

ARTICLE

## **Interrogating Masculinity through the Child Figure in Bombay Cinema**

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### **Abstract**

Patriarchy is most often understood in relation to the position of women in society. I propose to interrogate patriarchy in relation to children – particularly the male child – as depicted in two major works of Bombay Cinema. The number and scope of critical engagements with the onscreen portrayal of the child figure are restricted, and in the light of this lack I interrogate the portrayal of the male child figure, with particular emphasis on the constructs of masculinity that always implicate the child. The paper will undertake a detailed analysis of these masculine constructs, which are significantly shaped and interrogated in the areas of family and educational institutions for the male child (See Kakar 1981, and Haywood and Mac an Ghail, 2003).

For case studies, I analyze two highly acclaimed contemporary movies of Bombay Cinema: *Taare Zameen Par* (by Aamir Khan, 2007) and *Udaan* (by Vikramditya Motwane, 2010). Both movies critique the many notions associated with manhood and masculinity by situating their arguments within the contexts of family and educational institutions. What makes these critiques even more significant is the resistance offered by the child figure to conventional masculine authority through the agency of imagination. With such agency, not only does the male child debunk the traditionally sanctioned interests and attitudes of men, but also brings about a reconfiguration of those behavioral co-ordinates that have till now dominated the domains of family and education. Using ideas from sociological, film, gender and psychoanalytical theories, I highlight the role of children in subverting the traditionally oppressive ideas associated with Indian masculinity.

### **Keywords**

Child figure, adult, Bombay Cinema, father, masculinity.

‘We know nothing of childhood: and with our mistaken notions the further we advance the further we go astray. The wisest writers devote themselves to what a man ought to know, without asking what a child is capable of learning. They are always looking for the man in the child, without considering what he is before he becomes a man.’

Jean-Jacques Rousseau, *Emile*, 1762

‘The Child is father of the Man’

-William Wordsworth, ‘My heart leaps up when I behold’, 1802

‘Our modern commitment to the idea of the child is inseparable from its representation in the visual form.’

-Vicky Lebeau, *Childhood and Cinema*, 2008

Despite having the largest population of children in the world, Indian popular culture has hardly witnessed widespread cultural productions or discursive practices that have *critically* interrogated or problematized the lives of young people. While a few Indian intellectuals such as Sudhir Kakkar and Ashish Nandy have seriously contemplated the idea of childhood as a complex concept needing rigorous attention, such attempts have been rare in comparison to those pertaining to other areas such as gender and caste, to name a few (Kakar, 1981, and Nandy, 1987). If, on one hand, the past two decades have seen a proliferation of books, theoretical interventions, and institutionalization in childhood studies in the Western academia, on the other hand, such developments in the Indian scenario have been relatively non-descript. Owing to the ‘inadequacy of government, the ignorance of parents, the callousness of the public and the lack of educational opportunities’, Indian society has been viewed ‘as lacking in a fully developed conception of childhood’ (Nieuwenhuys, 2009: 147). Further, the hierarchical structure of the traditional Indian family, where man holds the highest position and children the lowest (Kakar

and Kakar, 2007) and the general tendency to view children in stereotypical terms (such as *repositories of innocence*), are some of the defining factors which may have strongly influenced dominant perspectives considering children as *passive* subjects of social processes. (This is despite the growing realization in many parts of the world that regards children as ‘active participants in society and not just passive subjects of social processes.’ (Wells, 2009: 4))

In light of the above, it is only fitting that cultural productions (films in particular) pertaining to Indian children, by and large, have also been few in number, whose ‘theoretical frameworks are always somewhat vague’ (Saari, 2009: 51). ‘Despite certain films for children having done well at the box office’, the ‘Indian film-maker’s obsession with adult cinema’ has adversely affected the growth of sensitive cinema for the youth (51). This lack is inevitably connected with ‘the absence of popular children’s literature’ that has only ‘forced scriptwriters and directors to take shots in the dark’ (55). It is not that Bombay Cinema has not involved itself with the child figure in any way. One is only to remember classics such as Raj Kapoor’s *Awaara* (1951) and Yash Chopra’s *Deewar* (1975), that have brilliantly displayed the rise of the hero / anti- hero by astutely focusing on his childhood, a stage that inevitably determines the trajectory of the protagonist’s journey and the film. The family-social genre has therefore often appropriated the child within its folds. However, its investment in the child figure has almost always been limited to the depiction of childhood as an impressionable stage in the hero’s life, without exploring other possibilities that childhood may offer. This paper, then, is a critique of such ‘possibilities’ that have been explored by contemporary Bombay Cinema productions dealing with the representation of children and adolescents. Few as they are, these films bring about a radical interrogation of childhood in India, by perceptively capturing the many facets, ambiguities, challenges and tensions that constitute the discourse(s) surrounding young people in the country.

