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Kill

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Kill

Abstract

This is a film review of *Kill* (2023) directed by Nikhil Nagesh Bhatt.

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***Kill* (2023), dir. Nikhil Nagesh Bhatt**

*Kill*¹ is the newest film from Dharma Productions, the titanic Mumbai studio helmed by Karan Johar. “KJo” made his name with diaspora-friendly romantic melodramas like *Kabhi Khushi Kabhi Gham* (2001). *Kill* is something else entirely: an experiment in bringing the “extreme action” genre to Indian audiences.² After its TIFF Midnight Madness premiere, Johar posted to Instagram (subsequently quoted by the *Times of India*) that the Toronto audience was “crazy and manic” for this “BLOODathon on steroids.”³ I missed that screening, but I saw the film a few days later alongside an analogously avid crowd. When the closing credits started to roll, a guy in the row behind me shouted “Top five movies of all time!!” *Kill* is clearly on its way to being a hit.

This is a film of sensations and sounds—bones breaking, heads squishing, punches landing. It is almost entirely action, a single long fight sequence. The setting: a night train on its way to Delhi. The problem: the posse of bandits (a literal forty thieves) who have commandeered several of its cars. The solution: one valiant army commando who just might be able to save the day. *Kill*

has schlock moments: if you have ever wanted to see somebody get their face smashed in on an Indian Railways toilet, this is the film for you. It has cheese moments: most of the romance notes. It is clearly an audience pleaser.

Yet although *Kill* might seem like action-flick popcorn fare—a kind of subcontinental *Speed*, sans Keanu but plus a dash of *Sholay* (the 1975 bandit-driven “Curry Western”)—its political undercurrents are deadly serious. Like so much of postcolonial Hindi cinema, this film functions as a kind of allegory for India as nation-state. There is arguably no better metonym for the nation than an Indian Railways sleeper car—an icon of machinic modernity that is also a space for demotic mixing, a veritable laboratory of democracy. This particular train is traversing a loaded political geography, going from Ranchi, in semi-ungoverned Jharkand (whence, presumably, the bandits) to Delhi, the seat of national power. The film closes with the train pulling into Deen Dayal Upadhyaya Junction railway station, located outside the Hindu holy city of Varanasi. Formerly named Mughal Sarai, the station was renamed in 2018 after a Hindu nationalist politician whose murdered body was found near the platform in 1968.

Once upon a time, the Indian nation-state was most often figured as female, as in Mehboob Khan’s 1957 *Mother India*.⁴ *Kill* moves in a different orbit: that of muscular Hinduism. The movie’s hero is Captain Amrit Singh Rathore (TV actor Laksha Lalwani, rebranded with the mononym “Lakshya”), an army commando with special fighting skills whose steroidal gym-body is an inspiration to the masculinized nation. When the bandits attack, he has to rescue his captured love interest, Tulika (a diaphanous Tanya Maniktala). He is also determined to protect the terrified men, women, and children who are everywhere huddled in the backs of their train berths. The people gaze upon Amrit with gratitude. The teenage boys want to be him; one second-guesses his

decision to go to university instead of joining the army. The camera cannot get enough of him, lavishing attention on this commando's sculpted male form.

Names do a lot of the symbolic work in this movie. Amrit (literally, the immortal) Rathore (a Rajput surname connoting knightly valor) is accompanied by his best friend and fellow commando Viresh (lord of warriors/heroes; the Sanskrit *vir* is etymologically related to the English *virile*). These names clearly mark our heroes as Hindu. Meanwhile, the bandit who emerges as Amrit's nemesis and near-equal is Fani (Raghav Juyal), an Urdu and thus Muslim-coded name meaning (to quote John Platts' classic dictionary) "perishable, mortal, frail, transitory."⁵ He is the unkillable Amrit's symbolic opposite.

Is Fani meant to be Muslim? *Kill* does not invest any energy in depicting him as such. Nor do his uncles, brothers, cousins, and father—this bandit brigade is a family operation—seem to be Muslim. The notes that I took during the screening are sloppy, and I do not remember the names of all forty thieves, but my recollection is that they were either Hindu names or religiously neutral nicknames. There were certainly no Mohammads or Abduls. *Kill* would thus seem to be channeling a longer literary tradition in which bandits or dacoits are depicted as religiously liminal—both Hindu and Muslim and thus maybe neither. Philip Meadows Taylor's classic colonial novel *Confessions of a Thug* (1839), for instance, featured a Kali-worshipping protagonist named Ameer Ali (its bandits later served as source material for Steven Spielberg's *Indiana Jones and the Temple of Doom*). It is hard to say whether British colonial officials' paranoid fantasies about thugs, stranglers, and murderous highwaymen reflected any kind of sociological reality. But it may well be the case that, historically, bandits hailed from marginalized tribal or oppressed-caste communities. If so, they would have existed outside the caste-inflected siloes of "world religions" like Hinduism and Islam, sometimes drawing strategically on the symbolism of those religions for

their own purposes.⁶ Such histories shape the cultural unconscious of *Kill*, even if this commercial production also flattens those histories. The result is our Muslim-coded villain, Fani.

Raghav Juyal's performance as Fani is, however, so deliciously sociopathic that he ends up stealing the show. Fani lounges like a bored undergraduate, body slack and face gently scowling as gory chaos erupts around him. He is the moral—or, better, amoral—center of this film, and he delivers what I take to be its key line. After Amrit's first kill, Viresh chides him, saying they could have contained the situation without violence. Bandits kill indiscriminately; soldiers kill with disciplined restraint. By movie's end, restraint has gone out the window (as have several passengers). The train is a bloodbath, and Amrit stands at its swirling center. "Who kills like this?" demands Fani. You're not a "protector" (*rakshak*), he spits, but a "monster" (*rakshas*).

