

A good Bombay film (as opposed to an insert-and-eject disposable) is one that has you persuaded while it lasts and can't be patronised in retrospect. Priyadarshan's *Gardish* is such a film. It is a cautionary tale about reluctant manhood and necessary violence, set in Bombay's streets and slums. It is riveting to watch and when it's over, it stays in the mind to nibble at politically correct ideas about how men and women behave and how they ought to be represented on film.

In its bare bones, *Gardish*'s plot is conventional. Amrish Puri is an honest *havaladar*, driven by a single ambition: his desire to see his son follow him into the force as an inspector. Jackie Shroff, his mild-mannered, dutiful son, accepts the future that his father has mapped out for him. He writes the entrance exam, does well, and then, as he waits for the results, things start going wrong. A slum lord, indifferent to the majesty of the law and Amrish Puri's uniform, beats him up. His son, who happens to be passing by, jumps in and given strength by rage, pounds the villain, Billa, into the ground.

This fight is the pivot on which the film turns. From here on, the son is hounded by the vengeful Billa. Every time he tries to run away from provocation, he's hunted down, cornered and forced into violent self-defence. As if this were not enough, his father is furious with him for having taken on the slum lord because he is afraid that his son's involvement in street fights might disqualify him for entry into the police force. Each time a fight is forced upon Jackie Shroff, Amrish Puri blames him for starting it, accuses him of vigilante bravado and warns that his son, drunk with machismo, is turning into a mirror image of the slum lord, Billa Jilani.

Menaced by Billa and estranged from his father, bewildered and desperate, he lurches from one fight to another, managing to survive, but moving further and further away from

respectability and that dreamed of career in the police. Inevitably, there is a fight to the finish, the film's last spasm of redemptive violence where he kills Billa and is reconciled with his father. But the cost is high: the moment of his triumph over lawlessness is also the end of his police career - the police arrests him after his battle with Billa and takes him away.

The unnerving thing about *Gardish* is that it engages your sympathies despite a set of female characters who conform to the woman-as-victim stereotype. They are all in male custody because they're unable to protect themselves. They are pawns in the strict sense: moved here and there to allow for the development of the bigger male pieces on this storyboard. Farida Jalal, who plays the nurturing, worried mother to perfection, is deliberately beaten by Billa Jilani to provoke the *havaladar*'s son out of hiding. Dimple Kapadia, the widow, whose trade unionist husband, along with her son, were burnt alive by Billa, begins to worship Jackie Shroff because he is the only man she knows who has taken Billa on and bested him. She is played as a strong woman, a survivor; but, even she is used to drive home the lesson that in a man's world, defiance or resistance not underwritten by a male protector is worse than futile, it is fatal.

Why doesn't this consistently attenuated representation of women disable the film or detract from its credibility? It doesn't for two reasons. First of all, because this film is

carefully, plausibly built. It isn't like *Coolie* or *Deewar* where Bachchan takes on a systematically unjust world. The *havaladar*'s son doesn't want to take anyone on, let alone the world. Nor is the world conspiring against him - in fact, his father's boss, the inspector, consistently bends the rules to keep him out of jail and a friend risks Billa's wrath to let him hide in his house. Secondly, the film's female characters work because Indian cities are full of predatory men preying on vulnerable women who do need male protectors whether these are concerned citizens, good policemen or kinsmen. The third reason that *Gardish* works is because the women he protects are members of his family.

Films like *Gardish* are like roughage; they make the gut move. They are an antidote to the intellectual habit of distancing experience by generalising it. To the sensibility that objects to *Gardish* on the ground that individual violence is no solution to injustice, the film asks the question: What would you do if you saw your father beaten in front of you or your sister kidnapped? Call your local NGO? Build neighbourhood solidarities? Lobby for more beat policemen? Because *Gardish* is a film, it doesn't allow us the luxury of the ideal solution in some socially engineered future. It makes us confront the question in the unreliable, less than perfect present. And because it is a powerful, affecting film, the answer we return is that given courage, we would follow the *havaladar*'s son. □

Gardish

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