

RESEARCH ARTICLE

Fashioning Criminality: Style, Masculinity and the Anti-Hero Vogue in Contemporary Indian Cinema

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ABSTRACT

The emergence of anti-heroic protagonists has significantly transformed contemporary Indian cinema, creating characters who command audience admiration despite their involvement in violence and crime. Films such as *KGF: Chapter 1* (2018), *Pushpa: The Rise* (2021), and *Animal* (2023) exemplify this trend by presenting criminal protagonists through distinctive costumes, grooming practices, accessories, and bodily performances that elevate them from narrative outlaws to cultural style icons. This article examines how fashion functions as a crucial mechanism in the aestheticisation of criminality and the construction of aspirational masculine identities. The article analyses the visual representation of the anti-hero in contemporary Indian cinema and argues that costume and performative style function as forms of symbolic capital, transforming criminality into a desirable, consumable aesthetic. Through these visual strategies, anti-heroes are presented as embodiments of confidence, power, rebellion, and masculine success. It also explores how these cinematic styles circulate beyond the screen through fan cultures, social media, and everyday fashion practices. The study concludes that contemporary Indian cinema contributes to the

normalisation of criminal aesthetics and reshapes popular understandings of masculinity, identity, and cultural aspiration in contemporary India.

Keywords: Anti-hero, Fashion, Criminality, Masculinity, Celebrity culture, Visual culture

FULL RESEARCH PAPER

Introduction

Cinema is a popular cultural medium which influences and shapes social values, aspirations, lifestyle choices, fashion trends, identity and gender performances. In India, film stars frequently emerge as cultural icons whose hairstyles, clothing styles, gestures, appearances and mannerisms are imitated by audiences worldwide. Cinema partakes in the creation and circulation of cultural meanings through spectacular visuals and costumes. Recently, there has been a surge of anti-hero protagonists who occupy morally ambiguous roles characterised by violence, rebellion and criminality, unlike traditional heroes who embody virtue, self-sacrifice, and social responsibility. Interestingly, these characters continue to attract admiration, fandom and cultural influence. Films such as *KGF: Chapter 1* (2018), *Pushpa: The Rise* (2021), and *Animal* (2023) illustrate this shift by presenting protagonists whose appeal derives not merely from narrative action but from specifically constructed visual identities. Their costumes, grooming practices, accessories, and bodily performances transform them into enigmatic figures whose influence extends from the silver screen into daily culture.

The growing popularity of these anti-heroes raises pertinent questions regarding the relationship between fashion, masculinity, and criminality in contemporary visual culture. While scholarly discussions have examined violence, stardom, and masculinity in Indian cinema, comparatively less attention has been devoted to the role of fashion in shaping the appeal of criminal protagonists. Costume and style are often regarded as secondary elements of characterisation, despite their significant contribution to audience identification and cultural consumption. In many contemporary films, fashion actively participates in the construction of power, desirability, acceptability and masculine authority.

Methodology

This article examines how contemporary Indian cinema aestheticises criminality through fashion, costume, grooming, and performative masculinity. The study examines *KGF: Chapter 1*, *Pushpa: The Rise*, and *Animal* to demonstrate that fashion operates as a crucial mechanism through which anti-heroes acquire magnetic appeal and symbolic power. These films smudge the borders between deviance and aspiration by transforming criminal protagonists into style icons, thus encouraging audiences to consume anti-heroic masculinity as a fashionable cultural identity.

The article explores how visual style contributes to the normalisation of criminal aesthetics in contemporary Indian cinema, drawing on the theoretical frameworks of Bourdieu and Connell. It also examines how cinematic representations circulate beyond the screen through fan cultures, media discourse, and consumer practices, using Goffman and Entwistle as lenses. Ultimately, the study concludes that contemporary Indian cinema does not merely depict criminality; it fashions criminality, transforming the outlaw into an aspirational figure whose influence extends into wider negotiations of identity, masculinity, and cultural desire.

The anti-hero's visual appearance frequently becomes a site where criminality is transformed into a desirable aesthetic. "Performance is the activity of an individual which occurs during a period marked by his continuous presence before a particular set of observers and which has some influence on the observers" (Goffman 13). The anti-heroes' walk, dialogue, violence, dress and body language are performances that influence audiences. "When an individual appears before others, he will have many motives for trying to control the impression they receive of the situation" (Goffman 8). These figures consciously cultivate an image of authority, domination and fearlessness. "Front is that part of an individual's performance which regularly functions in a general and fixed fashion to define the situation for those who observe the performance" (Goffman 13). Through such visual strategies, criminal figures are no longer represented simply as social deviants but as style icons whose identities are shaped through fashion and spectacle. Personal Front may be divided into appearance and manners (Goffman 15). These characters are increasingly seen as objects of admiration rather than condemnation. Pushpa's shoulder gesture, Rocky's cigar pose and Ranvijay's hairstyle are copied and reproduced by fans, Instagram users and reel creators.

