

Swaralipi Nandi and Esha Chatterjee (eds.)
Spectacles of Blood: A Study of Masculinity and Violence in Postcolonial Films.

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S*pectacles of Blood: A Study of Masculinity and Violence in Postcolonial Films* is a collection of essays that is aimed at expanding the moderately new area of theoretical scholarship involving critical men studies and film studies. The academic study of men and masculinities has come a long way since its emergence in the 1980s as a productive response to feminism and women's studies. This fairly recent discipline has already produced a substantial scholarly corpus including thematic studies as well as edited works and *Spectacles of Blood*, edited by Swaralipi Nandi and Esha Chatterjee is one such notable collection of essays that shows how, notions of masculinity is shaped, as different postcolonial cultures negotiate with violence in its own unique way.

The editors begin with a brief discussion on the study of violence in film and its relationship with masculinities within the theoretical ambit of post-feminist scholarship, and sociological studies. The essays in this volume, as the editors clarify at the onset, can be read following two broad interrelated tropes of postcolonial conditions. The first trope is how violence erupts, when the notions of memory, altered public space and the postcolonial gendered subject come to terms with conflicting social identities; and the other trope markedly underlines the political violence involving the postcolonial nation-state.

One of the key concerns of the book is to explore the "dominant gendering of violence" as Jigna Desai, mentions in her preface to the book that men's bloody bodies, both as perpetrators and targets of violence, frequently signify the cruelty of and the damage wrought by

both 'political' and 'structural' violence in the postcolonial public space. While it may seem that the *Spectacles of Blood* has a particular preference for the postcolonial film genre of third cinema, but true to the editors' claim in the introductory chapter, the volume does include discussions on films that are not limited only to the category of third cinema and yet represent alternative cinematic traditions that relate to the postcolonial conditions.

In exploring the critical scope of cinematic violence, *Spectacles of Blood* engages with the constitution of postcolonial identities, especially of masculinities. The volume specifically concentrates on how postcolonial cinema, as a subversive genre, intervenes in this gendering of space, beyond a man-woman power relation, in traditional patriarchal spaces. Since the 1990s, the theorizations on screen masculinities predominantly focus on the American cinema, with relatively fewer works on masculinities in European or Asian films. This volume seeks to resolve this imbalance; eight out of the ten essays thus address the national cinemas of India, Ghana, Haiti, Australia, Algeria, and Vietnam. Besides, despite the diversity of themes and perspectives it presents, *Spectacles of Blood* has a simple, reasonable intent which is to confront the genuine plurality of lived postcolonial masculinities from different national contexts by inquiring into the contradictory ideas of exceedingly plural male identities that are reconciled in the formation of a postcolonial 'masculine'.

In the very first chapter, Brian Cogan takes up the film *Bloody Sunday* (2002) directed by British director Paul Greengrass, which depicts the historical events in which several unarmed civil-rights protesters were shot by soldiers of the British Army in Northern Ireland, in 1972. Cogan argues that the film narrates the formation of a reconfigured Irish masculinity in the face of British suppression. He analyses the film to explain in what way the British occupation of Ireland and the continuing violence became a formative influence in the construction of roles and definitions of masculinity. In the next chapter, Jacob Mudy attempts to connect five different films— Merzak Allouache's *Bab El-Oued City* (1994), Yamina Bachir's *Rachida* (2002),

Nadir Mokneche's *Viva Laldjerie* (2004), Rabah Ameur-Zaimeche's *Bled Number One* (2006) and Djamilia Sahraoui's *Barakat!* (2006)— based on Algeria's traumatic conflict in the 1990s and argues how these films through a representation of masculinity and violence, and especially by identifying the links between those acts of violence and the notions of male domination, both reinforce and contest various receptions of the armed conflict in Algeria. In the following chapter, Peter Mathews, in his reading of Peter Weir's *Picnic at Hanging Rock* (1975) and Greg McLean's Horror film *Wolf Creek* (2005), explores the trope of the Australian landscape as a site of conflict both for the Australian colonial past as well as the chaotic postcolonial present. Although his essay does not probe deep into the issue of masculinity but, by tracing the symbolic space of the landscape, it explores the uneven relation between the colonizer and the colonized in the Australian context.

