

Stalking on screen must stop

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DETRIMENTAL EFFECT: A scene from *Theeran Oru Adhigaram*. Tamil cinema has been freely letting its heroes stalk its heroines.



By **Gautaman Bhaskaran**

Much like the horrendously tragic rape and murder of Nirbhaya in Delhi some years ago pushed violence against women to the country's conscience and centre-stage, the killing of 24-year-old Swathi, an information technology employee on the crowded platform of a railway station in Chennai on June 24, 2016 shook us to the core. A youth named Ram Kumar slashed her with a sickle and fled, but was soon nabbed by cops who found out that he had been stalking the girl for a while and had been distressed by her refusal to reciprocate his love. A former jailer in the prison where Ram Kumar was incarcerated told me that the boy had been deeply influenced by his favourite screen heroes stalking the girls they loved and ultimately winning over them. Despite public criticism of and outrage over such display of blatant male behaviour in movies, Tamil cinema has been freely letting its heroes stalk its heroines. Why even the latest Karthi film, *Theeran Oru Adhigaram*, has this, though mercifully the scene is brief.

Incidentally, Karthi's work came just about the same time another young woman techie, Induja, was burnt alive by a young man, who refused to take no for an answer from her. He kept stalking her and pleading with her to marry him, and when he felt a sense of utter hopelessness, he walked into her flat, doused her with inflammable liquid and set her on fire. She died even before she could reach a hospital. The guy, Akash, is now in jail, and Induja's mother and sister are in hospital having suffered burns while trying to save the girl.

In a state like Tamil Nadu – where cinema and politics have been almost like conjoined Siamese twins – films have been a huge influence on the youth. A common quip among some of my friends is that even an autorickshaw driver imagines himself to be a cinema hero – his style of talking and behaving running close to one star or the other. And when the man on the screen can stalk his love, hoping against hope that she would come around and fall into his love, why cannot a fan follow that! There are any a number of Tamil actors who have stalked women on the screen. Some have succeeded. Some have not.

Dhanush's Kundan did not in the Tamil version of *Ambhikapathy* (originally shot in Hindi and titled *Raanjaana*), where he essays the son of a Brahmin priest in Varanasi, falling in love with a Muslim girl, Zoya (Shruti Haasan). In spite of her repeated refusals – based on the fact that the two belong to different religions and are also divided by wide economic disparity, Kundan (Dhanush) persists, following her and even embarrassing her. The end is disastrous in a movie that to me seemed to have placed its firm stamp of approval on what is a highly irresponsible and demeaning male attitude, which equates a woman's no with bruised ego!

I can give any number of other examples. In *Paayum Puli*, Vishal is a cop who stalks and threatens a woman (Kajal Aggarwal), forcing her to love him. And audiences were made to believe that this was cutely romantic! In *Nanbenda*, Udhayanidhi Stalin plays a lover, who stalks. In *Sethu*, Vikram kidnaps a girl when she refuses him, and threatens to smash her head with a rock. In *Ambikapathy*, Kundan mucks up Zoya's marriage with Jasjeet Singh Shergill (Abhay Deol).

As one writer commented, "actors like Dhanush and others have turned stalking into a fine art – the loser boy who has nothing in life going for him, but can still aspire for the fair-skinned girl..Who wouldn't want to be like him, eh? But if you thought the problem was with only these men who play 'low-class' characters in their films, you'd be wrong. In *Vaaranam Aayiram*, Surya follows his love, Sameera Reddy, all the way to the US! After, she has said no".

But I would not blame cinema alone, though movies offer some kind of tacit approval for such stupidity, which at times leads to murder or maiming. Even in a city like Chennai, which takes pride in calling itself a modern metro, the society frowns upon free mingling of sexes which eventually makes men incapable of handling relationships involving women.

While some leading co-educational colleges in Chennai and other parts of Tamil Nadu discourage girls and boys from talking to each other (yes in this day and age) and where the community in general keeps harping that good girls and boys should not spend time with each other, cinema seems to mess up this notion with the hero breaking all kind of social barriers and taboos to win his girl. And when she herself spurns his "love", it turns into something unimaginably destructive. If Kundan can spoil Zoya's true love for Shergill, if a policeman can frighten a girl into submission and if a man can go to the extent of kidnapping a girl and forcing her to "love" him, young men like Akash and Ram Kumar will tend to get encouraged by such daredevilry. Also because, they are led to think that stalking is perfectly

acceptable.

And in a country like India and in times like these, when the young have no role models to speak of (with parents too busy making money), cinema stars assume a larger-than-life heroic stature. And these men can do no wrong. Yes, even when they are pushing a poor girl into a frenzied state. A torture of sorts to force a confession, only this time it is, "okay, I love you". What the heck!

* Gautaman Bhaskaran has been writing on Indian and world cinema close to four decades, and may be e-mailed at gautamanb@hotmail.com