SHOLAY
And the Discourse of Evil

In this chapter, we seek to examine the discourse of evil articulated in Sholay, the understanding of which is central to a cultural reading of the film. We propose to examine this discourse in relation to the concepts of melodrama and social order. Sholay is a melodrama which has a vital bearing on the concept of social order. The discourse of evil is analysed in com-
parison with two other very popular Indian films.

Melodrama comes from the Greek word melos meaning song and originally it denoted a stage play accompanied by music. In later times, the component of music ceased to be an integral part of melodrama, and the term came to signify a form of drama characterised by sensationalism, emotional intensity, hyperbole, strong action, violence, rhetorical excess, moral polarities, and the triumph of good over evil. Until very recent times, the term melodrama had been used in a perjorative sense to characterise works of entertainment that subscribed to an excess of hyperbole and which sought to manipulate crudely the emotions of the spectators. However, during the last fifteen years or so there has been a distinct rehabilitation of the term following a retheorisation of such issues as the nature of representation in cinema, the role of ideology, the construction of female subjectivity, scopophilic pleasure and so on. It is now employed not as a term of disparagement, but one of neutrality which serves to identify a genre of film-making. In discussing the concept of melodrama we need to bear in mind this valuational metamorphosis.

When we seek to apply the term melodrama to Asian cinemas we are confronted with further difficulties. None of the Asian languages has a term for melodrama; such terms as we find are clearly recent coinages. If we take Indian culture as an example, it is clear that the concept of melodrama is alien to it. Moreover, some of the greatest works of classical Indian theatre can be characterised as melodramas. However, in discussing cinema, which is clearly an importation from the West, we need to make certain finer discriminations based on cinematic experience in general. In this regard, the term melodrama, though not unproblematic, can also prove to be handy.

The discourse of evil is pivotal to melodrama and, as we shall presently see, is indissolubly linked to the question of social order. Social order is a human construct that is shaped by power and ideology. It is culture specific and historically contingent. As we seek to examine the discourse of evil inscribed in the filmic text of Sholay in relation to the other two films, we hope the importance of these observations would become more apparent. When we discussed, in the first chapter, the distinctiveness of Sholay in relation to the genealogy of popular Indian cinema, the concept of social order was invisibly present inflecting our thinking.

In this chapter we examine three of the most popular films made in India in relation to the concepts of evil and social order, and analyse how these concepts as discursive practices have been undergoing a transformation as a consequence of diverse social and cultural factors. Evil is a pervasive force in society and consequently, theologians, philosophers, social scientists, cultural historians, and analysts of popular culture have sought to uncover its true nature from their particular vantage point and preferred perspectives. Evil is a central fact in melodramas, both in the East and the West, and hence, it is only appropriate that closer and more sustained attention be given to this important topic.

The Oxford English Dictionary identifies two sets of meanings of the word 'evil': one strong and the other weak. According to the stronger sense of the word, the
term evil is employed to denote the polar opposite of the word "good" in all its usages—bad, wicked, vicious, malicious, morally depraved and so on. The weaker sense of the term denotes qualities of unpleasantness, disagreeability, offensiveness. In this paper, we use the term in its stronger sense. Paul Ricœur, who has done some interesting theological explications of the term evil, views it primordially as defilement and staining of what was once clean and pure. This seems to combine the stronger and weaker sense identified by the Oxford English Dictionary. Evil is best seen as a contested concept in the Galilean sense, and as Parkin rightly points out, in defining and explicating the moral evil of others, we are also making statements about ourselves, our sense of humanity, and our own capacity to cope with suffering. He goes on to identify three levels of meaning in the term evil: the moral reference to human culpability; the physical, which includes the elemental forces of nature like floods, droughts and earthquakes; the metaphysical, by which disorder in the cosmos results from conflicts of principles or wills. In a sense, all these three levels are intimately connected.

Paul Siwek defines evil as

all that opposes the intrinsic frailty of being. Therefore, it is all that hinders the being's full development, all that thwarts its tendencies, all that resists the drive from the depths of that being toward full expression, toward that completion which it would attain to in its ideal type, the archetype of its own nature.

This description is interesting because it identifies good with growth and evil as that which opposes it, a sense which takes on ironic undertones in this paper.

Evil is a central topic in melodramas both in the East and the West. Peter Brooks points out that the connotations of melodrama include indulgence of strong emotionalism, moral polarities, extreme states of being, situations, actions, overt villainy, persecution of the good and the eventual reward of virtue, overblown expression, and dark and sinister plottings. In all this, it is patent that evil plays a dominant role serving to define the moral contours of the hero, and providing the perfect counterforce to establish his moral authority.

Most melodramas are framed by the notion of evil; the Manichaeian struggle between good and evil set the discursive boundaries within which melodramas are played out. As Brooks observes,

the polarization of good and evil work toward revealing their presence and operation as real forces in the world. This conflict suggests the need to recognize and confront evil, to combat and expel it, to purge the social order.

The interplay between evil and social order in melodramas that Brooks is referring to can and do take many interesting forms.

Melodramas, by definition, deal with characters who are easily recognizable, very often stereotypical, and incarnate the forces of good and evil. What is important in melodrama is not so much the sense of external realism and complexity of characterization born of psychological depth, as emotional realism and the willingness of the audience to readily identify with the presented characters, in terms of emotional needs and moral imagination. Melodramas, by and large, move
away from literal facticity, and representational
versimilitude toward universality and metaphoricity.
They are metaphoric in both senses of the term—they
carry over from the world of actuality to a constructed
and symbolic world and are underwritten by pivotal
metaphors. This metaphoricity of melodramas is crucial
to a proper understanding of their nature, scope and
significance. What this means, of course, is that in inter-
preting and evaluating melodramas we should form
our critical yardsticks on the basis of the discursive
specificities of the genre itself, rather than in accordance
with imported norms. As a result, when we examine the
relation between melodrama and evil, and the poetics
of evil, we need to constantly bear in mind the signi-
ficance systems, economies of discourse, and inter-
textual forces associated with melodrama.

