Is everybody Kung Fu fighting? Indian popular cinema and martial arts films

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Abstract

Hong Kong's martial arts film have been popular in India since the 1970s (Srinivas 2012: 66) and they have had a profound influence on the Hindi action films of the 1970s-1980s, as martial arts were progressively integrated into their narratives (Banerjea 2005; Vitali 2006). This article investigates the appeal of Hong Kong the martial arts films, and of the figure of Bruce Lee in particular, with specific reference to the social, cultural and political context of reception in India. The context within which Bruce Lee made his entrance on the Indian screens was in fact critical for his success. In particular, the article examines the appeal of martial arts, and their incorporation in the Hindi action films of the 1970s, in relation to (post)colonial discourses of Asian masculinity. Drawing upon Yvonne Tasker's examination of the "anticolonial narrative" embedded in Hong Kong martial arts films (2012: 504), the analysis discusses the incorporation of a martial arts style of combat within Indian popular films as a response to colonial and orientalist tropes of Asian effeminacy and softness (Said, 1978) and argues that martial arts allowed the 1970s Hindi action hero to articulate an alternative, anticolonial, version of Asian masculinity.

Keywords: orientalism, colonialism, masculinity, Hindi action films, Hong Kong, martial arts

Introduction: martial arts and India

A famous scene in Narendra Bedi's *Adalat* (1976) sees Amitabh Bachchan performing a combination of dance and Kung Fu moves along the sound of Carl Douglas's song *Dance the Kung Fu*. The actor's smooth dance around the living room with partner Neetu Singh bears testimony to the popularity of Kung Fu in 1970s India[1]. Hong Kong's martial arts films have been popular in the subcontinent since the 1970s (Srinivas 2012: 66) and they had a profound influence on the Hindi action films of that decade (Banerjea 2005). While "action and stunts" have been integrated into Hindi film narratives since the early days of cinema in India (Vitali 2008: 1), the 1970s saw in fact the introduction of martial arts elements in Hindi films[2].

The appeal of martial arts and their incorporation into Indian films have been investigated by scholars from a socio-economic, political and cultural perspective, taking into consideration the

[1] The fact that both *Dance the Kung Fu* and Douglas's previous hit *Kung Fu Fighting* (1974), were produced by Biddu Appaiah, a British-based Indian music producer, also attest the popularity of Kung-Fu style martial arts in India.

[2] Martial arts moves still feature in Hindi films, most evidently in those starring actor Akshay Kumar, he himself trained in the martial arts. Think for example of films such as, among others, *Chandni Chowk to China* (Nikhil Advani, 2009), *Brothers* (Karan Malhotra, 2015) and even the more recent *Kesari* (Anurag Singh, 2019), in which Akhsay Kumar's fighting style is clearly informed by the actor's martial arts skills.

conditions of film production and distribution, as well as the political context of 1970s India (see for example Banerjea 2005; Srinivas 2003, 2013; Vitali 2006, 2007). While acknowledging the importance of understanding the socio-economic context of production and the economic imperatives behind the introduction of martial arts films in the Indian market, as well as the cultural and political context within which Hong Kong's martial arts films were introduced in India, this article wishes to examine in particular the appeal of martial arts, and their incorporation in the Hindi action films of the 1970s, in relation to (post)colonial discourses of Asian masculinity. The relation between experiences of oppression and colonialism on the one hand and the popularity of martial arts on the other has been commented upon by Srinivas, who observes that:

> Why martial arts, mediated by the Hong Kong action films, became attractive in other parts of the world with colonial histories and among marginal groups and how these forms were integrated into existing popular cultural productions are areas worthy of investigation (2003: 42).

Taking on board Yvonne Tasker's study of "racial discourses of masculine identity" in Hong Kong's films as a response to colonial tropes of Asian softness (2012: 504), the present analysis frames the integration of martial arts within Indian popular films in relation to colonial and orientalist tropes of Asian effeminacy and examines the appeal of martial arts in relation to the (re)masculinisation of the South Asian male body.

The article is structured in three parts: it first offers an overview of the socio-economic and political context within which Hong Kong martial arts films were first introduced in India; then, it focuses on similarities and overlaps between Hong Kong's martial arts films and Hindi action films of the 1970s, specifically in relation to the personae of Bruce Lee and Amitabh Bachchan, taking as an example Prakash Mehra's film *Zanjeer* (1973). Further, the analysis moves to martial arts as the vehicle of anticolonial instances and discusses the potential of martial arts to re-masculinise the Indian hero and, with him, the Indian nation, against colonial discourses of Asian softness and effeminacy. Finally, the article closes with some reflections on the martial arts-focussed films' potential to promote, following S. V. Srinivas, a feeling of "Inter-Asia solidarity" (2012).

