

Another history rises to the surface: melodrama theory and digital simulation in Hey Ram (Kamalahasan, 1999)
Ravi Vasudevan

Plot summary

In Chennai, on 6 December, 1999, an old man, Saket Ram (Kamal Hasan), is in a critical condition, and it's from his point of view that the film flashes back to the partition period. Archaeologists at Mortimer Wheeler's dig at Mohenjo Daro, Ram and his colleague Amjad Khan (Shahrukh Khan) are abruptly asked to pack up when Hindu-Muslim riots erupt. Ram returns to Calcutta to be with his beloved, Aparna (Rani Mukherjee), and finds the streets torn by marauding Muslim crowds answering Jinnah's Direct Action call. A nightmarish account of Direct Action day follows, with Aparna raped and killed by Muslims, amongst whom is a tailor, Altaf, well known to Ram. Ram himself is almost sodomized by the tailor's mate. Ram subsequently finds and kills Altaf, and witnesses the systematic execution of Muslims by Hindus and Sikhs. Assailed by guilt at his actions, Ram meets a Hindu firebrand, Abhyankar, who urges Ram to join him on his 'shikar' of Muslims. It is, however, Gandhi whom Abhyankar deems most culpable for the tragic fate of Hindus because of his alleged appeasement of Muslim leaders.

A numbed Ram returns to Madras, where he submits to the desires of his Iyengar family and marries Maithili (Vasundhara Das). The two travel to Maharashtra to meet Abhyankar, now the protégé of a fundamentalist Hindu Rajah. A friend from the past, Lalvani, a Sindhi merchant, fortuitously surfaces at this point, a figure ravaged by the rape and murder of his wife, the loss of his daughters, and the destruction of his business in Karachi. The Rajah responds compassionately to this devastated figure and provides him with a job. Ram's indoctrination continues, and, when Abhyankar is crippled in a riding accident, Ram is chosen to take his place as Gandhi's assassin. Ram prepares for this through elaborate rituals performed at Benares and arrives in Delhi where he stakes out the Birla Mandir for his assassination bid. A plot twist takes him to the Muslim quarters of old Delhi, where he happens upon his old friend Amjad who, despite personal losses incurred during the riots, remains fervent in his Gandhian values. At first implacable in his Hindutva beliefs, Ram's attitude changes when Amjad is threatened by what are clearly RSS incendiaries. He defends Amjad and his family, but Amjad dies. Overwhelmed, Saket Ram, now celebrated as the defender of Muslims, goes to seek atonement for his sins from the Mahatma, only to see him felled by Godse's bullet. A traumatized Ram removes Gandhi's sandals and glasses, and we subsequently find these housed in the room where Ram lives out his later life in darkness and silence. This museum of personal history is hung about with numerous photos, contains momentos of Gandhi, and a huge image of the Mahatma is pasted over the windows. In a peculiarly haunting and ambiguous last shot, as the credits roll Saket Ram's grandson opens these windows, and light begins flooding through and fragmenting the Mahatma's image.

In this article I examine Kamalahasan's controversial film, *Hey Ram*, along the following axes of reflection. What new perspective does the film offer on the traumatic partition of the subcontinent, and from what location in contemporary politics and culture does it launch this reflection? In other words, how does the film's historiographical agenda relate to present imperatives for issues of identity formation? The question of perspective here is also one of narrative point of view, and leads to a second series of reflections on the structure of filmic story telling, and whether the film offers the spectator a coherent perspective on its narrative world. I will seek to focus in particular on the contradictory effects of the film, the distinct uncertainty which viewers experience when confronted with the inflammatory images and voices that conjure up a narrative of Muslim bloodlust and Hindu trauma and retaliation. The uncertainty is compounded because these deeply troubling passages seem to be only ineptly redressed by less forceful narrative moves to distance the spectator from an extreme Hindutva perspective.

I want to place this analysis in terms of certain larger issues of popular cinematic form: specifically around the question of how a melodramatic mode of narration, its characteristic stylistic devices and hermeneutic dimensions have been subjected to revision in the contemporary era. In particular, I want to consider how the sweep of melodrama's manichean, bipolar universe is refigured against the grid of contemporary political systems. This is an arena far removed from the original contexts of the melodramatic mode which negotiated shifts in social experience away from the certitudes of traditional hierarchies and concepts of the sacred. Of central concern here is the changed location of the sacred itself, now transposed onto the domain of nationhood and its key icons such as the Mahatma. I am also concerned with the way narratives of national origins turn on the public modes of address of melodramatic performance. In this rendering, the individual agent is subsumed as a hyperbolic incarnation of the national drama even when a specifically psychological set of motifs - ineradicable feelings of loss and guilt, for example - are deployed. Arguably such characterization complicates any project of empathetic identification. For in this film the narrative seeks to construct the character through a personalized discourse of history, but also by staging identity as spectacle, and therefore in a key which does not quite allow us as spectators to internalise the character.

This melodramatic staging of history, in which the character is a figure who performs for us rather than is us directs attention to the particular regime of play associated with the star personality of Kamalahasan. The actor is known for his extensive experiments with cinematic representations of bodily mutation through physical contortions, makeup and digital manipulation. These performative dimensions may speak to the what-if, fiction-foregrounding premise of the narrative - its invitation to re-imagine the history of the nation-state as a biography of murder and revenge that speaks to the suppressed desires of Hindus at large. They braid in with the regime of play generated by the film's deployment of video-game structures and digital modes in key sequences. The cinematic art of the index, in which the photographed object leaves its physical trace on the film stock, is here challenged by a regime of effects that manipulate the image internally, without any relationship to an external referent. I suggest that these devices invite us (at least temporarily) to disengage from a relationship to history as something grounded in materially defined socio-political experience. Instead of 'this happened' or 'Godse killed Gandhi', the issue becomes 'any Hindu could have killed Gandhi' and that 'I invite you to re-play that possibility through a regime of images'. *Hey Ram* renders cinema and history as manipulable, as open to the play of desire which is in the active process of constitution. Yet, in essaying this, the film nevertheless seems to come up against a blockage, as if it cannot produce a new symbolic structure and national biography that will entirely replace earlier ones. The crisis in national identification signalled by the film and the shifting, unanchored structure of the post-cinematic signifier push protagonist and spectator to the brink of an imaginative abyss. As I will suggest, melodramatic history in the age of digital simulation produces uncanny compensations to recover meaning and the lost object of sacralized nationhood.