The presence of evil is pivotal to melodrama be-
cause melodrama seeks to establish the reality of a
moral universe. By vanquishing the villain and the evil
he embodies, melodrama reasserts the moral authority
of a world that temporarily looked as if it would fall
victim to the dark forces of evil. The attraction of
melodrama and its efficacy in drawing in the audi-
ence into its orbit of narration springs, precisely
from the temporary power enjoyed by evil, and the
authority it exerts. As has been aptly pointed out, the
force of evil in melodrama derives from its personalized
menace, its speedy implementation of its declarations
of diabolic intent, and the reduction of innocence to
impotence. Hence, the signifiers of good and evil are
readily identifiable and are indissolubly linked to ques-
tions of power and authority.

When discussing the relationship between evil and
melodrama, it is important not to lose sight of the fact

that evil, like social order, is socially and culturally con-
structed. This is not to suggest that murder, mayhem,
thuggery, and brutality are not universal phenomena.
What this statement suggests is that the way these
phenomena are framed, interpreted, evaluated, and
incorporated into an overall discourse of evil varies
from culture to culture. Raymond Williams makes the
point that culturally, evil is a name for several varieties
disorder which destroy actual life, and that it is only
fully comprehensible within the valuation of a par-
ticular culture. It is well to remember that evil is a
polysemous, contested and culture-specific concept.
The distinctive ontologies associated with good and
evil take their characteristic shape in relation to other
discursive practices in a given culture.

So far, we have been discussing the relationship be-
tween evil and melodrama. The next topic that merits
closer attention is the concept of social order and how
it relates to the discourse of evil. A social order is based
on shared meaning. It is indeed true that one can
establish social order through force and coercion, but
such attempts at best, are of short duration. Real social
order is based on shared meanings; this entails the
adjustment of individual needs to collective orienta-
tions. As McIver observes, a remark characteristic of
mainstream social science.

The problem of human society everywhere is
the adjustment of the ego interest and the group interest. This is the problem not merely of
social order but of every social relationship... Every human organization of every kind,
whether it be a family, a business, a state or a
church of God finds some way of reconciling
the interests of the whole. This fact is the primary
condition of the remarkably complex structures of human society.\textsuperscript{7}

A social order encompasses a collectivity of people interacting with each other. What is most important to note about this collectivity is that it is greater than the sum of its parts. Consequently, it can be legitimately said that the social order needs to be comprehended as a constructed social reality, and that the constructedness of the social order implies an interesting dialectic between self and social order, each feeding and shaping the other. The social order comes into being and functions as a unity as a result of the actions of collective individual selves, while the individual self is largely governed by the compulsions of the social order that they inhabit. The theory of homo duplex, which is popular among both social scientists and humanists, maintains that the human being is a double being, a unique individual with his or her own distinct ways, and a social being who enacts the roles that society has imposed on him or her. The social being, or what the symbolic interactionists refer to as "me" as opposed to "I", is a clear product of the social order. As Berger and Luckman observe,

Man's self-production is always and of necessity, a social enterprise. Men together produce a human environment with the totality of it's sociocultural and psychological formations. None of these formations may be understood as products of man's biological constitution which...provides only the outer limits for human productive activity. Just as it is impossible for man to develop as man in isolation, so it is impossible for man in isolation to produce a human environment...\textsuperscript{8}

This observation is very helpful in locating a crucial dialectic that informs the constructedness of the social world. However, we need to go beyond the phenomenological approach advocated by Berger and Luckman to appreciate the full force of the ways in which power inscribes itself in social relations, discourse sets artificial boundaries to social order that are then taken to be naturalized givens, and how ideology interpellates individuals within the social order.

On the basis of our discussion so far, we can say that social order arises as a consequence of shared meanings and as the interactions of people become crystallized in social relationships; that these social relationships are connected to ongoing patterns of social regularities; that the dialectic between self and social order is central to an understanding of social order; and that questions of power, discourse and ideology must necessarily enter into any discussion of social order.

The question of social order has been examined by many social scientists. On the basis of their writings, one can come up with a list of elements as constituting a social order: the continuity of a population in a given society through reproduction or recruitment, socialization and enculturation of members of the society, the promotion of communication and interaction among various sectors, the division of labour through specialization, tasks, activities, duties, and responsibilities, sharing of common social values and societal goals, establishment of social norms and rules of conduct, development of methods for organizational decision-making, enforcement of norms and punishment of deviance, protection of the order against both exter-
nal and internal threat, maintenance of unity and harmony, and creation of mechanisms for handling social change. Clearly, one can add more items to the list, but the elements listed above should give us an idea of the mainstream social science approach to this issue.

It is interesting to note that this approach leaves out of consideration two vital areas: the first is the symbolic dimension, and the second, the metaphysical. Human beings are symbol creators and symbol sharers. The social existence of human beings is firmly anchored in a symbolic universe. Human interaction and organization are inconceivable without a shared symbolic universe. Therefore, it can legitimately be said that the social order is possible only to the extent that the inhabitants of the social order share a common universe of symbolic meaning. As human language is the foremost symbol system that human beings have at their disposal, language is centrally linked to the notion of social order. This is indeed a dimension that merits the closest scrutiny from social scientists who write about social order.

The second is the metaphysical, and this is inextricably linked to the symbolic dimension. As scholars like Voegelin have rightly pointed out, social order is an attunement of man with the order of being. In other words, one can fully understand the complexity of any given social order only by investigating it’s metaphysical sources. The order of mundane reality is inadequate to represent or totally embody the order of human existence, because man participates in the order of being which transcends the mundane, and which is the source of order in society. It is interesting to observe how the anthropologist Clifford Geertz, approaching the question of social order from the vantage point of his own discipline, come to a similar conclusion as Voegelin. Geertz, too, demonstrates how the idea of a social order needs to be analyzed in relation to symbolic and metaphysical universes. For example, he points out in the case of Bali, how the court-and-capital is at once a microcosm of supernatural order. According to him, the ritual of the court, and in fact, the life of the court generally, is paradigmatic, and not merely reflective of social order.

