The Cinematic Pleasures of Indian Men’s Rights Activists

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Abstract

Indian Men’s Rights Activists (MRAs) claim that men are oppressed by laws of marriage and domestic violence, and that there is no recognition of men’s vulnerabilities. The State and organized feminist groups are identified as primary culprits. While MRA groups are commonly associated with calls to reinstate “traditional” family structures, here I focus on MGTOWs (Men Going Their Own Way), a subset of MRAs who oppose familialism and ideologies of compulsory marriage, preferring to live among like-minded men. This paper examines their oppositional negotiations with marriage, romance and masculinity through three films they recommended: a Bildungsroman with a naïve female protagonist, a male buddy film about adventure and healed trauma, and a revenge fantasy orchestrated by a scorned woman. MGTOW viewers were drawn to the ways that marriage and romance were critiqued, and families of choice highlighted. They emphasized spaces of men’s community and the portrayal of men’s silent struggles, while disavowing hegemonic masculinity associated with success. Female protagonists were treated as one of their own when their actions aligned with challenges to utopian heteronormative futures. In highlighting men’s community and vulnerability, MGTOWs elided privileges of gender, class and caste the men in these films embody, and drew attention away from their anti-feminist crusade.

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Indian Men’s Rights Activists (MRAs) complain that the State has abandoned the cause of husbands and facilitated their harassment by feminists. They identify law—in particular reforms of divorce and domestic violence law championed by feminist groups—as the principal mode of oppression. In various posters, blogs and memes, “feminists” (referring mostly to prominent activists involved with law and policy) are depicted as interchangeable with their wives (and women more broadly) in greed, selfishness and deceptiveness. There is an explicit nostalgia for the preservation of the “traditional order” of patrilineal kinship norms of sexuality, labor and property preserved in law, with the argument that the erosion of such structures has led to elder neglect and modern materialism. The blog entry “Modern day mother’s [sic]: Are They the Biggest Enemy of the Children?” is a perfect case in point. The author alleges that “[m]any daughter-in-laws don’t want to stay along with their father and mother in-laws . . . It’s the days of woman empowerment so these wives win, and

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succeed in keeping them separately so that they can have their own private space, they and their hubby and their own children.”

This paper is not interested in the plenitude of such patriarchal heteronormative longing, but is focused, rather, on a subgroup within the movement that purports to have a different attitude to gender and family. These members consider themselves among the most urbane and sophisticated of their brethren in rejecting the burdens of compulsory heteronormative marriage, as straight men choosing to live in homosocial spaces they have created. Anointing themselves as “MGTOWs” or Men Going Their Own Way in line with similarly named global groups, they vow to soothe the effects of toxic masculinity. They criticize the harm that gendered ideologies of male protection and female vulnerability cause to men, though notably without acknowledging the privileges of gender, class and caste that men draw from such ideologies.

Our entry into MGTOW subjectivities in this article comes not through an enumeration of their legal and political strategies, but through the lens of their affective attachments. Their recommendations for popular films present us with their anxieties and longings, the ethnographic encounter allowing us to trace their understandings of gender and sexuality in ways that their shrill public policy statements cannot fully capture. The following moment during a long interview with some prominent Bengaluru MRAs illustrates one such recalibration of the dynamics of the movement. My interlocutors, a couple of IT professionals and a real-estate broker, were giving me movie recommendations—suggestions I took to be invaluable insights into their subjectivities, beyond typical interview materials on legal troubles and movement strategy. Diligently writing down a list of titles, I was startled to recognize a familiar one: Queen. “Have you seen this film,” I asked astonished, “You do know it’s about a woman who jilts her fiancé and spurns marriage?” They assured me they had, and that the film’s protagonist was “one of them” in her refusal to cater to the expected script of conjugality, and in her resolve to find her own path outside of marriage. We had each read the film through our preferred framings—feminist adventure vs. marriage resistance—and decided its value and pleasure on that basis.

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2 This article draws upon my research on the Indian MRM, based on fieldwork conducted in eight Indian cities primarily between 2013 and 2015. My fieldwork methods include semi-structured interviews, group interviews, participant observation at weekly meetings and public events in various cities, and discourse analysis of media materials.
This paper explores some of those film recommendations as diagnostic of the MGTOW imaginary. The focus on viewing pleasure varies from discussions of their strategies on law or policy that I and others have analyzed elsewhere, illuminating varied positions within the movement. Most importantly, surveying the men’s viewing pleasures maps the unlikely casting of the MGTOWs as subjects of a queer reading of popular culture. The films, as the men perceive them, trouble trajectories of heteronormative romantic/marital bliss, feature rule-breaking heroines, and portray the pains (and joys) of toxic masculinity. In following the logic of their interpretations and offering my readings of the texts, I trace their subjectivities as revealed through their identifications and disidentifications, as well as through some gaps and erasures in these preferences. The men’s accounts toy with gender-fluid MGTOW identity, appear to challenge hegemonic constructions of patriarchal resource distribution, and align with feminist calls to transform normative kinship. Yet the MGTOWs draw value from masculine privilege and minimize the effects of feminist actions.

