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## AMATHIA, MASCULINITY, AND COLLECTIVE CONSCIOUSNESS IN POST-1995 HINDI CINEMA

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### ABSTRACT

This paper theorizes a significant transformation in masculine representation in post-liberalization Hindi cinema through the conceptual framework of *amathia*, a Greek philosophical notion denoting moral ignorance rooted in arrogance and lack of self-knowledge. Drawing primarily from Socratic and Platonic thought, *amathia* is understood as the ethical failure that arises when power is exercised without reflective awareness. The paper argues that pre-1990s Bollywood masculinity, characterized by aggression, entitlement, and heroic violence, mirrors this philosophical condition. Against this backdrop, *Dilwale Dulhania Le Jayenge* (1995) marks a cultural rupture, inaugurating a cinematic masculinity most prominently embodied by Shah Rukh Khan that rejects dominance in favor of emotional intelligence, restraint, and ethical self-regulation. This shift is theorized as the emergence of a “macholless masculinity,” which aligns with the Greek ethical ideal of self-knowledge (*gnōthi seauton*) and functions as a form of popular moral pedagogy. The paper further contends that the repetition of this archetype across popular cinema contributed to its internalization within India’s collective consciousness, reshaping normative expectations of male desire, romance, and authority. By positioning mainstream cinema as a contemporary analogue to Greek tragedy, the paper demonstrates how philosophical concepts migrate into mass cultural forms and participate in collective ethical reorientation.

*Keywords* : Amathia; Ethics of the Self; Masculinity; Moral Ignorance; Greek Philosophy; Cultural Ethics; Subject Formation

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### 1. Introduction

Greek philosophy consistently locates ethical failure not in ignorance alone, but in a specific kind of ignorance, *amathia*, where individuals remain unaware of their own moral deficiency while exercising power over others. In dialogues such as Plato’s *Protagoras* and *Gorgias*, Socrates identifies *amathia* as the root of injustice, tyranny, and moral blindness. This philosophical diagnosis finds a

striking cultural parallel in the dominant masculine archetypes of pre-liberalization Hindi cinema, where authority, violence, and emotional suppression were routinely presented as moral virtues.

This paper proposes that post-1995 Hindi cinema, beginning with *Dilwale Dulhania Le Jayenge* (DDLJ), stages a sustained critique of this masculine *amathia*. Through the romantic hero played by Shah Rukh Khan, Bollywood introduces a figure whose ethical legitimacy arises not from physical domination or social entitlement, but from reflexivity, emotional vulnerability, and consent-based love. The argument advanced here is twofold: first, that this cinematic shift can be productively read through Greek moral philosophy; and second, that its widespread cultural circulation contributed to a measurable transformation in India's collective moral imagination.

In Greek ethical thought, *amathia* signifies far more than a lack of information or simple ignorance (*agnoia*). As Plato repeatedly emphasizes, particularly in the *Protagoras*, *amathia* names a specifically ethical failure of self-knowledge, a condition in which an individual mistakes confidence for wisdom and authority for virtue. The *amathēs* subject does not know that he does not know. This false self-certainty becomes morally dangerous because it forecloses reflection, correction, and humility, thereby giving rise to *hubris*. Ethical error, for Plato, is thus not merely cognitive but existential: it is a distorted relation of the self to truth and to others.

Aristotle extends and systematizes this concern by situating ethical failure within the absence of *phronesis* (practical wisdom). In the *Nicomachean Ethics*, Aristotle distinguishes technical knowledge (*techne*) and abstract reasoning (*sophia*) from the kind of situational judgment required for ethical life. *Phronesis* involves not only rational deliberation but emotional attunement, moral perception, and responsiveness to context. Without it, even socially sanctioned authority or masculine virtue becomes rigid and destructive. Ethical excellence, Aristotle insists, requires moderation, self-restraint, and the capacity to deliberate well in relation to others, a direct counterpoint to the moral blindness of *amathia*.

Greek tragedy offers the most vivid dramatization of this ethical problem by translating *amathia* from an individual flaw into a collective crisis. Figures such as Creon in Sophocles' *Antigone* exemplify how masculine authority, when insulated from self-questioning, produces not order but catastrophe. Creon's failure lies not in malice but in moral inflexibility, his inability to recognize the limits of his own judgment. Tragedy thus exposes the political consequences of ethical ignorance, showing how unchecked certainty destabilizes familial bonds, civic harmony, and divine law alike.