We have discussed so far the relationship between evil and melodrama, and evil and social order. Next, we need to examine the ways in which the concept of evil was understood and evaluated in traditional Indian culture. Indologists, by and large, have subscribed to the notion that there is no problem of evil in Indian culture, and philosophers and religionists have sought to explicate it in relation to philosophical works. However, as Wendy Doniger O’Flaherty has ably pointed out, it is to mythology that we should turn if we are to obtain a clearer and more representative picture of the nature and significance of evil in Indian culture and imagination. As she says,

The theology that is developed in Hindu mythology demonstrates a more popular, general, and spontaneous attitude toward evil than may be found in the more complex arguments of the Hindu theologians.

Myths seek to present questions of evil in terms of drama and conflict, and hence, the approach of Indian myths to the idea of evil has a direct bearing on the essence of this Chapter.
In the generality of Indian myths, evil is perceived as an outcome of greed and lust. According to the celebrated Indian epic *The Mahabharata*,

Formerly, Prajapati brought forth pure creatures, who were truthful and virtuous. These creatures joined the gods in the sky whenever they wished, and they lived and died by their own wish. In another time, those who dwelt on earth were overcome by desire and anger, and they were abandoned by the gods. Then by their foul deeds, these evil ones were trapped in the chain of rebirth, and they became atheists.\(^\text{12}\)

According to a statement in the *Skanda Purana*,

In the Golden Age, people were happy and equal. There was no distinction between high and low, no law of separate classes. Then after some time, people became greedy, and the wishing-trees disappeared and passions arose.\(^\text{13}\)

Traditional Indian culture takes a very realistic attitude to the concept of evil, treating it as an entity that is both inescapable and important to social order. According to many cycles of myths, God created evil as a positive element in the universe with the intention of allowing goodness to define itself in opposition to evil. A high valuation can be placed in goodness in the universe only because there is also evil. In a much venerated classical text on ethics, it is said that,

In order to distinguish actions, the creator separated *dharma* and *adharma*, and made the pairs of opposites such as happiness and unhappiness. And whatever he assigned to each at the first creation, truth and falsehood, that quality clung spontaneously to it.\(^\text{14}\)

In this regard, the following comment by O’Flaherty is very opposite. She says,

In Hinduism, evil must be rightly ordered and kept in its place, away from the gods distributed among men or demons or both. Only in this way would there be a true balance, a true plentitude: were evil to weaken altogether, weaken the gods, or to disappear altogether—were all men to become virtuous, or all demons godly—there would be no universe at all, for their would be no “contrasting pairs”. In this view, God is powerful and good; he chooses to place evil and suffering in the universe, not because he is forced to do so by karma, nor because he is so evil that he enjoys seeing others suffer, but because if he wishes to create a universe at all, it is by definition necessary for that universe to contain evil as well as good.\(^\text{15}\)

In traditional Indian culture, as in most other cultures, evil was perceived as an unwholesome force. However, in the case of India, the relationship between self and social order was not a simple one where evil was seen as a negative and goodness a positive. As has been pointed out, the gods are responsible for the creation of evil for a variety of reasons: in traditional Hinduism because *dharma* is only possible and valuable, *adharma* also exists to act as a foil to it; in mythology dealing with asceticism, because the gods are afraid that human beings will acquire too much power and overcome them; and in devotional mythology, because God wishes to come down to the level of evil and to participate in it with the intention of liberating humankind. So in Indian culture, while the negativity of
evil was recognized, it was also valued as a force necessary for the maintenance of the social order.

It is against this background of thinking, that we need to discuss the three Indian melodramas that constitute the subject of this chapter: Kismet, Awaara, and Sholay. There are some interesting points of affinity that need to be pointed out at the outset. Kismet, Awaara, and Sholay are three of the most popular films made in India. All three of them can be categorized as melodramas, and have as their leading actors some of the most well-known stars of the Indian screen. All three films were produced in Hindi and deal with stories related to robbery and outlaws. The heroes of all three films are unconventional in that they operate from the wrong side of the law. Moreover, in terms of the semiotics of good and villainy, Kismet, Awaara, and Sholay differ appreciably from the general run of Hindi melodramas. According to traditional Indian aestheticians, a hero in a play had to be handsome, courageous, virtuous, of noble birth and so on, as opposed to the villain, who presented the exact opposite set of attributes. For example, in The Dharupa, a classical treatise on Indian dramaturgy, it is said that the hero of a play should be,

well-bred, charming, liberal, clever, affable, popular, upright, eloquent, of exalted lineage, resolute, young, endowed with intelligence, energy, memory, wisdom, skill in the arts, pride, heroic, mighty, vigorous, familiar with the codes, and a just observer of laws.16

In contrast, his opponent is “avaricious, stubborn, criminal, and vicious”. This distinction, with minor modifications, is found not only in classical theatre but also in folk theatre. What is interesting about the heroes of the three films under consideration in this paper, is that they represent a comingle of the attributes of the hero and his opponent, as enunciated in the classical treatises and found expression in traditional works both classical and folk. In the domain of cinema, too, one could discern a general conformity to these stipulated images. Hence, Kismet, Awaara and Sholay share many features in common.

Kismet is justly regarded as one of the longest running Indian films of all times. It ran for three years to full houses in the same theatre in Calcutta breaking all previous records. Kismet deals with the story of Shekhar, who as a child runs away from home and grows up to become an expert thief. He falls in love with Rani, who is an ex-dancer and now almost an invalid and their relationship propels the story of this film forward.

Shekhar, a good-looking young thief, one day happens to observe a man stealing a watch from an old man. He quickly picks the thief’s pocket and decides to pursue him. The thief goes into a jewellery shop, where stolen goods are bought. There the owner of the shop introduces Shekhar to Banke, whose pocket Shekhar had just picked. Banke realizing that he has been outfoxed by Shekhar, seeks to enter into an alliance with him. But much to his dismay, Shekhar sees the old man, whose watch was just stolen, coming into the jewellery shop with the intention of hawking his watch, so that he can attend a theatre performance. Shekhar, overcome by remorse, decides to take him to the theatre performance. There, to his great surprise, he comes to know that the old man with him now used to be the owner of that very theatre, and that the lead singer was actually his daughter.
It so happens that Rani, the old man’s daughter, was once a talented dancer. One day, under the influence of liquor, the old man had ordered her to dance non-stop until she collapsed out of sheer exhaustion. Rani never danced again, and now walked on crutches. To make matters even stranger, the present owner of the theatre, Indrajitbabu had once worked for the old man, and was now someone from whom the old man borrowed money.

