

Creating “Hip-hopisthan” Reading Zoya Akhtar’s Gully Boy

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Introduction

At the start of 2019, hip hop exploded suddenly into mainstream Indian culture. The elections due in May seem to have turned into a rap combat. In the wake of the release of Zoya Akhtar’s *Gully Boy* in February, it was quickly understood that rap music could help to communicate more effectively with the crucial voting age group of young people under 25. This represents a large chunk of the population and also the most vocal in terms of social media. So we have Rahul Gandhi’s “Apna Time Aayega”ⁱ, interesting because it pits him as the under-dog in this electoral battle. We have a rap black and white video extolling the achievements of Modi’s tenure.ⁱⁱ Both parties have honed in on the theme of “Azaadi” (i.e. freedom)ⁱⁱⁱ. While BJP wants the country to shake off the corruption associated with the Congress, the Congress is urging the country to set itself free from fear. Rap may have originated in the South Bronx area of New York but it has found a new home in India of 2019.

Gully Boy and the birth of Indian Raptivism

New York and Mumbai have striking similarities. Both are bustling, energetic coastal cities and financial hubs of their countries. New York has a unique position in being central to the origin of hip hop. Zoya’s film suggests a similar organic link between Mumbai and hip hop. *Gully Boy* chooses to locate its hip hop story in the slums of Dharavi. There has been a significant underground hip hop movement in this area and the rise of the rappers Naezy and Divine have been openly acknowledged as inspiration for the story. Hip hop collectives like Slumgods and independent rappers like Rapture are at the vanguard of the movement. The Dharavi Project is an after school hip hop project where students learn beta boxing, b-boying and street art like graffiti. The journey began in 2014 in a 100 sqft room and grew to become a full-fledged free school. The Dharavi Hustle is now an established hip hop practice.

Gully Boy is loosely inspired by the lives of Naezy and Divine. Naezy was born and raised in Kurla, a part of Mumbai

city notorious for drug related violence and poverty. His songs speak to young people who hail from the same background and who are gratified to see their lives reflected in his verse. Divine was born Vivian Fernandes and started his career as an underground rapper in 2011. He raps mostly about his own life experiences, including growing up with a single mother. His break out single “Mere Gully Mein” featuring Naezy came out in 2015. Divine and Naezy both served as consultants to Zoya Akhtar’s *Gully Boy*. Their song *Mere Gully Mein* was remade with Ranveer Singh rapping Naezy’s lyrics as part of the film.^{iv}

Rap in India is not confined only to Mumbai. The Cryptographik Street Poets addressed the battle between Uranium Corporation of India and local opposition environmental groups in Shillong. Kru172 have sung about the increasing drug menace in Punjab. Names like Baba Sehgal, Hard Kaur and YoYo Singh have already helped to bring rap into mainstream culture.

However *Gully Boy* differs from the popular conception of rap music in India by seeking to create social change. It is a form of ‘raptivism’ which seeks to challenge apathy with awareness, ignorance with intelligence and oppression with expression.

The film opens with an auto robbery in which the protagonist, Murad, (Ranveer Singh) is an unwilling accomplice. Given the context in which the film is set, it is inevitable that Murad is headed for a life in petty crime. Rap music plays in the car as they drive away. It angers Murad. This is “fake” rap, obsessed with cars and girlfriends. For Murad conscious rap is the real rap. It must have substance not just rhythm and rhyme. He seems to have an intuitive understanding of the power and the lyricism of true rap. Another scene has him rapping out the words to Nas’ “NY State of Mind”^v. This is an intense, visceral tale of a hustler who never sleeps because sleep is the cousin of death. Tourists from London have paid five hundred rupees to enter Murad’s house and photograph the squalor. One of the tourists is wearing a T-shirt with the photograph of Nas on it. Despite the visible differences in their life

conditions, the man and Murad are bound together for a second by their common love of rap. This episode has strands drawn from the actual experience of Divine’s life.

When Murad hears M.C. Sher rapping for the first time, he knows that true rap has arrived in India. The song “Sher Aaya Sher”^{vi} sung by Divine declares the distinction between “asli rap” and all else. The song is based loosely on his own song “Jungli Sher”^{vii}. It strikes out at toxic masculinity. This is conscious rap and Murad is enchanted.

