

Sabka Time Aayega: Language and the City in Gully Boy

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This chapter looks at Zoya Akhtar's *Gully Boy* (2019) to examine the relationship between Mumbai and its working-class communities and language, particularly poetry. The city plays a central role in the film as that which inspires, intrigues, gives and denies its people in a complicated relationship that demands to be examined. By using *gully* (street) rap to capture all these sides of Mumbai and reflect on the social and economic realities of its residents, *Gully Boy* represents the conflict between the city and its citizens.

This reflection is inspired by Murad (Ranveer Singh), the film's subaltern Muslim protagonist, who because of his position has a compelling outsider-insider relationship to this consuming space. Murad traverses the city from slums to skyrises, encountering and living through the tension that Mumbai, at once a city of dreams and a city of deprivation and exclusion, holds. In *Gully Boy*, this tension is explored by drawing on two enduring Hindi film character types to fashion Murad as a *shayar* (poet) who also carries the baggage of the *tapori* (urban vagabond). In the form of rap lyrics and dialogue, language becomes a way for Murad to chronicle, occupy and claim various parts of the cinematic metropolis that at once claims and rejects him as this vagabond figure, becoming the poetic voice of the city's tensions.

I present this argument in four sections: in the first, I examine how the rise of Mumbai as the 'global city' and its relationship with its proletarian citizens play out through Murad's engagement with Mumbai. In the next section, I show how Murad navigates this urbanscape using *gully* rap, making him a descendant of the *shayar* figure. The third section draws a contrast between Murad and two previous incarnations of the urban *shayar* – *Pyaasa*'s (Guru Dutt 1957) Vijay (Guru Dutt) and *Namak Haraam*'s (Hrishikesh Mukherjee 1973) Alam (Raza Murad) – to discuss how *Gully Boy* departs from the politics

of those films by adhering to a neoliberal order. In the final section, I interpret the *shayar/tapori* characterisation of Murad by examining his language and class location in the context of a need to emphasise the ‘local’, showing how language becomes a mode of subversion. By tracing the relationship between representations of Mumbai and its languages in Hindi cinema embodied by Murad’s liminal status as both *shayar* and *tapori*, I show how the film captures the dynamic between Mumbai and its marginalised citizens.

BETWEEN TWO WORLDS

The rise of Mumbai as the ‘global city’ and its relationship with its proletarian citizens plays out through Murad’s engagement with the city. While Mumbai might represent a ‘global city’ of dreams to some, Murad is shown to be in conflict with his immediate physical and social environment. As a talented young rap artist from Dharavi, Mumbai, one of Asia’s and the world’s largest slums, Murad must fight against his socio-economic circumstances and class expectations to emerge as a national rap sensation. At times this puts him at odds with his family and even his childhood friends and sweetheart, as well as at odds with the new world he is trying to enter. This incompatibility between *haqeeqat* (reality) and *khwaab* (dreams) is explicitly articulated towards the climax of the film, though it is also present throughout in the form of the urban landscape which Murad navigates. The two poles of Murad’s movement are the slum of his birth and the aspirational glitz of success elsewhere in the city, and it is his desire and eventual ability to move between these worlds that form the narrative arc of *Gully Boy*.

Gully Boy is a quintessential Mumbai film, a subset of Hindi movies that span genres as different as the social melodrama, the crime thriller, the urban romance and the coming-of-age drama. *Awaara* (Raj Kapoor 1951), *Deewar* (Yash Chopra 1975), *Don* (Chandra Barot 1978), Basu Chatterjee’s films from the 1970s, Saeed Mirza’s films from the 1980s, *Satya* (Ram Gopal Varma 1998) and *Wake Up Sid* (Ayan Mukherjee 2009) are some classic examples from across the decades. This subgenre, in which the city is a prominent character, has existed since the early years of Indian cinema because of the city’s modernity and infrastructural significance as the locus of the Hindi film industry. From the 1990s to the 2010s, globalisation exacerbated the class divide in Mumbai, creating a situation where an ever-widening gap in wealth is becoming apparent in civic infrastructure, ghettoisation and gentrification occurring side by side. Mumbai’s marginalised communities must develop vernacular forms of expression such as *gully* rap that can both record and resist the socio-political disenfranchisement that the city symbolises, while also celebrating its emancipatory facet. Throughout the film, the tension between the city and its

disenfranchised citizenry plays out in the form of Murad's ascent from slums to skyscrapers. Caught between the Mumbai of the poor and that of the wealthy, Murad's multifaceted experience of the city is ultimately directed towards an interpretation of its neoliberal globality, marked by interiors and architecture, as aspirational.