As my case studies, I undertake a detailed analysis of two movies that have received widespread critical acclaim for their engagement with children. Aamir Khan’s 2007 venture *Taare Zameen Par* (literally translated as *Stars on Earth*) and Vikramaditya Motwane’s *Udaan*, (literally translated as *Flight*) intelligently display the complexities that the middle class male child often

finds himself in. While *Taare Zameen Par* won the ‘Filmfare Best Film Award’ for 2008 and the 2008 ‘National Film Award on Family Welfare’, *Udaan* won the ‘Filmfare Best Film (Critics) Award’ for 2011 and was officially selected to compete in the ‘Un Certain Regard’ category at the 2010 Cannes Film Festival. My reason for choosing films depicting the male child protagonists has been a conscious one. I argue that in an otherwise traditionally patriarchal Indian society, where the boy has always been valued more than the girl, these recent cinematic depictions of the male child bring about a re-interrogation of the mentioned discriminatory politics. As has been duly noted, ‘living up to a gender role is more problematic for boys because of the level of social expectations that males experience. In particular, expectations of strength, power and sexual competence form the basis of male roles’ (Pleck, 1981 cited in Haywood and Mac an Ghail, 2003: 7). In a sense, the films press upon the fact that the idea of being a boy cannot be valorised or viewed in monolithic terms of privilege, but has to be questioned deeply, particularly when the child himself *resists* the *becoming* of a conventional, recognizable ‘male’. Such resistance is expressed and negotiated in the different interactions that the child has with his father and other alternate father figures. The paper therefore tries to look into the transactions of emotions and practices experienced in the *masculinization* of the child protagonists.

Firstly, it analyses the dynamics of discipline and punishment that largely characterize both the films through their portrayals of dominating fathers and oppressive educational practices. Having examined the oppressed position of the child within such an environment, the paper shifts its focus to alternative versions of masculinity and discusses those compassionate men who serve as rays of hope for the distraught child. In the same vein, it also looks into the caring role played by the mother figure. Finally, the study tries to understand the ways in which the creative ‘inner world’ (Kakar, 1981) of the child subtly helps in subverting the traditional notions of aggressiveness and callousness often associated with Indian masculinity. In the ultimate sense, the paper, having compared and contrasted the liberal politics of the two films, attempts to illustrate that ‘masculinity can be viewed as crucial points of intersection of different forms of power, stratification, desire and subjective identity formation’ (Haywood and Mac an Ghail, 2003: 5).

***Discipline and Punish: Dominating fathers and oppressive educational practices***

*Taare Zameen Par*, set in and around the west Indian city of Mumbai, is the story of an eight year old dyslexic child Ishaan ( Darsheel Safary), who is both misunderstood and punished by his parents and teachers on account of his constant failure in academia. Having had enough of his disinterest in studies, his father sends him off to a boarding school in the nearby hills, where again Ishaan meets with the same predicament, now in an even more insensitive manner. This is until the arrival of the kind and enthusiastic art teacher Ram Shankar Nikumbh (Aamir Khan), who initially joins the school as a temporary staff member, and soon wins over all the students with his creative teaching methodologies. Ram notices the emotionally troubled nature of Ishaan, and soon finds out that Ishaan has been suffering from dyslexia, a discovery that no one else has made before him. With a benevolent attitude and innovative strategies, he eventually succeeds in helping Ishaan appreciate academia, and also makes him realize his (Ishaan's) own worth as an immensely creative person. The film therefore ends on a hopeful and positive note.

The second film *Udaan* is a harder hitting story, as it narrates the relationship between the seventeen year old Rohan (Rajat Barmecha) and his cruel, patriarchal father who works in a factory. Having been expelled from his boarding school in the north Indian town of Shimla (where he has been for several years) along with his friends, he has no option but to leave the place and go back to his hometown in Jamshedpur in central India, to live with his father and a newly discovered younger step brother. Much against his wishes, Rohan is forced to study engineering and strenuously work in his father's factory, while he continues to dream of becoming a writer. His only solaces are a group of college friends, his kind paternal uncle and aunt, his step brother, and his telephone conversations with his old school friends who enjoy a happy life in Mumbai. When the dictatorship of his father becomes unbearable, Rohan finally decides to leave his claustrophobic home to make a life of his own. Before leaving, however, he also takes his step brother along, thus freeing him from the clutches of oppression as well, which makes for a hopeful denouement of a different sort.