A new history?

In interviews, Kamalahasan has said that it took him some time to understand that Pakistan was not just another country, it was a religion. In another context, drawing attention to an iconoclastic disposition in himself, he has spoken, ironically but not without seriousness, of the

oedipal contest with the father, referring to the Mahatma, but also, perhaps, to Periyar, EV Ramaswamy Naicker, the ideologue of the anti-caste non-Brahmin movement of Tamilnadu. The director's rather cryptic references to Periyar suggest that the Dravida Kazhagam movement and its successors had fashioned a cultural hegemony within which brahmins such as he had also distanced themselves from their identity. The situation has now changed, though the account does not provide us with a sense of how this has happened and of its implications.

What is being signalled here is a basic shift in perspective, one that marks the passing of a time in which there was a certain consensus about leading figures such as Gandhi and Periyar in an official or overt public discourse about secularism, democracy and identity. Running parallel with such official discourses was a repressed and therefore potentially seductive domain of beliefs and affiliations that could not be spoken loudly and fulsomely because it was deemed politically incorrect by reigning hegemonies. There are three strands involved here: the history of the Hindu public's relationship with minority communities; that of the Tamil to questions of caste and his/her place within the wider formation of the Indian nation-state; and, finally, the Hindutva critique of secularism functioning as a new commonsense which fashions its own repression of Hindu identity and memory. I will come back to the last and most complicated of these formulations later.

The secularism developed under the Congress state is now under sustained attack from the Hindu Right which castigates it for 'appeasing' a minority characterized as reactionary and backward. In a Hindutva perspective, this 'appeasement' has not only undermined the Hindu majority but also India's investment in with modernizing initiatives. The Hindu Right seeks to attribute responsibility to the Muslim for historical atrocities visited on the majority, and to effect the proper subordination of the Muslim, and other minority communities, to the Hindu in the name of a majoritarian diktat. From an entirely different direction the secularism of the nation-state has been critiqued for its politically repressive projects by left-wing, feminist and dalit intellectuals. The focus of this critique has been on the covert complicity of the nation-state with a high-caste Hindu elite and with its other, reactionary minority community formations. In this account the repression of secularism lies in its subordination of low caste and dalit society, and of other ways of thinking about the relation of community and nation-state than those of a composite yet hierarchized nationalism.

At one level, Hey Ram would seem to be aligned with the Hindu Right's unleashing of certain public discourses, its narrative highlighting Muslim atrocities and underwriting high-caste Hindu identity as the vehicle of a resurgent nationalism. Here lies the importance of the janeu, the sacred thread worn by the twice-born, the talisman through which Abhyankar recognizes Ram for what he is and what binds them. This talisman seeks to undertake a symbolic transformation, forging a pan-Indian elite that will be the vanguard for the reconstruction of the nation-state. Some of the narrative also hints at contemporary Hindu grievances through a displaced reference in the figure of the devastated Sindhi merchant Lalvani. His uprootedness from region, the ruination of his property and family, could clearly refer to the current anguish of the Kashmiri Hindu community. As Pankaj Butalia has remarked, it is significant that while the film has been attacked by a number of groups, and especially the Congress, the RSS has remained quiet about it; perhaps because the film has told the tale from their point of view.

On the other hand, in the representation of Tamil identity, Hey Ram is part of a recent current that challenges the Dravidian movement's influence by highlighting two features in the hero's profile, his Brahmanical identity, and his identification with the broader Indian nation-state. The DMK influenced cinema of the 1940s and 1950s subjected the Brahmanical order to a radical critique. It also distanced itself from the web of imperatives set by a north Indian nationalism, drawing on the anti-Hindi movement as a crucial vector of Tamil nationalism. We have observed such transformations in other Tamil films, especially the work of Mani Rathnam, in *Roja* (1992) and *Bombay* (1995), where elite, if not Brahmin coded characters, urbane, cosmopolitan professionals, had thrown themselves into situations of patriotic endeavour, in Kashmir and Bombay, that would have been an alien agenda for an earlier generation of Tamil directors. Hey Ram follows in the wake of this shift, but is even more strident, exhibiting no anxiety about emphasising the hero's Brahmin identity. In fact, this becomes a crucially enabling identity. For it generates a neo-traditional invocation of an archaic and hierarchical Hindu symbolic order as the ritual form through which the narrative can elaborate a renunciatory relationship for the higher cause of national re-generation.

This construction of the neo-traditional is pitted against another, that of the Tamil Iyengar household which underwrites the Mahatma's construction of the nation. Thus Ram's mother-in-law strongly affirms the power of Gandhian non-cooperation, and her husband is part of Gandhi's entourage. The Iyengar household is suggestive of the earlier linkage between nationalism, modernity and high-caste society emblematised by a leader such as C. Rajagopalachari in the pre-independence period. The hero distances himself from this earlier, 'unmarked' identity formation, turning instead to an aggressively figured pan-Indian Hindu consciousness grounded in Brahmanism as politically symbolic identity.

These trends in the Tamil cinema are part of a long-term concern to succeed in the Hindi market, the most substantial domestic market, through dubbed and multiple versions. The new feature is to yoke this drive into the national market to a pan-Indian patriotism that thrusts the Tamilian into a wider political agenda. It has been argued that Mani Rathnam's films negotiate a new position for the Tamilian vis-a-vis the Indian nation-state as an entity now reconfigured onto the global stage. The earlier investment of popular film in a narrative of Indian society's alienation from the west, defined by caricatures of westernized Indians, speaking English, sexually permissive, and indifferent to family allegiances, is now suppressed. Instead audiences are invited to identify with the urbane, English knowing, cosmopolitan figure. It as if a conduit had been set up between Tamilness and a new trans-regional national elite at par with its global counterparts, a new stage for mobility at home and around the globe.