Straight men obsessed by their encounters with marriage certainly seem an odd choice of topic for this special issue on Queer Legal Studies. These men insist they are heterosexual; are deeply invested in the gender binary and its material advantages; and are often casually homophobic. And yet they are highly critical of marriage as an institution and devoted to radical homosociality and profound male intimacy. I suggest that the troubled, problematic, utopian alternatives to heteronormativity through which they portray their lives are a strange and provocative example of the “alternative plots” of “desires for intimacy that bypass the couple or the life narrative it generates.” If queer theory is foundationally “concerned with destabilizing the binaries of gender and hetero/homosexuality,” then these responses, located between the homophilic and

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homophobic, show the circulation of alternate scripts of social and sexual being even if they may ultimately do little to destabilize gender and sexual hierarchies.

In the following sections, I first provide a brief overview of the Indian Men’s Rights Movement (MRM) in general and of MGTOWs in particular, and then discuss the relevant scholarly literature on film viewership and identification. The three films—a Bildungsroman with a naïve female protagonist, a male buddy film of adventure and healed trauma, and a revenge fantasy orchestrated by a scorned woman—are analyzed both as texts and through their fans’ perspectives, in terms of the pleasures and pains they evoke and the issues they elide.

I. The Indian Men’s Rights Movement: Law, Gender, Sociality

The Indian MRM typically dates itself to the early 1990s, formed in response to legal reform in the 1980s, including a new domestic violence law and a refinement of anti-dowry law. From faint beginnings in scattered solitary actions, it has gained visibility since the mid-2000s under the banner organization “Save Indian Family Foundation” (SIF), which holds weekly public meetings across Indian cities as well as a large annual conference. Some members travel to the US and UK, attend the International Conference on Men’s Issues (Detroit, 2014), and communicate regularly with diasporic Indian men in the US, UK and Australia. The names of MRM organizations—Society for Prevention of Cruelty to Men (Delhi), Child Rights Initiative for Shared Parenting (Bengaluru), Purush Hakka Sanrakshan Samiti [Organization to Conserve Men’s Rights] (Nasik)—evoke human rights and gender equity discourses for men and speak in the name of persecuted victim-husbands and children without custodial fathers.

The Indian MRM resembles men’s rights groups in other countries in several ways: in their allegations that women’s violence matches men’s; in the denial, minimization and excusing of men’s violence against women; in assertions that men face difficulties reporting domestic violence; in their complaints that custodial decisions are biased against fathers; and in their cynicism that the State garners political popularity by supporting feminist arguments. The Indian MRM focuses on the legal burden of men being charged simultaneously in criminal cases (including domestic violence) and civil filings (divorce, alimony), the former potentially leading to jail or job loss. MRAs allege that men are harassed and extorted by corrupt police and lawyers in these processes. Like their global brethren, they also promote universalistic notions of manhood and ideal fatherhood, question statistics on gender violence, and are hypervigilant towards unfavorable legal decisions. Similar to Canadian, US, and Australian MRMs, they challenge gender equity

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even as they contrarily draw on human rights and equality to frame their case against men’s oppression and marginalization.⁸

In response, feminist scholars and activists in India have pointed to women’s social and economic vulnerabilities as a group, including their dire situations following divorce and the low conviction rates for gender-based violence.⁹ While some feminist groups acknowledge that police corruption and class privilege can result in distressing legal burdens, others emphasize that the ability to simultaneously use criminal and civil law in good faith can be a critical advantage to women given their typically weak negotiating power. They have argued for greater vigilance on women’s behalf and against superficial notions of neutrality which ignore structural inequalities.¹⁰

Media profiles of MRAs typically feature upper middle-class men—engineers, marketing executives, small business owners, IT workers, academics, and doctors. I found that the professional profile accurately represents organizational leaders, who have the class- and caste-based privileges of literacy, communication, technological access and skills, and greater resources and time. But MRA organizations can be quite diverse: economically marginalized men also attended the meetings and were discreetly and generously provided for by others. They were offered food, a place to live, legal advice or simply company. Groups in each city tended to be ethno-linguistically diverse and upper-caste when Hindu, but many were multi-religious, with several Muslim men occupying leadership positions. Women led the groups in several cities. The MRM was resolutely unaffiliated with political parties (although they attacked specific politicians).

My initial interviews were consonant with the impression of MRAs as anti-social loners. I met a number of male leaders who lived alone, away from their families in other cities, and who deliberately cut themselves off from curious or disapproving relatives, neighbors and friends. Typically in their late 20s to early 40s, many had lost their jobs when their wives filed charges against them, either because they missed work to attend court or because they were jailed during the investigation. The ones still employed were often mandated to attend monthly court appointments in distant venues, limiting their occupational mobility. The heteronormative sociality of romantic or marital life was near impossible for them given their legal burdens. Later in my fieldwork, however, I did meet leaders who were well-integrated with their families and neighbors, sharing affection and support.

MRAs who lived as loners often consciously sought a homosocial world of male friendship: a community where their frustration or anguish resonated with others. Many

⁸ Susan B. Boyd, Backlash Against Feminism: Canadian Custody and Access Reform Debates of the Late Twentieth Century, 16 Can. J. Women & L. 255 (2004); Crowley, supra note 7; Flood supra note 6; Dragiewicz, supra note 6.


men devoted all their spare time to the organization, training themselves in legal matters, cultivating media appearances and writing prolifically for social media. They spent free time together, cooking, dining out or traveling. Some visited sex-work areas as a group. Movie watching, as this paper will demonstrate, served as an important site of articulating and negotiating social spaces. A few men with sufficient room in their solitary quarters deliberately created what they called “male spaces,” where other men in the movement could stay over, cook together and watch movies, talking into the night. When MRAs visited other cities, many reported calling other SIF members to make plans before they contacted family or co-workers. SIF buddies were often their first call in family crises, and men regularly visited ill parents of SIF members in hospitals and homes. The social networks generated through their movement work had thus become the basis for quotidian companionship and support. Such situational homosociality resembled a form of queer family (against the reading of its members), but also seems part of long-held South Asian traditions of homosociality, such as male living spaces in the context of single urban migration or intense male friendships alongside heterosexual marriage.