Zoya Akhtar's filmography complicates her approach to filming the geography of the proletariat. A filmmaker whose two preceding feature films, *Zindagi Na Milegi Dobara* (2011) and *Dil Dhadakne Do* (2015), were heavily invested in the world of the affluent, she states that she was conscious of the need for an immersion in Murad's world to prevent the 'Bandstand gaze' from taking over, an allusion to an affluent Mumbai area that could well be the home of the characters in some of her other films (Akhtar 2019a). Often criticised for making films only about the rich, Akhtar widens her horizons beyond 'a certain narrow strata of Indian society whose lives have been transformed by the embrace of a neoliberal, capitalist economy in post-1990s India' to also include Mumbai's poor (Bose 2017: 220–1). This reversal is apparent in a sequence early on in the film in which, in one smooth take, a local guide leads a party of foreign tourists through the sunny streets of Dharavi into Murad's home. The shots of the tourists entering the house are composed from Murad's perspective, the scene ending with him surprising one with a rendition of Nas' 'N.Y. State of Mind'. It is a somewhat backhanded commentary on the transactional workings of the global tourism industry that reduces poverty and subalternity to a cynical spectacle, but delivered almost as a riposte to the 'cine-tourism' of *ZNMD* and *DDD* (Bose 2017: 221).

Murad's character is partly constituted by Dharavi, the central Mumbai slum that is a fabric of his existence even as it hems him in. Akhtar had her production designer, Susan Caplan Merwanji, build a set within Dharavi, deciding to shoot on location for greater authenticity. 'You have to be there . . . you can't do it from the outside,' Akhtar has said (Akhtar 2019a), elaborating on the importance of filming *Gully Boy* where it is taking place and affirming its status as one of those films that Geoffrey Nowell-Smith states 'would have been impossible without the ontological link between nominal setting and actual location' (2004: 103). The inside/outside binary is key to understanding Murad's trajectory and changing relationship to the space of the city as a site of consumption. Merwanji noted the need to convey 'how circumscribed Murad is by his environment', while also discussing the need to create a geometry of horizontal and vertical arrangements that propelled the protagonist higher and higher as the film progressed, transporting him from his father's skyless hovel to his own tiny rented flat with a window (Ramnath 2019). As with *haqeeqat* and *khwaab*, when depicting a slum on screen there are 'many possible relations between filmic and profilmic spaces' to do with the ethical stakes of the dominant modes of cinematic representation that is documentary and realism

(Krstic 2017: 7–8). Akhtar has cited *Salaam Bombay!* (Mira Nair 1988) as an inspiration (Bose 2017: 221), though *Gully Boy* departs from that film's neo-realist mode by sticking more closely to the dictates of mainstream Bollywood and its popular conventions. This is true to Akhtar's practice, which, while deliberately naturalistic, lies 'within the stylistic conventions and limitations of Bollywood by adhering to the formulaic framework of industrial production' such as elaborate set design, song-and-dance sequences and a romantic subplot (Bose 2017: 223).

Gully Boy's narrative is spatialised in terms of Murad's movement out of the slum and into the Mumbai of the wealthy through his use of language. It is his ability to navigate both parts of the city that allows him to relate to Mumbai as simultaneously insider and outsider to portray its contradictions. Long shots of Dharavi's rooftops and clustered houses dwarf Murad against his world, but his verbal artistry opens doors for him that lead to another, more affluent one. Acknowledging the simultaneity of these starkly different versions of the same city, Ranjani Mazumdar makes a point about how Mumbai's extreme poverty is always in conflict with its global ambitions, necessitating other strategies of coping: '. . . the transformation of the interior provides the fleeting imaginary possibility of transcending the physical geography of the cityscape' (2007: 115).

For Murad, caught between inside and outside, Sky (Kalki Koechlin), a music production student studying at the Berklee College of Music in the US who offers to produce the song '*Mere Gully Mein*', embodies an entry into these interiors so removed from his own. The hip cafe where she first meets Murad and MC Sher (Siddhant Chaturvedi), her huge apartment whose bathroom Murad tries to measure in steps and the professional studio she makes available for their use – these are interiors that were denied to Murad until he became accepted and recognised for his poetry. Similarly, it is at the apparel showroom a friend works at, outside of the slums, where Murad learns of the rap battle he goes on to win, thus getting the chance to open for the American rapper Nas at his India concert. At the same time, by way of the jam sessions, rap battles and cross-class sociality of artists and their supporters occurring in different parts of Mumbai, *Gully Boy* 'chooses to impress upon us that spaces of emancipation need to be explored within the interstices or the in-between spaces that "dual-city" (belonging to both the rags and the riches) provides' (Mohanty 2019).

Throughout the film, Murad's in-betweenness is emphasised through the inside/outside motif elaborated via the use of language. In one scene, the camera tracks Murad's father and his newlywed second wife as they walk through Dharavi towards Murad, the *shehnai* of wedding music playing. As Murad plugs in his earphones, standing outside their house, to listen to the American rapper A\$AP Rocky's 'Everyday', the soundtrack switches to his aural perspective. His father yanks out the earphones and we hear the *shehnai* again, only

for Murad to reinsert them and switch back to A\$AP Rocky as he enters the house, using his music as a personal opposition to his father's second marriage and a defiance of his orders. Through the use of diegetic sound and an inside/outside motif, language is once again a form of rebellion, this time against a patriarchal order.

Murad's liminal status as both insider and outsider is again underscored in the sequence, set to a dreamy song with a retro quality, in which he accompanies Sky and her wealthy friends in a car across Mumbai. The rapid-edit montage sequence comprises a combination of overhead shots, long shots and tracking shots to reveal the city at different scales, skyscrapers looming in the background, rows of shops, the BEST (Brihanmumbai Electric Supply and Transport) city bus stops, construction sites and long roads illuminated by street lights. The group spends the night graffitiing metal sheets cordoning off construction sites, storefront windows, neon advertisements, politician's flyers and walls of seemingly distinguished buildings. This montage suggests a neoliberal-bourgeois vision of the contemporary Indian city and equates success with the material regime of finance capital, a globalised economy and, thus, the powerful elite in the company of whom Murad is exploring his city.