We can see certain wider historical transformations then being channeled through Kamlahasan's casual references to an oedipal logic challenging the father, be it Gandhi or Periyar. However, to take these remarks at face value, especially in relation to the Mahatma, may be to ignore certain tensions within the project. This is something I will come back to later in this argument, after tracking some of the key representational strategies which the film uses.

Publicizing an unofficial history

Central to Hey Ram, and more generally to the popular Indian cinema, is the concept of an iconic history. The past is rendered through a set of emblematic figures, locations and events which are deployed, by and large, to represent that which is already known. It is important to distinguish between contexts of knowledge here. As I have noted earlier, the secularist project has been subject to criticism for not accurately representing historical realities which, for the Hindu Right, has included an account of the offences committed by Muslims against Hindus. This has been one of the contending strands within popular Hindu understanding over a long period, but one which did not succeed in forcing its way into the official discourse of political parties and in arenas such as the cinema until the substantial

emergence of the Sangh Parivar. Manohar Shyam Joshi, who wrote the dialogue for Hey Ram noted that it had brought widely held popular attitudes into the cinema for the first time.

This iconized history is the sort familiar from pilgrimage maps and hagiographies, where the life of the bhakt, heroic figure or exemplary character is charted through his association with particular events and iconic spaces. The figure who carries the destiny of society in his life story may authenticate certain historical constructions by his status as witness. Even more seductive and insidious is the character on whose body and mind these public histories are imprinted through the direct experience of loss and suffering. This strategy works most transparently through the function of rape narratives. Nothing breaches the boundaries between the public and the private in as devastating a fashion.

At issue here is not only a partisan, Hindu communalized reading of history, but the fact that this has been mobilized into the cinema. The flashback devoted to Direct Action day, events which Kamlahasan described in an interview as 'an execution by the Muslim community of Jinnah Sahib's orders', has in some fundamental sense broken the rules by which communal conflict was represented in popular Indian cinema: the Muslim crowd banging at the windows of Ram's car, suggestive of a primordial simian mass; the Muslim tailor, welcoming his salivating mates to gang-rape the winsome Aparna (the use of the popular teen star Rani Mukherjee hyperbolizes the horror); Ram tied down and vulnerable to somewhat different pleasures, the threat of sodomitization suggestive of Hindu masculine anxieties; and, finally, the blood welling up from the slit throat of the dying wife. In its extended, graphic description of Muslim bloodlust and sexual assault - reiterated in other stories told by Hindus in the film - Hey Ram goes against the secular discretion exercised by popular film. That Saket Ram subsequently feels guilt-stricken at having let vengeful and murderous instincts towards the Muslims take him over hardly neutralizes the bestiality we have witnessed. The undermining of such popular conventions is not necessarily 'wrong' in itself, and its functions are something we will come back to later.

In the sections of the film devoted to Saket Ram's relationship with Abhyankar, the Hindu extremist gives voice to a well established set of criticisms of the Mahatma. The belief that Hindus and Muslims can or should be allied is lampooned as naive in the wake of the traumatic suffering Hindus have suffered at Muslim hands. In such exchanges, the film mobilizes a black humour on the side of the Hindutva ideologue, and, failing to produce another viewpoint, at least immediately, this view is allowed to gain resonance.

Subsequently, Ram is drawn into a Hindutva logic of perception by Abhyankar and the princely ruler. The iconographic rendering of the Hindutva conspiracy retains the disturbing features I have described earlier. The native ruler is a figure of regal equipoise, benevolent and deliberate in his demeanour. The ruined merchant, Lalvani's tale of Hindu loss is received with a paternalist concern by the Hindu rajah. However, from within this scenario a more sinister image for the rajah also emerges. The secret meetings between Ram and the others take place in a room ornamented with portraits of Hitler and Savarkar. In the director's account, this appears to function as a critique, putting the movement into the perspective of a rightist alignment with racist ramifications. However, there has always been considerable ambiguity in India towards the Nazi movement and Japanese fascism, an ambivalence suggestive of a continuing fascination in Indian nationalism with military assertion and a strong nation-state.

The film then employs a heroic Hindu iconography to figure Ram when he takes over a crippled Abhyankar's role as Gandhi's assassin. He is framed in battle with the elements and undergoes a ritual renunciation in Benares. This is an iconography now familiar from the Ayodhya movement, one expressive of the desire to re-figure a deity previously defined by the attributes of a harmonious disposition into one governed by aggressive drives.

Narrative form: dropping the quotation marks

I suggest that these passages are crucial to what I would call a narrative method without quotation marks. Realist narratives commonly attempt to outline a superior narrative authority which stands above the text, quotes various points of view, and arranges these into a hierarchical formation for the reader/viewer, allocating different truth and moral claims to the statements over the time of the narrative. A statement which has a particular rhetorical power at one point may be controverted in the overall architecture of statements. The more simplified structures of melodrama do something similar, by marking out a series of bipolar oppositions that suggest who is good, who is bad. However, in Hey Ram, neither at the time of their occurrence, nor retrospectively, are certain sequences properly situated in terms of the overall architecture of the narrative. This is especially notable of the scenes relating to Abhyankar, the princely ruler, and the fashioning of Ram into an icon of a heroic Hindutva.

Clearly, the director intended some of this to be menacing, especially the passages relating to the Hindutva conspiracy in the native state. At such points, the film could be interpreted as a critique of the politics, narratives and symbols associated with a resurgent political Hinduism, its ties to other right wing movements and, indeed, to contemporary Hindutva. But the film cannot or will not provide a structured distance through which the spectator can view these passages, by putting them into quotation marks, that is, as something being commented upon rather than inviting identification.

This unauthorized form of story telling, in which a stance is not outlined for what is said and shown, presents an unusual situation, quite different from the already disjointed but nevertheless morally structured melodramas of the Indian popular cinema. The very fact that you can show something without being able to explain it or ask the audience to assume a definite stance towards it, indicates why the director can say that he was actually being critical at points where the textual organisation leaves one bemused about the film's point of view. Is the image or narrative account we see meant to be menacing or laudatory? Does it invite reflection, or does it simply court fascination with the charismatic Hindu personality and Hindu masculine assertion, and employ a narrative rhetoric prejudiced against Muslims? Apart from the ambiguous passages, the textual organisation does not allow for a refutation of any of the micro-narrations that retail a Hindutva critique of Muslim bloodlust and the Mahatma's politics of appeasement. The overall architecture lets these elements float, and despite the ambiguities of the film's conclusion, they return as irreducible features of the historical memory relayed by the film.