Bruce Lee, martial arts and Hindi cinema

East Asian martial arts have been popular in India since the 1970s: several scholars agree that the release of Bruce Lee's *Enter the Dragon* (Robert Clouse, 1973) paved the way for the popularisation of martial arts in the country (Banerjea 2005; Prashad 2003, Srinivas 2003, 2013). And yet, as Banerjea points out (2005: 173-174), Bruce Lee's reputation preceded the release of the film. At a time in which none of his films had been imported yet into the country, in the 1960s Lee travelled

around India scouting locations for the film *The Silent Flute* (never to be made in the end), making a name for himself thanks to the occasional spontaneous performances he would engage in in various public places, invariably attracting the attention of curious bystanders (Thomas 1994: 111-113). In his biography of Bruce Lee, Thomas recounts how, even though the martial arts had been brought into China by the Indian monk Bodhidharma, "hundreds of years later there weren't even vaguely competent martial artists to be found in India" (1994: 112), therefore, whenever Lee showed his moves to local martial artists, they "stared in disbelief […] quite literally, in astonishment" (112). The situation changed when India started to import Hong Kong action films, which led to the "mushrooming of schools and 'institutes' offering training in East Asian martial arts, many of them linked to Hong Kong films and its stars in a rather direct way" (Srinivas 2003: 3).

The introduction of Hong Kong martial arts films in India responded to a very specific political and economic situation. Valentina Vitali's in-depth study of Hindi action films illustrates how Hong Kong martial arts films were introduced in the Indian market as a result of Indira Gandhi's economic policy, which imposed new, and more expensive, conditions to the Motion Picture Export Association of America (MPEAA)[3]. As a result, the MPEAA began to import new cheaper products into the Indian market, such as Hong Kong martial arts films, Italian spaghetti westerns and James Bond's films (Vitali 2006:133). These films "had a powerful impact on the Indian cinema audiences" (Banerjea 2005: 172), as narratives of injustice and revenge stroke a chord with viewers. This is because the 1970s marked a period of major socio-political changes in India, as the country was shifting from the "idealistic optimism" (Ahmed 1992: 292) of the Nehru years towards the period of "hard pragmatism" of his daughter Indira (294), which was accompanied by a growing disenchantment toward national politics. Widespread corruption, deep economic difficulties and moments of heightened social and political unrest – with episodes of police violently attacking protesters who had taken to the streets– culminated in the twenty-one months of Indira Gandhi's Emergency (proclaimed in 1975), a particularly dark moment in the history of independent India (Ganti 2004: 33-34; Kazmi 1998: 150-153).

This shift was reflected in Hindi cinema. In the post-independence period, the landscape of mainstream Hindi cinema had been dominated by narratives committed to a sentiment of nation-building and by a strong faith in the newly independent nation-state. Hindi films of the 1950s and 1960s actively endorsed the nationalist cause and, consciously upholding the socialist values of the Nehruvian era, addressed the viewer primarily as citizen[4] (see Chakravarty 1993, Prasad 1998,

[3] For a critical analysis of the relationship between martial arts, the global circulation of capital and the local organisation of film distribution in India, see Srinivas (2003, 2013) and Vitali (2006, 2008).

[4] In particular the films of Raj Kapoor, Bimal Roy, Guru Dutt and Mehboob Khan, the filmmakers of the "golden era of Indian cinema" addressed issues of social reform and the struggles of a nation-in-the-making, exhorting "the nation's citizen-soldier-peasant to the national cause" (Virdi 2003: 107).

Rajadhyaksha 2003). The film hero of the times was, in Virdi's words, "a crusader for the nation and optimistic about its future, notwithstanding his critical appraisal of problems besetting the nation" (2003: 92). However, the appeal of the genre began to decline in the 1970s: the political violence of the period and a steady disillusionment with the institutions of the state could not possibly resonate with narratives that celebrated these same institutions. Moreover, structural changes within the Indian film industry required producers and exhibitors to dispose of a quicker turnover of films to maximise profits, an objective that could not be fulfilled by the social films that have dominated the 1950s-1960s, as they were too costly and had a considerably slow turnover (Vitali, 2008: 193 – 206).

