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Niyoga and the Politics of Masculinities in Eklavya:

The Royal Guard (2007)

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Abstract

This paper examines how Eklavya: The Royal Guard (2007), directed by Vidhu Vinod Chopra, reworks the concept of niyoga, a socially sanctioned means of commissioned procreation, to examine the politics of masculinity in Indian cinema. Drawing on close analysis of the film, intertextual readings of The Mahabharata, and masculinity studies framework put forth by R.W. Connell, the study shows how the film transforms niyoga, a reproductive ritual, into a site of ethical crisis and sovereign violence. The mise-en-scène, spatial arrangements, and embodied performances in the film reveal intersecting and unstable masculine positions. Hegemonic masculinity of the pater becomes unstable in the private realm, the surrogate occupies a marginalised-subordinated masculinity, and the progeny manifests a confounded masculinity. This study aims to expand film and myth scholarship by approaching niyoga as a framework to examine how reproductive politics and masculinity become entangled in Indian cinema.

Keywords: *niyoga, The Mahabharata, masculinity studies, hegemony, Indian cinema*

Introduction:

Myth has never remained confined to the past in Indian cinema, and *The Mahabharata* occupies a distinctive place within this larger mythic imagination. Although Vidhu Vinod Chopra's *Eklavya: The Royal Guard* (2007) cannot be considered a conventional epic adaptation, it draws extensively on epic motifs through its explicit invocation of the Eklavya archetype and its more indirect engagement with Shakespeare's *Hamlet*. The existing scholarship on the film has remained confined to Robert White's article "Eklavya: Shakespeare meets the Mahabharata," an intertextual analysis, leaving unexamined the deeper reproductive and gendered structures that organise the narrative and shape its representations of masculinity. This paper addresses this gap by proposing *niyoga*, the epic institution of substitutionary procreation, as a theoretical lens to examine masculinity.

Textual and Etymological Foundations of *Niyoga*:

Niyoga, a term derived from Sanskrit, signifies a sanctioned form of union, formed from the prefix *ni-* (meaning “into” or “within”) and the root *yuj* (meaning “to unite”). P. V. Kane has defined *niyoga* as the “appointment of a wife or a widow to procreate a son from the intercourse of with an appointed male” (599) and “This appointment is made if the husband has no male heir and is incapable of producing one, either because he is impotent or dead” (Brereton 225). Sahgal describes it as “a special provision in the sexual ethics of early India” (9), and Wendy Doniger calls it “the most liminal form of Hindu pseudomarriage” (“Begetting on Margin” 173-4), noting that the line separating it from both marriage and adultery is exceedingly thin.

The agricultural people initially instituted *niyoga*, and therefore, the terminologies *kṣetra* (the womb, field or wife practising *niyoga*), *kṣetrin* (the owner of the field or the husband), *bījin* or *niyogin* (commissioned procreator or inseminator), and *kṣetrāja* (the male progeny of *niyoga*), and *niyogopattana* (the female progeny) are all drawn from the agricultural world. According to this agrarian logic, if the husband is unable to fertilise the field, he may import seeds to ensure a successful harvest. *The Laws of Manu* states: “The woman is traditionally said to be the field, and the man is traditionally said to be the seed; all creatures with bodies are born from the union of the field and the seed” (IX.33).

The institution of *niyoga* is governed by certain conditions and permitted only under specific circumstances. The husband should be incapable of fathering a child due to impotence or death. The copulation must occur with the husband’s permission or with the elders of the lineage, who also determine the choice of the surrogate. The surrogate or *niyogin* or *bījin* is generally selected from within the husband’s kinship network, most often the husband’s brother or *devara*, a close relative or *sapiṇḍa*, or a man belonging to the same lineage or *sagotra*. Godmen or sages are appointed to this role because of their perceived moral and spiritual qualities. The practice of *niyoga* allowed little space for desire or personal attachment. It should be guided by the concept of *āpaddharma*, which comes into action during distress. After the birth of the child, participants are expected to return to their prior social roles to avoid disrupting the established marital, sexual, and kinship structures.