Strangely, the much more offensive passages are those in which the film apparently seeks to take a stronger position against the Hindu Right. The turning point in Ram's development, his conversion after the meeting with Amjad and defence of the embattled Muslim community against Hindu extremists, is particularly offensive. For here, in the name of a reformed, more humane perspective, the film unselfconsciously conforms to the prevailing Hindutva ideology that a Hindu nation provided with a renewed sense of its potency will provide protection to the minority from majoritarian extremists.

Reading Hindutva masculinity

A reading of images and sequences rather than a clear signposting of how to look at them within the overall context of the narrative suggests the complexity of the film's narrative strategies. There is a subtle way in which the desire for masculine potency is implicitly tied to colonial affiliations. Thus, apart from the expression of male action through the hunt held in the native kingdom, there is also a set piece in which the men, sporting solar tops, engage in a game of polo. The interweaving of a colonial masculine sport with the desires of Hindu political assertion outline linkages which may be quite uncomfortable for anyone looking to authentic indigenous coordinates for the heroic Hindu.

Clear anti-Hindutva positions are also articulated through Maithili, Saket Ram's second wife. She is introduced to us as someone who believes in the Mahatma, and insists on a dialogue on this with her husband. Following on from the sensual play between Ram and Aparna another field of desire opens up, posing an alternative realm of human possibility than the male bonded assertion of Hindutva. In the scenes in the princely kingdom, this dialogue between Maithili and Ram is displaced into a logic of sensual and spatial oppositions. From the moment of their arrival, Maithili inducts a discordant note into the designs of Abhyankar. Disconcerted to find Ram married, Abhyankar seeks to immerse Ram into a different sensate universe by plying him with an intoxicant. However, the results are quite contradictory, retrieving strange images which continue to haunt Ram, as when Maithili is converted into an image of the orphaned Muslim girl, whose plight Ram witnessed during the Partition killings in Calcutta. In an unusual fashion, the sensual here retrieves an image for the conscience, a sense of the desire to be in the world, to hold onto existence against the vicissitudes of a violent history. In the film's depiction of Ram's relationship with his two wives, there is a clear investment in the playfulness and intimacy of the relationship, and a desire that the women should not take the hero as some kind of domestic deity.

But the realm of the sensual also encompasses other drives that have been foreshadowed in a statement made by Ram after he and Aparna have engaged in a gently erotic and playful love-making. Aparna says she fears going out into the riot-torn city, apprehensive that she will be sexually assaulted. In a strangely insensitive remark, Ram says, 'you have already been sexually assaulted, madam'. This conflation between love-making and rape pre-figures Aparna's rape and death. But it arguably also foreshadows the unleashing of sadistic dispositions within the hero, in which the political imperatives of self-assertion are channelled through a re-figuring of personality within a new, or at least hitherto suppressed order of masculinity. Crucial here is Abhyankar who, in Anirudh Kulkarni's performance, emerges as a mesmerizing, indeed homo-erotic emissary of a repressed and shadowy world. The image work of the film thus stages at various moments conflicting realms of the sensual, in which sadism and death drives and an erotics of being glance off each other. In terms of the force of images there is however a definite shift in the balance of elements, as sadism and masculine vainglory acquire centre stage.

Lifting the Mogul Parda

'You see, Hindu ideologies represented by Konarak or Meera-like bhajans in Tamil were all created by Hindus. Their ideology pertaining to sex, love and life seems to be at odds with what came to India after the advent of the Moguls and Christians. Today, they ostensibly fight over the Hindu ideology. But when it comes to my film - and I'm not even addressing myself as a Hindu but as an Indian who would like to compete with the rest of the world intellectually, no one seems to be bothered.' Kamlahasan interviewed by Screen

I would suggest we need to place these layered and contrary modes of erotic address within a particular discourse set in train by Kamlahasan. His self-image appears to be that of the artist who fights to liberate representations of sex, bigotry, hatred, from the edict of the censor, in order to provide an outlet for taboos, to get things out in the open. What is disturbing about his remarks is that a certain understanding of political freedom - from the repressive lineage enforced on Hindus by Muslims and Christians - is the condition for the recovery of suppressed sensual instincts. Despite disclaimers that he is talking as an Indian rather than as a Hindu, the othering of Muslims and Christians suggests that this is hardly the case. This sits disconcertingly with his statement that Pakistan is not a country but a religion, implying fanatical dimensions that will not accept the boundary of countries and nation-states. What is suggestive about this formulation too is the way in which contemporary Hindu nation-state discourses have generated a certain temporal conflation in the rendering of the historical past. Thus, the past is rendered in terms of Mughal and Christian domination, rather than say Mughal and British colonial, or Muslim and Christian. Within political discourse, the reference to Mughal rule appears to suggest a pastness to this repressive formation, while Christian repression, perhaps alluding to Victorian morality, relocates the other into the domain of contemporary politics, suggestive of the current Hindutva attack on the Christian communities of India. This is important. The reference to Mughal repression takes us away from a complex understanding of historical regimes which were always alert to the fact that they ruled over a complex weave of ethnic groups and cultures. And, in the second slippage, Kamlahasan is imprisoned within a highly contemporary discourse, deriving from another deferred revenge scenario, that of subordinating Indian Christians as representatives of the western other.

At the same time, one has to attend to the fact that the director does not seem quite satisfied with the representatives of a resurgent political Hinduism: 'they ostensibly fight over the Hindu ideology' but do nothing about the attempts to censor his film, that is, they are not adequately true to what it means to recover 'Indianness' from the repressions it has been subject to. Perhaps there is a domain here which exceeds what Hindutva is concerned to represent as Hindu. This is what I meant when I remarked that the Hindutva critique of an earlier secular political construction of inter-community amity is embraced by the film but also seen to enact another order of repression, that of certain crucial attributes of what the director believes Hindu identity to be composed of. That the repressed self within Hindutva is still a Hindu one, still the main point of identification, is of course heavily problematic, but my suggestion is that the film reveals that there are perhaps insurmountable problems in the institution of this Hindu personality.