It is in this context that a new kind cinema appeared in the 1970s. The new action cinema[5] of the 1970s marked a break from the post-national era because, in contrast with the mainstream Hindi films of the two previous decades, the films of the period articulated a growing dissatisfaction and cynicism within society. This cynicism found its perfect mode of expression in the "angry young man" films – which turned the then relatively unknown Amitabh Bachchan into stardom. Unlike the hero of 1950s and 1960s cinema, who was a "passive, gentle, honourable role model" (Ahmed 1992: 298), the new angry young man of Hindi cinema did not refrain from violence, as in fact in the new political climate, "violence as the mean to counter violence found acceptability […] as the state had lost his moral right to assert its authority and secure justice" (Chatterjee 2003:15). Furthermore, action films of the times – the most two notable examples being perhaps *Deewar* (Yash Chopra 1975) and *Sholay* (Ramesh Sippy, 1975) – saw the introduction of martial arts–inspired modes of fighting into their narratives (Banerjea 2005; 172 – 176; Rajadhyaksha and Willemen, 1999: 423; Van der Heide, 2002: 148).

In this context, it becomes clearer why Hong Kong martial arts films resonated with local audiences in India. As Banerjea observed:

> It is no secret that when Bruce Lee's *Enter the Dragon* (dir. Robert Clouse, 1973) was shown in India […] it had a profound impact on Indian audiences across the country. In this decade of increasing authoritarian rule led by Indira Gandhi, the celluloid iconography of Bruce Lee's lean and mean stance against the villainous Mr Han found ample residue in the angry Amitabh Bachchan characters (2005: 164).

[5] The boundary between genres, in Indian popular cinema, is not as clear-cut as in western cinema, as films tend to combine elements (such as comedy, drama, action, romance, etc.) that in the west are used to distinguish between genres (Rajadhyaksha and Willemen 1999: 13; see also Thomas 1985: 120 - 121). As a consequence, as Ganti notes, in Indian cinema "the genre of a film depends upon which element is foregrounded as the driving force of the plot and other narrative conventions" (2004: 84). Therefore, even though the action ingredient has been integrated into film narratives for a long time, the 1970s films starring Amitabh Bachchan became known as "action film" because of the emphasis they put on action, even though maintaining other elements (see Ganti 2004: 84; Rao 2003; Virdi 2003: 178; Vitali 2006: 127 – 133)

It was especially Bruce Lee's rebellion against oppression and his fight against a system which is no longer capable of (or interested in) guaranteeing justice that, according to Banerjea, prompted a comparison with the angry young man character, as viewers picked on the similarities between the plights of the two. Indeed, there are many interesting parallels between the two characters.

Hong Kong films and Hindi action films of the 1970s

There are several elements that 1970s Hindi action cinema shares with Hong Kong martial arts films. This section will offer an overview of similarities and overlaps between these two kinds of cinema by taking into consideration in particular Prakash Mehra's *Zanjeer* (1973), the film that launched the "angry young man" and which laid out the narrative structure of these films. Even though the fighting style of Vijay in *Zanjeer*, described by Mishra as "a mixture of Bruce Lee and the street fighter" (1985: 139), could at first appear as the most immediate similarity between the two genres, there are some other important narrative elements that bring *Zanjeer* close to Hong Kong martial arts films.

For a start, the narrative structure of both genres, being modelled on action cinema, operates "around an axis of power/powerlessness" (Tasker 2012: 503), as films trace the journey of a hero who suffers "physically, emotionally and or psychologically" (Kazmi 1998: 140) and yet reacts against his circumstances and eventually overpowers his oppressors. As Tasker explains:

> While the hero is, by definition, an active figure, he is also frequently rendered passive, subject to a range of restraints and oppressive forces. The hero is also defined in part by his suffering, which both lends him a certain tragic status and demonstrates his remarkable ability to endure (503).

This is clearly the case for the Vijay/Amitabh Bachchan character in *Zanjeer*. The tragic status of Vijay, who leads a solitary life, can be traced back to the murder of his parents, but his ability to endure has led him to become a police inspector some twenty years later. And yet, his life is tested again when he is framed for bribery and unjustly jailed. If in the early part of the film, when he fights petty criminal Sher Khan while off-duty, and with his bare hands, the ineffectiveness of the police as an institution had already been suggested, after his imprisonment it is clear that Vijay has been failed by the system and has "to take the law into his own hands" (Dwyer 2000: 124). And he does so literally, because, just like Bruce Lee in the Hong Kong martial arts films, he does not dispose of any other weapon except for his own body (Banerjea 2005: 174; Tasker 2012: 503-504).