The performance is over, and the old man disappears. As Rani is searching for her father, she is very nearly run over by a car but for the timely intervention of Shekhar, who quickly pulls her aside. Rani had seen him with his father and takes him to be one of his father’s friends. Indrajitbabu and his wife appear on the scene, and Shekhar, who had observed the gold necklace she was wearing, deftly steals it. As the police are in the vicinity, he decides to conceal it in Rani’s carriage. However, before he is able to recover it, the carriage disappears. Shekhar finds his way to Rani’s house and takes back the necklace. Rani wakes up and sees him. She is under the impression that he has come with her father and asks him to stay the night over with them in their house. The following day, Indrajitbabu’s manager demands that her father pay back a loan that he had obtained from his client. Shekhar, despite the occasion, suggests that he will rent a room in their house so as to facilitate the paying back of the loan.

The police inspector who arrives at Indrajitbabu’s house to investigate the theft of the necklace, learns about the sad story of the man’s eldest son, Madan. Madan had grown up to be a mischievous child, and one day as punishment, his father had ejected him from the house. He had never returned. Mohan is Indrajitbabu’s younger son, and he is in love with Lila, Rani’s sister. In the meantime, Shekhar is paying back the old man’s loan by stealing from Indrajitbabu’s manager. Rani anxiously hopes that one day she will be able to walk without the crutches, and a doctor tells Shekhar that it can be done if he is prepared to spend a substantial sum of money. Shekhar also comes to know that the necklace he had stolen from Indrajitbabu’s wife, had originally been a gift Rani had been given by her father, and which later they had been forced to sell. Shekhar gives Rani the necklace, and each expresses his true feelings for the other. Despite Shekhar’s advice to the contrary, Rani wears the necklace to the theatre, and Indrajitbabu’s wife detects it and calls the police. The police arrives on the scene, and demand that she tell them from where she had got the necklace, but Rani does not answer. At that point, Shekhar rushes in and confesses that he stole it. Rani is overwhelmed by shame, and does not want to have anything to do with him.

Mohan, in the meantime, goes away to continue his higher education, unaware of the fact that his girlfriend is pregnant, and Indrajitbabu rudely dismisses theason between his son and Lila. Meanwhile, Rani is operated on and is cured. However, she finds out, much to her chagrin, that the money for the operation had come from Shekhar. At this point, as fate would have it, the police inspector, who has been following the entire case very carefully, comes to the realization that Shekhar is in point of fact Indrajitbabu’s long lost son, Madan. All charges against him are dropped, and
all are happily united, as Indrajeetbabu finally accepts Roni and Lila as his daughters-in-law.

This, in essence, is the story of Kismet, which in many ways concretizes the central features of Indian melodrama. The story is convoluted and strains the viewers’ credibility. As the title of the film itself suggests, fate plays a dominant role in the entire sequence of events. Kismet conforms to the characteristic patterns of Indian melodrama, not only in the way that the digression has been constructed, but also in the way in which song and dance have been incorporated as means of counterpointing the digression. Kismet contains eight songs that became extremely popular with the Indian movie-going public. It creates a symbolic world that is all too familiar to the audiences.

Although this film follows broadly the contours of Indian melodrama, it also departs significantly from the accepted model. For example, the hero of the film, Shekhar, does not conform to the conventions of Indian melodrama: he is a thief who operates from the other side of the law, and this goes against the usual image of a hero. On the other hand, although a thief, he is an affable and good-hearted one, and his appearance, demeanor, and behavior strengthen this impression. This contradicts the accepted semiotics of villainy. As in most Indian melodramas, romance takes centre stage, but is here grafted on to a character who, according to standard practice, would hardly qualify to be the protagonist.

Moreover, although Kismet deals with the life of an outlaw and with social distinctions, it never challenges the system: at the end of the film we realize that the

Thief Shekhar is none other than the elder son of Indrajeetbabu, and family union etymologically establishes the nature of the existing social order. If questions of class and exploitation were temporarily raised, they are quickly submerged in the happy family reunion and the romantic fulfillments. The film seems to attribute everything to the power of fate, and accepts it as given. Hence, the concept of evil that is contained in the film in no way questions the existing social order or extends it’s discursive boundaries.

Awaara by Raj Kapoor is an equally popular film. It’s popularity was not only confined to India, and as a result, Raj Kapoor became a household name in the Arab world, Southeast Asia as well as the Soviet Union. It combined romance, social commentary, music and melodrama in a way that appealed enormously to the movie-going public. The story centres around the life of Raj, a boy growing up in the slums of Bombay. Judge Raghunath, a conservative man, is firmly convinced that only children of gentlemen can climb up the social ladder and enjoy the kind of social recognition that he does. By the same token, he subscribes to the notion that the children of criminals are bound to be eternally condemned to a life of depravity and darkness. As a consequence of a series of events depicted in the film, this conviction is seriously challenged.

