



A ferocious cinema

By Gautaman Bhaskaran

Two weeks ago, I was waiting in a lounge at the Bangalore City Station, when my gaze fell on a little lad of about six or seven years of age. He was standing at the doorway and using his hands — quite imaginatively I would say — to shoot with a gun he probably dreamt of holding. Of course, there was no gun, but plenty of “shots” flew all around. With the sounds he made from his mouth and the gestures his hands carved out in the air, he could have killed a lot many people on the railway platform that afternoon. But, well, he had no gun.

Where did he get this idea of shooting with a weapon — something I could have never thought of when I was the boy's age. Obviously the boy must have got this imagery into his head from cinema and television, which incidentally is so filmy in content.

This takes us back to a question that never ceases to bother me. Has the meaningless violence which one sees in movies slipped off the screen and onto the streets? The jury is still out there. But with charges and counter-charges being traded against the kind of cinema which revels in blood and gore, I certainly feel that the behaviour of children and adolescents is often guided by screen images.

In any case, there is nothing new about this. Boys and girls have always copied the mannerisms and fashion of their favourite films stars. But in the past, cinema violence

was neither as gruesome as it is now, nor as common.

However, the picture is enormously different today. Cinema or television has little to do with style, more to do with sadism. Cops hammer suspects in police stations. In *Dabangg 2*, the villain played by Prakash Raj wants Salman Khan's Chulbul Pandey killed and sliced into tiny bits! How grisly can all this get? Some of the Tamil movies freely use the sickle not to harvest the rice crop, but to slit the jugular.

It is a different fashion we are talking about today.

In *Aaranya Kaandam*, blood spattered out of men's bodies to make geometric patterns on the walls — a la Quentin Tarantino.

This brings us to the American cult director whose early movies like *Pulp Fiction*, *Reservoir Dogs* and *Kill Bill* left a gory mess on the screen — and enormous discomfort in viewers' heads. Now, Tarantino is said to have been “audibly annoyed when a (recent) radio interview turned to talk of film violence sparking real-world violence”.

Terry Gross, host of NPR's *Fresh Air*, asked the director whether he would begin to enjoy violent movies less after the December 14 school shootout (20 children and six adults dead) at Newtown in the US. “Would I watch a Kung Fu film three days after the Sandy Hook massacre? Would I watch a Kung Fu movie? Maybe, 'cause they have nothing to do with each other,” Tarantino said.

Tarantino was angry at being asked this, and he said so. “I'm really annoyed. I think it's disrespectful. I think it's disrespectful to their memory ... of the people who died to talk about films,” he said. “I think it's totally

disrespectful to their memory. Obviously, the issue is gun control and mental health.”

The American helmer may have a point when he talks about gun control, which Washington has never been able to implement, given the powerful lobby supporting the possession of weapons. Yet, the recent school tragedy has sparked a furious debate in the US, where the violent scenes from Tarantino's latest movie, *Django Unchained*, were used to slam actors who were hypocritical to ask for stricter gun control laws while they themselves played horribly macabre men on the screen.

A poll conducted by *The Hollywood Reporter* found that 70% of the people over age 30 questioned answered that there was indeed too much of savagery in films and television. And that this was influencing especially the young. But, of course, Tarantino had a different take. And as I said, the jury is still out.

As much as I would campaign for a gun free society in America, I would not like to forget that India has reportedly the second largest number of weapons after the US. Not all of them are guns here, though. They could be knives, sickles and when these are not available, iron rods would do. At the recent rape and murder of a 23-year-old paramedic in Delhi, a teenager used an iron rod to rip out her intestines. How horrifying can things get? How did he become such a monster? I shudder to think of the horror he perpetrated.

Let me return to the train station on a pleasant afternoon to watch something that was not so pleasant. The boy was getting ready for a shooting spree. Unless, of course, his parents see this coming and stop him.

Mushy romance going nowhere

Gautham Vasudev Menon makes romantic films, sometimes crime or psychological thrillers like the Tamil *Vettaiyaadu Vilaiyaadu* and *Nadunisi Naaygal*. If

his thrillers were unrealistically scripted (despite novel ideas), his love stories have been juvenile. Certainly, they are in this day and age, where the young are far more mature than Menon's characters. His 2010 *Vinnaihaandi Varuvaayaa* had a good performer in Trisha, but the movie she had to carry was silly and syrupy with an end that was clearly meant to fox the viewer.

Menon, though, corrected this climax in the Hindi version, *Ek Tha Deewana*, which he helmed a little later. But Amy Jackson, who replicated Trisha's character, looked uncomfortable. Obviously so. What else can you expect from a British model having to mouth Hindi lines and fit into the Indian melodramatic mould?

Menon's just released *Neethaane Enn Ponvasantham* (You Are My Golden Spring) has more tears and icy clichés than what I had seen in a while. Yet again a romance that begins in a Kindergarten school between two children, who part, because their families move away. They meet again at high school, key in their romantic hormones and part again.

Seven years later, they meet yet again to part yet again. She goes away to Cambridge. She can afford to, because she is a rich kid — and he is not (cliché!). But when the tsunami strikes India, she rushes back home to start a school for the orphan children in a remote village. She hopes to have achieved a sense of fulfilment and purpose, once a bone of contention between the lovers. He did not want her life to just revolve around his; she had been happy doing that, and he found that possessively restrictive.

After going through this endless cycle of splitsville, Varun (Jeeva) still pines for Nithya (Samantha), and bunks work to travel to his old flame at the tsunami-hit village. But she is in no mood to accept his apologies — though I wonder why he was saying “sorry”, because every time she was the one who walked out on him. The couple part for the umpteenth time, and by then the audience was yawning. For, this part-to-meet-to-part game had stretched itself too far.

Menon's work is a major tearjerker, with weepy Samantha testing our patience no end, though she sparkles as a schoolgirl. Jeeva is at his wooden best. Indian directors/producers have no qualms about getting their 30-something actors into school uniforms. Menon may have the craft at his command, but he falters with his script and story, and his love stories seem, at best, like a Mills and Boon novel.

(Gautaman Bhaskaran has been writing on cinema for over three decades, and may be contacted at gautamanb@hotmail.com)



✿ Jeeva and Samantha in *Neethaane Enn Ponvasantham*.