On preliminary viewing itself, it is obvious that the two films differ widely in their treatment of the child figure. While both of them do use forms akin to realism, the contrast in their stylistics is palpable enough. Of course, this owes much to the different contents they deal with as well as to the directorial visions that drive their specific politics and portrayals. Nevertheless, in context of the discussion on the representation of masculinity, there are similar concerns that can be compared and contrasted simultaneously. Both *Taare Zameen Par* and *Udaan* interrogate the diverse relationships between the male child protagonists and other adult males by focusing on the impinging discourses woven around functionality, achievement, authority and desire, which further get tied up with those of education.

To begin, perhaps the most conspicuous motif one can instantly locate in the two films is that of the manner in which authority implicates the child (or the adolescent), particularly in form of the father figure. One is only to recall the discipline of psychoanalysis that has time and again focused on the complexity of the father-son relationship that ushers in newer ideas of self and identity for the male child. As the renowned Indian psychoanalyst Sudhir Kakkar has persuasively argued, the initiation of the male child into a masculine atmosphere, a ‘second birth’, marks an important event in his life, as it introduces the child to ‘intense bewilderment, uprootedness, and misunderstanding’ (Kakkar, 1981: 126-127). ‘The world of Indian childhood widens suddenly from the intimate cocoon of maternal protection to the unfamiliar masculine network, woven by the demands and tensions, the comings and goings of the men of the family’ (126). Both movies portray such ‘demands and tensions’ that continue to affect the young person’s character even when he has crossed the stage of infancy and entered boyhood (as in *Taare Zameen Par*), or is well into his teens (as in *Udaan*). It is through these subtle and direct interactions that the child protagonist gets introduced to the many notions of masculine behaviour. But ‘the process of becoming male is a fluid one, elongated over time and not achieved at once’ (Chopra, Dasgupta and K Janeja, 2000: 1608). Thus, Ishaan and Rohan are frequently confronted with a ‘combination of bodily alterations and cultural markers’ (1608) dictated by their fathers, so that in future they become men in the *real* sense.

The ‘strict, hard, dominating’ (*Taare Zameen Par*) father in *Taare Zameen Par*, Mr. Nanadkishore Awasthi, is a ‘successful executive who expects his children to excel’ (ibid). Unable to deal sensitively with his son’s constant failure in academics and social relationships at large, he threatens Ishaan of severe consequences if he doesn’t mend his ways. He overlooks his prodigious talent of painting while berating him for being a totally useless fellow. Not understanding the ‘functionality’ or ‘usefulness’ of art (as *opposite* to science) in which Ishaan is interested, and suffering from what the Nobel Laureate Amartya Sen has termed as ‘first boy syndrome’ (Sen, 2005: 8), the father wants him to excel in class like his elder brother, a constant achiever. It is in order to teach Ishaan a *lesson* that he sends him to an all boys’ residential school. In such condemnation, we notice how Mr. Awasthi reflects a major viewpoint prevalent in much of Indian society that regards science suitable for boys, not only because it has some function or usefulness, but also because it is somehow more *masculine* than the arts, that are still seen as *feminine* in nature. The aggressive and dominating character of Mr. Awasthi is shared by the teachers at Ishaan’s new boarding school, whose constant use of abusive terms such as ‘duffer’, ‘idiot’, ‘bloody nonsense’ (like the father) etc. sends Ishaan in a state of shock and utter despondency. The brilliantly picturized song sequence ‘*Kyun mera bheja kam?*’ (*Why is my mind so inadequate?*) thus depicts Ishaan’s teachers publicly humiliating him with such words, and also draws attention to Ishaan’s resistance towards books and stationery, with alphabetical letters assuming shapes of crawling spiders and blackboards becoming snakes.