At meetings, I observed that there were sharply divided attitudes to marriage among MRAs. Many men (often older or more conservative) opposed the notion of divorce, deeming it alien to “Indian” (read Hindu) culture. On the other hand, there was a powerful faction of younger, middle-class professionals who vociferously sought to dismantle marriage by refusing to partake in it. These MGTOWs resolved to do without marriage and to make a fulfilling life for themselves. They argued that the fundamental problems with alimony and custody lay in the gendered dependence inherent in ideologies of marriage, rather than with unfair judges or corrupt police or vengeful feminists. MGTOWs recommended that men not devote undue energy to being married: those involved in alimony or divorce cases were advised to keep their cases going indefinitely by showing up in court and paying dues (often minimal) but making no moves to file a divorce case (until their wives broached the issue). Thus neither party would be free to marry for the foreseeable future. One leader often said aphoristically, “Society has married marriage, it needs to divorce from marriage first.” Several MGTOWs claimed to have been raised by feminists and to be sympathetic to feminism in principle, despite their virulence against feminists in public life. However, they typically framed such commitment to gender equity as claims to equal space and resources, and equal attention to men’s vulnerabilities.

Like their transnational counterparts, MGTOWs foregrounded the harm of gendered expectations. For example, the notion that men should not express their feelings or the assumption that they are the breadwinners of the family. Consider this plea/threat to take a break from hegemonic masculinity by Amar, one of the IT professionals whom

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we will soon meet again as a movie aficionado:

If you see, the male attitude [is] that I’m a violent protector. You’re a James Bond or a Terminator or . . . , the movies project so much of . . . Mahabharata [the Indian epic] as a male protector thing. “I will protect dharna. I will protect honor. I will protect this. I will protect that. I will protect religion. I will protect language. Bengali or Tamil, I will protect language.” Can’t we just take a break for fifty years and say we men are going on a holiday? We will protect nobody. We will protect nobody. Most probably terrorism will come down, ok . . . Terrorists exist because they’re thinking they are trying to protect something.

Amar is exhausted by masculinity as strength. He emphasizes how even masculinity as “protective” is nonetheless violent and destructive. Refusing such a role is posed as both a challenge and a threat: he asserts that rates of terrorism may or may not be affected, but the MGTOWs will no longer take on sacrifice or defense. They might as well be safe and comfortable rather than court danger by being a protector or thanklessly labor as nice guys (as they claim they tried to be before marital trouble): “Whether we speak nice or we speak bad, badnaam to bona bi hai [we will be bad-mouthed anyway].” If hegemonic masculinity is destined to fail in its effects, why bother?

Notably, these claims to be marriage resisters and, thereby, to be undoing the institution of marriage, are retroactive. MGTOWs became critics of marriage only after their part of the “patriarchal bargain”13—in which they were primary income-earners and their wives were responsible for domestic labor and reproduction—fell apart. They want to cast off their conjugal, gendered responsibilities without avowing the attendant privileges of greater income or property. They expect wives to be equal participants in the labor market only after women may already have become disadvantaged in education or skills given that they too were raised on an understanding of the same patriarchal bargain, in which they acquire less market potential in exchange for being economically supported by husbands. One of the popular ways that MRAs refuse to support their wives financially, even when they might be legally mandated to pay alimony, is thus to un-work—to give up jobs and spurn the trappings of male identity acquired through employment.14 Like the refusal to be violent protectors, un-working embraces failed masculinity and challenges the normative gendered roles of marriage.

This sense of aggrieved masculinity courses through the beliefs of MGTOWs globally. Nagle15 defines MGTOW groups as “marriage resisters,” one wing of a movement that we popularly gloss as the Alt-Right, though they vary widely in their political and cultural goals.16 They are loosely united in the “dark preoccupation with thwarted or failed white Western masculinity as a grand metaphor” and in the performative preference for

14 Such work resisters often use the appellation NEET: Neither in Employment, Education nor Training.
15 Angela Nagle, Kill All Normies: Online Culture Wars from 4chan and Tumblr to Trump and the Alt-right 18 (2017).
16 Admittedly, there is no direct evidence of active collaboration between these Indian men and other MGTOW groups, and the Indian representatives did not echo the passion for mass violence identified in US groups.
chaotic, subversive actions, venting prolifically in sites like Reddit (4chan in particular). MRAs profess marked contempt for “Normies” (norm followers), describing themselves as “Beta males” or “red pill men” in contrast, a metaphor drawing on the famous mythology of The Matrix:

Ingest a blue pill and live in a bland fantasy land, or ingest a red pill and see the world as it really is. The Red Pill is a popular sub-Reddit premised on the idea that women, by claiming to be victims, are given free rein to espouse misandry and govern the world with impunity. Meanwhile, men are demonized.