This transformation reflects the developments within contemporary celebrity culture and consumer society. In an era shaped by social media visibility, influencer

culture, and image-based communication, fashion functions as an important form of symbolic capital. Audiences engage with cinematic characters not only through narrative identification but also by consuming the styles, gestures, and visual aesthetics associated with them. The popularity of anti-hero-inspired hairstyles, beard fashions, clothing styles, and social media trends demonstrates how cinematic representations influence everyday practices of self-fashioning. "The audience...often assume that the character projected before them is all there is to the individual who acts out the projection for them" (Goffman 31). Criminality, along with attractive visual aesthetics, acquires cultural legitimacy and commercial value.

Fashion serves more than a decorative function; it is a cultural language through which identities, aspirations, and social meanings are communicated. Joanne Entwistle argues in her essay "Addressing the Body" that dress functions as a "situated bodily practice" through which individuals negotiate their relationship with society (414). People wear clothes to construct identity and communicate social meanings. Clothing therefore becomes an important medium for expressing power, status, gender, and belonging. In cinema, costume extends beyond realism and participates in the construction of character identity. Through clothing, grooming, and bodily presentation, audiences are encouraged to interpret personalities, moral positions, and social roles.

The relationship between fashion and identity becomes particularly significant in the representation of anti-heroes. Unlike conventional heroes, anti-heroes often operate outside accepted moral and legal frameworks, and they continue to attract admiration because their identities are constructed through compelling visual aesthetics. Costume, grooming, and bodily style become mechanisms through which criminality is transformed into charm. "Taste classifies, and it classifies the classifier" (Bourdieu 6). Costume in *K.G.F. Chapter 1, Pushpa: The Rise and Animal* does more than identify a character; it classifies the protagonists socially and culturally. The visual appearance of the protagonists influences how audiences perceive, remember, and emulate these characters.

Masculinity studies further illuminate the appeal of contemporary anti-heroes. R. W. Connell's concept of hegemonic masculinity refers to culturally dominant forms of manhood associated with authority, strength, confidence, and control. Cinema frequently reinforces these ideals by presenting male protagonists as physically powerful and emotionally resilient figures. "Masculinity is simultaneously a place in gender relations, the practices through which men and women engage that place in gender, and the effects of these practices in bodily experience, personality and

culture" (71). Contemporary anti-heroes embody such characteristics through their appearance, gestures, and bodily performances: "Hegemonic masculinity can be defined as the configuration of gender practice which embodies the currently accepted answer to the problem of the legitimacy of patriarchy" (77). Their costumes and grooming practices become visible markers of masculine authority.

The appeal of anti-heroes can also be understood through the lens of celebrity culture. Joanne Entwistle argues that "dress or adornment is one of the means by which bodies are made social and given meaning and identity" (412). Contemporary audiences often engage with cinematic characters not only as narrative figures but also as lifestyle models. "Dress in everyday life is always more than a shell; it is an intimate aspect of the experience and presentation of the self- it is not perceived separately but simultaneously, as a totality (414). Entwistle asserts that the body is a natural object shaped by social forces, and that the social body constrains how the physical body is perceived. Their bodies become sites where power, class and gender are displayed. So, dressing the body for the social world becomes the primary concern, and costume prepares the anti-hero for recognition and authority (417). In an age dominated by visual media and consumer culture, the styles associated with popular characters frequently circulate beyond the screen through social media, advertising, and fan communities. Cultural values continually shape what consumers desire and the choices they make in everyday life. Audiences choose products not just for practical reasons but due to the meanings and identities they represent (McCracken 71). Consequently, anti-heroic identities become aspirational cultural products rather than merely fictional representations. So, fashion emerges as a crucial mechanism for transforming criminality into cultural desirability. Contemporary Indian cinema increasingly presents anti-heroes as style icons whose visual identities contribute significantly to their popularity and influence.

The anti-hero occupies a central position in contemporary Indian cinema. Films such as *KGF: Chapter 1*, *Pushpa: The Rise*, and *Animal* demonstrate how criminal protagonists are transformed into aspirational figures through fashion, grooming, and performative masculinity. Although these characters differ in social background and narrative context, they share a common visual strategy that converts criminality into an attractive cultural identity.