For Murad, language becomes at once a marker of origin and vehicle for successfully traversing the geography of Mumbai from its seething margins to its glamorous centre. A personification of Mumbai's megacity dualities, Murad negotiates between the material and symbolic polarities of the city using language, the foremost incarnation being his rap lyrics. If one considers the rap sequence, '*Mere Gully Mein*' ('In my Hood'),¹ the bright, vivid tones and dynamic cinematography put Murad and his collaborator MC Sher in charge of showing off Murad's neighbourhood (similar to Sher's own) as they tell its story. Native informants, they are the focus of the camera, on the screen and off it, performing their space, their bit of Mumbai, for consumption not just by their 'homies' (as their shout-out to Bombay 17 during recording indicates) but by a much greater audience that may not be conversant with this particular area or society but to whom it is nonetheless alluring. Indeed, this is the song that proves to be a breakthrough for Murad in terms of his popularity and diegetic propulsion. Mazumdar describes the sequence:

The choreography is spatialized to provide a sense of synergy between what is viewed as embodied knowledge of Dharavi and the content of the lyrics. With drones, tracks and handheld camerawork, the sequence consciously maps the location with its rooftops, narrow alleys, and more. (2019)

The music-video-within-the-film sequence of '*Mere Gully Mein*' celebrates the place where the *gully* rappers on whom the film is based grew up. Just as

the streets and city of Mumbai hold such an important part in the rise of these rappers, so too do they play a key role in *Gully Boy*.

Through its representation in the film, the city becomes a map of the complex relationship between its multilingualism and its class-caste and religious divisions. This sort of articulation of Mumbai's social landscape in terms of its languages is not new in Hindi cinema, itself a product of migrations and the import of northern Indian habitus into a global city: 'Mumbai's relationship to language has always been fascinating particularly in the context of a powerful film industry that emerged in a non-Hindi speaking state [Maharashtra]' (Mazumdar 2001: 4873). *Gully Boy*'s urbanscape acknowledges the many linguistic communities that constitute Mumbai and Hindi cinema and the newer forms of cultural practice that this multilingualism and polyglossia generate.

Murad's poetry in the form of *gully* rap addresses the concerns and draws on the imaginary of his neighbourhood, understood and appreciated by those with whom he shares a linguistic heritage, inflected by both region and class. At the same time, his public performances encapsulate for a global consumer base Mumbai's socio-economic asymmetries and the complicated bond its marginalised residents have with it. Murad's engagement with Mumbai is a playing out of the vexatious relationship between subaltern citizens and the metropolis they belong to (and which belongs to them) – frustrating and freeing at the same time. Through the polyglossal mode of poetry and everyday speech, he straddles the borders of two worlds, the definition of 'inside' and 'outside' constantly shifting as he deploys language to move between both.

POET IN THE CITY

In Hindi cinema's history, the impoverished *shayar* has often represented melancholic masculinity that is harnessed to critique the socio-economic status quo, his words describing and condemning the realities around him, serving as both record and judgement. The *shayar* has been the voice of the oppressed, inhabiting or operating on the periphery of a society that he deems unjust and corrupt, and from which he has been excluded.² The *shayar* figure in Hindi cinema can be understood as a somewhat gentrified nod to the subcontinent's legacy of protest poetry and political balladeering within the archive of popular Hindi cinema.³ The examples I am referring to are *Pyasa*'s Vijay and *Namak Haraam*'s Alam: for the *shayar* figure in these films, language becomes a way to affirm their subjectivity in a world that they are in conflict with. Murad navigates this urbanscape using *gully* rap, making him a descendant of the *shayar*.

From the 1950s, the *shayar* has been a rebellious, contrarian figure who confronts and counters the prevailing order, casting a more direct message in poetic terms. Murad is a subaltern hero whose poetry propels him out of his

marginalised context and into a global arena. The film presents the device of poetry as emancipatory and communitarian, a polyglossal bulwark against the hostility of the city and society. While he shares with his predecessors the use of language as a form of resistance to the prevailing order and his poetry carries the social themes of his predecessors, Murad nonetheless departs from them politically and is celebrated by neoliberal, capitalist consumer society, as I will discuss in the next section. By giving Murad a feel-good happy ending, *Gully Boy* refashions the *shayar* from tragic figure to successful hero, his songs of protest now palatable spectacles.

Similar to his navigation of class that is spatialised in the form of Mumbai's geography, Murad embodies a continuum between the old, elite codes of Urdu poetry and new ones based in *Bambaiya* patois. While Urdu does not have a monopoly on poetry, in Hindi cinema it has historically been the language of poets – *Pyaasa's* Vijay, *Palki's* (Mahesh Kaul, S. U. Sunny 1967) Naseem (Rajendra Kumar), *Namak Haraam's* Alam or *Saajan's* (Lawrence D'Souza 1991) Aman (Sanjay Dutt). In *Gully Boy*, Murad's poetry/*gully* rap incorporates both the Urdu of *shayari* (poetry) and the flow of his predominantly lower-class Muslim neighbourhood's street talk. As Murad's friend and fellow rapper MC Sher notes, *gully* rap is rhythm plus poetry, and Murad already has the legacy of the latter bequeathed to him by his Bollywood forebears.