Significantly, Beta males foreground their lack of romantic success (inevitably heterosexual), directing their ire both at men who appear hegemonically successful (often mocked as “Chad Thundercocks”), and at women (“Stacys”) deemed to be shallow because of their preference for such traits over other less valued masculine characteristics.

II. Viewership: Romance and Resistance

Analyses of cinematic texts are often grounded in the understanding that popular films are diagnostic of cultural anxieties and that melodrama or fantasy reveal inarticulable psychic crises better than realist cinema can. Romantic comedies (or tragedies), by this argument, seem primarily centered on the (heterosexual) couple form, but scholars suggest that they function as a space to work through issues of identity formation in the primal place of the family, and desires around class, religion, race or migration. Priya Joshi finds Freud’s notion of “family romance” useful for exploring Bollywood film narratives that do their work by simultaneously “satisfying” and “unsettling” their audience, because the concept allows her “to ask what traumas [Bollywood films] mask, what ‘reality’ they seek liberation from, and what kinds of fantasies a culture develops in the process.” Popular cinema, she contends, “is the nation’s family Romance, a space where the nightmares of the collective are addressed, where its public fantasies might be retrieved, and where alternatives can be scripted even if they must eventually be dismissed,” a formulation that can work even after accounting for the ways that Indian kinship expectations may not line up with the family imagined by Freud.

The following discussion of films, in a similar vein, allows us to examine multiple identifications against the grain of the dominant genre. In mainstream Bollywood cinema,

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17 Nagle, supra note 15, at 25.
20 Id. at 88.
the formula is for romantic love to run up against patriarchal, caste and religious kinship norms with either a happy resolution of the two or a death which stands in the place of impossible union. Patriarchal authority in the private and public spheres is normalized through figures such as the dutiful daughter-in-law tending to the extended family. But, while other MRAs might long for such scripts, MGTOW viewers, as the following sections describe, scorn the perfect heteronormative synergy between marriage and extended kinship. They proffer oppositional readings of alternate homosocial kinship and revised gender roles (reactionary or otherwise). While dominant narratives proffer predictable happy endings, resistant readings often indicate a cultural ambivalence surrounding conjugal stability and family cohesion.

Scholars of Bollywood film have also drawn attention to the metonymic link between kinship and desire in the context of late capitalism and postcolonial nationalism. Sangita Gopal has suggested that there was a distinct change in the leitmotifs of Bollywood cinema: from an earlier focus on the resolution of the couple’s individuation through acceptance within the larger kinship group to a post-economic liberalization (1989) model in which films begin with an already married couple and explore anxieties within marriage. This new schema, according to Gopal, shows the couple “extracted from the domain of family” and instead “technologized,” “inserted into a network of material objects, lifestyle attitudes, sociological trends, and financial and economic metrics, in order to demonstrate [the married couple’s] “applicability” to the new set of social and cultural parameters that define the contemporary.” Consumption practices are aestheticized as “a harmonious union between capital and culture” that is supposed to appeal to diasporic and elite audiences.

The films discussed in this paper meet both these criteria: the near-absence of the extended family as a source of tension and the overwhelming presence of branded goods and consumer practices as markers of cosmopolitan (yet) Indian citizenship. While the MRAs did not remark on either of these criteria, I see these films as a new, third stage in popular Hindi cinema: the triumphant happy ending of the straight couple makes way for a vision of a non-tragic life without marriage, with nonnormative friendships providing the succor previously associated with the extended family. The films emphasize unhappiness within marriage and dating, including frustration with conjugal expectations of formulaic affective repertoires. They reveal (and implicitly or explicitly critique) sexuality as acceptable only in the interest of the reproduction of patriarchal kinship. Such anxieties fit well with what Nivedita Menon impeccably diagnoses as a present “implosion” in normative


23 Id.

24 Id. at 79.

25 Gopal suggests that filmmakers such as Karan Johar may be seen as a transitional example of this third moment, such as in the depiction of serial monogamy and the suggestion that happiness may be multiple or deferred.
ideologies of marriage, in which women’s changing expectations of conjugality toward more companionate egalitarian relationships clash with men’s rage and confusion at a perceived midstream change in gender roles. Thus, the films may be all too resonant for MRAs who think compulsively about futures after failed romance and marital dissolution.

While the work of the Film Studies scholars cited above parses the textual and visual elements of films, ethnographic work on viewership has been crucial to mapping counterintuitive meanings and pleasures provided by such texts. Inspired by John Fiske and Stuart Hall’s influential theories that media texts are not consumed passively but become tools for navigating one’s cultural possibilities, such scholarship has demonstrated how audiences work through conflicts over gender, class, sexuality or diasporic identity in their responses. Dickey’s early ethnography suggested that Indian working-class audiences identify with overdetermined family dramas even as they relish such films as escape from quotidian stress, but Lakshmi Srinivas usefully reminds us that more complex processes are at play too: film cannot be separated from embodied practices of cinema-going and the concomitant signifiers of taste, class and caste expressed in one’s choice of movie—or even in one’s seat selection in the theatre. When Sara Friedman watched a popular film with Chinese viewers whose community was represented in the film, she described them as simultaneously experiencing “identification and disavowal.” Bollywood (or other Indian) films evoke similarly mixed feelings: pleasure in the genre may coexist with uneasiness about the normalization of domestic violence, the eroticization of sexual harassment, and the inscription of gendered nationalist positions.