In KGF: Chapter 1, Rocky's suits, leather jackets, shoes and gold jewellery create an image of wealth, ambition, and dominance. Fashion functions as a visual marker of social mobility, symbolising his journey from poverty to power. Gold occupies a particularly important symbolic role, transforming material success into a visible

performance of masculine authority. Rocky's appearance encourages audiences to associate criminal success with prestige, confidence, and aspiration. Rocky's gold-centred aesthetic transforms material wealth into symbolic capital and masculine prestige (Bourdieu 255).

Pushpa Raj's appeal is rooted in raw authenticity. His loose shirts, lungis, rolled sleeves, sandals, and thick beard communicate working-class resilience and resistance to authority. Unlike the polished appearance traditionally associated with cinematic heroes, Pushpa's style celebrates roughness and self-made masculinity. His appearance projects confidence without refinement, allowing audiences to interpret his criminal rise as a story of empowerment rather than defiance. The popularity of Pushpa-inspired beard styles and signature gestures demonstrates how his visual identity moved beyond the film into everyday culture. Pushpa Raj's visual identity reflects a form of rebellious working-class masculinity that derives legitimacy from authenticity rather than social respectability (Connell 74-76).

In *Animal*, Ranvijay embodies a more contemporary form of hypermasculinity. His luxury clothing, muscular physique, intense gaze, and heavy beard convey a sense of physical dominance. Ranvijay's style projects elite power and psychological intensity. Violence becomes intertwined with fashion, producing a cinematic figure whose appeal derives as much from appearance as from narrative action. Ranvijay's appearance exemplifies a contemporary form of hypermasculinity characterised by bodily dominance and emotional intensity (Connell 83).

Discussion

In all three films, costume and grooming perform important ideological functions. Fashion redirects attention away from the moral implications of criminal behaviour towards confidence and style. Criminality is not presented as social failure but as an alternative route to power and recognition. Through well-crafted visual aesthetics, anti-heroes become cultural icons whose identities are admired, imitated, and consumed.

The influence of these representations extends beyond cinema. Social media platforms, fan communities, and popular fashion practices contribute to the circulation of anti-hero aesthetics. Hairstyles, beard fashions, clothing styles, and gestures associated with these characters are reproduced by audiences seeking to embody similar qualities of confidence, rebellion, and masculine authority. Consequently, the anti-hero functions not merely as a cinematic character but as a model of self-fashioning within contemporary consumer culture. The growing

popularity of such figures suggests that in contemporary Indian cinema the distinction between celebrity and criminality is blurred. Through fashion and spectacle, anti-heroes acquire symbolic legitimacy and cultural desirability (Bourdieu 172). "The perception of the social world, positive or negative, is based on nothing other than the interest of the individuals or groups" (475). The circulation of anti-hero styles through fan cultures illustrates how media representations influence everyday identity formation: "Popular culture is a hopelessly commercial culture. It is mass-produced for mass consumption. Its audience is a mass of non-discriminating consumers". Storey challenges this mass-culture theory by stating that if such were the case, all categories of films would succeed. However, many films fail because audiences actively choose what they like. "Many have been persuaded that about 80 per cent of singles and albums fail financially despite extensive advertising...Such statistics should clearly call into question the notion of consumption as an automatic and passive activity" (Storey 8). Commercial cinema responds to what attracts mass audiences. The success of the anti-hero protagonists and the popularity of these films reflect audience preferences and encourage filmmakers to produce anti-hero films. Their visual identities become powerful cultural resources that shape perceptions of masculinity, status, and aspiration in contemporary society.

Conclusion

The analysis of *KGF: Chapter 1*, *Pushpa: The Rise*, and *Animal* has demonstrated that costume, grooming, accessories, and bodily performance play a crucial role in transforming criminal protagonists into alluring cultural icons. The study reveals that fashion and visual style operate as a form of symbolic capital through which anti-heroes acquire authority, desirability, and cultural influence. Fashion contributes significantly to the construction of identities that audiences admire and emulate through the engaging, diverse styles of Rocky, Pushpa, and Ranvijay. The popularity of anti-hero aesthetics illustrates the growing influence of celebrity culture and consumer practices in shaping contemporary understandings of masculinity. In this process, criminality is increasingly detached from its moral implications and reconfigured as a fashionable expression of confidence, rebellion, and power.

Contemporary Indian cinema therefore participates in a cultural transformation in which visual appearance becomes central to the production of identity and aspiration. These films contribute to the normalisation of criminal aesthetics within popular culture by fashioning criminal protagonists as style icons. Ultimately, the anti-hero's influence lies not only in actions but also in looks and costumes in contemporary, image-driven society.

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