Mumbai's legacy is its multilingual poetic traditions, for it 'is a lived city as well as an imagined one, imagined and retold through its various lives in different languages, spaces, representations and vocations' (Nerlekar and Zecchini 2020: 2). *Gully* rap is one such contemporary subaltern poetic tradition of Mumbai, its fame (and name) and appeal based on its rootedness in the Mumbai *gully*. A fictionalised version of the real stories of *gully* rap pioneers Naezy and Divine (Kappal 2019), *Gully Boy's* backdrop captures the vibrant rap scene that has taken off in Mumbai within the past decade. Divine started to rise in popularity through the release of his song 'Yeh Mera Bombay' ('This is My Bombay' 2013) and both he and Naezy became international sensations with their collaboration on 'Mere Gully Mein' (2015). While recording the film's version of Divine and Naezy's career-making hit, Murad proudly identifies himself with 'Bombay satra' ('Bombay 17'), the postcode for Dharavi. In doing so at the moment in the film when he asserts his artistry as a multilingual rapper, he establishes the link between his practice and the specific geography of Mumbai that he belongs to and that endows him with that polyglossal facility.

Like the older *shayars* but more explicitly than them, Murad deploys language as a type of protest against an unjust socio-economic system, giving voice to those oppressed by it. In the track 'Mere Gully Mein', Murad and MC Sher rap in a mixture of *Bambaiya* Hindi (*bantai, bacchi, bamai*), English (We gettin' money-money) and Urdu (*daulat, shauhrat, mohabbat*) to tell the story of a neighbourhood in a way that is unique to it. *Bambaiya* Hindi or Mumbai

Hindi is a pidgin native to Mumbai, a mix of Hindi-Urdu (Hindustani) and Marathi, used mostly by the working-class communities of the city. Popularised in Hindi cinema as the language of lower-income characters (*taporis*, petty criminals, domestic workers, etc.) or those with similar origins (gangsters), the use of *Bambaiya* marks a character as being from Mumbai's underclass. Language becomes a form of political agency, not only because they are wordsmiths but also because of the polyglossia of their *gully* that affords them a rich lexicon and free range.

Akhtar emphasises that the Mumbai we see in *Gully Boy* has been determined largely by Murad's engagement with it: 'we just saw the city through him' (Akhtar 2019a). As Murad moves through the city and encounters people from its various parts, his language shifts too, a conscious effort on Akhtar's part (Akhtar 2019b). In college he attends English lectures, at home he speaks Urdu, with his neighbourhood friends he speaks *Bambaiya* and with his fellow rappers he tweaks all of these languages to imbue everyday speech with rhythm and flow. The spatial and the lingual frequently are co-constitutive – the homes of his friends in various pockets of Mumbai gesture towards the city's polyglossia. Examples include MC Sher's Marathi-speaking father in their *chawl* (tenement), Sky's plush apartment in which she switches between Hindi and English, and Safeena's middle-class home in which her mother (Sheeba Chaddha) chastises her for using the formal second person address of *aap*.

There is another, more literal thread that connects Murad to the Urdu *shayars* of the past: director Zoya Akhtar is the descendant of generations of well-known Urdu poets from the paternal side of her family. This includes her grandfather Jan Nisar Akhtar and father Javed Akhtar, who, apart from being an established screenwriter responsible for penning scripts that featured the subaltern Mumbai of the 1970s and were responsible for a hardening of Bollywood language (Masud 2005), has contributed poetry, lyrics and dialogues to her films, including this one. Javed Akhtar collaborated with Divine and Rishi Rich on the song '*Doori*' ('Distance'), which melded Hindustani, English and the cadence and perspective of Murad's life in Mumbai.

'*Doori*' appears in the film as a recited poem and in its musical form hews to the traditional Hindi film song more than any of the other rap songs on the film's soundtrack. Akhtar recounts another instance of collaboration that gestures towards a congruency between poetry of seemingly divergent types: initially Divine wrote the track '*Apna Time Aayega*' as '*Sabka Time Aayega*'. It was Javed Akhtar who suggested he change *sabka* (everyone's) to *apna* (mine) because '*apna* is what you own . . . it'll make you feel something' (Akhtar 2019a). In this way, Javed Akhtar's interventions, rooted as they are in a more classical register, prove to be reconcilable with *gully* rap, subtly endowing Murad's poetic voice in the film with the ancestral craft of multiple generations of *shayars*.

These aspects of the film, both the profilmic and extra-filmic, indicate that the political angst and anti-establishment content of Murad's songs connect him to the Hindi film character type of the *shayar*. As is the case with these older examples, his poetry is a record of the tension between the city and its citizens. However, unlike these earlier representations, Murad's attempt to navigate Mumbai through poetry – moving between the 'inside' and 'outside' as discussed in the previous section – is a rewarding journey. Murad is positioned as a new kind of *shayar* hero for the neoliberal era who, paradoxically, can rage against the machine and yet benefit from it.