Importantly, tragedy in the Greek polis functioned as a form of public moral pedagogy. Through spectacle, suffering, and recognition (*anagnorisis*), it invited collective reflection on the dangers of authoritarian masculinity and unexamined power. The tragic stage became a space where society could confront its own ethical blind spots and re-evaluate dominant moral ideals.

This tragic - philosophical tradition provides a compelling framework for interpreting popular cinema, particularly in cultural contexts where film operates as a primary medium of moral narration. Just as tragedy once shaped the ethical imagination of the polis, modern cinema participates in the formation of collective moral consciousness, offering narrative models that either reproduce or transform inherited structures of authority, masculinity, and ethical selfhood.

## **2. From Tragic Ethics to Technologies of the Self: A Foucauldian Transition**

The ethical problem diagnosed in Greek philosophy and tragedy, the danger of authority untempered by self-knowledge, finds a striking afterlife in modern theoretical reflections on

subjectivity. Michel Foucault's later work on ethics and "technologies of the self" offers a contemporary vocabulary for rethinking *amathia* beyond the framework of moral failure alone. For Foucault, ethical life does not primarily consist in obedience to external norms, but in the ongoing work by which subjects constitute themselves through practices of reflection, discipline, and care (*epimeleia heautou*). Ethical breakdown, in this sense, occurs when power operates without reflexivity, when the subject governs others without first governing the self.

This Foucauldian insight echoes the Greek insistence that ethical authority must be grounded in self-formation rather than mere positional power. Figures like Creon can thus be reread not simply as tragic villains but as failed ethical subjects, men whose inability to problematize their own authority results in violence against both others and the social order. Foucault's ethics shifts attention away from transgression and punishment toward the conditions under which certain forms of masculinity, authority, and selfhood become normalized and unchallenged. In this sense, *amathia* may be understood as a historically recurrent ethical condition: a mode of subjectivity that forecloses self-critique and renders power immune to reflection.

By reframing ethical failure as a failure of self-relation rather than solely of knowledge, Foucault allows us to extend the tragic insight into modern cultural forms. Ethical transformation, whether in ancient tragedy or contemporary media, emerges not through moral exhortation but through narrative disruptions that expose the fragility of dominant identities.

### **2.1 From Tragic Spectacle to Popular Cinema: Bollywood as Ethical Narrative**

If Greek tragedy served as a civic technology for ethical reflection within the polis, popular cinema in postcolonial India performs an analogous function at the level of mass culture. Bollywood, as a dominant narrative apparatus, operates as a contemporary site where ideals of masculinity, authority, and emotional life are staged, contested, and reimagined. Like tragedy, it translates philosophical problems into affective narratives that invite collective identification and moral evaluation.

The continuity between Greek tragedy and Bollywood cinema lies not in form but in function. Both rely on recognizable character types, moral conflict, and emotional excess to dramatize ethical crises. The tragic hero's downfall due to *amathia* finds its cinematic parallel in figures whose rigid masculinity, emotional repression, or moral certainty leads to isolation and loss. Conversely, moments of ethical redemption often coincide with vulnerability, self-doubt, and relational openness, qualities traditionally marginalized within heroic masculine ideals.

Crucially, Bollywood's reach enables these ethical narratives to circulate at a scale unimaginable to the ancient polis. Through repetition, star personas, and melodramatic conventions, cinema shapes what Charles Taylor would later call the "social imaginaries" within which subjects come to understand themselves and others. The emergence of a new cinematic masculinity, particularly in the post-1995 period associated with Shah Rukh Khan, signals not merely a stylistic shift but a transformation in the ethical grammar of heroism itself.

In this context, Bollywood can be read as a modern tragic space where inherited forms of masculine authority are symbolically dismantled and reconstituted. The movement away from arrogance, domination, and stoic invulnerability toward humility, emotional expressiveness, and ethical reflexivity marks a departure from *amathic* masculinity toward a Foucauldian ethics of the self, one grounded in care, relationality, and self-questioning.

## **2.2 Pre-1990s Bollywood and Masculine Amathia**

The dominant male protagonists of Hindi cinema from the 1970s through the late 1980s, most notably the “angry young man” archetype, embody a culturally sanctioned *amathia*. These figures derive legitimacy from righteous violence, emotional invulnerability, and patriarchal authority. Their ethical certainty is rarely questioned; rather, their lack of introspection is framed as strength.

This cinematic masculinity parallels the Greek tyrant figure, who mistakes power for virtue. Romantic relationships in these narratives often reproduce this logic, with pursuit overriding consent and aggression substituting for emotional communication. The absence of reflexivity marks a cinematic moral universe in which masculine dominance appears natural and unquestionable.