Queer readings of film are especially useful for understanding MGTOWs’ viewing choices (the group’s resolute insistence on their straightness notwithstanding). Queer readings illustrate perspectives that run counter to the grain of the heteronormative romantic arc, which maps affective identifications that principal plotlines do not foreground. Some queer readings of Bollywood film have focused on the charged physical space of movie halls, but the bulk of analyses examine audience responses that resist the diegesis. An illustrative example is Banaji’s study of British Asian viewers, which

26 Nivedita Menon, Seeing Like a Feminist (2012).
28 Sara Dickey, Cinema and the Urban Poor in India (1993).
31 Steve Derne, Making Sex Violent: Love as Force in Recent Hindi Films, 5 Violence Against Women 548 (1999); Patricia Uberoi, Imagining the Family: An Ethnography of Viewing Hum Aapke Hain Kaun . . . !, in Pleasure and the Nation: The History and Politics of Indian Popular Culture 309 (Rachel Dwyer & Christopher Pinney eds., 2001).
oversampled self-identified gay and bisexual subjects. While her respondents criticized mores such as chastity and hypocrisy in the films, they nonetheless became part of the romantic imaginaries of her subjects despite their socially regressive messages. The films served as better texts of learning practices around sexuality than could be found in their communities. These ethnographic findings accord with the work of other scholars who look at the ways that affect, embodiment and identification exceed the narrative: in “carnivalesque” hypermasculinity and violence in Salman Khan films that create gender as masquerade, enabling a “transvestic pleasure” moving beyond male and female spectatorship; by the “reclaiming and recoding” of an effeminate figure of Marathi cinema/dance through “dynamic, queer, regional viewing practice”; or in the assertion of a “queer diasporic viewing practice” as one that reinterprets sex/gender play assumed to be normative in India (although this perspective seems to imagine Indian viewers as less sophisticated consumers of film than diasporic ones).

Within dominant narratives of the heteronormative family romance, representations of gay and lesbian people are rarely queer because they buttress rather than challenge the narrative. Gay men or lesbians have mostly been invisible in Indian film (with very rare exceptions such as Fire). A few recent films featuring the modern gay couple suggest that the norm may be changing, but these characters are often located in “foreign space” and typically part of comedic misrecognition. However, Dudhra argues that such films are deliberately structured to make queer spaces, lives and desires visible even as the grand narrative continues to silence them, thus proffering “implicit and suggestive queer possibilities.” Redlich, more hopefully, cites director Karan Johar’s attempts to gradually change expectations of sexuality by introducing notions of sexual satisfaction, hypermasculine yet non-homophobic “cool” heroes and the possibilities of queer lives.

III. Marriage Resistance and Tender Male Friendships: Three Favorite Films

The following films, recommended by MGTOWs, echo their sense of masculinity as ostracized, alienated and silenced, but they also evoke gendered community as a space of affirmation and recognition. Across a range of genres—a Bildungsroman with a female protagonist; a male buddy film thinly disguised as a romantic comedy; and a horror-revenge

33 Shakuntala Banaji, Intimate Deceptions: Young British-Asian Viewers Discuss Sexual Relations On and Off the Hindi Film Screen, 3 S. Asian Popular Culture 177 (2005).
plot orchestrated by a “scorned” woman—MGTOWs identify the pleasures and poignancies of these texts, lauding them for their criticisms of compulsory marriage, their portrayals of otherwise hidden masculine subjectivities, and their takedowns of hegemonic male power. The films therefore reflect and facilitate the MGTOWs’ self-ascriptions as modern and progressive, supporters of feminism (by their definition), and therefore unlike the old guard of conservative sexists. They identify with female protagonists, projecting their own revenge fantasies against hegemonic masculinity onto the women. However, these resistant efforts to claim space disavow the structural privileges of elite male power.

Queen (dir. Vikas Bahl, 2013), as previously mentioned, seems an unusual pick for the MGTOWs because the film chronicles female empowerment: the transformation of a shy bride into an adventurous traveler contemplating an open future without marriage. Rani (“queen” in Hindi, played by a glowing Kangana Ranaut), sheltered and naïve, makes the best of being stood up on the eve of her wedding by traveling alone on her honeymoon itinerary to Paris and Amsterdam. She collects a motley group of friends across races, genders and ethnicities, many of them with marginal jobs and painful or shadowy pasts; she turns away the fiancé who has quickly seen the error of his ways.

I was astonished that my interlocutors chose a film where a woman becomes ambitious about her future and leaves a man high and dry. They anointed her an honorary MGTOW because she went her own way, a gesture suggesting that they would expand the category of MGTOW to a woman. Their notion of gender in this case seemed to be assigned based on behavior and resistance, even though they fiercely identified with their own biological assignment as male. As Amar said, “See, why we can relate to that to a great extent is because our MGTOW philosophy is like that, like put yourself first.” They lauded her for choosing friendship and self-development over marriage, for refusing the triumphal narrative of compulsory conjugality. They took her adventures to be a form of radical individualism outside the economic and cultural responsibilities of kinship. But this MGTOW reading conveniently overlooks that Rani’s “going her own way” is mobilized relationally. Her deep attachment to her kin, evidenced by her affectionate conversations with them, her family and friends’ nervous yet thrilled encouragement of her adventures, and the firm but kind way she ends her prospective marriage, indicate that Rani draws succor from family relations rather than withdrawing from them.