Melodrama: Peformativity and expressivity

These tensions in the representation of a desirable Hindu personality lead to a significant splitting of character into different forms of representation. In an earlier film of patriotic provenance, Hindustani, Kamlahasan had played two roles, splitting his performance between a superior entity not bound by earthly passions, driven by the higher calling of patriotism, and his more everyday counterpart, a son who has rebelled against his father's impractically upright and honest attitude to the world. The son immerses himself in the dense circuits of a corrupt and sensual everyday world. The old patriot, adorned either in chaste veshti or INA uniform, determines to undertake a secret crusade against the corruption he sees around him, and the film invites the audience to indulge a vicarious pleasure in the vengeance he unleashes against corrupt officials on behalf of the people. However, this is not a figure that invites empathetic identification. Kamlahasan's fascination with filmic mutations of appearance, through make up, morphing and physically demanding distortions, here renders the older protagonist into an implacable and indeed sadistic mask. And there is something quite disturbing about the single-minded way in which the patriot pursues the just way, in the process sacrificing his daughter for failing to pay a bribe to a bevy of corrupt policemen, hospital administrators and doctors. Clearly there is meant to be something tragic about this, but it is hardly easy for us to identify with. In contrast,

the mundane world of the son, a tout who facilitates applications and wants a regular job as a transport official, is cynically but amusingly depicted. This is a world at once more realistic and, punctuated by standard comedy and dance sequences, much easier for the audience to place itself in. The narrative manages the tensions generated by this bifurcation by making one of the son's casual acts of corruption have horrendous consequences: he passes a bus which is not roadworthy, there is an accident and many schoolchildren die. The relentlessly principled Hindustani takes his own son's life, a sacrificial punishment that his wife and girlfriend accept.

These different drives are composed of different modes of representation, one edifying and iconizing, freezing the patriotic figure into a kind of re-animated death mask/mould, the other deploying realist and performative tropes that elevate the domain of comedy to a significant status within the organization of film narrative. That the narrative generates a set of conflicts that ultimately results in a moral resolution does not ensure that one mode entirely supplants the other. This despite the film's conclusion which shows Hindustani in another country, informing a corrupt state that he is still at large and its functionaries cannot rest easy. In a sense, the presence of two modes of representation, and the persistence of an alienating and punitive dimension to the patriotic superego suggests a sado-masochistic double bind for the spectator. S/he is invited to approve the actions of a just state, and destined to remain alienated from it, and to fear that the imaginary state's punitive drives will ultimately be visited on the mass spectator him/herself, caught as s/he is in a circuit of adjustments with the corrupt everyday world. If this were a coherent strategy, seeking to integrate the different levels properly rather than bifurcate them, then it would move characters through registers of guilt at what they have done. Thus in classic Indian melodramas such as *Mother India* the mother's moral imprimatur is routed through the characteristic melodramatic plot structures of suffering. A strongly conceived pathos results when the mother has to punish her bandit son for transgressing moral communal norms and taboos. In *Hindustani*, something strangely disjointed remains. The moral-political domain is situated in a vacuum, and ultimately in another country/ space, and finally fails to become part of the register of the everyday. Morality springs free from all sense of suffering and mortality, and achieves a transcendent iconicity.

I will suggest that the problem posed by *Hindustani* for the mode of performance, figuration and representation, have implications for *Hey Ram* as well. To show how, I will take a slightly convoluted route, looking to the overall narrative strategies of the melodramatic mode to understand the way in which the spectator is invited to relate to character in *Hey Ram*. It has been argued that melodrama is a mode of representation that addresses the shift in sacred and socially hierarchical meaning systems in the transition to modernity. Melodrama strives to retrieve the security afforded by earlier systems. However oppressive these were, they nevertheless provided people with a sense of where they were located, and how to rationalize their circumstances. But this recovery is not possible, and, in however unconfident and faltering a fashion, melodrama generates new sources of meaning in the secularised world of family and a non-hierarchically situated individual personality. In this sense, the logic of representation exceeds known systems of meaning, and this lack of fit is registered in the tropes of pathos associated with characters who suffer the trauma inflicted by the old and the uncertainties of the new. This melodramatic modernity relates the individual to larger formations, of the civil domain, in which s/he can vent a repressed set of truths and moral claims. The articulation of personality as locus of meaning is predicated then on a particular frame, that of the modern state supplanting the intermediate term of the family, an organism associated with issues of status and extended power within traditional societies. Melodramatic narration places its subject in transit - displacing attachments to the father and the connotations of power he carries from earlier social hierarchies, revolving emotionally around the mother, and apparently locating the ultimate outlet for its protagonist in the transcendent, equalizing imprimatur of the modern state form and the identity of the citizen-subject. Its distinctive feature is uncertainty and messiness, a striving to reinscribe the security of older forms while feeling its way towards an uncharted territory of the new. Some of the particular power and interest of melodramatic undecidability is the way its hesitations may ask us to look back at older forms in different ways, rather than simply urge us to look forward into entirely new ways of figuring past and future.

