantly involved in mitigating this crisis. The stylisation of the molestation sequence is arranged in the following manner. Developments in the car, which escalate from physical harassment to the (suggestive) insertion of a coin in Minal's vaginal cavity, are constantly undercut with visuals of Deepak contacting various officers of the police force, trying to get them to act on this. Such a montage, presented in a manner loaded with high-intensity, briefly reveals the crisis of the state. The oscillation between the two sets of visuals along with the stylization of molestation in a suggestive manner, also serves the purpose of de-eroticising Minal, while clearly presenting the men as antagonists. More importantly, Deepak Sehgal, whose motives were largely ambiguous prior to this point, now becomes a figure of identification and admiration, especially after he visits Falak and Andrea to explain to them the procedure of bailing out Minal after she gets arrested on charges of attempt to murder. Thus, it is evident how both instances of molestation play a critical role in the process of de-eroticising the victim and triggering critical shifts in the narrative.

## **Revenge**

Deepak Sehgal's involvement in the case, as an agent for attaining justice, develops as an important exploration for the filmic stylisation of *Pink*. In the initial part of the film, it is established that Deepak has an ailing wife, whom he visits in the hospital, where he is shown to be engrossed in paperwork. In the conversation that follows, the central topic of discussion is the absence of any nominee for his property i.e., the absence of any child. All three women placed at the centre of the film, too, live away from their parents, especially fathers. In fact, this also becomes a tool for the prosecution to escalate an attack against the character of the women. In lieu of this, Deepak Sehgal's involvement in the trial helps project him as a father figure to the women.

As Falak, Andrea, and Minal feel overwhelmed by the surmounting pressure of the legal system, Deepak Sehgal is of immediate help. After the scene where Deepak explains the procedure for bailing out Minal to Falak and Andrea, they search for details about him on the internet. Apart from establishing the fact that he is a veteran lawyer who quit his practice several years ago, this moment, briefly captured with a close projection of the screen, produces a moment for Falak and

Andrea to look at Deepak with admiration. This is also the point where the agency to obtain justice shifts from the women to Deepak Sehgal and opens newer room for identification.

As discussed before, in the courtroom space, the language and constraints of vengeance get redefined. The objective of the avenging figure in this setting is to seek justice from within the bounds of law and this can be secured only by drawing attention towards and ascertaining the truthfulness of the violence inflicted against the victim. In *Pink*, as stated before, Minal is arrested on charges of the attempted murder of Rajveer, and all three women are charged with prostitution. In order to acquit the women, especially Minal, Deepak Sehgal has to ascertain the fact that Minal was molested and that her aggressive move against Rajveer came in response to the provocation he had initiated. In order to do this, Deepak Sehgal has to challenge the charge levelled by the prosecution that Minal could not have been molested, for she herself, along with Falak and Andrea, solicited sexual services to the men, who refused to pay more money to them, leading to an attempt by Minal to murder Rajveer. Thus, in order to ascertain the truthfulness of the act of molestation, Deepak Sehgal also has to recover and legitimise the agency of a woman to give and withdraw consent, irrespective of her profession and lifestyle – tying up the character motivations of the story world with the social function of the film vis-à-vis its challenge to the moral order of patriarchy and its de-legitimisation of consent.

Through the lens of melodrama, the courtroom elevates the force of monologues as tools for expressing emotions and negotiating the hegemony of any dogma or ideology. As Madhava Prasad (1998) notes, “language in melodrama is not derived from realist speculations about the necessities of the situations and characters represented. The characters are objects of emulation or disapproval ... they speak a language suited to the primal function of representing the conflicts of a moral order” (p. 71). In *Pink*, Deepak Sahgal’s monologues place themselves within, but also transcend the requirements of the story world to communicate with and challenge the logics of patriarchy.

In the context of *Pink*, while Amitabh Bachchan’s “*No means no*” monologue, presented as his closing statement for the case, is often regarded as the strongest moment in the film, this paper draws attention to another such monologue. Throughout the course of the trial, Deepak Sehgal responds to the prosecution’s arguments by placing them within the construction of a “Girls’ Safety Manual,” ironically noting the dos and don’ts of patriarchy in order to safeguard the “character of women.” The attempt by the prosecution to paint the women as characterless (and thus, prostitutes) involves noting that they were alone with men in different rooms on the night of this act, that they live separately from their parents, and that they consented to drinking with the men on the night in question. Drawing from the last argument, Deepak spirals into a monologue noting that “Girls should not drink alcohol with boys, because if she does, the boy seems to think that if she can have a drink with me, she won’t mind sleeping with me as well”. This monologue, dwelling into the details and contradictions of the patriarchal mindset, lasts for

over a minute after which Deepak says, “I am ... digressing your honour”. While the said monologue is treated like a digression from the lenses of realism, it is very much central to the motivations of the melodramatic form, for it “spectacularly” reveals the moral conflicts the film wishes to address; in fact, the recreation of moral polarisations is also witnessed in Deepak’s cross-examination of Rajveer Singh, at the end of which, the latter loses his temper and says “women like these [pointing at Minal, Falak, and Andrea] deserve such a treatment. You know what they are called? Whores!” This statement, in context of the story world, helps finally affirm that Minal was molested – thus acquitting Minal, Falak and Andrea of all charges.