Bharati, Judge Raghunath’s wife, is abducted by the notorious criminal Jagga, who resolved to become a criminal in the first place, when Judge Raghunath erroneously convicted him of a crime he had not committed. Because Jagga’s father was a feared criminal, Judge Raghunath, is keeping with his philosophy, arrived at the conclusion that Jagga had committed the crime. Jagga later returns the wife, but the news of her
abduction as well as her pregnancy quickly spreads in the community, much to the anger and worry of Raghunath. Clearly upset by the circulating gossip, he decides to discard his wife. Bharati gives birth to a son in the slums, and he is named Raj. Jagga is obviously happy with the turn of events. Bharati takes Raj to Bombay with the intention of bringing him up in a way that would be in accord with the reputation and social standing of his father. Raj is admitted to a school where he meets Rita, and takes an intense liking to her. But as Raj is unable to pay his school fees, he is thrown out of school, and enters the dark and dangerous world of crime. It so happens that his friend Rita is the daughter of a friend of Raghunath. Many years later, the paths of Raj and Rita cross again. Now Rita is a young attorney and Raj a criminal, and their earlier friendship during school days blossoms into love. Raghunath, of course, has no inkling of who Raj is, but is somehow suspicious of him. Rita invites Raj to her house for her twenty-first birthday, and Raj accepts the invitation, but is now confronted with the problem of buying her a good gift. When he sees Judge Raghunath on the street carrying a box of jewellery for Rita, he knocks him down and steals an expensive necklace from it. At the party, the judge recognizes Raj as the one who had stolen the necklace. He is horrified and livid with anger. To make matters worse, he realizes that Raj has given Rita the necklace, but Raj leaves the birthday party before he is caught. This sequence of events prompts Rita to look into Raj’s life and background. As a consequence, she arrives at the conclusion that Raj is none other than Raghunath’s son. As in Kismat, here, too, we begin to see how the topoi of necklaces and mistaken identities play a crucial role in the propulsion of the story.

As a criminal, Raj has increasingly come under influence of Jagga and is aware of it. He wishes to free himself from his dominion, and in sheer desperation, kills Jagga. As Raj’s lawyer, Rita accuses Raghunath in court for having succumbed to unfounded suspicions about his wife’s infidelity, and blames him for his son becoming a felon. Had he not behaved irrationally, Raj would not be leading the kind of life to which he was now condemned. But Raghunath refuses to face the fact that the criminal who is being tried is his son. For his part, Raj, who has by now been made aware that he is in point of fact Judge Raghunath’s son, is deeply hurt by all this. He makes a speech, siding with all those children who have, like him, grown up in a sordid environment and ended up on the wrong side of the law. He stresses the fact that criminality is not a product of heredity but of social environment. Raj’s speech makes a deep impression on Raghunath, who finally comes to accept that Raj is his son. He visits him in prison and admits his guilt. Raj is given a three-year prison term, and he assures Rita that after his release he will lead a good life.

Awaara is a characteristically Indian melodrama, with song and dance contributing to the enhancement of the whole spectacle. Let us, for example, consider the famous dream sequence in the film, which has been executed with much dexterity and takes place at a significant juncture in the filmic digres. It exemplifies rather graphically the problems facing Raj, and points at the vast social gap that separates him from Rita. The dream sequence serves to fulfill two important functions. On the one hand, it forces Raj to face the reality of his situation and make up his mind. On the other, it serves to externalize, in terms of readily
graspable visual icons and culturally embedded signifiers, the conflict encountered by the hero in a way that would appeal to the movie-going public.

The dream sequence consists of three parts, each with its distinctive thematization, visualization and musicalization. The first part transports us to the idyllic world of Raj and Rita. We see a flight of steps leading to a spiral tower amidst vast, fluffy clouds. Exceedingly beautiful damsels dressed in white, dance on and around the steps. We see Rita at the bottom of the flight of steps, beckoning Raj to come, giving expression to her desire. In stark contrast, the second part depicts the interior of the hell in which Raj is condemned to live. Here, instead of the icons of romance and desire we observed in the first part, we see grotesque images of skulls with bulging eyes; instead of the beautiful damsels, we observe dark and sinister-looking figures wearing horns. Raj desperately cries out for help, as the flames are on the verge of consuming him, and he is unable to free himself from the threatening presence of the demons.

No sooner does he cry out than he is transported back to the romantic scene with the fluffy clouds and the flight of steps, and Rita at the centre. As she walks up the steps, she begins to sing in total joy. This sequence, while spectacular and inventive, underlines the disparity between the two worlds that Raj lives in, and the iconography of the dream sequence serves to enforce this point admirably. We are, at first, shown the flight of stairs from bottom up, emasculating the social gap between Raj and Rita, and as the song ends, we are shown Rita leading Raj up the flight of steps. In the eyes of Raj, as well as in the eyes of the audience, uniting with Rita means moving up in the world socially. Furthermore, since all this is depicted through a dream sequence, it serves to establish the point that, although Raj is a poor criminal from the underworld, he is also the son of Justice Raghunath, and the social gap between Raj and Rita is illusory. Therefore, it is clear that Raj Kapoor has succeeded in investing the dream sequence with an ideology of emotionalism, and an aesthetic of spectacle that contain culturally coded meanings that are central to the experience of the film. We chose to concentrate on this dream sequence to illuminate the fact that in Awaara, the melodrama combines narrative and spectacle in a more integrated fashion than in Kismet, and to point out that in Indian melodramas, filmic digesis is interestingly counterpointed by spectacle.

As in Kismet, in Awaara too, the idea of a social evil is at the heart of the film. However, whereas in Kismet it was explicated, rationalized and evaluated in terms of the inevitability of fate, in Awaara, on the other hand, we are definitely told that it is a product of the social order. Raghunath's conviction, that criminals are born and not made, is severely challenged by the film, and he himself comes to accept it's baselessness. The statements made by Rita and Raj also serve to underline this belief. In Awaara we, therefore, see a greater emphasis on the social dimension of evil than in Kismet. However, this mode of thinking is not allowed to result in an extension of the discursive boundaries related to social order, because the weight of emphasis is placed on the romance and the genealogy of the family. As we have pointed out elsewhere, Raj Kapoor's is a cinema of security. He achieves this sense of security by harmonizing various discourses like tradition and...
modernity, and social protest and maintenance of the status quo, and this is clearly evident in Awaara.

The third Indian melodrama that we wish to examine in this chapter is Sholay, reputed to be among the most popular films made in India. The dialogues contained in Sholay have been released on long-playing records and sold to the public, creating a new market in the process. These dialogues are often played on loudspeakers at fairs, weddings, commemorations of all kinds, and religious ceremonies, much to the amusement of the attending audiences. In addition, a whole line of Sholay-brand commodities like jeans, belts, jackets and so on, have entered the market as well. Sholay can best be described as an Indianized Western, with the visual vocabulary and the attitude to life displayed in such films as Dirty Dozen, Butch Cassidy and the Sundance Kid, and the Magnificent Seven, clearly in evidence.

