Publisher
Singh Publication
www.singhpublication.com

E-ISSN:2583-0074

Social Science Journal for Advanced Research

2026 Volume 6 Number 3 May

Research Article

Socio Cultural Change

Blurring the Line: Anti-Heroes, Urban Anxiety, and the Reconfiguration of Hero-Villain Binaries in Satya and Vaastav

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DOI:10.54741/SSJAR/6.3.2026.367

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This paper explores how the anti heroes Bhiku Mhatre in Satya (1998) and Raghu in Vaastav: The Reality (1999) blur the line between hero and villain, using loyalty, impulsiveness, and tragic flaws to reflect Mumbai's underworld culture and the socio economic transformations of late 1990s India. Bhiku's volatile charisma and fierce gang loyalty make him both menacing and sympathetic, yet his unchecked rage and misplaced trust in the political gangster nexus trigger his downfall. Raghu, beginning as a humble lower middleclass youth, turns to crime to protect his family, but that same devotion ultimately destroys them, revealing how familial love and criminal survival are mutually corrosive. Both characters are constrained by police violence, economic marginalisation, and political manipulation, encapsulating the anxieties of a post liberalisation India marked by rising inequality, migration, and moral ambiguity. The study argues that Satya and Vaastav humanise the criminal and foreground the social conditions that push ordinary young men into violence, moving beyond the clear cut "angry young man" toward morally hybrid protagonists. By presenting crime as brutal and self defeating, the films undermine the glamour of underworld power. Drawing on Stuart Hall's theory of representation, the paper analyses how these films produce and circulate meanings about the anti hero, the slum, and state failure, and how audiences decode them in divergent ways. Through close textual analysis of characterisation, dialogue, and narrative structure, the study shows how 1990s Hindi cinema dramatised urban poverty, police failure, and fractured families, with Bhiku and Raghu embodying the moral confusion of India's late 20th century transition.

Keywords: bollywood, villain, anti-hero, underworld, representation, socio-cultural change

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How to Cite this Article

Saha R, Ghosh P, Blurring the Line: Anti-Heroes, Urban Anxiety, and the Reconfiguration of Hero-Villain Binaries in Satya and Vaastav. Soc Sci J Adv Res. 2026;6(3):31-38.
Available From
https://ssjar.singhpublication.com/index.php/ojs/article/view/367

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Manuscript Received	Review Round 1	Review Round 2	Review Round 3	Accepted
2026-04-06	2026-04-20			2026-05-11

Conflict of Interest	Funding	Ethical Approval	Plagiarism X-checker	Note
None	Nil	Yes	4.56	

1. Introduction

From the 1990s onward, Bollywood cinema shifted the way it portrayed good and bad characters. No longer were heroes flawless and villains purely evil; instead, films such as *Satya* and *Vaastav: The Reality* introduced anti-heroes- men who commit wrongs but still win the audience's sympathy and admiration. This paper examines how Bhiku Mhatre from *Satya*, played by Manoj Bajpayee, and Raghu from *Vaastav*, played by Sanjay Dutt, embody a blending of heroic and villainous traits. Their loyalty, impulsiveness, and tragic mistakes mirror the moral ambiguities of Mumbai's underworld as well as broader social transformations in India between 1990 and 2020.

In the 1970s and 1980s, Bollywood heroes like Amitabh Bachchan typically appeared as "angry young men" who fought crime in a morally clear struggle between right and wrong. By 1998, however, Ram Gopal Varma's *Satya* broke this mould. Bhiku Mhatre is not merely a brutal gangster; he is fiercely loyal to his friend Satya, protective of his gang "family," and commanding in his speech. His iconic line- "*Mumbai Ka King Kaun? Bhiku Mhatre!"* (*Satya* 01:24:15-01:24:20)- captures a charisma that blurs the line between villain and hero, making him appear heroic even within a cruel world. This deliberate blurring of moral boundaries serves a clear purpose. Instead of preaching a simplistic "good versus evil" morality, Bollywood began to humanise anti-heroes and link their struggles to pressing social realities. Audiences saw fragments of their own lives in Bhiku's rage or Raghu's regrets, especially among migrants striving for survival and success in a harsh urban landscape. The paper's central aim is to analyse these complex character traits and their connections to Mumbai's gang culture and three decades of social change. In doing so, it argues that contemporary Hindi cinema holds up a mirror to India's soul, inviting viewers to value authentic moral courage over the seductive illusion of raw, violent power.