The melodrama of *Hey Ram* addresses a new territory of transformation. Instead of traditional hierarchies and older, religious connotations of the sacred, it opens onto a symbolic domain that has already been transformed by modernity, repositioning the sacred in the nation-state and its sacred icons. The oppressiveness of the sacred lies in the subordination of a certain construction of the self, that of the Hindu who believes s/he has been and continues to be wronged by the state, in a sense that s/he has been denied the full rights and political determinacy of citizenship. As I will suggest, this deployment of melodramatic form hinges on the drive to articulate a notion of citizenship which is founded not on the sovereignty of the individual but that of the community that the individual represents. This new articulation of the melodramatic form cuts across earlier formulations about the relationship between tradition and modernity. Instead of rendering these as binary opposites, the film pits two different constructions of the modernizing of tradition against each other: one deploys Gandhi and a certain image of the high-caste Tamilian follower, smoothly carrying the marks of ritual identity and being into a new territory of social and political flexibility and openness; the other poses the first form as colluding with the repression of historical wrongs, and embraces a tradition of the ascetic warrior. The ritual identity of this figure speaks not of a sociology of identity and its adaptability, but a symbolic of identity, as something which inflates a high-caste Hindu identity into something which transcends its localness, its particularity. In the process, it creates a new and unashamed form for the invention of a Hindu community to stand up, speak out and act against the tide of a history which has denied it a sense of right, of pride and the will to exact retribution and assert itself. There is no space in either of these trajectories to speak of other identities, they remain resolutely Hindu in their provenance. In this sense the oppositions are played out within the Hinduness of the protagonist. It is perhaps suggestive that the second form, the symbolic of Hindu political identity, arises in a figure who has already distinguished himself from the sociologically defined elite who are the Mahatma's followers. Though Ram follows family diktat in terms of marital arrangements, it is a form of accommodation that is undertaken in order to renounce it and to assume a transcendent identity. The character is uprooted from the determinants of a local sociology and space, and figured forth as an entity fashioned by the historical itinerary of a wounded and then resurgent Hindu nationhood.

What is distinctive to this melodramatic form is the recourse it takes to the large gesture, the scaling upwards of expressive functions, in terms of emotional pitch, bodily disposition, musicality and mise-en-scene. Central here is the publicness of melodrama, where the mode of excess, an inflated mode of speech, demeanour and iconic figuration, displaces the realist, intimate communication between characters. It is as if such expressive functions are meant to be seen and heard publicly, beyond the delimited narrative world we see on screen. This publicness relates to a staging of the personality rather, simply, than rendering it as plausible. On being questioned about the nature of characterization in the film, Kamalahasan said that it would be wrong to see the character as realistic in the way we have been used to when viewing Hollywood cinema. Instead, he stated that he was drawing upon indigenous conventions which presented character as character, as a figure being enacted rather than inhabited, in the mode of a sutradhar function. And, indeed, the histrionic excess of his performance - together with the outright invocation of iconic dimensions in the investiture of the character with the imagery of Hindu ascetic warrior- could be read in exactly these ways. This again problematizes identification with the character. The tortuous dimensions of melodramatic transitions is expressively heightened, refusing the calibration of a lower pitched, naturalist performance, and gesturing instead to the ineffable, to a zone of meaning that has not been settled or normalized. The complications involved are suggested in the

way the performance also hyperbolizes interiority. There are key moments where the character is defined by the ravages of loss and guilt, when he witnesses Aparna's death, and subsequently when he is haunted by her loss and the death of other - Muslim - victims. In the first instance, the actor renders the loss of his wife through a highly gestural range of effects, groping for support, turning away from the horrific sight, and finally giving vent to anguish by a scream from the balcony, framed for architectural affect by the low angle camera.

I have spent some time on these expressive functions to suggest where Hey Ram's strategy of characterization departs in some respects from that of Hindustani, with different effects for the mechanisms of spectator identification. Hindustani splits its iconic character from the logic of everyday life, mobilizing the embalmed figure of nation-state history as a punitive superego. Hey Ram seeks to bring this figure into an intimate register to recover a sense of historical wrongs as experienced by an 'ordinary' or typical character; but it does this in such a way as to retain large-scale personality tropes. The performative excess of intimate expression presents the audience with a staging of an ordinary life caught in extraordinary times, as a form of public identity rather than a personal one. Internality, 'interiorization', identification, are not domains and processes that emerge out of the subliminal compact between screen images, characters, worlds, and the individuated spectator. Instead, they are governed by the articulation of collectively invested narratives, myths, historical constructions, in which the spectator is mobilized into a wider orbit of subjectivity. I think this is an important distinction, for in recovering the ordinary or typical experience as supra-individual, as relating to all of us, the narration insidiously invites us into a narrative community marked by a sense of righteous outrage and united by a melodramatic urge to give voice to a hitherto suppressed sense of historical wrong and victimhood.

But, as I have said, there is only a partial departure from Hindustani's structures of representation. For the film also invokes the extraordinary rather than the typical, investing the character with the attributes of the mythical Ram, an iconic figure brought into being by a highly ambiguous set of story-telling mechanisms that induct the spectator into a regime of play rather than straightforward identification.

Melodrama in the age of digital simulation

In terms of symbolic transactions around concepts of the sacred, the hero seem to be the vehicle of a melodrama that seeks to displace the earlier icons and cultural strategies used to create identification with the nation-state. It sets him up in opposition to the earlier Congress inspired tradition of high caste nationalism and, in terms of filmic narrative traditions, against the DMK inspired anti-caste Tamil nationalism. The countervailing pull here is that of the sensual and the domestic, the this-worldliness of women and of everyday life, and it is augmented by that characteristic melodramatic striving to retrieve the securities of an older sense of self. Thus the film traces a tortuous route back to the sacredness of older notions of imagining the nation, in the persona of Gandhi.

This particular tracking back is made problematic because of a sign-referent problem emerging from the deployment of particular modes and technologies of representation. For the sacred now returns in the somewhat caricatural performance by Naseerudin Shah as the Mahatma. The climactic moment of the assassination has the Mahatma flung backwards off the ground in a manner normally employed for stunt and action scenes. The sobriety of the sacred is further compromised when Mahatma, charkha, and crescent become objects within a video-game format, where the spectator/player is invited to blow away this constellation and generate a swirling set of computer images, the swastika metamorphosing into a swastika and a hard-edged lotus.

Alongside Shah's cartoonish performance then are stunt mechanics and video-game and computer-generated images. While the latter is associated with a particular moment relating to the Hindutva conspiracy to assassinate the Mahatma, the others, not so calibrated, indicate a general problem in representing the figure of Gandhi with a sense of gravity and dignity. This is a highly unusual compendium of effects with which to represent a revered, iconic entity. Indeed, the armature is suggestive of a post-modern aesthetic, generating a certain pastiche driven, depthless quality in the relationship between viewer and screen. (Jameson, Screen) More specifically, the use of digital means to represent the Mahatma displaces an indexical relationship of sign to referent, in which film physically captures a trace of the human body, by a digital mode that can alter the nature of the image internally, without reference to a 'real' image.