The film deals with the lives and the conflicts experienced by a group of characters who forcefully dramatize the pervasiveness of evil in society. Thakur Saheb is a retired police officer and a rural landlord. He hires two trigger-happy jailbirds to hunt down a gang of bandits led by Gabbar Singh, who are terrorizing villagers, including those in his own village. Some time in the past, the Thakur, then a young police officer, had arrested Gabbar Singh. However, the thug had succeeded in escaping the prison, and avenged himself by brutally killing the Thakur’s family, and cutting off his arms. How the hired gunmen fight Gabbar Singh, and the violence that ensues, form the bulk of the story. The film ends with Thakur Saheb seeking his vengeance by trampling Gabbar Singh to near death, and the police arriving on the scene. Sholay brought to the Indian screen some of the most brutal and repulsive scenes of human violence and depravity. And what is interesting is that these were executed without any qualms or feelings of guilt. There was a matter-of-factness to the acts of violence that was then comparatively new to Indian cinema.

The film opens with a train entering Chandanpur station. Ram Lal, the Thakur’s servant, is awaiting the arrival of the jailer. The jailer gets off the train, and he and Ram Kaka mount two horses. The whistling of the train is heard on the sound-track. The theme song comes on as the camera follows the two horsemen across terrain where the action is to take place, then tracks them as they go past rocks and boulders, trees, bushes and pools and on to the village of Ramgarh, where they arrive at the Thakur’s house. The house fills the entire frame of the screen, exuding a sense of tranquillity, as goats are seen grazing around it. The guitar music in the theme song intimates the mixture of Western and Eastern sensibility that the film represents.

Sholay, which has been dismissed as a ‘curry Western’, no doubt gains in discursive force as a consequence of that intertextual memory. The hills, boulders, open sky, and vast empty spaces captured in long shots bring to mind the natural ambience of Westerns.

The Thakur, draped in a large shawl, observes their arrival in silence and walks up to them. The jailer has come in response to his letter. The Thakur shows the jailer a photograph, and he recognizes the men in it as Veeru and Jaidev, two highly professional crooks. The Thakur then says that he is aware of the crooks’ backgrounds, and that along with their despicable at-
tributes, they also possess some good qualities. He recalls an incident after their capture in Jabalpur, when he was taking the two men to the police station on a freight train. Through a flashback, we see the young police officer Thakur with the two felons, Veeru and Jai, with their hands bound. Of the two, Veeru is shown as the more talkative and personable. He comes across as a simple man who enjoys life, and accepts whatever it might bring him. Jai, on the other hand, is quiet, confident and self-possessed. Not given to sentimentality or reflection, there is a certain sense of practicality about him. The train suddenly stops with a jolt, and we see a blockage of the railway tracks. The foreman is shot, the driver wounded, and the train starts moving backwards. "You want to test our courage?" asks Jai. "There is still time to think it over", adds Veeru. They extend their handcuffed wrists to the Thakur, and their hands frame his face. The Thakur fires at their handcuffs and frees them, warning them not to try to escape. The next 640 shots are action shots executed with a great deal of competence and technical skill. Every now and then slow motion is used to heighten the dramatic effects. There is virtually no dialogue, and the editing is quick and forceful. The camera very fluidly registers the actions and reactions of the combatants as they engage in a drama of violence.

We are spontaneously drawn into the conflict, as the bandits on their horses, chase the moving train. Our eyes follow the bullets as the camera charges toward the bandits. After emerging from a tunnel, the train crashes through a pile of wood blocking the tracks, and there appears to be a moment of silence. However, the battle is not yet over and the bandits are now on the train. The ropes tied around the petrol drums in one of the wagons snap as the fight continues, and the petrol spills out. Veeru takes out the burning coal from the engine with a shovel. It is shown in close-up as the conductor watches the coal being hurled. A low angle shot in slow motion captures it. The live coal descends on the bandits as rain, and is followed by the explosion of the petrol wagon and the flames engulfing it. The Thakur is shot and is pulled back into the train as the last of the bandits is thrown out of the train. The two friends turn to each other, and one says, "Let's get the hell out of here." The Thakur then stumbles in, warning them not to try to escape, but falls down unconscious. Veeru and Jai pause to discuss their next move. If they choose to leave, the Thakur will almost surely die, and if they stay, they will have to go behind bars. Veeru asks Jai to toss a coin saying, "Heads, we take him to the hospital, and tails, we escape". Jai opens his hand and heads win.

At this point, the film comes out of the flashback as the Thakur says, "If they had so desired, they could have left me and escaped. They are scoundrels, but brave. They are considered dangerous, but know how to fight. They are bad, but human. I need those two. Please find them for me". This sequence very clearly establishes the courage, fiber and moral values of Veeru and Jai. Their decision to stay with the Thakur serves to win over the sympathy of the audience, and in point of fact, the hero of the film gets split into three in an interesting twist. The Thakur, armless and powerless against his enemies, acquires the strengths of the two jailbirds whom he hires, and who become, not only instruments of his revenge, but also an extension of his personality.
We have sought to discuss these opening sequences of Sholay because they demonstrate the kind of new sensibility and rhetorical strategies this film brought to Indian cinema. The unapologetic violence and its visual correlates—the nature and the disposition of the two hired jailbirds, the sense of evil that permeates the entire film—are well caught in these initial sequences, and indicate a significant departure in terms of cinematic digesis and textual production from the two earlier films discussed, Kismet and Awaara. Although this film, to be sure, both in terms of content and style, is heavily indebted to American Westerns, however, the director has endeavoured to assimilate the imported elements into the fabric of Indian melodrama and strategies of cultural coding. It is indeed apparent that the textual energies of the film have been expended in widening the discursive boundaries of popular Indian cinema, reconstituting the dialectization of evil and social order at a different ontological and epistemological plane.