Rani develops a crush on a man, a predictably dreamy Italian. In the convention of romantic comedy, the relationship begins in a skirmish over their mutually unflattering opinions of each other’s cuisines, and progresses into a cooking competition as the site of growing discovery. The relationship ends with a thoroughly pleasing kiss, contributing to Rani’s portfolio of new experiences but avoiding a happily-ever-after romantic outcome (the Italian is not even on the film’s poster). Rani charms audiences with her candid surprise at “bland” Italian food, youth hostel life, kissing, sex work and club life. However, the chasté kiss is of a piece with the virginal protagonist: her embodied delight in drinking and dancing affirm the joy that is a hallmark of her character, but her adventures are never sexual, perhaps showing the limits of identification/approbation possible in a Bollywood
female adventure. One can only wonder whether the narrative would be championed by MGTOWs if the discovery of sexual agency (and the destabilization of norms this could involve) were a normalized part of her knowledge and empowerment, as they are in the Joyce-ian male Bildungsroman.

The dominant takeaway, I would contend, is one of cross-cultural compassion that declines sexual shaming. Indian cosmopolitanism and “culture” (such as the winning golgappa in the cooking competition) triumphs: Rani wins “for India.” There are never any suggestions that race, caste, or ethnicity might affect how she is treated or perceived, whether to her advantage or disadvantage.

To my MGTOW interlocutors, however, the most significant aspect of the film is the role of three minor characters: Rani’s roommates in the Amsterdam youth hostel. These three men (French, Japanese, Russian) say little about the trauma that brought them there, other than through cryptic drawings and photographs, but act with profound and silent camaraderie towards each other (as well as towards Rani). This sphere of male understanding of affective needs falls outside the heteronormative reproductive circuit, contended the MGTOWs. In Amar’s words, “If you see those three guys, those three guys in the second half, they were in a perfect male space . . . . They were connecting. They had their own emotions . . . . And they were complete. You know, in spite of their circumstances they were complete.” They evince manifest longing for such spaces where (men’s) trauma might be silently understood and healed, for the recognition of male relationality. They might admire Rani as one of their own who “puts herself first,” but she is mostly irrelevant to this empathic “male space,” at best an honorary member. If these men function as plot devices demonstrating Rani’s expansive experience and capacity for empathy in the dominant narrative of the film, in the queered reading of the MGTOWs they represent ideal masculinity, an intimate community of feeling men.

Zindagi na Milegi Dubara (dir. Zoya Akhtar, 2011, literally You Won’t Get This Life Again), a road trip buddy film, seems a clearer choice for MGTOWs: it celebrates male friendship and levels a sustained reproach of the deadening effects of hegemonic, gendered discourses of success. Like Queen, it was a huge critical and commercial success, but unlike the former’s low-budget origins, this was a lavish production featuring mega-stars and noted music direction. The three protagonists, Kabir, Imran and Arjun (a cross-religious group much like the MRAs), might well represent the archetypal Chad Thundercocks whom the MGTOWs so despise: upper-middle class to obscenely wealthy, with perfect bodies and female company galore. The film reproduces standard tropes of over-the-top hegemonic masculinity, involving three men (acting as boys) living out a childhood pact to adventure together. Each friend chooses a rite of overweening masculine performance to affirm risk and confront fear, with Spain as the perfect venue for testing machismo: deep-sea diving, skydiving and the running of the bulls in Pamplona. In faithful commitment to the genre, the film depicts the hollowness of masculine success and proffers the moral superiority of following one’s passion for adventure, work or creativity over making money, marrying advantageously, or buying nice things. This anti-materialist argument, ironically, is
established through lavish scenes that assert Indian cosmopolitanism by using Spain as exotic backdrop: as in Queen, there is no suggestion of racial hierarchies in Spain that might thwart their access, nor of the privileges of class and caste that enable their adventures.

The last formal shot of the film affirms masculine intimacy as the core affective register: the three friends running on with the bulls, despite their having a chance to step out and even as they have resolved their deepest worries. Laughing without (yet) knowing if they will die or outrun the bulls, they signal vulnerability through daring and toughness, a “hybrid masculinity” strengthened by the evocation of weakness. A more conventional heteronormative ending of coupled lives is given lip service in the closing credits, but the heart of the film is the pleasure of homosocial male space, demonstrated in the scenes where the men lovingly recall idiotic pranks, old jokes and drunken songs.

Figure 2. Imperiled but impervious masculinity

One might imagine that ZNMD has resonance for MGTOWs in part because of the ways the film poses families of choice—centered around male friendship—as the healing alternative to the authority of kinship. The identification aligns with queer family as chosen communities based on affinity and care in the face of rejection from blood relatives, here ostracization based on the men’s divorce or domestic violence charges. But what MGTOWs emphasize is reinscribing masculinity through the intimacy of friendship. As Amar’s following comment suggests, he sees in the film a celebration of men’s sociality—a blueprint for overcoming the loneliness imposed by gender roles, and for breaking the equivalence of men’s toughness with silence: “In the society, listening spaces of men do not exist. When you don’t have listening spaces then you will not communicate. For example, a guy facing domestic violence for two years, he calls me, he meets me. I asked, how many people did you share [your story with?] . . . . He will share with only a few people, not because he has ego, just because he knows that they will not listen. And if you see this movie (ZNMD) there’s a scene: when a guy has a problem with the girlfriend and he’s not communicating because he’s terribly afraid that he’ll be judged in a harsh way.” Amar’s

observation resonates not only with the more general criticisms of toxic masculinity, but also with the specific situation of MRAs who he contends shut down from being unable to voice their feelings around marital trouble. There is also evidence that such longings resonate beyond men in marital trouble: on the YouTube site for the film’s trailer, fans of ZNMD revel in nostalgia for old friendships and laud the film’s focus on men’s space.  