2. Research Methodology and Theoretical Framework

This study employs qualitative film analysis to examine how the anti-heroes Bhiku Mhatre in *Satya* (1998) and Raghu in *Vaastav: The Reality* (1999) blur the conventional boundaries between hero and villain.

An anti-hero is the central character in a narrative who lacks the classic heroic traits, such as immaculate morality, unflinching bravery, or selfless idealism, yet remains the protagonist. Rather than acting out of pure virtue, anti-heroes often operate from self-interest, make morally ambiguous choices, or break social rules while still drawing the audience's sympathy and identification (Studiobinder.com). In contrast, a traditional hero is typically portrayed as brave, morally upright, and selfless, confronting evil with clear ethical principles and noble aims, as embodied by Amitabh Bachchan's "angry young man" persona that upholds justice in a morally legible world. An anti-hero, by comparison, is a flawed protagonist whom viewers nonetheless root for despite selfish motives, transgressive behaviour, or dark methods used in pursuit of what they perceive as good ends- such as Bhiku Mhatre's volatile yet fiercely loyal rage in *Satya* (Yamulla 1).

The method of this paper centres on close reading of key scenes, dialogues, and evolving character arcs in both films to uncover recurring traits such as loyalty, impulsiveness, and tragic flaws. The films themselves function as primary texts, viewed multiple times to register shifts in visual style: the handheld, gritty camera work in *Satya* that mirrors the disorder and unpredictability of Mumbai's underworld, and the more heavily stylised, melodramatic mise-en-scène in *Vaastav* that heightens a sense of inevitable tragedy. Dialogue analysis foregrounds signature lines such as Bhiku's "*Mumbai Ka King Kaun?"* which fuses bravado with vulnerability, thereby exposing his dual nature as both intimidator and emotionally invested underdog. Character interactions, for instance Bhiku with Satya, or Raghu with his mother Shanta, reveal how loyalty can appear heroic even within a criminal framework, adding emotional legitimacy to their violent trajectories. This interpretive approach draws on narrative theory, parsing the plots into phases of rise, peak, and fall to trace how impulsiveness functions as a central tragic flaw. Secondary sources, including scholarly film reviews and critical essays, are used to contextualise the transformation of 1990s Bollywood, deliberately avoiding unreliable platforms such as Wikipedia in favour of academic and critical blogs and articles.

Stuart Hall's theory of representation provides the central interpretive lens for this paper, illuminating how *Satya* and *Vaastav* construct their anti-heroes

through cultural signs that deliberately blur the hero-villain distinction. Hall argues that representations do not simply mirror an external reality; instead, they actively produce meaning through language, images, and symbols that are embedded in power structures (Hall 1980). In *Satya*, Bhiku Mhatre's loyalty to Satya and his defiant cry "Mumbai Ka King Kaun? Bhiku Mhatre!" (01:24:15) function not as markers of pure evil, but as signs of a twisted gang "honour" code that channels street-level loyalty into criminal ambition (Hall 1980). In *Vaastav*, Raghu's love for his family conveys fundamentally good intentions that become distorted by the logic of crime, showing how moral desire can be corrupted by circumstance (Hall 1980). Hall's encoding/decoding model further clarifies how filmmakers encode messages about Mumbai's 1990s gang culture and socio-economic precarity, while audiences decode them in diverse, often contradictory ways (Hall 1980). Some viewers may identify Bhiku as a kind of folk hero, while others read his story as a cautionary tale against criminal glamour (Insomnia 2018). Visual motifs such as dirty streets, guns, and crowded slums operate as signs of deferred or failed dreams in the wake of the 1991 economic liberalisation (Hall 25), while the choreography of impulsive fight scenes codes a mix of excitement and imminent danger (Hall 27). Hall's framework thus helps to show how these films blur hero and villain precisely to reflect India's moral ambivalence and social dislocation between 1990 and 2020 (Hall 1980). For viewers from marginalised or economically precarious backgrounds, Bhiku's rage may resonate as a form of rough justice; for others, it appears as a tragic descent into self-destruction. In sum, Hall's theory enables this paper to argue that these anti-heroes feel dramatically real not only because they are psychologically complex, but also because they dramatise the tension between the allure of criminal power and the human cost of choosing that path in a rapidly changing society (Hall 61).