As has been perceptively noted, classroom discipline provides a major ‘context for the emergence of young male identity formations’ (Haywood and Mac an Ghail, 2003: 64). Schools indeed ascribe to ‘a teaching ideology that believes tough teachers make tough boys’ (Heward, 1991 cited in Haywood and Mac an Ghail, 2003: 64). This shared idea of toughness and masculinity is further reinforced in a climate that is an *all-male* one. One is only to remember other cinematic productions such as Nagesh Kukunoor’s *Rockford* (1999) and Peter Weir’s *Dead Poets Society* (1989) (which clearly seems to have inspired *Taare Zameen Par*) that have also tried to understand the politics of a masculine environment in a detailed manner. The movies’

emphasis on authoritarianism and corruption in educational scenarios is indeed directly linked to the cultivation of specific behaviours that are *traditionally* sanctioned as *masculine*, and therefore, must be subscribed to without questioning.

*Udaan's* focus on the other hand is not so much on educational institutions as on the father's irrational obsession with success and physical toughness. Bhairav Singh, played by Ronit Roy, is certainly more authoritarian than Mr. Awasthi, in that his attitude towards his sons is emotionally and physically tyrannical, besides being disciplinarian. Desiring that his children address him as 'Sir', he is against the idea of Rohan wanting to become a writer, as he thinks that writers are a frustrated lot, who only grow long hair like 'girls', and needlessly feel important about themselves. His aversion and contempt towards anything related with the female sex is further noticed when he openly criticizes Rohan's facial expressions for their 'femininity' and scornfully relates them to his deceased mother's features. And even when he tells Rohan how his mother loved him a lot, it is not difficult to smell the jealousy that marks his recollection. The dialogue is an important one, as it illustrates the tensions associated with what is known as the 'oedipal complex' in psychoanalytical terms, a web of relationships, gains and losses formed amidst the triad of the father, the son, and the mother. In Freudian psychoanalysis, the male child during the Oedipal stage (the earliest phase when he focuses all his attention on the mother) realizes that the father exists in competition for his mother's love, and it is here that the first friction between the father and the son sets up. Becoming aware of his powerless position in front of the father figure, the child, throughout his childhood, continues to accept and internalize the threatening, punishing aspect of the father. The father, on the other hand, remains at a distant position, envious of the close and loving relationship between the son and the mother. It is this envy that gets played out in the above dialogue between Bhairav Singh and Rohan.

Like Ishaan's father, but certainly in a crueller manner, Bhairav Singh also forces his son to study science (specifically engineering), and additionally, makes him work strenuously in the iron manufacturing factory where he is a business dealer. Singh's authoritarianism clearly seems to be in conformity with the observation that 'masculinity is central to the modernity project with its

emphasis on rationality, reason and scientific progress' (Haywood and Mac an Ghail, 2003: 12). Moreover, his unbending emphasis on work also reflects another commonly held idea that 'to become a man is to become a worker' (22).

This forceful 'becoming' not only takes place in working or educational spaces, but dominates daily routine as well. Singh forces Rohan to undergo physical training, ordering him to race as his opponent every morning and always outdoing him, so that in the end he is able to repeatedly label his own son as 'disgraceful'. It is interesting that during this daily competition, the six year old younger son Arjun, is also forced to stand at the house gate and measure the time that the father takes in finishing the run. Indeed, Singh's behaviour towards Arjun is no different than it is towards the teenage Rohan. In fact, it is Arjun who is brutally beaten with a belt when Singh holds him responsible for the failure of a business deal. When Rohan accuses Singh of lying and hiding this criminal act, his father instantly becomes furious, lamely acknowledging his crime while simultaneously, and quite ironically, hitting and hurting Rohan as well. As Sudhir Kakar has also observed, 'the hierarchical principle of social organization' is so much ingrained in Indian society, that "confrontation on the issues' simply do not occur' between the young and the old (Kakar, 1981: 120). The physically torturous and threatening nature of the father figure is also a point of discussion for Rohan's friends in school and college. For instance, at the beginning of the film itself, when Rohan and his friends are suspended from their boarding school, it is the prospect of their fathers' reaction that makes them cringe in fear (mothers are not even mentioned). Again, when Rohan and his new college friends discuss the stories of their lives at a small bar in Jamshedpur, one of the friends narrates the episode about his drunkard father's atrocities on his mother and himself. And he sullenly concludes, '*Sabhi chhote sheher ke baap ek jaise hote hain.*' ('All small-town fathers are alike.')