## **2.3 DDLJ and the Ethical Rupture of 1995**

Dilwale Dulhania Le Jayenge represents a decisive rupture within the genealogy of Hindi cinematic masculinity. Shah Rukh Khan’s Raj is neither morally omniscient nor physically hegemonic; he does not command authority through violence, sacrifice, or stoic dominance. Instead, his masculinity is articulated through patience, irony, emotional transparency, and, most crucially, ethical restraint. The film’s pivotal refusal to romanticize elopement, despite its availability as a narrative shortcut, repositions desire within a moral horizon structured by responsibility rather than impulse.

From a philosophical standpoint, Raj embodies a sustained rejection of *amathia*. Unlike earlier heroic figures who assert moral certainty through action, Raj repeatedly demonstrates reflexive self-knowledge. He recognizes the limits of his entitlement to Simran, acknowledges the legitimacy of familial and cultural bonds, and consciously suspends personal gratification in favor of ethical negotiation. This is not submission but self-governance: a Foucauldian practice of ethical self-formation in which desire is disciplined without repression. His authority emerges precisely from his refusal to exercise it coercively.

Raj’s success, therefore, is not achieved through conquest, transgression, or spectacle, but through endurance, persuasion, and moral consistency. The narrative valorizes waiting over seizing, consent over force, and relational harmony over individual triumph. In Aristotelian terms, Raj approximates *phronesis*, practical wisdom attuned to context, while avoiding the hubristic excesses that define tragic failure. His ethical stance redefines cinematic virtue as a capacity for restraint, dialogue, and temporal patience rather than heroic domination.

In this sense, Dilwale Dulhania Le Jayenge functions analogously to Greek tragedy, not by staging downfall, but by dramatizing ethical transformation. It places inherited norms, patriarchal authority, filial obedience, romantic absolutism, into tension without fully discarding them, thereby inviting collective reflection rather than moral rupture. The film critiques older masculine ideals while offering an alternative ethical script, one capable of reshaping public imagination. Through Raj, Bollywood articulates a new model of heroic subjectivity: self-aware, relational, and ethically accountable, marking a profound shift in the moral grammar of popular cinema.

## **2.4 Macholess Masculinity and Ethical Self-Knowledge**

The post-*DDLJ* Shah Rukh Khan screen persona consolidates what this paper conceptualizes as “macholess masculinity”, a mode of masculine subjectivity that neither disavows strength nor glorifies domination, but instead rearticulates strength through emotional intelligence, dialogic engagement, and sustained ethical accountability. This masculinity is not defined by the capacity to overpower

others, but by the ability to govern oneself. In this sense, it represents a decisive shift from heroic sovereignty to ethical self-regulation.

Philosophically, this formation resonates strongly with Socratic ethics, particularly the injunction that “the unexamined life is not worth living.” Shah Rukh Khan’s post-*DDLJ* characters, across films such as *Dil Se*, *Swades*, *Chak De! India*, and *My Name Is Khan*, are marked by introspection, moral hesitation, and a persistent questioning of their own motives and limits. Rather than presenting masculinity as a completed moral state, these narratives foreground ethical becoming as an ongoing process. Masculinity here is not a naturalized essence but a cultivated practice.

Crucially, this figure operates without the illusion of moral infallibility that characterizes earlier cinematic heroes. Doubt, uncertainty, emotional exposure, and vulnerability are not framed as weaknesses to be overcome, but as ethical resources. These qualities enable responsiveness to others and openness to transformation. In Butlerian terms, masculinity is no longer stabilized through rigid performative repetition but is rendered contingent, revisable, and relational. The male subject is allowed to fail, reflect, and recalibrate without forfeiting dignity.

This ethical orientation directly counters *amathia*, understood as false moral certainty. By foregrounding reflexivity as a masculine virtue, the post-*DDLJ* Shah Rukh Khan persona displaces arrogance with attentiveness and domination with dialogue. Ethical authority emerges not from certainty but from the capacity to listen, negotiate, and remain answerable to others. The hero no longer claims to know what is right by virtue of strength; instead, right action arises through engagement with competing moral claims.

At a collective level, this cinematic reconfiguration participates in reshaping the moral imagination of Indian popular culture. As these narratives circulate widely, they normalize a form of masculinity that is emotionally articulate, ethically constrained, and socially embedded. In Foucauldian terms, this marks a shift in the technologies of the self available to male subjects: cinema becomes a site where new ethical practices of masculinity are rehearsed, internalized, and made culturally legible. Macholess masculinity thus functions not merely as a representational shift, but as an intervention into the ethical formation of the social body itself.