This is an important element of commonality between the two characters: both Bruce Lee and Amitabh/the angry young man are in fact portrayed as working-class heroes (Jachinson Chan, 2001:

80-85; Chakravarty 231) as they embody the frustrations of the left behinds, the "working classes and other marginalised groups" (Prasad 1998: 138) who find themselves confronting a corrupted society, with no possibility to seek help from the police and/or from the institutions of the state (Prasad 1998: 142-144; Tasker 2012: 503-504). Reflecting the axis of power/powerlessness mentioned by Tasker, the angry young man is helpless against irremediably corrupted authorities and so he "speaks to the powerlessness of the common man, relying just on his hands, his feet and his courage to transform his environment" (Banerjea:176).

It is not surprising then that Bruce Lee reminded Indian viewers of Amitabh Bachchan: Vijay Prashad too, talking about the reception of Bruce Lee's *Enter the Dragon* in India, wrote that, to viewers, he appeared like "a foreign version of Amitabh Bachchan" (2003: 54). He commented: "Lee stood his ground against corruption of all forms, including the representative of the worst of the Asian bourgeoisie, Mr. Han. With his bare fists and his *nanchakus*, Lee provided young people with the sense that we could be victorious" (54) – the "we", of course, is the common man referenced by Banerjea. Moreover, if Bruce Lee's characters tend to engage in a fight to protect their own community (Tasker 504) so does Vijay in *Zanjeer* (and the character of the angry young man in general) as in fact his fight is not simply for his own personal gain but is endowed with "a social purpose" (Prasad 1998: 144)[6].

Another important overlap between Hong Kong martial arts films and the Hindi action films of the 1970s , is, as Vitali observes, the prominence of notions of "status, spirituality and mythology" (2006: 147), which are embedded in the narratives of both film traditions. As she explains:

> Notions of destiny, of Hindu mythology and of status as caste are evidence of the action film's distance from the discourses of the (nominally) secular State. More pertinently here, these notions link the genre to localised Indian networks and, indirectly, to the Hong Kong martial art film, where the hero's skill is also embedded in ideas of status as proximity to the imperial head, of spiritual integrity and Chinese mythology (2006:146).

The disenchantment with the institutions of the state upholding ideals of citizenship and secularism was thus reflected in Hindi action films in which the hero, rather than putting its faith in the law of the state, seeks divine blessing and displays a trust in destiny never seen before in the rational hero of the 1950s-1960s.

[6] Prasad's point is particularly significant because it points to the continuity between Hindi action films and the melodramas of the 1960s. As will be discussed in the following sections, for all the criticism of the state, Hindi action films retain in fact a strong faith in the project of the nation.

The similarities, in terms of themes and narrative structures, between Hong Kong martial arts cinema and the 1970s Hindi action films that have been sketched in this section, contribute to explain why, as remarked by Banerja and Prashad, the arrival of Bruce Lee on Indian screens resonated with Indian audiences and reminded them of Amitabh Bachchan. Not only Hong Kong martial arts films tackled themes that could speak to the Indian spectator, but, as mentioned before, Hindi action films of the period began to insert in their narratives action scenes clearly inspired by Hong Kong martial arts films (Banerjea 2005: 173, Rajadhyaksha and Willemen, 1999: 423; Vitali 2006: 149). Fight scenes abound in films made in the 1970s and 1980s, and they often borrow from East Asian martial arts films. This way, it appears, Indian action films found in martial arts a suitable mode of expression of the predicament of the hero. The question that needs to be addressed then is, why martial arts appeared to be "a suitable mode of action for an Indian hero" (Vitali 2006: 134).

Kung Fu and Hindi action films: the anticolonial element

The answer to this question, according to Vitali, is to be found in the financial situation of the time, marked by Indira Gandhi's economic policy of centralisation against "the globalising pressure of US financial capital" (2006: 147). As the film industry had remained relatively free from government control, it became a crucial site for the circulation of capital and needed to find ways to produce (successful) films at a faster rate. The solution was found with Hindi action films, which combined elements which had proved successful at the lower end of the market (such as the martial arts ingredient) with values that resonated with the upper end of the market (such as melodrama and the question of the nation, albeit tackled from a different angle), considerably speeding up the turnover of films while at the same time appealing to a much wider audience (Vitali 2006: 139 – 150; 2008: 203). The insertion of martial arts in Hindi films thus responded to a very specific political and economic situation:

> Hong Kong martial arts film were deemed a suitable source of inspiration for the Hindi action film because, through this genre, the industry was reshaping itself so as to better function as a medium for the circulation of capital – a capital rooted in localise, lineage-based networks that sought to evade a centralising, secular state (Vitali 2006: 146-147).