Sholay, as a popular Indian melodrama, differs significantly from the other two films. In Kismet, the presence of evil in the filmic discourse was explained in terms of a transcendental fate, while in Awaara, it was correlated with the social environment in which human beings happen to grow up, and thereby pointed an accusing finger at the social order. However, in both films, the family wealth and privilege, coupled with the heavy romantic overlay, prevent any serious engagement with social issues. In Sholay, on the other hand, evil is gratuitous, pervasive, inescapable, and is attached to a psychology of cynicism. In Kismet and Awaara, ultimately the selfhood of the protagonists are defined in terms of family genealogy, while in Sholay, the selfhood of Veeru and Jai are defined in terms of the violence that surrounds them. Moreover, in both Kismet and Awaara, the heroes are rooted in the social ambience in which the narrative takes place, while in Sholay, they are rootless, thereby ushering in a newer kind of sensibility to the Indian screen, and opening a new discursive space for the filmic enunciation of the dialectic between violence and a social order.

Another very interesting point about Sholay, and one that relates to the reception by audiences of this film, has to do with the character of Gabbar Singh. He is portrayed in the film as an archvillain who destroyed the Thakur’s family in cold blood, cuts off his arms, and terrorized villagers, thereby transgressing all known social norms. Hence, one would expect him to be extremely disliked by all audiences. However, in a detailed study of the audience reaction to the film, we found that the preponderant majority of the movie-going public liked Gabbar Singh. They were enamoured of his dialogues and his delivery. Here we find a very interesting contradiction: the archvillain of the film, given to mindless violence, emerges as the most popular character. It is not that the audience lacks a concept of evil or a moral imagination. Rather, a different phenomenon is at work here; namely, that the element of spectacle has been privileged over the narrative, in a way that was not seen in earlier Indian melodramas, and the audiences accordingly drew a vital distinction between the performative and constative dimensions of the film’s discourse. The audiences applaud Gabbar Singh as played by Amjad Khan, and his masterful delivery of lines, even as they realize that he is morally depraved and a despicable character. Interestingly, a demystification of the logic of repre-
sentation takes place here with its concomitant of destabilizing the naturalness, and displaying the constructedness of filmic narrativity.

Another point that merits closer attention is the way that the concept of the body functions in the three films. In most Indian melodramas the body, as the object of fetishised male desire and the inscription of male dominance and power, is centrally situated in the filmic discourse. In both Kismet and Awaara, with the high premium placed on the erotization of the human body and the paramountcy of the somatic genealogy, the body is crucial to the reading of the films. In Sholay, too, the body is of pivotal significance to the textual intent of the film, but there is an appreciable difference. Here, the body becomes the battleground both literally and figuratively—Thakur Saheb’s arms are cut off by Gabbar Singh, and his hegemonic power and the countermoves to it are dramatized on the human body. Here, the body becomes the central arena for the contestation of ideological meaning, in a way that is not perceived in earlier Indian melodramas, and is deployed as the terrain on which good and evil vie for supremacy and as a realizing force of social order. As the film ends, we feel that the human body has functioned as a cathartic cathexis which is both expressive and oppressive.

While Kismet and Awaara, by selecting thieves and felons as the protagonists, initiated a new and interesting discussion of evil and social order, still rigorously circumscribed the traditional cultural codings, and hence, their respective orthodox resolution of the conflicts engendered by the narratives. In Sholay too, at the end, the villainous Gabbar Singh is brought to jus-

The visualization of violence in Sholay has the effect of glamorizing it, a phenomenon new to Indian melodrama. The low-angle shots investing the actors with added aura, the slow motions and freezes, serve to secure this effect. There is also a certain uninhibitedness in the depiction of violence. Two of the most gruesome scenes in the film are the decimation of the Thakur’s family, and the amputation of his arms by Gabbar Singh. We hear the sounds of gunshots on the soundtrack, and four members of the Thakur’s family are killed. We do not see the killer, only the frame freezes on the victims and then, one by one, each of them falls to the ground. Then an extremely long shot captures a tiny moving figure. We then cut to a mid shot of Gabbar Singh with an ambiguous smile spread across his face. The Thakur’s grandson comes out running, as Gabbar Singh moves toward him with a menacing air. The self-contented look of Gabbar Singh is contrasted with the terror in the child’s eyes. He quite matter-of-factly takes out his gun: the soundtrack registers the gun shot. A cut to the engine of a train follows and the Thakur alights at the station. Subsequently, we are shown how the Thakur is placed
under the gallows, and how Gabbar places two swords on his shoulders and lifts them. A cut to a long shot of his shawl and to the sleeves of his shirt dangling in the air conveys a kind of visual representation of violence which struck a new note in Indian cinema.

Apart from the behaviour of Gabbar Singh, the actions and attitudes of Veeru and Jai, too, are interesting in terms of their bearing on the question of violence. They adopt a casual attitude which reflects a cynical spirit. They are hired to do a job, and that is all that matters. There is a professional air and a detached cynicism about what they do and how they act. Amitabh Bachchan, who plays the role of Jai, gained great popular recognition for his role of an angry young man in Zanjeer, a role which he has played over and over to the delight of the audiences. Veeru and Jai have the courage to defy convention. Death is of no concern to them; it is what they accomplish before death that matters. They seek to prove to themselves that they are a power to reckon with in society. Their actions focus on evil and social order in a way that we have not seen in earlier Indian films. Amitabh Bachchan plays the role of a man of few words, who rarely displays his emotion, is never given to self-reflexion, and tries to define himself in terms of physical action. He becomes a kind of symbol which concretizes the destructive powers of evil that pervade society, as well as its inevitability.

Frederic Jameson believes that all Third World cultural texts should necessarily be read as national allegories. This is, no doubt, a controversial statement which does not seem to pay adequate attention to the rich cultural traditions of Third World countries that have evolved over a long period of time, nor to the diversity of the cultural texts. However, in the case of Sholay, it can justifiably be said that the film works at the level of national allegory. The lack of comforting narratives which offer the security of stable logics, the phenomenon of the social order being constantly undercut by ambiguities of meaning, and the absence of human feeling and the concomitant devaluation of human life which are dramatized in the film, work at the level of national analytics as well. The film, in its own melodramatic way, brings out a social themes that has a deep relevance to Indian society as a whole.