In the effusion for the depiction of male closeness, both the MGTOWs and such fans appear to recognize the smattering of heterosexual desire in the film as a foil to emphasize the depths of the homosocial bond. Following the formula for the big budget romantic comedy, posters of the film feature the two female leads—the once relaxed girlfriend turned difficult fiancée Natasha and the half-Indian free spirit “I don’t do regret” Laila—but they have very little character development in the film compared to the lavish attention to the three men’s personalities. The women serve as props to excavate the depths of the men’s relationships and to illustrate the constrictions of marriage. However, one might argue that Laila, the free spirit, serves as a model of self-realization and escaping from rat-race norms, another female figure who embodies ideal MGTOW liberation through her actions and personality. More than the men, her character has seized her dreams, including a motorcycle, a job as a diving instructor, and footloose sexual agency. She is a contrast against and thereby a muse for the workaholic Arjun. While different from Rani in her confident experience with travel or pleasure, she could similarly be an MGTOW stand-in for flouting conventional expectations of marriage and gender, and a contrast to the conventional Natasha.

MGTOW reactions to ZNMD are thus, perhaps, not resistant but expansive, following the film’s message. But the men do redefine the film’s focus according to their preoccupations. Their identification overrides the well-known MRA contempt for Farhan Akhtar, a producer, writer, and one of the ZNMD’s male leads, prominent as a public pro-feminist figure. The affective charge of the film also appears to be powerful enough that my interviewees are not critical of the buff male leads who are the veritable Chad Thundercocks of alt-right discourse, that is, figures whose professional and romantic success MGTOWs deem both unreachable and injuring. Rather, they home in on the incompleteness within those hegemonic appearances. These male leads are both vulnerable and powerful, so despite the MGTOWs’ promotion of non-hegemonic masculinities, they are able to imagine the characters as just like them: the social capital the film’s men acquire through material success and conventional attractiveness becomes an extension of the focus on value acquired through the intimacy of men’s shared failures.

Love ka the End (dir. Bumpy, 2011, literally Love: The End!), as a dark fantasy of female vigilante justice, seems an even less likely MGTOW preference than Queen. The film centers on three female characters: the optimally thin and beautiful “sweetest and prettiest virgin”

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38 Responses on https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=61Vc46RbVOs are one example.

39 Akhtar founded Men Against Rape and Discrimination (MARD) in 2013 and served as the first male goodwill ambassador for UN Women in South Asia.
Rhea, the protagonist, flanked by two girls depicted respectively as a weight-obsessed airhead and a chubby loudmouthed bully. Rhea’s boyfriend Luv Nanda (Luv is a name associated with the Ramayana epic and of course a pun on “love”) is a Chad Thundercock par excellence exemplified by his posh car, rich smuggler father, impeccable hair and abs, flirtatiousness and vanity. Their plans for the night of Rhea’s 18th birthday, for her to have a “perfect romantic night” to lose her virginity, are dashed when Rhea discovers that Luv is part of the Billionaire Boys’ Club, a group of super-rich Indian men who score points through sexual achievements, achievements broadcast over social media. Luv is leading in points, having secured high marks by sleeping with a teacher, but sex with Rhea would give him an unsurmountable advantage, for the category of “sweetest, prettiest virgin” receives highest points. In the logic of the contest, the violation of patriarchal kinship norms represented by sex with a virgin, which renders the woman valueless for lineage reproduction, ranks above sex with those deemed already available, even as the teacher is prized as a taboo object.

Rhea and her friends, aided by the inhaler-guzzling nerd Kartik they often ignore, pursue a ruthless revenge against Luv in which he successively loses his car (with a baseball bat-smashing that predates Beyoncé’s *Lemonade*), his money, his buddies, and so ultimately his masculinity. The final humiliation, following the “turnabout is fair play” logic of the revenge genre, is broadcast for their class to see. One of Rhea’s master moves is to convince Luv’s buddies that he is gay, leading to a painful scene in which he is raped by his closeted best friend. The strategy is founded on homophobic logic at the heart of patriarchal relations, that being gay or trans is emasculating, weakening and hence deadly given that masculine performativity secures access to symbolic and structural power. Homophobia animates the “feminist” revenge, with the film’s only gay character represented as a violent, insecure buffoon, indiscriminate and untrustworthy. Both homophobia and rape reinscribe patriarchal power established through violence, while the “virgin as highest prize” demonstrates the parallel logic of women’s sexuality as ownable patriarchal property.