The monologues of the film stand testament to the argument that *Pink* plays the purpose of challenging patriarchy at a dogmatic level, responding to discourses around victim shaming – which politicians, civil society actors, and even the lawyer defending *Nirbhaya*’s culprits in court have been party to (Ghosh, 2017). Throughout the course of both monologues, the camera remains frontally stationed, occasionally panning close to the faces of several people around, including women lawyers and police officers, who look at Deepak with admiration. In fact, at the end of the trial, a female police officer, stationed outside the court room, gets teary eyed and shakes his hand. The handshake is not visible to the viewer, for the camera is panned close to her face, capturing her teary eyes.

*Pink*, in many measures, is different from most films belonging to the “rape-revenge” genre. The very act of violence inflicted in the film is molestation and not rape, even though it does play the function of de-eroticising the victim and narrativising sexual violence. The film is entirely concerned with seeking justice within the institutions of law (which is a constraint that can be linked to the re-enforcement of the paternal nature of the state by the avenging entity, who is also stationed as a father-figure<sup>3</sup> to the victims) and there is no “transgressive path” to revenge. The social function of the film, owing to its placement within the courtroom space, is not to expose the inability of the state to dispense justice, but to reveal and challenge the dogmatic notions of patriarchy in the way that it de-legitimises the agency of women to give consent on the basis of their lifestyle, occupation, etc. The method of seeking justice, in a similar vein, does not entail the annihilation of the perpetrator, but the judicial recognition of sexual violence inflicted on the victim by the perpetrator.

Displacing the agency of seeking vengeance of a woman’s molestation to a male star-figure, who is also metaphorically stationed as a father figure makes the film different from the ones assessed by Gopalan (1997), owing to the ancillary position occupied by its female characters; thus, also partly conforming to formulations surrounding women’s films in classical Hollywood cinema noted earlier.

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<sup>3</sup> Shifting the agency of vengeance from the victim to a father or a brother-figure is a common trope in two other recent films – *Simmba* (2018), an avenging cop film, where the avenger forms a brother-like bond with the victim and *Bhoomi* (2017), where avenging the rape of the daughter is linked with the recovery of ‘fatherhood’ as a familial emotion and duty.

## Conclusion

This paper began with the elucidation of a crisis of legitimacy of the state in the beginning of the 2010s, triggered by corruption scandals against the government of the day and the gang-rape of *Nirbhaya* in the capital city of New Delhi; this crisis was reflective of a collective disappointment of civil society in the inability of state institutions to deliver goals of social justice and ensure the safety of women in public spaces. This furore also revisited fundamental questions about the position of women in a patriarchal society which involved questions about the causes and triggers of rape and the debate around consent.

Both *Pink* and *Mom* have reflected this crisis “spectacularly.” *Mom*, a maternal-revenge drama, positions its avenging figure Devki as a metonymy of the nation and God. It puts her on a sacredly sanctioned mission to bring her daughter’s rapists to justice of her own accord, as the courts and police had failed at their jobs. *Pink*, on the other hand, attains justice from within the processes of law. Deepak Sehgal, who develops a paternal relationship with the victims, becomes the avenging figure, and reveals, not the inability of state institutions to perform their tasks, but the dogmatic contradictions of the patriarchy in the way it terms women as “decent” and “characterless” and de-legitimises the agency of women to give and withdraw consent on the basis of the same. In *Mardaani 2*, the modern institution of the state and feudal deification of women finds a synthesis in the figure of Shivani Shivaji Roy, through an ambiguous climax the most palpable purpose of which was catharsis. Along with *Mom*, it challenges the idea that vigilante justice and cathartic vengeance are only “transgressive” imaginations, as posited by both Gopalan (1997) in the case of the rape-revenge genre and Hayward (2000) within women’s films at large. The victim, in each film, loses the agency to avenge the violence inflicted on her, reducing the event of rape or molestation to a narrative interjection and the limited visuals and descriptions of the same to the functional purpose of evoking anger and triggering a collective remembrance of the brutal rape of *Nirbhaya*. Each film, as is evident in the analysis, generates its own system of identification, rationalities, and moral polarities, while evoking different questions of gender politics. Together, they present the requirement for a new reading of rape-revenge films, one that breaks from looking at “rape-revenge films” as monolithic, and instead considers it as a cluster of genres, forms, and filmic practices and designs.

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