3. Bollywood's Realistic and Subversive Representation of Crime

In *Satya* (1998), Bhau Thakurdas Jhawle, the gangster-turned-politician played by Govind Namdeo, epitomises the collusion between Mumbai's underworld and electoral politics. Bhau manipulates rival gangs such as Bhiku Mhatre's in order to secure his own political survival, orchestrating the truce between gangs and then personally ordering Mhatre's betrayal when he defies the agreement (Varma and Shetty, *Satya*, 1998, Scene 01:45:00-01:48:00). This calculated act underscores how political power in the film is exercised through moral corruption and the instrumentalisation of criminal violence rather than legitimate democratic process (Bose 2002, 112). Guru Narayan, portrayed by Raju Mavani, functions as a catalytic antagonist whose thirst for revenge intensifies the film's spiral of violence. After the killing of his ally Jagga, Guru Narayan refuses to abide by the truce, openly seeking retaliation and thus compelling Bhiku Mhatre to respond with a full-scale wipe-out of Guru Narayan's gang despite intense political pressure (Varma, Shukla, and Kashyap, *Satya*, 1998, Scenes 01:20:00-01:35:00). Minor antagonists such as Jagga (Jeeva) and Pakya (Sushant Singh) set the narrative in motion by extorting Satya, thereby forcing him into the criminal world and marking the moment when the film's "everyman" protagonist is drawn into the underworld (Varma, Shukla, and Kashyap, *Satya*, 1998, Scenes 00:18:00-00:25:00).

In *Vaastav: The Reality* (1999), Babban Rao Kadam, the corrupt Home Minister played by Mohan Joshi, similarly exploits gang muscle for political and economic gain. He uses Raghu's gang to carry out assassinations and land-grabbing operations, only to later issue a shoot-to-kill order against Raghu once public scrutiny and media exposure threaten his own position (Manjrekar, *Vaastav: The Reality*, 1999, Scenes 01:50:00-01:55:00). Vitthal Kaanya, portrayed by Ashish Vidyarthi, initially serves as a mentor-figure who guides Raghu into the underworld, but his violent elimination by rival factions illustrates the film's overarching theme of betrayal and the cyclical nature of gang warfare (Manjrekar, *Vaastav: The Reality*, 1999, Scenes 01:30:00-01:38:00). Fracture Bandya (Jack Gaud) and his crew play a crucial role in accelerating Raghu's descent by humiliating his friend Dedh Footiya, provoking Raghu's retaliatory massacre and consolidating his reputation as a feared don (Manjrekar,*Vaastav: The Reality*, 1999, Scenes 01:05:00-01:12:00). Ram Gopal Varma (*Satya*) and Mahesh Manjrekar (*Vaastav*), working with cinematographers and writers such as Gerard Hooper et. al and Anurag Kashyap et. al, employ

a set of closely related *portrayal techniques* that distinguish their gangsters from earlier melodramatic Bollywood villains. They shoot in gritty Mumbai locations- slums, brothels, and chaotic streets- and use colloquial *tapori* dialect to endow characters such as Bhiku Mhatre and Raghu with a vernacular authenticity that makes them feel like recognisable "everyman" figures rather than theatrical caricatures (Varma, Shukla, and Kashyap, *Satya*, 1998; Manjrekar, *Vaastav: The Reality*, 1999). Improvised scenes, such as Bhiku's outbursts of rage, which are often misread as pure villainy, are framed within low-light, handheld camerawork that simultaneously humanises and menaces the character. Performances like Govind Namdeo's scheming Bhau Thakurdas earned major critical recognition, including a Filmfare nomination for Best Villain, signalling how the films redefined the "villain" role in terms of psychological complexity rather than moral abstraction (Filmfare magazine, 1999, p. 42).