In *The Mahabharata*, *niyoga* appears in both overt and covert forms. Overt *niyoga* identifies the situation, participants, and the outcome with little hesitation. The episode involving Vysa’s sanctioned begetting of Dhritarashtra and Pandu through Ambika and Ambalika after Vichitavirya’s death is a direct example. Here, *niyoga* is presented as a lawful and pragmatic solution to the reproductive crisis of the dynasty, and the text leaves no doubt regarding its purpose or legitimacy. In contrast, covert *niyoga* works through euphemism, narrative displacement and divine intervention to obscure the socially uncomfortable sexual implications of the practice. It shifts attention away from the underlying issue of male infertility, as in the birth narratives of the Pandavas.

Thus, the epic most openly acknowledges *niyoga* in situations where the husband is dead. Even then, the masculinity of the dead husband is preserved in heroic and virile qualities. Though the practice of *niyoga* reveals the failure of the husband to secure biological succession, ritual sanctioning allows the husband to be the symbolic and legal father of the child. The secrecy of biological paternity allows the protection of masculine authority of the husband by concealing reproductive inadequacy. Thus, “*niyoga* indirectly vocalises as well

as repairs the masculine element by giving him a chance to reverse his fate through commissioned procreation" (Zacharias 164).

Situating *Niyoga* in the Narrative of *Eklavya: The Royal Guard*:

The film *Eklavya: The Royal Guard* is structured around a paternal secret that recalls the structure of *niyoga* in *The Mahabharata*. The desert landscapes and palace architecture in Rajasthan succeed in evoking a timeless, quasi-mythic setting, rendering a distinct epic resonance to the modern political setting. Binod Pradhan's cinematography is central to this effect, giving the film its austere, feudal atmosphere. Starring Amitabh Bachchan, Saif Ali Khan, Boman Irani, and Vidya Balan, the film was selected as India's official entry to the Oscars for the Best Foreign Language Film category at the 80th Academy Awards in 2008. Set in the fictional princely state of Devigarh, *Eklavya: The Royal Guard* traces the moral and political unravelling of a feudal monarchy. At the centre of the film is Eklavya, an ageing royal guard who is going blind day by day. His unwavering loyalty to the royal household lends him the force of the epic figure from whom he derives his name. Eklavya's fathers Queen Suhasinidevi's children, Harshwardhan and Nandhini, through *niyoga* that remains concealed from everyone except Rajamata, who proposed and consented to it. Upon discovering that Eklavya is the biological father of the queen's offspring, from the mouth of the queen, when she repeatedly utters the name of Eklavya, in her sickness, Rana Jayawardhan, who believed that an anonymous sage from Gangotri fathered the children, abruptly responds with lethal violence, murdering the queen to suppress the threat posed by compromised lineage.

The central tension of the film revolves around Harshwardhan's concealed paternity. The epic logic of *niyoga* is replicated with Rana Jayawardhan assuming the position of social fatherhood while Eklavya is reduced to silence. Prince Harshwardhan, who returns from his studies, is shattered to learn about the secret of his birth through a letter from his mother, Rani Suhasinidevi.

Theorising Masculinity: A Connellian Reading of the Film's Triadic Structure:

The film's visual language and performances do not present masculinity as layered, resonating with Connell's model of multiple masculinities, which rejects the idea of a single, uniform masculinity. The four key forms of masculinity, according to Connell, are hegemonic masculinity (associated with authority and power), subordinate masculinity (devalued by hegemonic masculinity), complicit masculinity (benefiting from patriarchal privilege) and marginalised masculinity (shaped by intersections with race, class or caste). Confounded masculinity does not appear as a category in Connell's topology. It arises as a descriptive phrase when conflicting social expectations and personal experiences unsettle a man's identity. The mise-en-scène of the film places male bodies in separate spatial zones, producing a visual code of a triadic structure of masculinities: hegemonic royal masculinity, subordinated servile masculinity, and confounded filial masculinity.

Jayawardhan's status as Rana grants him the privileges of hegemonic masculinity, but this seemingly secure position is privately destabilised by reproductive incapability. This inadequacy attempts to compensate through intensified sovereign brutality and secrecy, as in the murder of the queen and plotting against Eklavya, exemplifying what Connell describes as crisis tendencies (201-2), a reorganisation of patriarchal power when hegemonic masculinity is threatened. In the scene of the murder of the queen, his insecurities culminate in brutal action. Upon recognising that Eklavya is the biological father of their child,

Jayawardhan responds with lethal force, murdering the queen to erase the evidence of his compromised virility. What begins as a romantic reading of the sick Queen's favourite Shakespearean sonnet 18, "Shall I compare thee," turns into brutal murder (00:04:33). The scene aptly stages crisis masculinity, in which hegemonic masculinity compensates for its instability through surveillance and necropolitical violence. His brutality is not presented as a sudden outburst of cruelty, but a defence strategy to stabilise masculine authority. For Jayawardhan, his infertility is not simply a private limitation but a shameful flaw that renders him vulnerable to public mockery. He imagines people "laughing at him" (00:25:23) behind the facade of royal respect. He quibbles with Harshwardhan that "his father's life is in danger" (00:26:22), indicating his plan to kill Eklavya, at the same time creating an illusion that his own life is under threat.