### ***Rays of Hope: Compassionate men and empathetic notions of male hood***

It is in this environment of patriarchal oppression that both the movies introduce a few alternate male characters, who consciously do not ascribe to such conventional ideas of masculine

behaviour, and in turn remain empathetic to the visions and ideas of the child. *Taare Zameen Par*, in the latter half of the story, introduces us to the jovial and enthusiastic art teacher Ram Shankar Nikumbh, who believes in children's imagination and inspires them to cultivate different perspectives to this multi-faceted world. The enthusiastic classroom song and dance sequence 'Bum bum bole', in which he introduces himself to his new students, endearingly represents his free thinking politics, that is indeed radically different from those of all other male teachers teaching in Ishaan's boarding school. Not surprisingly, these teachers find his lecture-cum-demonstration manner of teaching unsuitable for a school that upholds the idea of 'discipline.' At the most, they are only able to view such pedagogical practices relevant for those schools that cater to disadvantaged students. Nikumbh indeed has been teaching at one such school as well, and such jibing commentary by his colleagues only reveals the discrimination involved in the perception of not only teaching methodologies, but also of students' mental and physical perfection. It is interesting then, that Ishaan's only close friend, the sensitive and humble Rajan Damodran (Tanay Chheda), is a physically handicapped person who is also at the top of the class. By aligning the idea of success with physical deformity, *Taare Zameen Par* not only subtly critiques the above assumptions of the teachers, but, in the larger context of this discussion, also presents us with another representation of masculinity. It is a masculinity that goes against the norm through the very expression of its physicality, and therein lays its importance.

Something similar is found in *Udaan*, where Rohan's uncle and Bhairav Singh's younger brother Jimmy (Ram Kapoor) emerges as the alternate male character, who is not only the most supportive of Rohan's writing pursuits, but also serves as his friend and mentor in moments of utter hopelessness and suffering. With no children of his own, he bestows all his love on Rohan and Arjun, and expectedly, this uncle-nephew(s) relationship collides sourly with the father-son relationship.

Noticing that his brother had time and again been arguing in favour of Rohan's dream of becoming a writer, Bhairav Singh agitatedly criticizes him for doing so in the latter half of the

movie. That Singh is jealous of their happy and friendly relationship is more than evident in the heated dialogue that takes place between them. Soon, Singh vents all his frustration on Jimmy, and terms him a ‘failed’ person, because he has been unable to produce children of his own. When Jimmy offers to help Singh by adopting his younger son Arjun (whom his father is about to send to a boarding school as he is frustrated with his role as a parent), Singh angrily retorts that by doing so, his brother won’t be able to hide his impotency. (Indeed, sexual prowess for Rohan’s father is almost a prerequisite for being a ‘male’ in the ‘real’ sense. Earlier too, he had asked Rohan whether he had had sex in school, and on receiving a negative reply, had ridiculed him.) The episode thus marks the end of the brothers’ relationship, presumably forever.

*Taare Zameen Par*, on the other hand, while critiquing the contemporary educational scenario, also brings about a dialogue between the two adult male characters, i.e. between the father Mr. Awasthi, and the teacher Nikhumbh. In two important scenes, it too displays the tensions that trouble Mr. Awasthi on observing the concern displayed by Nikhumbh towards his son. In the scene where the art teacher reveals to the Awasthi family for the first time that Ishaan has been suffering from dyslexia, there is apparent distrust and disinclination to acknowledge this fact on part of the father. While Ishaan’s mother goes into a state of sadness, Mr. Awasthi aggressively maintains that to rationalize Ishaan’s failure by reasoning it is sheer nonsense. While the reaction of the father is certainly dissimilar to that of Bhairav Singh’s to his brother, one can still sense the smell of anxiety and worry that has just shaken Mr. Awasthi on this glaring revelation. It is as if his sense of fatherhood is disturbed and challenged, not quite because he receives the news of his son’s dyslexic condition (which he could never identify), but because the news comes from another man. Thereafter, having realized his ignorance, Awasthi visits Nikhumbh after some days, in order to tell him sarcastically that he and his wife had now grown quite attentive to all the issues pertaining to his son. It is in this scene that Mr. Awasthi tries to gain an upper hand by forcing Nikhumbh to hear that *he cared for his son*. In a befitting reply, Nikhumbh again punctures Mr. Awasthi’s egotism, and it is only then that Ishaan’s father realizes how he had been wrong in more ways than one. Here, I differ from the renowned film critic Subhash K Jha’s otherwise appreciative review of the film, where he objects to the ‘sanctimonious lecture’ that

Nikumbh gives to Ishaan's father (Jha, 2007). The scene is not a 'deviation from the delectable delicacy of tone adopted by the film' as Jha would have it, as it is in this very dialogue that Mr. Awasthi's egotistical presumptions get diluted, as a consequence of which he begins to appreciate the 'delicacy' of Ishaan's world in an empathetic, novel manner.