It would be productive to see the video game format influencing the structure of other scenes as well, not only those where its form is specifically used. This is when a scene may be read as providing a sequence of effects governed by player choices. In the key sequence at the Rajah's palace, the spectator-player is routed into the game by the movements and awareness of Ram, who has been inducted into intoxication by Abhyankar. He wanders as if in a maze, the coordinates of which are Abhyankar, his wife Maithili, the destitute Lalvani, and the Rajah. The first phase of the game does not picture the latter figure, and inducts the player into an intoxicated, sensualized experience, with Ram approaching Maithili as an erotically charged object. Unexpectedly, this phase relays this erotic charge as opening the protagonist to a heightened awareness of the tragic loss of human existence, as the erotic object morphs into the eerie figure of the bereft Muslim child. The springing of memory and conscience through the sensualization of the character conjures an appropriate mise-en-scene, weaving the tragic, drunken figure of Lalvani through its field. However, a new phase is inaugurated, where the player's acceptance, or rather submission, to particular game-paths constrain options. The Rajah emerges to conduct Ram into his sanctum sanctorum, but Maithili and Lalvani are denied entry, as if Ram's acceptance of the Rajah's domain jettisons certain options, a more open erotics and an alertness to human loss. This configuration will not allow for the weaknesses of compassion.

The productivity of the metaphor of the game for registering the dissolution of earlier forms and the inauguration of the new phase is appropriately rendered through Ram's giddy fall into the checker-board style black and white floor. The Rajah's rhetoric now constrains the terms of verbal and perceptual discourse. He decries the Mahatma as the enemy of Hinduism, and selects Abhyankar and Ram to carry out the assassination. The decor includes pictures of Hitler and Savarkar, and produces three appropriate computer generated images. As the Rajah exhorts the men to action in defence of Hinduism, he is morphed into Ram's dead Bengali wife Aparna, who, her head swathed in saffron cloth, perhaps invokes both Vivekananda and more contemporary images of the militant sadhvi. This iconography, associating Hindu consciousness with notations of honour and revenge in the image of the murdered wife, is in sharp contrast to the possibilities opened up around the figure of Maithili in the previous phase of the 'game'. The second vision conjures images of Abhyankar's refrain that the Mahatma's policies have nurtured the Muslim threat from a sapling into an overwhelming tree. And, finally, there is the computer-generated annihilation of the Mahatma and the hated symbols of the Muslim other. The overarching filmic domain of this mediating point in the game presents a composite structure of filmic and post-filmic effects, linking narrative to older photographic and newer computer generated modes of representation and address. The particular channelling of the 'player' through this domain structures subsequent choices. There is a machismo quality to Ram's love making, and the game's aggressive channelling of libidinal drives metamorphoses the woman's body into the kitsch image of a gun.

It has been argued that game culture, and new regimes of special effects, have articulated the possibility of multiple narrative drives, rather than a linear, cause-effect driven one. At one level, this would mean affording the spectator multiple plot structures that facilitate a variety of

possibilities or choices in fashioning the way narratives will develop. Science fiction's manipulation of temporality - its foundational premise that technology has remade human existence in terms of space-time constraints, allowing for movement back and forth in time, making alternative pasts and futures possible - makes it the favoured genre for a simulation of spectator interactivity with screen narratives, even if closure ultimately reasserts itself within standard narrative formats. (It is through video game culture, and cd-rom and net based interactive packages for experimentation with familiar serials and films that a more structured variety of endings have emerged.) But the issue is not only that of multiple plots but also of the multiple forms made possible by the transcendence of cinematic indexicality through special effects.

The simulation of film characters into history provides an important background here. *Forrest Gump* (Robert Zemeckis, 1994) mobilized the eponymous simpleton hero into newsreels associating him with great public leaders at decisive moments in American history; *Zelig* (Woody Allen, 1990) did the same for its man without personality, a figure who assumes an identity through the environments he is placed in. *Hindustani* follows on from this, but to make the hero monumental rather than mundane, placing the INA hero in the same frame as Subhas Bose. These films clearly provide a technological inspiration for *Kamalahasan*, as he seeks to simulate the subject's presence in history: [put this earlier] in *Zelig*, in ways that enact a comedy of the totalitarian subject, or in *Forrest Gump*, to assert the way in which its simpleton incarnates basic human values that enable him to bear empathetic witness and bring balm to the victims of the history through which he has lived.

But films such as *Zelig* and *Forrest Gump* do not bring simulated history into tension with official history, or symbolically re-write history. In *Hey Ram*, digital technologies articulate the domain of possible histories, histories other than those which a society has stabilized for itself over time. There are distinct strategies involved here. *Hindustani* morphed character into actuality footage, a procedure which renders history as physically alterable at the level of its mechanically determined representation. *Hey Ram*, on the other hand, by and large maintains its indexical relationship to what takes place in front of the camera, accepting the historicity of its own fictional representations, distinct from earlier live action representations of historical personae. Instead of simulating presence, its use of computer graphics and 3D artwork disrupts the seamless induction of fiction into history. This alerts the spectator to the different ways in which forms of remembrance refigure the drives which compose the shifting terrain of the present. The configuration of these drives in the crucial sequence is relayed through the game structures I have described, as artifice, projection and play. They markedly exceed the requirements of defining character motivation and character perception.