At the mosque, dressed in traditional Muslim attire, Murad is face to face with the unfair world of Muslim masculinity where his father can bring in another bride and even his mother’s brother will not reprimand him. There are limits to what a Muslim can dream of in India and a career in music is definitely not on that list, his father warns him. Murad’s father is a driver. He has scrimped and saved to put Murad through a college education so he may get a white collar job. When he fractures his foot, Murad must substitute for him as chauffeur. His father trains him in class etiquette. No “heropanti”, he warns. The class divide is cast in stone and cannot be crossed. The immutability of class differences leads him to write “Doori”^{viii} out of the experience of watching his employer weep without being able to ask why she is unhappy. The song speaks of the distance between the two worlds, those who live in sky scrapers and those who sleep on the roadside. In the face of repeated humiliation, rap consoles him and gives him hope. After all the rappers know what it is to be poor, to suffer and be humiliated. Their subsequent material and social success is an inspiration. Murad turns to rap to drown out his troubled emotions as the shehnais play to bring his step mother into their home.

The violence encoded into the social fabric of lives is expressed through the physical beatings that parents inflict on their children. Murad’s father beats and humiliates him but it is only when he lifts his hand against Murad’s mother, that the son suddenly rebels against his physical abuse. In the case of Safeena it falls to her mother to school her into the expectations that society holds for young women. Safeena always finds ways to circumvent those limitations. She has dreams and aspirations of her own. She does not subscribe to the rules of femininity. We see this first when she beats up a potential rival. This incident sparks laughter and amusement. Later she attacks Sky (Kalki Koechlin) with a bottle. The incident has the potential to turn serious and derail her life if Sky lodges a complaint. Sky could have been seriously injured. The two characters never become friends but a glimpse of the social freedom that Sky enjoys provokes Safeena into telling her parents she wants to lead a normal life, wants to go for parties, wear lip stick, meet boys openly. Her mother beats her up in retaliation. This generational use of violence to suppress and control is part of the angst that runs through the film. Violence is firmly enmeshed with authority and power. Police brutality in Dharavi slums is almost taken

for granted and we hear jokes about it in the song “Meri Gully Mein”.

The songs also reveal another side to life in the slums. Friendships thrive in the dusty streets of Dharavi, as friends share cigarettes and tease each other. The upbeat music is coupled with visible pride and a sense of belonging. “Prayer, aarti aur namaaz” exemplifies the secular nature of life in the Dharavi pockets. Houses may be small but the hearts are big and people who live lives of such dire poverty are still generous and quick to help each other. Dharavi is not just the grim, drug addled, crime infested slum that we imagine it to be. It is also the location of an almost carnivalesque celebration of life.

Murad’s journey as a rapper progresses speedily from his first performance among a friendly crowd to rap combats, the recording studio and finally a live performance. He is aided in his journey by the wisdom and generosity of M.C. Sher, who teaches him to put words and thoughts into rhythm. He teaches Murad to focus on content because strong content is what draws audiences to rap music. It is real life content, things rappers have actually gone through, situations they have actually encountered which lend a rap song its authenticity and originality. However Murad is carried away by the admiration of his new friends. Thus he has an affair with Sky as his career begins to take off his relationships fall apart. His closest friend resents the fact that Murad is ashamed of him and will not introduce him to his well-heeled new friends. Safeena moves away as Sky moves closer. His best friend and the love of his life are increasingly alienated from him as he integrates into the rap culture of graffiti and parties. Murad must do some intense self-searching in order to understand just what he wants and who he really is. In a pivotal moment of the film he tells Kalki life without Safeena is like growing up without ever being a child. She is his bed rock and strongest supporter.

Murad’s entry into the recording studio marks the first step to becoming a serious rapper. The juxtaposition of the recording studio where rap is recorded and the call of the muezzin at the mosque is dramatically symbolic. He receives his identity as “gully boy” while he is wearing a prayer cap. This symbolizes a central conflict of loyalties within Murad. Ironically it is when his uncle congratulates him for not giving up his main chance in life that Murad finally and completely embraces his destiny. He is a rapper. It is time for the final combat.

In the final combat Sharule attacks him at his greatest point of weakness. His lack of self-confidence based on where he comes from and the life that he has led. He mocks his attire and his attitude. “Kachremeintupaltahain” (you grow up in the rubbish). He ends by throwing a rupee coin at him and urging him to buy his mother a saree.

Murad picks up the coin. He closes his eyes and puts the microphone to his heart. The flow that erupts has the entire hall jumping to its feet.

The song begins with the question “Kaun bola mujhsena ho payega?” (Who said I will not be able to do it?) It goes on to document a moment in time when fear has been lost. The words flow like lava and will melt the chains that have bound people like Murad. Their dreams can no longer be buried, They will no longer be silenced by fear.

“Harraastekocheerenge

Ham kaamyabicheenenge”

We will push through and we will succeed. It as if a generation has declared “Our time has come”.