### ***Repositories of Love: Mothers' role in a stifling environment***

If the two movies engage in a dialogue of contesting masculinities through such characters, then it may also be important to understand the role that the woman plays in this (re)interrogation and (re)configuration of male identities. *Taare Zameen Par* and *Udaan*'s primary women are the mothers of the child protagonists. Bombay Cinema since its beginning itself has always valued the role that the mother plays in a child's life. The father may be the bread winner of the family and higher in the social hierarchy. But it is the mother who is attributed with the cultivation of all those values and care that holds the hero in good stead throughout his life. Discussing this relationship as a dominant feature of much of the Indian society, Sudhir Kakar aptly notes that the majority of Indian men view their mothers as 'highly supportive and extremely loving', and it is primarily from this relationship that they learn to love their own selves as well as to become helpful and kind to others (Kakar, 1981: 82- 83). Ishaan's mother (Tisca Chopra) in *Taare Zameen Par* is an epitome of sacrifice, who has relinquished her job for the sake of looking after her sons. She stands in stark opposition to Ishaan's temperamental father, and it is her comfort that Ishaan desires the most. Thus, for instance, the song '*Maa*' ('*Mother*') poignantly captures the consequences of the emotional and physical separation of Ishaan from his family, once he is forced to study and reside in the new residential school. The lyrics of the same song again evoke Oedipal resonances, as they express the dependence and trust of Ishaan in his mother that is obviously more than that he has in his father. Sung in the voice of the child, a line therefore runs: '*Whenever my father pushed the swing hard, my eyes always searched for your assurance, mother...*'

In *Udaan*, Rohan's mother is conspicuous by her very absence, as she has died a long time before the narrative even takes off. In a touching scene, Rohan's uncle reveals to his nephew how his mother would have been proud of his ambition had she survived, because she had truly wanted him to become a writer. Further, in an even more heart rending moment, both Rohan and his step brother Arjun remember their mothers, and Rohan in particular mentions the sweetness that was very much a part of his mother's personality. It is significant that this collective reminiscing takes place in the hospital, where Arjun had been admitted after his father had brutally beaten him up with a belt. It is as if the mere thought of maternal care- what Kakar calls 'the memory traces of maternal ministrations'- is able to dispel the darkness of paternal hostility, even if it is for a few seconds (Kakar, 1981: 82). In light of this, then, it is also significant that in the end, Rohan himself dons an almost maternal role, in that in his final escape from his father, he takes upon himself to nurture Arjun for the rest of his life, instead of letting him rot in what Rohan perceives to be an unchangeable tyrannical environment. It is not difficult to notice how Rohan has developed his self-identity from being an unconcerned elder step brother in the beginning of the movie to becoming a guardian and rescuer of Arjun by the end. In the Indian scenario, it is usually the elder sister who inherits the role of 'taking care of herself as well as the other younger children in the family' from her mother (Kakar, 1981: 126- 127). In the absence of a caring sister or a doting mother, Rohan very consciously subverts the traditional role of being a male, and negotiates his masculinity by tempering it with empathy.

### ***Imagination and Independence: The power of creativity and the male child figure***

While the alternate male and mother figures provide the child protagonists the emotional support they desire in a stifling patriarchal atmosphere, it is important to realize that children *themselves* also bring about a subtle critique of the conventionally aggressive masculine behaviour prevalent around them. That is, it is through the very expression of their *subjective* artistic and creative desires that children temper the rigid, *objective* masculine behaviours deemed fit for a male. Both the filmmakers self-consciously uphold the role of creativity by investing the child protagonist with abundant individual talent. They are aware that within the act of socialization in an adult

world, children are often depotentiated, who become ‘nominal ciphers seemingly without an active dimension’ (Jenks, 2005: 9), and it is as a result of this awareness that the directors portray the child protagonists as *agents*, by empowering them through access to creative and imaginative faculties. Such imagination is indeed very much in contrast to the one-dimensional manner of thought of their fathers and teachers who cannot comprehend the significance of creative ideas, in opposition to which they constantly hammer in the utilitarian benefits of science. Indeed, recent debates on the state and perception of Indian education have expressed great concern over the ‘relentless assault on the humanities’ (Dasgupta, 2010) and arts as a whole, despite their tremendous ability to cultivate ‘imagination, creativity, emotional investment, analysis, clarity of thought and expression, poise, reflection’, with a ‘certain rigour’ (Bose and Chakravarty, 2010).