A NEW KIND OF SHAYAR

Though belonging to a line of *shayars* in Hindi cinema, Murad represents a new version of the old mould; unlike the traditional poet who is often a tragic figure who remains at the margins of the city, *Gully Boy's* poet protagonist is on his way to achieving success and rising to national (and perhaps international) fame. This is most apparent in the way he moves through the city, from the periphery of his subaltern neighbourhood to the centre, the glitzy upscale venue where he gives his closing performance and finally 'arrives' onto a global arena. Drawing a contrast between Murad and two previous incarnations of the urban *shayar*, *Pyaasa's* Vijay and *Namak Haraam's* Alam, I argue that *Gully Boy* departs from the politics of those films by adhering to a neoliberal order. Murad is a *shayar* true to his age, just as Vijay and Alam were to theirs, and his version of the *shayar* must be understood in his historical context. He is meant to represent the aspirations of citizens in a neoliberal political economy of which Mumbai is an important infrastructural and emblematic node.

Though Murad is a *shayar*, his trajectory is one that accords him agency and upward mobility, as he is embraced and rewarded by the market. Unlike his onscreen predecessors, Murad's words are easily co-opted by the capitalist system of injustice and inequality that he rails against, a sign that his confrontations themselves are now palatable and profitable. Mirroring the co-option of a proletarian art form like *gully rap* by the music and film industries, *Gully Boy* departs from older characterisations of poetry as a mode too radical to allow the character wielding it to thrive within the confines of the Hindi film. Whereas the older *shayars* rail against and resist a system that they recognise as being inherently flawed and configured to exploit the oppressed, Murad's poetry catapults him to the world stage, making a case for poetry (through music) as compatible with the neoliberal order in which an individual can rise above structural oppression by sheer grit and talent.

A comparison with older *shayars* shows how Murad is an era-appropriate manifestation of the *shayar*. In *Pyaasa*, the gifted but unsuccessful poet Vijay,

asked, 'Yeh duniya agar mil bhi jaaye toh kya hai?' ('So what if the world were mine?'); the song was written by Sahir Ludhianvi, 'master of the technique of the classical ghazal and of the film lyric' (Masud 2005). Though Vijay too faces poverty and rejection as an artist in the big city, his story is a tragic unfurling of the immoral forces of capital and power vanquishing an authentic artist. In rejecting the world of material success that only wants to profit off his words, Vijay maintains his artistic integrity. Compare the iconic scene in which Vijay appears singing this song towards the end of *Pyaasa*, framed in silhouette against the doorway facing the stage with the vast audience's back to him, with Murad's triumphal performance of 'Apna Time Aayega' at the end of *Gully Boy* where he commands the stage, facing his admirers. There are similarities: whereas the former sequence is composed of a triangulated intercutting between close-ups of a stricken Vijay, his lovers, treacherous friends and nemeses and long shots of his audience as he is dragged out of the auditorium, the latter features Murad's girlfriend Safeena (Alia Bhatt), loyal friends like MC Sher and Murad's competitors nodding along interspersed with mid-shots of his audience. The righteous rejection of Christ-like Vijay is stark when juxtaposed with Murad standing on the precipice of attaining the world – the *duniya* (world) Vijay repudiates is Murad's for the taking.

Informed by the Nehruvian socialism of the 1950s, a time replete with a post-colonial socialist sensibility, *Pyaasa*'s leftist poet does not consider popular or commercial appreciation of his poetry to be worth the suffering he has endured, instead finding solace in retreating from the urban public he once so craved to be recognised by. In contrast, Murad finds himself profiting off his own words; in the end he wins the rap battle and along with it Rs. 10 lakh, ADIDAS classic sneakers and a ticket to global stardom. Murad lives in an age when India has long embraced the free market and its celebration of individual accomplishment.

My second point of comparison with *Gully Boy* is *Namak Haraam*. That film's character Alam writes verses like 'Nadiya se darya, darya se sagar, sagar se gehra jaam / Jaam mein doob gayee hai yaaron meri jeevan ki har shaam' ('From stream to river, river to sea, deeper than the sea a drink / Friends, drowned in drink are each of my life's evenings'). A young alcoholic kitemaker, Alam belongs to a similar world as Murad, composing poetry from a proletariat perspective and performing despair for Somu (Rajesh Khanna), a friend of Vicky (Amitabh Bachchan) the factory owner, who infiltrates Alam's community to destroy them from within. Sometime before dying surrounded by a *mehfil* (intimate poetry recital) of friends, Alam bequeaths his poetry to Somu, now sympathetic to this community, his words becoming a souvenir of the pain of poverty and marginalisation that he has carried all his life. Somu's status as a sort of intermediary between the ruling class and the proletariat allows him to 'carry' this pain to his friend, eventually converting Vicky to Somu's side in a death scene that echoed Alam's, a victim of the system once he fully accepted the mantle of a proletariat consciousness.