The performance of masculinity lies at the heart of Lee Bessette's essay that takes a closer look at the two distinct and yet complementary Haitian cultural motifs of the *gwo neg* or the 'big man' and the zombie. Bessette studies the central character, Fanfan in Dany Laferriere's film, *Le gout des jeunes filles* (2004) that shows how Fanfan negotiates between becoming a zombie and a brutally aggressive *gwo neg* and in the process a subversive form of his masculinity is produced. Similarly, the frailty and ludicrousness of violent masculinity is explored in Wisdom Agorde's essay on, *Time* (2000), a videofilm on occultism in Ghana, directed by Ifean Onyeabor. Referring to Michael Kaufman's theory of the triad of men's violence, Agorde examines the subject of the performative aspect of masculinity, and men's involvement of violence against women, children, and other men.

In the following three chapters, the figure of the gangster, in different cultural contexts, provides an interesting site to explore the relation between violence and the construction of masculinity. Hanh Ngyugen and R.C. Lutz's essay revolves around the gangster protagonist in Tran Anh Hung's film, *Cyclo* (1995) as they examine in what way, the gangster figure reconfigures and invests new and conflicting meanings to his masculinity, exposing the deep chasms in the postcolonial Vietnam.

In the subsequent chapter, Sayantani Satpathi and Samiparna Samanta provide a fairly wide-ranging overview of the gangster films of popular Hindi cinema to identify the shifting notion of masculinity in mainstream Indian society. With specific discussions on *Parinda* (1989), *Satya* (1998), and *Sarkar* (2005), their essay attempt to explain how cinematic violence materializes as a result of the mutually constitutive forces of nationalism and masculinity in India and how contests over masculinity, within national imaginaries, have historically rendered Muslims and women as imperceptible and marginalized. 1970s BBC television drama *Gangsters* set in Birmingham's underworld forms the focus of Mark Duguid and Eleni Liarou's essay that underscores, how the use of language affect the representation of masculinity and violence in the narrative, and how it operates as the locus of postcolonial domination and defiance.

The two concluding essays engage with the aesthetics of representation, as Laurent Mellet analyses Academy Award winning film *Slumdog Millionaire* (2008) in terms of aesthetic and emotional ambiguities of masculinity, and, Joya Uraizee discusses the cinematic techniques of the popular Hindi film *Bombay* (1995) to explain the ways in which the film both discloses and conceals certain unnerving concerns relating to religious violence in present-day India. Unlike, Mellet's essay— which compellingly argues that *Slumdog Millionaire*, in comparison to the original novel, assumes an undeniable discreetness in visually depicting the violent masculinity on screen and strives to identify with the aesthetics of western masculine models— Uraizee's essay does not delve deep into the issue of masculinity, instead, focuses on the 'unreal' and 'melodramatic' representation of the violence in the film.

The essays are well written and lucid; however, the intense theoretical focus and repeated use of jargon in a few of the essays might make the text somewhat esoteric to those lacking a secure grounding in film or cultural studies. While each of the essays stands well on its own, the edited collection could be more cohesive. In particular, *Spectacles of Blood* perhaps would benefit from a more persuasive focus on

masculinity and manhood in postcolonial cinema to balance the evident emphasis on violence. In this respect, a couple of aspects that might have been worth adding are the debates involving queer masculinity and the construction of race and class in relation to masculinity and violence in films. Of course it is always possible to ask for more, but *Spectacles of Blood* does more than satisfy its assurance of providing an extensive contextual analysis of postcolonial films that explore the ways violence as a cinematic trope shape postcolonial identities, especially of masculinities? The scholarly rigor and unambiguous commitment to the gendered understanding of violence undeniably make the book a valuable contribution to the emerging field of men's studies.

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