Sholay by no means represents high cinematic art, and many elitist critics have labelled the film superficial, derivative, and lacking in serious human content. However, it also needs to be said that within the domain of popular culture, films such as Sholay do register resistances to the general drift of society. At this point, it may be helpful to invoke the name of Gramsci, who focused on the concept of hegemony and the complex cultural strategies by which the dominant class, through both coercion and consensus, maintains its domination. Gramsci saw culture as the terrain on which a continuous battle takes place between the dominant and the dominated classes for the negotiation of meaning. This clash takes place most forcefully between the dominant culture and the acts of resistance emanating from within popular culture. In the case of Sholay, by portraying violence as a ubiquitous force of society in which rational voices are hard to find, and by dramatizing how evil produced by society itself, constantly explodes into human destruction, we are jolted into a newer awareness of the relationship between violence and social order. In earlier film
melodramas, when human violence and the consequences that follow were depicted, they were made endurable and comprehensible in terms of a larger framework of moral evaluation. In Sholay no such framework exists; it throws into bold relief the power of evil and the inability of society, which produced it in the first place, to contain it within an accepted scheme of moral adjudication and retribution.

When discussing melodrama, there is a tendency to regard it as an essentialized, reified and transhistorical category, which it clearly is not. It is a culturally generated theoretical construct which shapes and is shaped by the social formation around it. In this sense, all three melodramas that have been discussed in this paper display a vital linkage with the wider social matrix from which they emerge, and into whose discourse they make an intervention.

Kismet was produced in 1943 and reflects the social concerns and currents at the time as shaping forces on the filmic texts. The fact that all three films were exceedingly popular at the time of their release tells us that they did relate to some significant interests and needs of the audiences. The 1940s witnessed India seeking to come to terms with the forces of modernity at a mass level, and this necessitated a rethinking of traditional, inherited values and the morphology of the cultural heritage. Kismet, in its own and simplistic way, reflects the preoccupation with the issue. The social world that is depicted in the film is one that is being rapidly modernized as it yields to newer civilizational forces. At the same time, there is an attempt to cling on to tradition and the comforting presence of cultural memory as a way of countenancing the newer disruptive social forces. For example, as Iqbal Masud points out, the love relationship in Kismet can best be understood in relation to the traditional love stories of Laila-Majnu and Radha-Krishna. The overall valorization of fate in the affairs of humankind also testifies to the hankering after tradition and well traversed paths of human meaning. Therefore, what we find in this film is a narrativization of the co-mingling of traditional and modern discourses that one finds in the wider society. The film seems to be saying that evil is undoubtedly a product of social order, but that there is a traditionally ordained higher scheme of things in terms of which evil can be explained and domesticated.

As has been rightly pointed out, the foundations of the popular Hindi cinema were laid in the 1940s. This foundation includes the financial institutions associated with the industry as well as the content, form and style of the films which, in turn, were shaped by the circumambient social forces. Kismet in its content, form, and narrative conventions represents the assimilation of these factors.

Awaara was produced in 1951, and likewise, is representative of the Zeitgeist. Hindi cinema of the 1950s constituted an outgrowth of the city culture that was beginning to spread out in post-independent India, and hence, the city became the locus of action and the topos of narrativity in many of the films produced in this period. The city with its attractions and resources, as well as its dehumanizing counterforces, came to serve as an emblem of the modernity into which India was stepping. The rich upper classes enjoying the benefits of the newly found opulence, while the poorer classes were struggling to eke out a living in dark slums.
against severe odds, presented a socially generated binarity and character types that scriptwriters and film directors were quick to transform into filmic images. Awaara shows this proclivity very clearly. However, working within an accepted tradition of melodrama and subscribing to a residual optimism, Awaara resolves the social conflict, as symbolized by the main characters, by resorting to a traditionally accepted strategy of family reconciliation. The questioning of social order in the film, such as it is, does not result in challenging it’s basic tenets or a widening of the horizon of discourse, and this is in keeping with the mood of the time.

Sholay was produced in 1975, and by now, the social scene in India and the sensibilities of the people had changed appreciably, leading to a sense of disenchanted, at times bordering on cynicism. As Masud has remarked:

India in the seventies became a good place to escape from. War in 1971; social unrest; Emergency; a weak coalition government, the restoration of the mainstream party; the steadily increasing inflation eroding the power base of the old middle class; the rise of the new rich—the brash robber barons; the proliferation of the urban poor in the sprawling slums; their steadily growing links with the mafia-smugglers, drug traffickers and plain criminals who connected at the other end to the nouveau riche.18

In addition, we began to witness India getting increasingly caught up in the world-system, and how the forces of late capitalism, as symbolized by the two hired jailbirds, were beginning to enter the rural culture. The entire film constitutes a spectacle of evil—evil that is socially-grounded, self-generated and irrevocable. Sholay underlines the need to re-examine the parameters of social order as a way of understanding pervasive and mindless violence, and eventually eliminating it. Hence, here we find a new dialectic between evil and social order (evil testing the social order), which urges a rethinking of the nature of society as it comes to grips with late capitalism.

Veeru and Jai exist outside the accepted social values. The concept of the family, which almost always provides narrative closure to Indian melodramas, is conspicuously absent in Sholay. The Thakur’s family is decimated earlier in the film, and what we find is a group of people, who have no anchorage in the institution of the family, confronting their destiny through the instrumentalities of evil. In this film the violence seems to invest the brutal, the vicious and the hideous with an aesthetic value. Violence becomes the lynchpin of the signification system of the outsiders and the inarticulate. The sanguine faith in the existing social order is seriously questioned. Through evil they are reaching out to a newer social order. As with the classical Hindu myths that were referred to at the beginning of this paper, is the director of Sholay saying that the age of violence and the extinction of traditional certitudes should lead to a more tranquil and prosperous age? That the flames suggested by the title of the film might burn up the existing social order so that a better one can take it’s place? If so, the positive function of evil insisted on by traditional Hindu myths will have been reaffirmed.
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