While the economic context of production remains central to understand the cultural production of the time, the specific appeal of martial arts, beyond the overlaps of tropes discussed in the previous section, requires further investigation.

In order to understand the specific appeal of martial arts in India, Yvonne Tasker's examination of the "anticolonial narrative" embedded in Hong Kong martial arts films (2012: 504) offers a useful point of departure. Tasker's analysis is primarily concerned with discourses of race

and masculinity in the Bruce Lee's martial arts films of the 1970s. If, as previously mentioned, she notes how the tension between activity and passivity is a key element of the typical action narrative, this dynamic, she observes, is "complexly articulated through the discourses of race, class and sexuality that constitute the body of the hero" (503). In Hong Kong films the empowered body of the hero is all the more important because the plight of the hero is always framed in relation with the country's colonial past, so that conflict is enacted "in terms of the figures of colonial oppression, in which the enemy represents a threat from the outside", either as an agent of colonialism or imperialism (504). Seen in this perspective, martial arts represent a particularly appropriate mode of fighting because, as Zarrilli posits, "the martial arts are techniques of bodily practice that allow an individual to gain agency or power *within certain specific contexts*" (1995:189). Through this technique, Zarrilli maintains, "the practitioner's "self" ideally is reconstituted through long-term practice to achieve agency and power that can be deployed personally, socially, aesthetically, performatively, and cosmologically" (188-189). The colonial references made in Hong Kong martial arts films render the empowered body the means through which the hero achieves agency and gains power against the agents of colonialism, fighting it in the name of the social and, critically, national group he represents.

It is because of the context within which the action is framed that, drawing upon Fanon's reflections on the oppressive limits imposed on the natives in the colonial world (1961), Tasker suggests that Bruce Lee's films stage "fantasies of physical empowerment" that allow the transgression of these same boundaries (2012: 504). Taking as an example *Fist of Fury* (Lo Wei, 1972) – but the same applies to the other Bruce Lee's films – Tasker argues that Lee's muscular body serves the purpose of championing a "muscular Chinese national identity […] against the insults of the Japanese" (505; see also Hoang 2004: 228-229). In the film, Lee's response to the Chinese people being called the "Sick Men of Asia" is in fact a physical one: this way, his body becomes not simply the means which allows him, as previously mentioned, to fight oppression, but it is also the medium through which he articulates, and avenges, Chinese nationalism. As Tasker observes:

> This expression of nationalism is very clearly inscribed through the revelation of Lee's body – as he ritualistically removes his jacket – so that discourses of masculinity and nationhood are complexly bound together in his star image. It is Lee's body that marks the assertion of a masculine national identity (505).

Questions of masculinity and nationhood, in these films, thus intermingle in narratives which avenge both man and nation.

By emphasising the muscular body of the hero, Hong Kong martial arts films also respond to a tradition of racial stereotypes rooted in western orientalist representations of Chinese men as "soft and delicate" (Hoang 2004: 228). Drawing upon Edward Said's work on orientalism (1975), Tasker in fact notes how "the hardness of Lee's body and of his star image emerges from a history of softness, a history of images in which both Chinese men and women had been represented as passive and compliant" (508). Bruce Lee's fight against the agents of colonialism thus not only becomes the means through which he articulates a Chinese masculine national identity, but it also allows for the temporarily rewriting and avenging of "memories of racial subjugation" (Mackintosh 2014: 1487). The anti-imperialist narrative embedded in Lee's films is, according to Mackintosh, the reason behind their success with immigrant audiences in the West, as well as with peoples with histories of colonialism:

> Lee's vengeance was not simply a racial affirmation. It was a potently gendered assertion of non-white race; the histories of war, imperial subjugation, economic privation, and transnational migration, all inscribed onto the bodies of men were re-charted anew (2014:1487)

The combination of nationalistic, anticolonial and anti-imperialist nationalism, as well as the subversion of orientalist stereotypes of effeminacy and softness are thus key ingredients of Hong Kong martial arts films. Even though the Hindi action cinema of the 1970s does not propose a direct reference to India's colonial past, these themes amply resonate with the angry young man films. A closer look into the physical abilities of the hero in Hindi action films shows important similarities in the ways in which instances of anticolonial nationalism are embedded in the male body.