### **2.5 Collective Consciousness and Cultural Internalization**

The repeated circulation of this ethical masculine archetype across mainstream Hindi cinema enabled its gradual absorption into India’s collective consciousness. Drawing on Émile Durkheim’s concept of collective representations, cinema can be understood as a shared symbolic system through which societies articulate, negotiate, and stabilize moral norms. In this framework, popular film operates not merely as entertainment but as a cultural institution that mediates ethical meaning at a collective level.

Following *Dilwale Dulhania Le Jayenge* (1995), the sustained visibility of Shah Rukh Khan’s macholess masculine persona contributed to a subtle but significant recalibration of normative expectations surrounding masculinity. Romantic conduct grounded in consent, emotional expressiveness, patience, and ethical negotiation increasingly entered public discourse, particularly among urban and aspirational middle-class audiences. These shifts did not manifest as explicit moral instruction but as repeated narrative patterns that rendered alternative masculinities imaginable, intelligible, and socially acceptable.

Importantly, this process should not be misconstrued as a simplistic model of cultural causality. Cinema does not directly produce social transformation; rather, it participates in what Charles Taylor describes as the shaping of a society's moral imaginaries—the background understandings through which individuals make sense of their ethical lives. Popular cinema contributes to this imaginary by offering embodied moral scenarios that viewers can emotionally inhabit and tacitly internalize. The ethical force of such narratives lies not in prescriptive doctrine but in affective repetition and symbolic resonance.

In this sense, mainstream Hindi cinema performs a function structurally analogous to Greek tragedy. As tragedy staged moral conflict within the polis, inviting collective reflection on hubris, authority, and ethical failure, popular film stages contemporary ethical dilemmas within the social body. Through repetition, identification, and ritualized viewing, these narratives normalize certain virtues while quietly displacing others. The macholess masculine archetype thus becomes a collectively rehearsed ethical possibility, one that counters amathia by privileging reflexivity over certainty and ethical restraint over domination.

Cinema, therefore, emerges as a modern site of moral pedagogy, where ethical subjectivities are not imposed but cultivated through shared narrative experience. Its power lies precisely in its ability to render ethical transformation both familiar and desirable, embedding philosophical shifts within the texture of everyday cultural life.

### **3. Conclusion**

By placing Greek ethical philosophy in sustained dialogue with mainstream Hindi cinema, this paper has demonstrated that amathia offers a productive and underutilized framework for understanding transformations in masculine ethics within popular culture. Rather than treating cinematic change as merely stylistic or market-driven, the analysis reveals a deeper ethical shift, from models of masculine authority grounded in certainty, domination, and moral infallibility to forms of subjectivity marked by reflexivity, restraint, and ethical negotiation.

The emergence of reflective masculinity in post-1995 Bollywood, crystallized through Shah Rukh Khan's romantic persona, signals not simply a narrative innovation but a broader ethical recalibration within the social imagination. These cinematic figures reject the arrogance of presumed moral mastery and instead foreground self-knowledge as an ethical virtue. In doing so, they resonate strongly with the Socratic insistence that the examined life constitutes the foundation of moral excellence, as well as with Aristotelian notions of practical wisdom that privilege emotional attunement and situational judgment over brute assertion of will.

Crucially, this transformation must be understood as a collective phenomenon rather than an individual one. Popular cinema, through repetition and wide circulation, functions as a modern analogue to Greek tragedy, an arena in which societies rehearse ethical tensions, critique inherited norms, and imagine alternative moral futures. Shah Rukh Khan's characters do not merely entertain; they model ethical comportments that audiences are invited to inhabit, normalize, and internalize. In this sense, cinema becomes a site of ethical pedagogy where moral learning occurs affectively rather than didactically.

The paper further argues that this cinematic ethics counters amathia not by replacing one heroic ideal with another, but by destabilizing the very notion of moral omniscience. Uncertainty,

vulnerability, and dialogic engagement emerge as ethical strengths, reconfiguring masculinity away from domination and toward relational accountability. Such a shift has profound implications for understanding how mass culture participates in the formation of collective moral consciousness, particularly in societies where cinema occupies a central symbolic role.

Ultimately, the convergence of ancient Greek ethical thought and contemporary Bollywood cinema underscores the continued relevance of philosophy in interpreting cultural change. Ethical concepts forged in classical antiquity find renewed vitality when applied to modern narrative forms, demonstrating that philosophical inquiry need not remain confined to canonical texts. Instead, it can illuminate the moral work performed by mass culture, revealing how ethical ideals are not only theorized but lived, rehearsed, and transformed within the shared imaginative life of a society.

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