Alam's verse is dark and pessimistic, as befits the 1970s, an era of workers' agitation and political disillusionment with the status quo. By contrast, Murad's rap is hopeful and celebratory: '*Apna Time Aayega*', '*Mere Gully Mein*' and even Murad's political anthem '*Azadi*' ('Freedom') are fuelled by righteous anger rather than depressed resignation. Unlike Alam's resignation to death dictated by his structural powerlessness, Murad's confrontational optimism manages to change his circumstances and effect the leap to a better life, not an ignominious death. It is interesting to note, however, that Murad is constantly aware of the spectre of ruin by the presence of his friend Moeen (Vijay Varma), the mechanic-cum-carjacker with a heart of gold whose life represents what Murad's might be if he isn't careful. Cynical and caustic, it is Moeen who captures some of Alam's angst and serves as an alter ego and reminder for Murad as he occupies the gap between two worlds. In doing so, the film shifts the burden of diegetic nihilism from the poet-as-citizen to the citizen-as-criminal: the poor poet might find his way to a better life but the negotiation between the citizen and the city is not without danger.

Another small but significant difference between Murad and his predecessors is that unlike with Vijay and Alam, there is nothing mysterious about his craft; the materiality of his labour of language is on display, tying it into his physical conditions. In one montage, we see Murad's process of toiling over his poetry: working in collaboration with MC Sher, marking rhythm in his notebook, rapping into a sieve for the right acoustic effect and practising rapping in front of a mirror with hand gestures and wearing a borrowed hoodie. We often catch him in the act of writing down his words that we later hear as fully formed songs. '*Apna Time Aayega*' is an example of a song that provides an invisible thread through Murad's journey, in a sense running parallel to him.

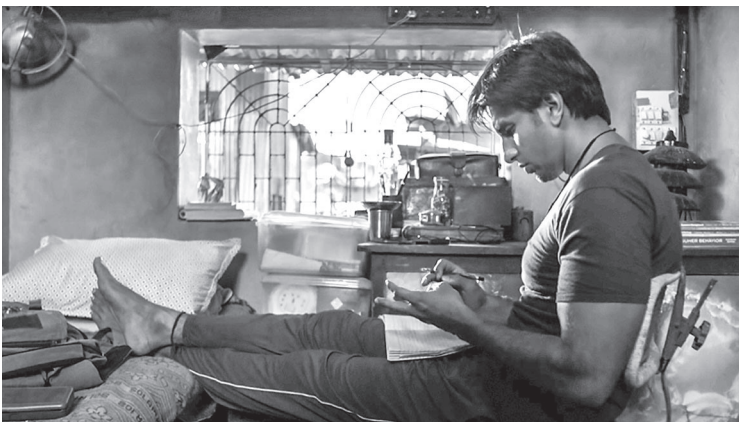


Figure 6.1 Murad is shown toiling over his writing, dispelling its mystery.

Relevant here is the broader history and evolution of hip-hop and rap music from its origins in the Bronx of the 1970s, inhabited by the Black community and other disenfranchised racial minorities, to its current mainstream avatar as a multibillion-dollar industry (Price 2006). In *Gully Boy*'s opening sequence, while assisting Moeen during an auto theft, Murad criticises the Punjabi rap tracks ubiquitous in Bollywood films for being about superficial, material pleasures like 'my ride, my shoes, my liquor, my chicks'. Ironically, while initially there is an ostensible commitment to the possibility of radical popular art (as this bit of dialogue shows), by the end of the film, the expressive depth in Murad's rap is on its way to being co-opted by the entertainment industry.⁴ Consider how the original track '*Azadi*' (a remix of a leftist student leader's chant in response to a state crackdown on a university in 2016) was edited for *Gully Boy* by removing its references to the structural problems of Indian society and the violence of Hindutva unleashed by the Indian government.⁵ The commercialisation of Murad's art in the free market and the acquisition of associated capital is underway. This is also a valid interpretation of the real stories on which *Gully Boy* is based and points to how the music industry has historically been able to enervate the radicalism that powered the art of the marginalised and made it consumable by the masses.⁶ Instead of standing up against the capitalist machinery that is the cause of his suffering, Murad is on the brink of being absorbed by it when the film ends.

Tracking the figure of the *shayar* across half a century, from *Pyaasa*'s Vijay to *Namak Haraam*'s Alam to *Gully Boy*'s Murad, the distinctions in political attitudes are revealed. The shift in the *shayar*'s journey from melancholia to optimism signals an alignment with a neoliberal-bourgeois order that is inimical to the interests of the working classes and oppressed castes. This is important in the context of Murad's class/religious location in Mumbai which genealogically connects him to another classic Hindi film character type: the *tapori*. Where Vijay and Alam reject the materialism of the world and fight the status quo, Murad embraces it, for as much as he is a *shayar*, he also carries the baggage of the *tapori* whose 'style is individual and his resistance relies on an ambiguous relationship to issues of lifestyle and consumption' (Mazumdar 2001: 4876).

SHAYAR AS TAPORI, TAPORI AS SHAYAR

As the previous section shows, though the film ultimately succumbs to Bollywood's neoliberal tendencies with Murad's success coded in terms of consumerism and global capital, there are brief moments when the lingual becomes subversive, rejecting the system that keeps artists like Murad oppressed. This is made possible by the adding of the *tapori*'s features to the

characterisation of Murad, making him wield language rooted in his city to talk about the despair of living in it.