In the film, Rana Jayawardhan mostly occupies elevated and enclosed spaces, such as throne rooms, balconies, and private chambers. Low-angle framing enlarges his physical appearance. His rigid body, sharp gestures and unpredictable aggression suggest dominance, and the fragmented lighting across his face points to secrecy. These visual choices help in the construction of Rana's troubled masculinity, which appears to be commanding but visibly insecure.

Eklavya's subordinated masculinity is established through his marginalised positioning within the visual frame. His early appearance as the royal guard in the film is marked by medium, long tracking shots, as he moves through the palace, often filmed from behind. During royal decision-making palace scenes, he stays outside the visual centre. Placed near the edges of the frame or separated from others by the architectural structures of the palace, he remains close to power but is excluded from its exercise. His restrained body language, expressed through lowered gaze, sparse words, and carefully controlled movement, produces a masculinity that can be defined only by obedience.

The cinematic positioning tied to epic memory is shown through an allusion to *The Mahabharata*, particularly in the opening scene, where Eklavya's voice tells the twins, young Nandhini and Prince Harshwardhan, the story of Eklavya, a Nishada. By narrating the tale of the archer who cuts off his own thumb out of deference to authority at the very beginning of the film, Eklavya self-reflexively places himself within marginalised masculinity marked by renunciation and erasure. This scene prepares the audience for an adaptation of mutilation seen in the epic, not of the body, but of paternal recognition.

The clandestine union of Eklavya and Sushasinidevi is dimly shot, isolating the bodies from political space. This scene operates as a cinematic analogue to *niyoga*, in which copulation occurs in secrecy. The love Eklavya secretly harbours for the queen is symbolised recurrently by the red scarf, a Shakespearean visual motif. The queen's letter to Harshwardhan reveals that both she and the Rajamātā placed greater trust in Eklavya than in any ascetic intermediary. Their choice of Eklavya as the surrogate father is a deliberate action. His healthy body and mind, discipline, proven skills and competence qualify him as an ideal choice for this role, suggesting that masculine merit, rather than ritual formalities, underwrites the act of reproduction.

Following the queen's death, Eklavya's unspoken grief is communicated through a prolonged static shot with minimal soundscape. His inability to express his love for the twins becomes a visual sign of genitorial erasure. The unsent letter, he writes for Harshwardhan, gives his erased fatherhood and suppressed paternal longing a rare verbal form: "When an

ageing father's hands begin to tremble, it is the son's duty to give him a helping hand" (0:7:42). Fatherhood is imagined, written, but socially withheld.

The film repeatedly allows Eklavya's suppressed paternal longing to surface briefly, only to contain it before it can be openly expressed. A striking instance occurs when the young Harshwardhan runs towards him, calling him "Baba". Eklavya's instinctive response to opens his arms and embrace the child is restrained, and he lowers the gesture into a dutiful bow (00:12:45). For a moment, he exceeds the limits of his assigned role, but his discipline quickly restores the boundary. His subordinated masculinity takes the form of self-censorship, through the refusal of his own paternal impulse. This self-erasure mirrors the logic of *niyoga*, in which the genitor must remain socially invisible so that the existing order can be preserved. The film does not replicate the literal bodily mutilation of the Eklavya narrative in *The Mahabharata*. It stages a symbolic mutilation; the deliberate cutting of the thumb returns here as the deliberate excision of paternal acknowledgement.

Eklavya's adherence to duty intensifies after the murder of Rana Jayawardhan at a railway crossing. Haunted by his mother's injunction: "You have to protect the king. Only one dharma. Fail, and nine generations will burn in hell. Like Eklavya, do your dharma" (00:41:08), his resolve to avenge persists. He brutally kills Jyothiwardhan and Udaywardhan, the executors of Rana and realises the shocking truth that the prince himself planned the murder of Rana. In a cruel irony, Eklavya believes that he must kill his son, though Harshwardhan's purpose was to protect Eklavya, his biological father, from the plotting Rana.