Fani's wordplay here reenacts a very old etymological process. In the essay "Plato's Pharmacy," Jacques Derrida pondered how the Greek word *pharmakon* denotes both poison and cure, with each entity thus necessarily containing its opposite. The poison is the cure, and vice versa.⁷ The Sanskrit term for protection similarly came to denote the thing that people needed protection from: *rakshasas* or demons, like those that roam the forests and wilderness areas of the Hindu epic the *Ramayana*. In *Kill*, Amrit functions as a kind of Rama, a hero who with the help of his buddy-brother (cf. Lakshman) tries to rescue his captured love (cf. Sita) from bandits (who like *rakshasas*, are often associated with jungles). He is the quintessential protector. But make no mistake, Fani reminds us: he is the demon too.

Amrit's demonism is contagious. It's hard not to root for him or experience his righteous rage as he bashes bandits into bloody pulp. It's even harder not to root for the passengers who eventually take up arms. I am not an action movie person. Fight sequences mostly bore me. But even I could not tear my eyes off this one, nor could I resist its vengeful feelings. In its ability to

stoke bloodlust, *Kill* bears some comparison to *RRR* (dir. S.S. Rajamouli, 2022), the Telugu-language quasi-historical bromantic global sensation that pushed a not-so-subtle Hindu-nationalist agenda on its cheering audiences. (It also plays on Hindi cinema's recent army-film revival, as in 2019's *Uri: The Surgical Strike* and 2021's *Shershaah*.) Where *RRR* goes upbeat, *Kill* goes dark. In doing so, it almost seems to indict the viewer. If you're rooting for Amrit, maybe you're as demonic as he is. (Sorry, guy in the row behind me.)

In the classic nationalist allegory *Amar Akbar Anthony* (dir. Manmohan Desai, 1977), three brothers separated at birth and raised as Hindu, Muslim, and Christian reunite to give their ailing mother (i.e., India) a blood transfusion. Family bonds, the film implies, are ultimately the cure for intra-national violence. *Kill* is a different kind of film. Not only does it spew all its blood on the floor; it also sends a very different message about family. Here, family is the source of violence. It cannot be the cure, because it is so obviously also the poison (cf. *Kabhi Khushi Kabhi Gham*). Our bandits weep over each other's corpses and avenge each other's deaths; they may or may not have thieves' honor, but they certainly have family feelings—and that's the problem. More respectable families are much the same. As we learn in the film's opening sequences, Amrit is trying to steal Tulika away from the engagement arranged by her father, Baldev Singh Thakur, a powerful businessman (and owner of the ironically named Shanti Transit). When Amrit tries to abscond with Tulika at her engagement party, she cautions him not to; her relatives brought guns. If the lovers run, they will wind up dead.

In this film, demons are everywhere. They are the attackers. They are the attacked. Even the innocent bystanders prove potentially demonic. Some of the besieged train passengers turn out to be bandits in disguise. They surprise Amrit, slicing and stabbing him. Other passengers surprise the bandits by discovering their own capacity to kill.

The overall effect is queasy-making. An Indian Railways sleeper car is a space of the everyday, and the first twenty minutes of the film efficiently evoke its cozy discomforts. (Feet up please, annoying upper-berth neighbor!) To see this train's abutting bodies sliding into bloody mayhem thus becomes acutely discomfiting, a real horror. It is all too easy to imagine that violence lurks claustrophobically in such everyday spaces. There are multiple weapons aboard a train, it seems, and most of them are people. Even the guy asking you directions while you exit the toilet could be a killer—a demon inside the demos.

It is only a light spoiler to say that Amrit survives the action. His destiny is, after all, written in his very name. Still, I couldn't help think that it was Fani who won. Who *does* kill like that? Consumed by a violence he so obviously does not control, Amrit is, at best, an ambivalent national hero. He is also an alarming augur of one possible political future, heralded by the blood-smear**ed** strong-man.

¹ My thanks to Ridhima Sharma for discussing *Kill* and recommending recent army films.

² Naman Ramachandran, "Karan Johar, Guneet Monga Kapoor, Nikil Nagesh Bhat on Toronto Film 'Kill': 'Even 'John Wick' Gives You Some Respite, This is Relentless,'" *Variety*, 8 September 2023. <https://variety.com/2023/film/asia/karan-johar-guneet-monga-kapoor-toronto-kill-john-wick-1235714568/>

³ "TIFF: Karan Johar Says Audience Response to 'Kill' Was 'Heartening,'" *Times of India*, 10 September 2023. <https://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/entertainment/hindi/bollywood/news/tiff-karan-johar-says-audiences-response-to-kill-was-heartening/articleshow/103550117.cms?from=mdr>

⁴ For historical context, see Sumathi Ramaswamy, *The Goddess and the Nation: Mapping Mother India* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2010).

⁵ John T. Platts, *A Dictionary of Urdu, Classical Hindi, and English* (London: Samson Low, 1884).

⁶ P. Sanal Mohan and Joel Lee, "Dalit Religion," *Religion Compass* 16, no. 4 (April 2022): e12429. <https://doi.org/10.1111/rec3.12429>

⁷ Jacques Derrida, *Dissemination*, trans. Barbara Johnson (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1981).