While Murad is a working-class Muslim man whose parents worked hard to make sure he could get an education, his class location, polyglossal dexterity and distance from 'pure' Urdu together allow him to fit into the lineage of another Bollywood figure – the *tapori*. From *Awaara*'s Raj (Raj Kapoor) to *Ghulam*'s (Vikram Bhatt 1998) Siddhu (Aamir Khan), the *tapori* has had a long career in Hindi cinema and can be theorised thus:

The *tapori*'s imagination has emerged out of a complex web of linguistic, spatial and imaginary journeys. He speaks to a structure of feeling that is located both in the everyday and the spectacles of cataclysmic transformations that a city witnesses. Using the popular Bumbaiya language as his weapon against an unequal world, the *tapori* creates a space through insubordination – of subcultural practices that endow him with certain dignity in the cinematic city. (Mazumdar 2001: 4872)

The *tapori*'s deft navigation of Mumbai and distinctive use of language are qualities that allow Murad to occupy an intermediary space where he navigates multiple spaces of the city by toggling between the elite performative register indicated by *shayari* and the subaltern one indicated by *tapori Bumbaiya*.

There is a broad context to the *tapori*-esque characterisation of Murad in *Gully Boy* which in the first section I showed to be a film that is invested in showing Mumbai and its class intersections through its male protagonist. After a long absence through the 2000s and 2010s, the return of this type of male persona is tied to a response to two phenomena: the dominance of Mumbai as a global city and the rise of North India as the setting for Hindi films during these decades. Along with the increase of narratives set in foreign locales with the commercial clout of the South Asian diaspora viewership in the 1990s, Mumbai started being presented onscreen in the 2000s and 2010s through the neoliberal logic of global capital that excludes its most vulnerable occupants. The modernity of Mumbai, when relevant, has become externalised through the markers of a 'global city', as opposed to the small town which represents 'the shadow-regions of the urban order . . . visually chaotic and performatively excessive' (Kumar 2019: 63–4). Almost in opposition to the overdetermined globality of Mumbai that dominated Hindi cinema in the post-New Economic Policy (1991) era, in the past fifteen years there has been an emergence of Delhi, a city widely associated with feudal orthodoxy, as well as the northern Indian small town as the space of the 'local' in the narratives of Hindi films. Tracing it to the deployment of local language as a signifier of place in Mumbai gangster films, Kumar has termed this phenomenon the 'provincializing' of Bollywood:

. . . cinematic Delhi emerged not as a competing metropolis but as a north-Indian congregation sitting on the tricky boundary between urban and elsewhere . . . become[ing] the synecdoche for north-Indian small-towns by hosting the urban-provincial, a performative counterpoint which finds resonances within the urban. This, indeed, has its precedents in the provincial turn to vernacular Mumbai, later overwhelmed by the north-Indian dislocation. (2013: 71–2)

Language in *Gully Boy* is a marker of the ‘local’ in the context of a city that is constantly positioned as ‘global’, a node that connects India to the international market. The *tapori* embodies this through his language and urban connections. ‘Through his linguistic performance, the *tapori* shifts the course of a well-defined language system [and] enters a space where a multilingual street culture inflected with diverse regional accents can be captured’ (Mazumdar 2007: 44). Through Murad’s use of *Bambaiya*, *Gully Boy* imparts to him the spirit of the classic Mumbai masculinity of the *tapori*. Incorporating the provincial in terms of language, notably without centring crime and violence as the prominent feature of life-worlds by choosing, instead, to foreground poetry, *Gully Boy* brings into visibility the Mumbai Muslim proletariat after three decades of absence from the screen.⁷

Despite going to college and writing poetry, Murad nevertheless embodies the *tapori*’s urban subaltern masculinity, ‘the performative desires of marginalized groups’ (Mazumdar 2007: 78). He is ‘the voice of the streets’, as *Gully Boy*’s trailer announces, that he brings to the national and global stage, transforming the street into both. United by the quality of lingual dexterity, the *shayar*’s political angst is fused with the *tapori*’s proletarian mobility, allowing the titular *Gully Boy* to move between the local street and the global stage. Akhtar has framed her own interest in bringing the story of *gully rap*’s young poster boys to the screen in terms of exploring how class limits artistic ambition and creativity (Akhtar 2019b). She has downplayed the importance of Murad’s Muslim identity in favour of emphasising the film’s focus on class,⁸ presenting it as a commentary on how an unjust economic system has ‘colonised dreams’ (Akhtar 2019b).