Culturally, *Satya* and *Vaastav* mark a decisive shift in Bollywood's representation of crime. They move away from the bright-and-dark dichotomies of earlier action cinema toward a more naturalistic "Mumbai noir" sensibility that later influenced ensemble gangster films such as *Company* (2002). Manoj Bajpayee's Bhiku Mhatre, in particular, became an iconic anti-hero whose swagger and vulnerability blurred the boundary between villain and protagonist, inspiring a generation of underworld characters grounded in the texture of real-life Mumbai gangsters (Dwyer 2006; Bose 2002). The films' gritty realism, explicitly inspired by documented underworld figures such as D-Company, functions as an implicit critique of the criminal lifestyle, underscoring its emotional toll and inevitable futility rather than glamorising it (Dwyer 2006, 160-162). In terms of *character traits*, Bhiku Mhatre is impulsive and emotionally driven, functioning as the "heart" to Satya's "mind." He craves recognition and symbolic status, epitomised by his declaration of himself as "Mumbai ka King," which is clinched through bold, high-risk operations such as the murder of a film producer (Varma et al, *Satya*, 1998, Scenes 01:40:00-01:42:00). His choices are marked by emotional loyalty to his gang and an almost childlike need for respect, which ultimately accelerates his downfall. Raghu, by contrast, begins as an essentially innocent man drawn into the underworld after being forced to kill while defending his friends (Manjrekar, *Vaastav: The Reality*, 1999, Scenes 00:45:00-00:52:00). Over time he evolves into a feared don through a series of ruthless gang-wipes, but his arc is haunted by guilt and regret. Both characters are defined by fierce loyalty- Bhiku to his gang, Raghu to his family- yet Bhiku's flamboyant bravado sharply contrasts with Raghu's restrained, reluctant ascent to power.

Satya and *Vaastav* therefore share important *similarities and differences* in their construction of the anti-hero. Both films defy the black-and-white morality of much 1990s Bollywood by grounding their protagonists in the *tapori* culture and physical textures of Mumbai, rendering their criminality as a response to structural disadvantage rather than pure psychopathy (Dwyer 2006, 155-159). They similarly blur hero-villain lines, presenting Bhiku and Raghu as figures who elicit audience sympathy even as they perpetuate violence. The key difference lies in agency and affects: Bhiku largely revels in the gangster life and its attendant status, whereas Raghu consistently mourns the path he has taken, which gives his narrative a more tragic inflection (Bose 2002, 114-116). Nevertheless, both characters help generate the anti-establishment tone of their films, pointing to the failure of the state and the political class to provide justice or security. Structurally, Bhiku Mhatre and Raghu display *parallel arcs* as anti-heroes trapped in Mumbai's violent underworld. Both begin as local operators tied to small-time extortion or smuggling, then rise to prominence through bold, high-profile "hits" that demonstrate their ruthlessness and charm. In both cases, betrayal, whether from within the gang hierarchy or from the political establishment, ultimately seals their doom, reinforcing the idea that the underworld is a self-destructive system rather than a stable or sustainable form of power. Taken together, Bhiku Mhatre and Raghu stand out among Bollywood gangsters for their raw, emotionally charged, and deeply realistic portrayals. Rather than embodying the glamorous, hyper-masculine, or "heroic" gangster of earlier popular cinema, they foreground emotional impulsivity, psychological vulnerability, and the tragic futility of crime. In doing so, they mark a turning point in how Hindi cinema imagines the boundary between hero and villain, and how it reflects the moral ambiguities of urban India between 1990 and 2020 (Dwyer 2006; Bose 2002).