Martial arts, Hindi films and postcolonial masculinities

If Bruce Lee's body marks the assertion of a Chinese masculine (and muscular) national identity against a history of orientalist depictions of Asian men, in a similar way, the tough hero of the Hindi action films of the 1970s and 1980s, when he fights against corruption and injustice also affirms a new form of masculinity – one which is juxtaposed to orientalist representation of Indian men. One of the pillars of orientalism was the representation of European colonies as the contrasting image of Europe (Said 1978: 9; see also Nayar 2012). This juxtaposition served the purpose of reinforcing the perception of Europe's superiority and to justify its right to rule other countries. The colonial discourse actively produced a dichotomy according to which India was "barbaric, primitive, irrational", in contrast with a Europe that was instead defined as "advanced, modern, rational" (Nayar, 2012: 61). Along these same lines, the British colonial discourse promoted a "homology between sexual and political dominance" (Nandy 1983: 4), whereby the Indian natives were effectively

feminised in opposition to the "more masculine" British coloniser[7] (see Srivastava 2016: 6-8: Gabriel 2013: 53-55). The characterisation of the colonised subject as soft and effeminate was thus a rhetorical strategy to signify their "incapacity for self-rule" (Srivastava: 7) and, by contrast, to confirm the right of the colonial power to rule them (see also Chacko 2012; Gabriel 2013; Nandy 1983).

Despite the fact that the angry young man films made their first appearance more than two decades after the end of British colonialism, its legacy was still strongly felt in India and, as Ahmed (1992: 300-301) and Srivastava (2016: 11-14) observe, it had left some traces in the characterisation of the gentle hero of post-independence Indian cinema, who, being shaped by ideas developed during the anticolonial period, unwittingly displayed a (problematic) continuity with colonial representations of Indian masculinity. This continuity transpires in the separation between the material and the spiritual domains of culture which had been theorised by the nationalist movement in the struggle against colonial rule in India: the material sphere was the one in which the colonising power was most powerful, whereas India was superior in the spiritual sphere of life. The argument of the nationalist movement was that, in order to win independence, India needed to acquire the technical skills of Britain, while at the same time protecting its spiritual sphere from any western influence (Chatterjee, 1993: 120). As Chatterjee explained:

> Science, technology, rational forms of economic organization, modern methods of statecraft-these had given the European countries the strength to subjugate the non-European people and to impose their dominance over the whole world. To overcome this domination, the colonized people had to learn those superior techniques of organizing material life and incorporate them within their own cultures. […] But this could not mean the imitation of the West in every aspect of life, for then the very distinction between the West and the East would vanish-the self-identity of national culture would itself be threatened (1989: 623).

Importantly, the anticolonial nationalist movement identified the material with the outside world -the world of "statecraft, science and technology"- which was the domain of man, and the spiritual with the private sphere of the home, which was the domain of the woman (Chatterjee 1993: 6). But if in the colonial discourse the binary distinction between masculinised colonisers and effeminate natives was based on the technical superiority of the former, accepting one's own inferiority in the domain of science and, furthermore, marking it as the domain of man, meant re-inserting colonial discourses on masculinity, or lack thereof, into the nationalist agenda. This is the reason why Srivastava argues that the anticolonial nationalist, instead of interrogating the colonial model, agreed with its premise

[7] With the exception of the "martial races" such as the Sikhs and the Gurkhas (Srivastava 2016: 8)

that “Indians lacked manliness” due to the country’s inferior scientific attainments and “sought to rectify this ‘defect’ through the promotion of western science” (10). As masculinity was associated with science, and science with the institutions of the modern nation-state, a direct connection was drawn between masculinity, science and modernity. As a consequence, in the “association between science and masculinity […] being scientific also became an indispensable sign of Indian modernity” (10).

In the popular Hindi films of the post-independence period, which largely promoted the values of the newly independent nation-state, the hero not only displayed a strong moral authority but, in agreement with the modernising stance of the government, he was also a champion of science. A classic example is the character of Bharat in Manoj Kumar’s *Purab Aur Paschim* (1970): Bharat is a promising Indian student temporally moving to Britain to further his studies and to acquire the technical skills that will allow him, upon his return to India, to contribute to the modernisation of the country. The whole film revolves around the juxtaposition of India and the west, showcasing the moral superiority of Bharat (whose name suggests his character is a metaphor for his country) compared to his British, and British Indian, counterparts. Indeed, moral superiority (signified by the hero’s ability to endure), a passion for science and a strong faith in the institutions of the nation-state were, in post-independence Hindi cinema, the key characteristics of the hero. And yet, the gentleness of the hero and his “passivity translated in terms of moral superiority” reflected an image of the Indian man “partly created by himself and partly by the coloniser”, so that “the Indian hero became a parody of a parody” (Ahmed 300). The problem with this characterisation lies in the fact that, by being described by his extraordinary capacity to endure suffering and his willingness sacrifice himself in the name of the nation, the hero inadvertently replicated the colonial stereotype of the colonised man as soft and passive (Ahmed, 300-301).