In *Taare Zameen Par*, Ishaan’s love for art and fantasy is evident from the numerous paintings and sketches he makes every now and then. Interestingly, in order to depict his imaginative thoughts, the film also uses the mode of animation that places Ishaan’s perspectives in stark contrast to the realistic adult world. In *Udaan*, Rohan takes recourse to literature so as to make sense of the bitter social reality he often finds himself in. Thus for instance, at the prospect of his expulsion from his boarding school, he narrates a deeply existential and painful poem to his friend, and in the hospital, when nursing his brother, he weaves a fantastical tale around his friends and his authoritarian school teacher Rathore to entertain him and all other patients and staff present there.

Not surprisingly then, the aggressive masculine environment which both the children inhabit, does its best to stifle this very creativity. Even though Mr. Awasthi is not as tyrannical as Bhairav Singh in lambasting his son’s pursuits, there is an obvious anxiety regarding Ishaan’s future, in which his artistic inclinations, Mr. Awasthi believes, won’t do him good at all (a point already discussed). Science, it seems, would make him successful and independent. Arguing with Nikumbh, he even blurts that he would not be ‘providing for Ishaan all through his life’. Such discomfort only reflects an anxiety at parenting, specifically at *fathering a son*, that becomes more of an obligation than a responsibility for both the father figures. (In *Udaan*, Bhairav Singh

also makes tall claims in front of his brother regarding how he had spent all his resources in educating his son who only squandered them. He would not like to, Singh asserts, make Rohan, or for that matter any other person around him, happy).

At his boarding school, where the oppression from his teachers only multiplies, there comes a moment when Ishaan stops all together to engage in any creative activity he had been doing for all these years. The torrent of humiliations and punishments totally shatter his dignity and imagination. Even the art teacher prior to Nikumbh did not understand Ishaan's immense potential, as he would want all his students to draw and paint only in a correct, ordered, mathematical way. So when Ishaan is asked to create something of his own by the kind new art teacher Nikumbh, he only stares at the sheet blankly, unable to even pick up his brush. In the final lap of *Udaan* on the other hand, the father turns totally sadistic and burns the novel his son had written over the years, thus marking the final attempt to murder any sort of agency that the son has.

### ***Locating the Action: Spatial distributions and identity formations***

While promoting the ideas of imagination and freedom, the directors compellingly use spatial strategies to complement the growth of the child protagonists. If the fathers inhabit the confined spaces of offices and factories, and spend most of their time in front of the laptop or television news, the children yearn to straddle those spaces that lie beyond the limiting confines of their educational institutions or homes. In *Taare Zameen Par*, fearing another of several punishments, Ishaan runs away from his school and wanders aimlessly across the city, sensing and soaking its myriad sights and emotions. 'Freedom' rightly is the recurring theme in the song ('*I want to be free!*') that accompanies his travel. Movement and observation of the city's spaces not only gives him a sense of individuality, but also provides the *materiality* for his imagination. As Ranjani Mazumdar has observed, 'the context of the Indian city [can be seen] as a metaphor, as a space, as a conundrum of diverse human experiences, as an imaginary landscape of deep psychic dislocations' (Mazumdar, 2007: xxii). Even in his boarding school, before the drawing

competition, Ishaan visits the nearby lake to stimulate his creative senses. It is only fitting that the painting he makes depicts his own self sitting beside the lake.

The narrative of *Udaan* also experiments with such spatial politics. It often depicts random shots of Jamshedpur, with Rohan walking across those spaces that serve as an alternative for the oppressive environs of his home, college and factory. He becomes the Benjaminian *flâneur* as he continues to discover his identity in marginal spaces. Consequently, it is besides the lake or atop the water tanker where Rohan gives words to his literary imagination, or vents his anger against his dictatorial father. And it is on the vacant roads and streets at night that he secretly enjoys driving his father's car with his newly made friends. As in the article 'Understanding Masculinity', the authors make it clear, 'the street is an open ended space, exterior to both home and field, free of supervisory authority, where boys are said to indulge in 'shaitani' or devilry' (Chopra, Dasgupta and K Janeja, 2000: 1608). (While it is true that the context of this article is different from that of the movie under discussion, I have consciously used the inferences of the former in understanding the spatial practices of *Udaan* as the issue- expression of masculinity- is the same under consideration). Thus, 'while learning hard work is an idiom in the hierarchic mode of producing 'maleness', the son, in contrast to his father, needs to assert his masculinity fiercely and the context of this assertion is the 'gang' in the street' (1608). Interestingly, it is also in the street that Rohan finally breaks away from his father forever, by defeating him in the final run for the first and the last time.