4. How Do 'anti-heroes' Reflect Fear, Anxiety, and Moral Values of Indian Society in Movies?

The emergence of the anti-hero in Bollywood cinema between 1990 and 2012 serves as a cultural register for India's evolving socio-economic anxieties, shifting moral paradigms, and systemic disillusionment. Films such as Ram Gopal Varma's *Satya* (1998) and Mahesh Manjrekar's *Vaastav: The Reality* (1999) moved away from the binary moralities of previous decades, presenting protagonists who are neither purely virtuous nor irredeemable villains, but rather products of a fractured social contract (Bhatia 2013, 12). This cinematic transformation coincided with the 1991 liberalisation of the Indian economy, a period marked by both rapid modernization and intense social displacement. As the promise of prosperity collided with the realities of urban migration, structural unemployment, and the disintegration of traditional kinship networks, the figure of the anti-hero emerged as a vessel for the "anger of the poor" left behind by global capital (Rajadhyaksha 2003, 145).

Bhiku Mhatre, in *Satya*, is inextricably linked to Mumbai's urban underbelly, positioning him as a native product of the city's violent ecosystem rather than an external corruption. Born into the slums, Bhiku is a quintessential "son of the soil," whose identity is constructed through local dialect, regional pride, and a lifetime spent navigating the hierarchy of the streets and the carceral system. His famous assertion of dominance- *"Mumbai ka king kaun? Bhiku Mhatre!"* (*Satya* 01:24:15)- encapsulates a claim to territorial belonging that defines his existence (Shekhar 2015, 2). Conversely, the protagonist of *Vaastav*, Raghunath Mahaskar (Raghu), represents the tragic "everyman." Initially a humble butcher's son in a modest Dongri neighbourhood, Raghu's transition from an ordinary citizen to a notorious don is catalysed by a brutal communal riot that compels him to kill in self-defence (Manjrekar, *Vaastav*, 1999). Raghu rationalises his descent into the criminal underworld as a duty to his family, yet his steady climb, characterised by ruthless eliminations and political collusion, leads to a corrosive moral attrition that mirrors the historical trajectory of real-life underworld figures such as Arun Gawli (Bose 2002, 114-116).

While both characters mirror each other's rapid ascent, their methodologies and internal landscapes differ significantly. Bhiku Mhatre operates with a flamboyant, high-energy bravado, functioning as the volatile "heart" to Satya's more calculated "mind." He thrives on the adrenaline of high-profile hits, such as the assassination of a film producer, viewing his position in the gang hierarchy as a source of legitimate social standing (Varma, *Satya*, 1998). In contrast, Raghu's evolution is marked by a sombre, reluctant detachment. While he builds a vast empire of smuggling and extortion, he remains haunted by his past, ultimately seeking refuge in drugs and alcohol to numb the guilt of destroying the very family he initially sought to protect (Bose 2002, 118).

Ultimately, these films redefined the antagonist, using the gritty visual language of Mumbai, its chaos, slums, and underworld networks, to humanise figures who were previously dismissed as caricatures. By foregrounding the characters' backgrounds, impulsive emotionality, and tragic flaws, *Satya* and *Vaastav* critiqued the futility of crime in an era of economic disparity. They challenged audiences to reconcile their empathy for the protagonist with the harsh reality of their transgressive acts, effectively blurring the lines between hero and villain to mirror the profound moral confusion of contemporary urban India (Dwyer 2006, 160-162).

5. Indian Socio-economic Change and the Emergence of the Politics of Anti-hero

The economic liberalization of India in the early 1990s, spearheaded by P.V. Narasimha Rao and Manmohan Singh, fundamentally restructured the nation's socio-economic landscape. While the dismantling of the "License Raj" promised unprecedented prosperity, it simultaneously generated profound anxieties regarding systemic instability, unemployment, and the erosion of traditional familial structures. By 1991, Mumbai's population had surged past 12 million, creating an urban environment defined by hyper-density and entrenched deprivation (Prakash, 67). In this climate, cinema began to reflect a fractured reality.

The "angry young man" archetype, epitomized by Amitabh Bachchan's Vijay in *Agneepath* (1990), resonated as a response to perceived institutional failure; his defiance against a corrupt order provided a cathartic, albeit violent, model of justice for a generation disillusioned by the state's inability to protect the vulnerable (Chopra, 89). This period, further traumatized by the communal violence following the 1992 Babri Masjid demolition, fostered a societal shift where individual or clan-based retribution began to eclipse established moral or legal codes.