This ‘provincial turn to vernacular Mumbai’ in *Gully Boy* is confirmed by Vijay Maurya, the film’s dialogue writer. Working in collaboration with young rappers to update his *Bambaiya* vocabulary (Iyengar 2019) and drawing on his own lingual reserves as a Mumbai native who grew up in a *chawl* and internalised the city’s multilingualism, Maurya ‘transcreated’ the script from Zoya Akhtar and her co-writer Reema Kagti’s English original (Kharude 2019). Words like *altarpanti* (messing around), *bahot hard* (very cool), *tod-phod* (sexy) rub up against *dozakh* (hell) or *baahargaon* (foreign), creating a lingual map, seamlessly pinning character to location or cluing viewers in to context

and tone. One of the most memorable lines in the film is uttered by Murad's girlfriend Safeena, who justifies her assault of a romantic rival thus: '*Mere boyfriend se gulu-gulu karegi toh dhoptoyengi na usko*' ('If she coochie-coos with my boyfriend, sure I'll whack her'). It is Maurya who brought in the word *dhoptoyengi*, a *Bambaiya* word with Marathi origins. He discusses his own process as one that involves being tuned into everyday language in the city: 'I try to use what I observe and hear on the street in rhyme. Now I realize maybe I was Murad' (Iyengar 2019). Indeed, as Kumar notes in the context of *Gully Boy*, 'The true protagonist of *Gully Boy* is the linguistic community of Mumbai subalterns, whose rebellion against their political inexistence is not just rap music but how it is provincialized in Mumbai swagger' (2019).

This amalgam of city and language in the figure of the *tapori* is key to understanding how the lingual becomes subversive in *Gully Boy* when combined with the *shayari* of protest. It is in the melding of the cinematic imprints of the cultural form of protest poetry represented by the *shayar* and that of Mumbai's everyday proletarian lingual (and by extension performative) legacy exemplified by the *tapori* that the film, like Murad, briefly challenges the dominant socio-political order before succumbing to its ideological underpinnings.

CONCLUSION

Through its use of language and its relationship with the city, *Gully Boy* captures a fraught dynamic within the framework of popular cinema, with all its ideological limitations and conservatism, at once positing the possibility of a radical politics but necessarily effacing it in favour of industrial cinema's appropriation of subaltern angst. From carjacker to celebrity, Murad's journey as *shayar/tapori* is framed as aspirational for those watching in his neighbourhood, and the film seems to end on a predictably conformist note, with socio-economic ascent accomplished and the hero's problems with love and family surmounted. But sandwiched between *Gully Boy's* ending, the final stage of the contest and his opening act for Nas, is Murad moving through the local stations of Mumbai and bylanes of Dharavi 17. He will always be moving between two worlds, a successful artist but also one whose art is entirely driven by the place he comes from – we have invested too much in the detail and drama of that odyssey for it to be entirely erased by Bollywood's corporatist gaze. Kumar writes:

Even though the narrative of the film is derailed via false boundaries, the performative essence of living amidst soul-crushing contrasts and the desire to break free of glass ceilings continues to linger . . . While the film may want you to exit the environs as he exits them, only to briefly revisit as a 'star', we know almost intuitively, that Murad would

still remain suspended in the cracks between vertical integration and horizontal sprawl. (2019)

The anecdote about Javed Akhtar's suggestion to Divine and Rishi Rich to change *sabka* to *apna* captures the film's attitude towards Murad's movement between two worlds. Playing with the word *apna*, which could mean both 'mine' and 'ours', *Gully Boy* presents the journey through the city-as-spatial-metaphor for success through a *tapori* brand of *shayari*. Like language, this journey is something individual but also shared by a community of citizens. The tension between city and citizen key to the equilibrium of *Gully Boy* is ultimately negated by the predictably reactionary commitments of Bollywood. However, the staging of the tension itself is one of the functions of popular cinema and, in doing so, *Gully Boy* presents a tantalising vision of the possibilities of a creative life in a deeply unequal society.

NOTES

1. The song sequence is based on the actual music video recorded by Naezy and Divine.
2. The documentaries *Bombay: Our City* (Anand Patwardhan 1985) and *A Night of Prophecy* (Amar Kanwar 2002) are important points of reference in discussing the subaltern poet in Indian cinema.
3. The contemporary *lokshahir* (people's poet) movement emerged in pre-Independence Maharashtra from an existing medieval itinerant balladeer tradition combining 'familiar refrains' with 'colloquial speech-song' (Damodaran). In Urdu poetry, a language that dominated Hindi film song lyrics since its earliest years, there is a strain of political and explicitly dissident sentiment from the eighteenth century to the present day (Jalil).
4. Looking at the role of art in revolution, Pope (2005) uses Herbert Marcuse's distinction between 'life art' and 'contrived art' to describe the devolution of hip-hop music into twenty-first-century 'party rap' (81). He tracks how a genre that grew out of a radical political consciousness about poverty and race became one that celebrates capitalism which only perpetuates systemic racial violence, thereby transforming 'from a mode of expression . . . to entertainment . . .' (87).
5. 'The fact that the track is now owned by Zee Music Company, part of Zee News, which was instrumental in spreading false narratives about the JNU protests, is a haunting example of how movements can be co-opted and profited from' (Kapur 2019).
6. Continuing with Marcuse's model, Pope (2005) attributes the deradicalisation of hip-hop music from the 1970s to the 2000s to two factors: the economics of the mass market system (87) and the change in audience (91).
7. The last major Hindi film to focus on the Muslim proletariat was *Salim Langde Pe Mat Ro* (Saeed Mirza 1989), which featured a protagonist who is a petty criminal bribed into stirring up a communal riot in his neighbourhood, leading to his tragic death.
8. Though there is no explicit reference to it, Murad's Muslim identity and the film's subtle acknowledgement of his religious culture is significant in the context of India's current political climate of Hindu majoritarianism and the long absence of a Muslim male protagonist from Hindi cinema.

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