Rhea humiliates Luv further by drugging him and then having him dance in the stereotypical sartorial style of a courtesan. He dons a *lahanga-choli* (a sequined skirt and short blouse), exposes a bare midriff, and is accessorized with long hair, flowered bracelets, and a lower back tattoo. The sequence ends with men pawing Luv and showering him with currency notes. Rhea and her friends dress Luv up to dance to the “Mutton Song,” whose lyrics ironically evoke the common Bollywood trope of women’s bodies sexualized as meat. The refrain, “*mera jism jism, mera badan badan, mein hoon taaza mutton mutton*” (my body body, I am fresh meat), cannot but remind viewers of the infamous songs such as “*choli ke peechey kya hai*” (“what is behind the blouse?” answer: my heart), with their associations of heaving bosoms and leering men. The opening line of the “Mutton Song” is translatable as “in the right light a multiplex looks like a *maikhana* (a place of drink and merriment); if you put her in a *lahanga*, a Rustom looks like a *Rukhsana,*” the two proper names connoting “lover” and “courtesan,” respectively. The broad chest looks slender merely with waxing,
the lyrics continue. One's sex, the lyrics suggest, is artifice, a matter of lighting, and gender is enacted through repetition of the right dance moves.

In a conventional reading, one might well blanch at the sexism and transphobia of the song-and-dance routine: at individual vengeance rather than social transformation as the solution, at female empowerment imagined through coerced humiliation, at revenge achieved through setting up the molestation of the drugged, drag-enforced performance. Butler's performative theory of gender, and drag as a dramatization of that theory, may, however, help us see the song-and-dance sequence more subversively. Butler's provocation—"To claim that all gender is like drag, or is drag, is to suggest that 'imitation' is at the heart of the heterosexual project and its gender binarism . . . that hegemonic heterosexuality is itself a constant and repeated effort to imitate its own idealizations"—can be applied in this context to demonstrate gender being constructed through repetition. The imposition of drag and the reminder of gender as artifice in the film, by that logic, is a counternarrative to the binary gender order signified in the men's competition and the women's sense of betrayal in romance.

The wronged heroine of this "Generation Y" film is a difficult figure of feminist identification, especially within a genealogy of righteous heroines in Hindi film who eventually confront relentless physical and sexual threat with violence, turning quotidian

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objects into tools (famously, *Mirch Masala*[^41] where the women laboring in a chili powder-making site use it against the powerful men in the village intent on rape). It also seems a surprising choice for MGTOWs, as a narrative of a man’s humiliation at the hands of a devilishly vengeful woman. My interlocutors provided no rationales for the choice beyond encouraging me to view it, but my conjecture from their discussions of other films is that this choice signals their claim to be modern discerning men; that they identify with the protagonist’s loss of faith in romance. Rhea’s scary quest for revenge may be very different from Rani’s sweet self-realization, but she too is exposing “perfect” heterosexual relationships as lies. In contrast to Rani, her disillusionment and revenge both center on sexuality, but then she is a dystopic figure (the rape scene during the final credits is only one of the ways the film leaves us with the sense of a dystopic world). Her actions, like that of many Alt-Right activists, suggest explosive chaotic revenge as the only possible interventions in an unfair world.

Rhea becomes the vehicle for the destruction of Luv Nanda’s hegemonic prowess, through the very registers of wealth and sexuality which hold up masculinity. But the locus of MGTOW identification, given their mockery of men like Luv, may be Kartik, the very opposite: utterly invisible as a romantic figure (“InCel” or involuntarily celibate in the MRA lexicon), the tech-savvy nerd who has access to surveillance and infinite information rather than a car, cash or abs. A resistant reading may position Kartik as a postmodern hero, whose expertise over quotidian networks of communication allows Rhea to ferret out Luv’s secrets and broadcast his humiliation.

**Conclusion**

MRAs are often defined in terms of their relationship to law; they foreground legal strategy in their meetings, materials and counselling. This article looks not to those strategies but to cultural sites which may express the longings and identifications grounding the legal claims. MRA groups rely heavily on communities built with fellow sufferers: one of the commonest social activities, movie watching, often becomes a site of articulating their worldviews about alienation or toxic masculinity. Drawing on the literature on popular culture and viewership, I use discussions and recommendations of films to understand MGTOWs’ oppositional negotiations with marriage, romance and masculinity.

MRAs organize themselves as men; they seek to transform certain registers of gender (which they claim are harmful) while taking other registers of privilege (often kinship, labor market, property) for granted. MGTOWs proclaim themselves as a select group of modern men and creative thinkers, identifying with the cosmopolitanism and global citizenship prominent in the films. The movement is foundationally anti-feminist, yet some of their political positions resonate with certain feminist stances[^42], such as the

[^42]: Basu, supra note 3.
MGTOW credo of marriage resistance or the preference for male spaces that de-emphasize patrilineal kin as the primary axis of intimacy.

These films lend themselves to a queer reading that destabilizes gender and sexual identity: in the men’s attempts to explode systems of kinship and substitute families of choice, in their keen attachment to formations of masculinity through memory and community, and their disavowal of hegemonic masculinity associated with romance and success. MGTOW identification with independent, even destructive, women as protagonists is deemed to be consistent with their claims to counter-intuitive thinking and true feminist ideals (meaning gender neutrality). But the real stars of their resistant readings are men: the inchoate fun of camaraderie, their articulation of vulnerability to each other, their solidarity in issues big and small. These longings almost make us forget the privileges of gender and class the men in these films embody, or MRA ire against real-life feminists.