### ***Conclusions: Reconstituting relationships, reconstituting masculinities***

With such an emphasis on imagination, creativity and agency, the two movies offer a strong argument in favour of children who *must* be seen as individuals in their own right, even when they are placed under the protection of an adult world. It is also important to realize that both the protagonists do not subscribe to the idea of 'perfection' their fathers would like them to. In fact, it is their subtle and direct resistance to such ideas of correctness and achievement through their sensitive reflections and actions, that they are able to successfully critique conventional *maleness*

through a subtle reconstitution of the traditionally hierarchical father-son relationship. Arguing in favour of such a reconfiguration, as Sudhir Kakar and Katherina Kakar have rightly observed, ‘a less hierarchical and closer father-son relationship...will, inevitably, change notions of the desirable power distance in institutions and expectations that young Indians will have of their leaders’ (Kakar and Kakar, 2007: 24). Simultaneously, the films also mark a significant shift from those Bombay Cinema productions of yester years, which upheld and justified a ‘conception of innate merit’ in children (Chandra, 2009: 124).

Finally, we may remember how both the movies conclude, and what, if any, are the changes that occur with respect to politics of masculinity. With Ishaan having improved a lot under the guidance of his teacher Nikumbh, his father and other teachers also come to recognize the brilliance of his artistic forte. But this recognition of his creative pursuits is not only because he succeeds academically. What is significant is that all the male teachers also discover themselves through the act of painting by the end of the movie. Their initial stubbornness towards not participating in the drawing competition organized by Nikumbh soon gives way to an absolute involvement in colours and imagination. The strict father Mr. Awasthi also breaks into tears once he recognizes Ishaan’s potential and his own faults. With *Udaan*, however, the situation remains grim and suffocating till the end. It is the relentlessly cruel and unchangeable nature of his father that forces Rohan to escape his home. What is important is that this escape, this flight (*‘udaan’*) towards freedom is an unselfish one, as he shares it with his brother Arjun whom he helps in escaping as well.

It is clear that while the focus of both the movies is primarily on the growth of the child figure, the movies inevitably also engage with the dynamics of adulthood. As such, it is difficult to categorize movies like *Taare Zameen Par* and *Udaan* as purely ‘children’s cinema’. Indeed, it becomes imperative to diffuse the very boundary that separates children’s cinema from adult’s cinema, as well as to constantly question the relevance of such categorization. Through the course of this paper, I have tried to demonstrate the ways in which the clash of individualities of children and adults takes place, and the extent to which both the individualities partake of each

other. The conventional male's sense of a superior self- as has been shown- necessarily derives from keeping the child in a subordinate position, whereas the alternate male figure's unconventional identity develops as a result of respecting and improving the child's individuality. This autonomy of the male child does not rest upon any notion of self righteousness, but is a product of his sensitive engagement with human relationships and also a consequence of his reliance on imaginative pursuits. Comparing and contrasting the different expressions of masculinities that arise out of the above discussion, one can strongly support the statement that the 'fragments through and within which the practices of being and becoming male are differently mapped and the process of 'knowing' these fragments is highly gendered' (Chopra in Chopra, Dasgupta and K Janeja, 2000: 1608). With their sustained interrogation of masculine constructs, both *Taare Zameen Par* and *Udaan*- to reiterate a previous point- compel us to reformulate the semiotics of conventional gender analysis, by critiquing masculinity from within and not by positing it against femininity. The films therefore emerge as novel critical interventions, that broaden and nuance our perceptions towards gender and social relationships. One can only hope for more such cultural productions in the future, that may continue to chart such transformative practices.

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## **Filmography**

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*Awaara*, 1951. [Film] Directed by Raj Kapoor. India: Raj Kapoor Productions

*Dead Poets Society*, 1989. [Film] Directed by Peter Weir. United States: Touchstone Pictures

*Deewar*, 1975. [Film] Directed by Yash Chopra. India: Trimurti Films Pvt. Limited

*Rockford*, 1999 [Film] Directed by Nagesh Kukunoor. India: SIC Productions

*Taare Zameen Par*, 2007 [Film] Directed by Aamir Khan. India: Aamir Khan Productions

*Udaan*, 2010 [Film] Directed by Vikramaditya Motwane. India: Sanjay Singh and Anurag Kashyap Productions