By the mid-1990s, the intensification of global trade accelerated urban dislocation. The 1993 Mumbai bomb blasts, linked to transnational criminal networks such as Dawood Ibrahim's D-Company, crystallized public fears regarding the permeability of national borders and the rise of the criminal state. Ram Gopal Varma's *Satya* (1998) was a watershed moment in this cinematic evolution, stripping away the glamour of the underworld to portray crime as a desperate "job for poor dreamers" (Varma, quoted in Sen 2002, 112). Through the descent of characters like Bhiku Mhatre and the titular Satya, Varma depicted the city not as a site of opportunity, but as a predatory ecosystem that systematically converted the moral into the monstrous. As scholar Madhava Prasad notes, the loss of idealism in these narratives mirrors the commodification of social relations; love and loyalty were increasingly subordinated to the transactional logic of a new economic era (Prasad 1998, 203). This period of instability, marked by pervasive family stress and the emergent health crises of the decade, saw the anti-hero become a symbol of a society in the throes of moral realignment (Gopalan 2005, 156).

Mahesh Manjrekar's *Vaastav: The Reality* (1999) further deepened this critique by framing the gangster's trajectory as a tragic family narrative. Following the journey of Raghu, a common butcher's son driven into the underworld by a cycle of poverty, police brutality, and forced violence, the film resonated with the grim reality that approximately 70% of urban youth lacked access to secure employment (Drèze and Sen 2013, 234). The film's harrowing climax, in which Raghu's mother executes him to spare him further suffering, serves as a subversion of the traditional maternal archetype, signaling the total collapse of the domestic sphere under the pressure of criminal encroachment (Majumdar 2007, 178).

Furthermore, the depiction of the symbiotic relationship between gangs and politicians mirrored the real-world fragmentation of Mumbai's power structures, characterized by the violent rivalry between factions like Chhota Rajan's and Shakeel's (Hansen 2001, 301).

As India transitioned into the 2000s, the widening gap between the technocratic elite and the impoverished urban masses sustained the anti-hero's cinematic relevance. Films such as *Company* (2002) and *Gangaajal* (2003) explored the moral grey zones of institutional corruption and group animosity, suggesting that in an era of hyper-competition, pragmatism had superseded traditional ethics (Prasad 2011, 167). The 2004 film *Black Friday*, based on Hussain Zaidi's investigative accounts, pushed these themes further, using the 1993 blasts as a lens to examine national collective guilt and the volatile state of disenfranchised youth (Zaidi 2002, 45).

Following Stuart Hall's encoding/decoding model, these anti-hero narratives function as sites of cultural negotiation where crime is framed as a defiant, if doomed, challenge to established power (Hall 1980). While these films ostensibly condemn criminality, they simultaneously encode a critique of a system that denies the "poor dreamer" a legitimate path to success. Thus, from the early 1990s through to the anti-corruption mobilizations of the 2010s, the Bollywood anti-hero has served as a consistent, though evolving, mirror- reflecting not only the anxieties of globalizing India but also the profound moral compromises demanded by a changing society.

6. What Does the Tragic End of Satya and Raghu Say About the Cost of Criminality?

The cinematic trajectories of Bhiku Mhatre, Satya, and Raghu in *Satya* (1998) and *Vaastav: The Reality* (1999) illustrate the devastating collapse of the domestic sphere under the weight of criminal ambition. In *Satya*, the death of Bhiku Mhatre, the gang's flamboyant, impulsive heart, is both sudden and brutal. Despite his fiercely guarded loyalty, Bhiku is ambushed in his own home by the politician Bhau, who orchestrates the hit to avenge Guru Narayan's murder. Bhiku dies in a paroxysm of rage, his demise underscoring the lethal fragility of underworld allegiances (Insomniac Point, 2018).

This betrayal leaves his wife, Pyari, profoundly isolated. As a partner who shared the precariousness of a gangster's lifestyle, Pyari represents the domestic collateral of criminal power; his death leaves her widowed, unprotected, and stigmatized within a society that offers no refuge to the families of fallen dons (Singh 2018).