If that was the case in the post-independence period, things changed by the 1970s, when Gandhi’s “politics of feminized masculinity” (Chacko 2012: 111) was replaced by a much more aggressive politics. Representations of masculinity in Hindi cinema, Virdi observes, tend to shift according to national historical changes (2002: 88-89), and in a context of growing inequalities and declining faith in national institutions (Nandy 1998: 9), the films of the 1970s promoted the image of a new hero who, disengaged from the politics of the state, rejected a model of manliness grounded in science and rationality and detached from “bodily representations or aggressive behaviour” (Srivastava 13). As previously established, having the state lost its legitimacy, the new hero, rather than accepting his faith with stoic resignation, would denounce corruption, and he would put up a fight in his quest for justice. This way, the hero not only reacts to the shortcomings of the public

institutions of the state, but he also rejects a representation of masculinity which was still rooted in orientalist narratives. As Ashis Nandy put it:

> The anti-hero, when he turns against the villain, also turns against the- 'passive', 'effeminate', ineffective hero and, if I may add, against the popularly perceived cause of the decline and collapse of the imagined world of pastoral innocence and moral incorruptibility. To invoke the well-known psycho-analytic formulation of an ego defence, he turns against a self that has become identified with failure and *impotency* (1998: 8-9).

The physical strength of the angry young man character thus breaks away from orientalist narratives just like the Bruce Lee character in Hong Kong martial arts films does, relying solely on his own physical abilities to challenge the inequality, injustice and corruption which plague society. Martial arts thus provided a suitable mode of expression of the character's struggle and suffering not only because the struggles of the Hong Kong hero resonated with those of the Indian hero of the time, but also because the martial arts ingredient allowed for the articulation of a version of Asian masculinity which broke with a tradition of orientalist representations whose residual legacy was still present in the post-independence cultural production in India.

And yet, notwithstanding the fact that he denounces, and confronts, the corrupt institutions of the state (be it the law or the police), the fight of the angry young man is ultimately a fight for, and not against, the state. Despite being placed on the wrong side of the law in fact, the hero of the 1970s action cinema is not introduced as an outlaw –rather, just like Vijay in *Zanjeer*, he turns into one when it becomes apparent that the institutions which are supposed to uphold the values of the state have failed and that this is his only chance to get justice (Nandy 1998; Prasad 1998; Vitali 2006, 2008). The hero's endorsement of violence is thus a consequence of him being "failed by the state" (Dwyer 2000:124) but it firmly remains for him a means to secure social justice, not an end in itself. The social significance of his mission is also emphasised by the support that he received from other "dispossessed", which add a social meaning to his personal struggle (Prasad, 1998: 143 -144). In this respect Fareeduddin Kazmi remarks that the hero-turned vigilante takes on the individuals who have abused and corrupted the institutions of the state, but never the system itself (1998: 134 –155). As a consequence, in his quest for justice, the Hindi action hero, even though officially operating outside of the boundaries of the law, acts as a substitute for those same institutions that have let him down. As Prasad observes:

> The Amitabh persona is a 'proletarian hero' who is at the same time a representative of the state. It is the act of switching sides, positioning himself on the side of the 'illegal' (but morally upright) margin, that gives the figure its power (1998: 144).

This way, the hero of 1970s Hindi action films "mediate the split between state and nation" (Vitali 2008: 209), making up for the shortcomings of the state and acting as an "agent of national reconciliation" (Prasad 1998: 141). Not only Hindi action films displayed a continuity with the past with a hero who is, as Prasad argues, "a representative of the state" [8] (1998:144), but the emphasis on sundered families and the plights of mothers and (orphaned) sons too retained a strong melodramatic character that resonated with the films of the earlier days (see Thomas 1998).

Seen in this light it becomes clear then why martial arts appeared like a suitable way to articulate the instances of the subaltern hero. As a discipline which, as Zarrilli points out, combines spirituality with physical training (1998), it emerges as the perfect practice for the Hindi action hero, who, although using his body as a weapon, retains a moral superiority over his opponents as he eventually "conquers villains through a combination of physical and moral strength" (Vitali 2006:146). The incorporation of martial arts into Hindi films does not mean that Hindi action cinema simply copied Hong Kong films though. The incorporation of the martial arts into the fighting scene of the Hindi action hero meant that the hero borrowed certain elements of and mixed them up with "indigenous fighting techniques" (Vitali 2006: 149). Martial arts – as it happens with any other element borrowed from foreign cinemas in Hindi films – were thus integrated within narratives and themes and actively "indianised", so that they could resonate with the national audience (Thomas 1998: 161-162).