The 3D art and video game rendering of the Mahatma as a target is relayed through Ram's point of view in the Rajah's inner sanctum. But these frontally composed frames are phenomenologically marked off from the rest of the scene, a disjointment which breaks the textural coherence of the scene and opens these out for a different view. Fabricated to render the drugged perspective of the protagonist, these images are not however sealed through his point of view, and appear borne by an agentless gaze, one which inducts the spectator into a direct regime of play with perspective and history. It is here that the film makes a crucial move, inviting the spectator to directly assume a point of view on the possibilities of symbolically re-writing history. It is no longer the case that someone else, a fictional character in a film, has such visions, but that we are invited to assume this vision, to view history as a game with alternative game outcome. This symbolic re-writing is crucially to do with something which exceeds prosaic fact, and mobilizes a realm of desire, an acknowledgement of what people imagined and wanted to happen, and an acknowledgement that these desires still animate present consciousness. To kill the Mahatma here signifies not merely a larger complicity and desire which exceeds a specific character and organisation, but amounts to a will to visit a symbolic death on him and the politics of appeasement of which he is characterised as an exemplar. The game metaphor then opens history to a collective re-writing. But in posing this as game, in disrupting the flow of character driven narration, the film may open up the possibility of the question, do we want to play the game?

It is here that the narrative without quotation marks, where the spectator is not clearly signposted on what standpoint to assume, takes on a particular distancing dimension. For, from this point on, the film also shifts registers of representation. If earlier the character Ram relayed a large-scale rendering of the intimate effects of catastrophic events, from now on he assumes an iconic set of poses. Refashioned by the particular channelling of libido with aggression, he acquires the transcendent figuration familiar from *Kamalahasan's* *Hindustani* incarnation. The tableaux used to point up his mythical empowerment, as a Brahmanical figure who can withstand the elements and undertakes a symbolic cleansing and renunciation at Banaras, draws upon the imagery of the Ayodhya campaign, and provides the spectator with a distanced stance, for these are no longer the registers of the ordinary or typical character.

None of this carries the charge of melodramatic investment, urging us to identify and imaginatively participate in character transformation; instead they are presented as a sublimation of individual subjectivity into iconic character. Nevertheless, this sequence of transformations poses definite problems. Marked as artifice and game, their depthless quality denies history to our look, leading, apparently, to a waning of affect, a diminishing of investment in earlier figurations of the sacred. In this particular deployment, the digitally composed animation complicates the conventions of sobriety and emotional sanctity with which significant historical entities are represented. In melodramatic terms, this has a serious implication: the bid to recover lost meaning, always fraught in narratives of transition, is rendered thinner by the loss of the cinematic signifier's referential integrity.

The waning of affect lies not only in the difficulty of re-investing the nation-state and its icons with value and meaning, but in the transformation of the cinematic signifier away from its own claims to capturing the real. However, this is to put things rather too simply, for the waning of affect on these terms may in turn induce a pathos, a sense of lack, on the part of the spectator for earlier certitudes in symbolic meaning and cinematic referentiality. And the transformation of the signifier highlights, in some fundamental sense a pathos around the lost body of reality - of the human body, of a stable and verifiable history, of earlier codings of history which revered the Mahatma. This doubling of lack - of the nation-state in its earlier incarnation, of the signifier - heralds the need, in terms of symbolic exchange, for a new order of compensation.

This, I would suggest, is what is caught in the particular fashioning of Saket Ram in the film's framing narrative. When we first see the figure, now in old age and his death bed, he is organised to conjure up the image of the Mahatma: *Kamalahasan's* face, heavily adorned with make-up, is fixed on top of the emaciated, dhoti clad body of the Mahatma in the present of 6 December 1999. The eeriness of the fabrication arises from the narrative it implies: that Saket Ram has been transformed into the lost body of the Mahatma, by some strange process of osmosis, and has been frozen in time. If the realm of the simulacrum has displaced the Mahatma from the orbit of sanctity within which a nationalist imaginary has positioned him, then the film generates a compensatory simulacrum, one that has taken over and neutralized the subjectivity of the disaffected Hindu into the body of the Mahatma. Significantly, this offering of another position for spectatorial affect rests within a space that rigorously refuses to sublimate the rest of the past. The traces of the old, traumatized Saket Ram

are maintained, including the prominent placement of Abhyankar's photograph. Something of the peculiar duality of the last image, Gandhi's huge image both fractured and illuminated by the opening out of discourses by the present generation suggests the issues involved: where the icon and the history that carries it has been submitted to dissection to reveal other layers of subjectivity, but in ways which still require a reinvestment in the Mahatma.

Rather than assert that the film unabashedly conforms to Hindutva narratives, another, more complicated interpretation could suggest a cathartic function. For the repression of such beliefs can only lead to a festering of scarred psyches, and the development of a substantial political unconscious that functions as a secret motive force destined to erupt in ways manipulable for a politics of hate. Instead of keeping quiet about what I believe, let me speak it out, let it come to the surface in its most virulent form, and let me then see if I can generate the resources to come back from the brink. Following this second track, in which the cinematic public is now privy to an exhibition of wounds whose display has hitherto been proscribed, the narrative assumes the functions of the confessional, where the Hindu protagonist admits of his succumbing to a retaliatory bloodlust and the spectator is, in turn, invited to acknowledge a collective desire to re-write history. However, for this second account to work, there must be a conviction that the confessional form does not become an exercise in vindication, but actually stages a debate which opens discussion out. This the film clearly does not do. But I would suggest that it is important not to see the film in isolation, but as part of an emergent and, crucially, public re-evaluation of history animated by different viewpoints. Jabbar Patel's *Dr. Babasaheb Ambedkar* (2000), for example, stages a series of debates between Ambedkar and Gandhi which has the iconized dalit leader upstaging a notably diminished Mahatma.

Generated within the coordinates of a post-Hindutva identity, *Hey Ram* constructs the Muslim other in a variety of ways: as bestial other, as a reasonable, self-effacing entity amenable to political assimilation, and as object of the conscience. While much of this is congruent with Hindutva perception, in associating images of conscience and sensuality, the narration gestures to a domain of feeling that I think is ill at ease with the obsessive, puritanical discourses of Hindutva. Highly charged encounters are succeeded by much more ambiguously defined and 'open' structures of narration that appear to specifically solicit interpretation from the spectator rather than offer a coherent position. The draining of investment in the sacred is strangely mirrored by the invocation of the emotionally remote entity of the all-powerful Hindu. Unable to chart a clear path through the thickets of an erupting unconscious, the film can finally only compensate for its sense of ineffable loss by simulating a self now imbricated in the iconicity of the great other.

Ridding oneself of the father isn't all that easy, after all; recovering him is even harder.