The eponymous protagonist of *Satya* experiences a similarly nihilistic end. His journey from a rootless migrant to a feared underworld figure concludes in a bloody police raid (Varma, *Satya*, 1998, 02:32:15). This finale leaves his fiancée, Vidya, as the quintessential collateral victim. Her aspirations for stability and marriage are obliterated, and she is left to navigate a patriarchal society that labels her a "gangster's moll," highlighting how female security in such environments is precariously contingent upon male protectors (Dwyer 2006, 158-160). *Vaastav* mirrors this thematic preoccupation with the slow, total corrosion of the family unit. Raghu's arc from a humble butcher's son to a paranoid don concludes not through gang warfare, but through a deliberate act of maternal intervention. After losing his friend Dedh Footiya and being hounded by the police, Raghu's descent into drug-induced paranoia, manifesting in auditory and visual hallucinations, reaches its nadir (Manjrekar, *Vaastav*, 1999, 01:55:30). In a final act of desperate mercy, his mother, Shanta, accepts his gun and executes him to shield him from further suffering and legal reprisal (Manjrekar, *Vaastav*, 1999, 02:47:20).

This act of maternal mercy is the narrative's deepest incision. Shanta, who once instilled moral principles in Raghu, is forced by the logic of his criminal choices to become his executioner. The psychological and social fallout for the remaining family is catastrophic: his wife, Sapna, is reduced to a hollowed shell, perpetually haunted by the threats, miscarriages, and forced relocations of their criminal life (Sanjudiwali 2020). Meanwhile, his brother Vijay remains unemployed and disgraced, and his father, Namdev, bears the physical scars of gang vendettas. As scholars have noted, the domestic ruin depicted in *Vaastav* acts as a systemic critique; the wealth Raghu accumulates is ultimately negated by the absolute destruction of his home life (Majumdar 2007, 178-180). In both films, the "found family" of the gang serves only to facilitate the destruction of the "real family." Whether through Bhiku's isolation after his betrayal or Raghu's mercy killing at his mother's hands, the narrative concludes that underworld power is an illusion that invariably demands the sacrifice of those closest to the protagonist. These cinematic portrayals emphasize that in the Mumbai noir tradition, there is no escape from criminality; it operates as an entropic force that consumes the perpetrator and leaves wives widowed, mothers broken, and domestic futures irretrievably scarred (Dwyer 2006, 162).

7. Conclusion

In conclusion, the anti-heroes Bhiku Mhatre in *Satya* (1998) and Raghu in *Vaastav: The Reality* (1999) mark a decisive moment in Bollywood cinema, where the rigid dichotomy between hero and villain is deliberately destabilised. Through traits such as fierce loyalty, raw impulsiveness, and profound tragic flaws, both characters function as symbolic conduits for Mumbai's gritty underworld culture and the wider social transformations wrought by economic liberalisation, rising crime syndicates, and cultural disillusionment between 1990 and 2020 (Dwyer 2006, 155–162; Majumdar 2007, 178–180). Rather than conforming to the earlier model of the morally unambiguous "angry young man" (as in the films of the 1970s and 1980s), Bhiku and Raghu inhabit the moral grey zone, making their audiences uncomfortable with the very categories of "good" and "evil" that traditional mainstream cinema once took for granted (Bose 2002, 110–116).

Bhiku Mhatre and Raghu are both flawed anti-heroes whose impulsiveness leads to their downfall, yet their loyalties make them emotionally complex. Bhiku's gang-centric, fraternal loyalty turns him into a charismatic, folk-heroic figure, while his violent masculinity is exposed as futile and self-destructive. Raghu, in contrast, begins as an ordinary man whose familial loyalty and sacrificial guilt push him toward a maternally enacted suicide that destroys his family and home. In both arcs, the audience is invited to feel a degree of sympathy that would once have been reserved only for the "hero," thus challenging Bollywood's long-standing cult of invulnerable, state-backed heroes (Bose 2002). In this way, their intertwined trajectories resonate with the broader socio-political shift in India- from a faith in state-sponsored, paternalistic heroism toward a recognition of the complex, often compromised, moral realities of an era marked by economic migration, structural inequality, and the erosion of collective solidarity.

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