Conclusion: anticolonial narratives and transnational solidarity

Since their introduction into the Indian market in the mid-1970s, Hong Kong martial arts films have had a profound influence on the Hindi action films of the time, which began to incorporate a martial arts mode of fighting into their narratives. The action ingredient had been part of Indian cinema well before the arrival of Hong Kong films onto the scene and, in the 1950s and 1960s, there existed an action film genre which revolved entirely around the figure of wrestler Dara Singh. And yet, notwithstanding Singh's popularity, this genre remained largely "at the margins of the industry" if compared to the Hindi action films of the 1970s –which incorporated a martial arts style of fighting (Vitali 2008: 134).

[8] It is important to note that in Indian popular cinema the family is a metonym for the nation: the aforementioned division of the domain of culture into a material sphere and spiritual one, deemed the spiritual sphere as the bulwark of national culture and identity, as the quote from Chatterjee clearly shows (1989: 623). In such a gendered spaces, women became the custodian of the family and of the nation's honour, as well as the emblem of the nation itself , As a consequence, the hero who fights for his family (and for his mother in particular) is metonymically fighting for the nation (for more detailed analyses of the representation of the family as nation see Desai 2004: 133- 157; Dwyer 2000: 130 - 132; Virdi 2003: 11-13, 34 - 43).

As explained in previous sections, Hong Kong martial arts cinema and the Hindi action films on the 1970s displayed many similarities in terms of narrative structure and motifs, which explains why Indian viewers could easily identify with Chinese characters (see Banerjea 2005 and Prashad 2003). But for what concerns the incorporation of a martial arts mode of action in Hindi films, this article suggests that it is especially the articulation of anticolonial instances in Hong Kong martial arts films that led to the incorporation of martial arts sequences in Hindi action films. As Mackintosh observed:

> Lee's assault on Japanese virility tapped into a post-colonial anger worldwide. His own diasporic situation—born in America and suffering America's anti-Chinese racism—spoke not only to his compatriots in the global Chinese diaspora, but to erstwhile colonial populations, the displaced, and the dispossessed (2014: 1486-87)

The incorporation of martial arts in Hindi action cinema responds not only to the characterisation of the gentle hero of the post-independence period, but especially (and simultaneously), to centuries of orientalist stereotypes on Asian masculinity. The strong body of the hero in these films counters centuries of stereotypes of softness and effeminacy, but also actively challenges injustice and oppression. The fact that, as Zarrilli poses, martial arts combine physical and spiritual training and allow the practitioner to achieve agency and power through it (189), makes it a very suitable mode of fighting for an anticolonial narrative.

The incorporation of martial arts into Hindi films also opens up a dialogue between India and China. The parallel history of colonialism of India and Hong Kong, and the incorporation of martial arts in Hindi films as anticolonial tropes, speak of the possibility of a shared sensibility between the Indian and the Chinese audience. Notwithstanding the specific "Indian" flavour of Hindi martial arts films, Banerjea in fact observes that "Bachchan's iconoclastic performance introduce a kind of migrant metaphor into commercial Bombay films. His adaptation of Tae Kwon Do fighting style, for instance, embodies the ways in which concepts of culture and identity are not exclusively rooted in one location" (176). Indeed, part of the pleasure derived from the angry young man films, according to Banerjea, derived from the "fluency" of the audience in Hong Kong martial arts films. The similarities of themes between the two genres and the borrowing of the martial arts mode of expression thus become of particular interest because they speak of an alternative version of the global movement of cultural forms which is in contrast with views of globalization as a synonym for Americanisation. In recent years two films in particular, Nikhil Advani's *Chandni Chowk to China* (2009) and Stanley Tong's *Kung Fu Yoga* (2017), notwithstanding tensions between the two countries, have attempted at creating a dialogue between India and China, although with not much

success[9]. A more detailed analysis of the relationship between the two cinematic traditions and the modes of engagement with these films could thus pave the way for a reflection on the role of popular culture in the creation of what Srinivas calls "Inter-Asia solidarity" (2013).

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[9] For a more detailed discussion of these two films see Srinivas 2013 and Łuszczykiewicz, and Iwanek 2017.

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