The film works through this ethical conflict by reworking Eklavya's sacrificial gesture from the epic. When he learns that Harshwardhan killed Jayawardhan, he is placed in an impossible position: he must judge the son he was never allowed to acknowledge as his own. Yet he deliberately misses his target and spares Harshwardhan. He then declares, "Instead of cutting my thumb, I struck the hand that was going to kill my son" (01:39:58). At this point, Eklavya's subordinated masculinity breaks out of the silence and self-erasure that have contained it. The scene encodes a crucial transformation and reverses the logic of *dharma* and sacrifice, which, until then, was mere obedience.

The most striking portrayal in the film lies in its construction of the confounded masculinity of the offspring, Prince Harshwardhan. Unlike Rana Jayawardhan or Eklavya, Harshwardhan is framed neither by sovereign command nor servile discipline. He occupies neither position with coherence. His *mise-en-scène* is characterised by isolation. He is repeatedly framed in isolation inside the palace. The wide framing angles, shot with Harshwardhan against the backdrop of the palace, dwarf his presence. The fact that he is positioned in transitional spaces (corridors and stairways) points to uncertainty about his identity. Reflective surfaces carry this fragmentation further by making his body appear splintered or obscured. His masculinity in these scenes is presented as an unresolved question, caught between his biological origin and the dynastic descent.

This instability reaches its fullest expression in the letter-revelation scene, when Harshwardhan learns the truth of his birth. This secret reaches him through writing, a deferred form of truth that adds to the film's emphasis on secrecy. The letter reveals both Eklavya's biological fatherhood and the ethical reasoning behind the queen's decision. As a justification of her act, she repeats Bhīṣma's formulation of *dharma*, mentioned in *The Mahabharata*: "*dharmah matibhyah udghṛtah*," presenting *dharma* as arising from reason,

intellect, heart, mind, and soul (00:23:11). The prince's response to this revelation is confusion and exhaustion. But the knowledge of the truth of his mother's death, which was revealed to him from the painting of his twin sister Nandini, along with the revelation of a conspiracy against Eklavya's life, forces him to act and save the life of his biological father. His confession to his beloved Ranjju: "This citadel of customs, traditions, rites, and rituals is driving me insane" (01:06:02) gives voice to a Hamlet-like psychological toll of inhabiting a masculinity overburdened by expectation. The camera often places him near symbols of power, such as the throne, ceremonial spaces, and decision-making assemblies. Still, he occupies them without bodily ease or spatial dominance that characterises Rana Jayawardhan.

Perhaps the most moving expression of confounded masculinity can be seen in the moment of filial yearning when lonely Harshwardhan, after the queen's funeral, asks Eklavya: "Will you hold me?" (00:29:14). The momentary collapse of the distance between biological truth and social prohibition occurs as the son seeks paternal comfort from the man whose fatherhood has been systematically erased. Similarly, the final invocation of "baba" (01:39:34) carries the same emotional force. Through this word, *dharma* is ultimately fulfilled. The word restores what the system tried to erase. Thus, *Eklavya: The Royal Guard* offers a cinematic reworking of *niyoga* when Harshwardhan publicly acknowledges Eklavya as his father by upholding his mother's logic of *dharma*.

Unlike Jayawardhan, whose masculinity is seemingly strengthened by his command over spaces of authority, Harshwardhan is marked by solitude, hesitation and displacement. The letter unsettles his position as the legitimate heir and leaves him divided between biological paternity and social fatherhood. The film uses this conflict to recast masculinity as something unstable rather than assured. In Harshwardhan, it becomes a confounded masculinity, formed with the unresolved tension between lineage, law, and *dharma*.

Conclusion:

Taken together, these visual and performative choices reveal a shifting hierarchy of masculinities. Jayawardhan's hegemonic masculinity depends on the denial of his biological truth, and this masculinity, which he projects in the public sphere, begins to falter in the private space. Eklavya's subordinated and marginalised masculinity is sustained through silence and self-erasure. Harshwardhan is left unresolved or confounded, suspended between biological origin and political inheritance. Through its use of space, body, and performance, the film reveals that the genealogical uncertainty produced by *niyoga* unsettles not only the political order but also a destabilised masculine self.

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