The struggle to put his own experience and emotions into words has transformed Murad into an artist. Rap has given him self-worth and identity. He has made his choices. His dream will no longer be divorced from reality. He will make his reality live up to his dream. The song is autobiographical, tracing his struggle and inner doubts. It also borrows of braggadocio rap as he declares that he is the “hardest” rapper of them all. The song is the voice of a generation that is coming into its own. It has overcome its doubts and fears.

Does he lose his flow for a moment? Safeena’s shout “Shabaash Murad” brings him back into battle mode. The outcome of the contest is a foregone conclusion. Murad, the “Gully Boy” have fused into one.

Gully Boy is a rapper’s coming of age story. Murad must learn to stand up to his father’s violence and to social realities that would keep him down. Perhaps more dangerous than his father’s physical abuse is the emotional pressure of living up to the opportunities that his uncle provides him. The predicament is captured in the lyrics of the song “Ek Hee Raasta^{ix}”. There is a straight road on which everyone walks, in a linear journey towards their destination. They walk with closed eyes, not asking any questions, just walking without even thinking. A bend comes in the road, a detour, an untrodden path. Only the crazy people follow that path. The rest keep moving like zombies on the straight route, with a secret regret of having said no to adventure and to life.

The final scene of the film has Murad performing at a concert by Nas. He has won the contest, won a substantial amount of money and won his spurs as a rapper. In some ways Nas is the absent centre of the story. One of the most powerful MC’s ever, Nasir Jones became hip hop’s chosen one when he dropped Illmatic and cemented his reputation as New York hip hop’s savior. “NY Se Mumbai feat. Nas”^x by Naezy and Divine is the end credit song of Gully Boy and pays tribute to the man who inspired a generation of rappers in India. Nas is executive producer of the film. It weaves together countries and cultures in a truly global production. While Naezy, Divine and Ranveer recorded out of Mumbai, the record was developed with AO producers XD Pro in Toronto; iLLWayno of Mass Appeal Records, who worked alongside the AO A&R team in New York and Nas in Los Angeles.

Gully Boy as Hip Hop Cinema

Regina N. Bradley’s essay on Hip- Hop Cinema provides a useful framework within which to explore the reception and impact of Gully Boy. She writes:

“For nearly half a century, hip-hop has served as a mouthpiece for exploring the marginalized experiences of black and brown people in the United States and abroad. Hip-hop was more than a popular cultural expression. It served as a context for complicating and recognizing a transition into a post-civil rights movement era.”^{xi}

Rap is the soul of the film Gully Boy. Fifty two rappers have collaborated together to create the soundtrack for the film. The bulk of the raps contain messages and warnings. “India 91” brings together some of the vernacular rappers and we are treated to rap from places like Amravati and Dharavi and rap in Gujarati, Marathi and Punjabi. The recurring themes are a call for a revolution and a rant against fake rappers. “Jingosthan”^{xii} blazes with the violence which is often associated with rap music. “Drag them, scratch them, bruise them, kill them” the rap drones on. The year is 2018, the country is in danger. It’s time to spread hatred, to cheat and lie. The title of the song points directly at the jingoistic nationalistic discourse which is rampant in the country. Though the song speaks of violence, it is a sardonic take on the violence simmering within the country.

Azaadi continues with the political critique. It is an anthem of freedom from hunger, discrimination and backwardness. It takes a direct shot at the Swacchta Abhiyaan by stating that the intentions of our leaders are not clean. If you want education, water in your taps, or your own land in your own name, you will have to pay money. Then what option does a poor man have except to resort to drug peddling and crime?

The song goes on to “diss” politicians and a system of justice that is based on gross injustice. Religion is man-made and is being used by man for his own purposes. It’s time to speak up and to fight for freedom

One of the reasons that rap has had difficulty with gaining mainstream respectability lies in its misogynistic tenor. Feminists have often derided rap for its hyper masculinity. Women are stereotypes as whores or groupies. Men are cast as pimps or players. Gully Boy tackles this bias against women in the heckling of the woman rapper who refuses to conform to sexualised notions of what a woman should be. When she leaves the stage after being humiliated, MC Sher’ srap song “Sher Aaya Sher” attacks toxic masculinity. The men who had heckled the woman leave quietly like sheep while Murad rushes over in admiration to participate in the rap.

The character of “Sky” played by Kalki Keochelin, is also informed by an understanding of alternative roles for women within hip hop culture. She is the producer of Murad’s video, she studies music at the Berkeley School of Music at Boston. She is free spirited, intelligent and sexually liberated.

Gully Boy mobilized a whole army of rappers in order to evolve the script and dialogues. Gully Boy owes its soul and texture to the involvement of real life rappers who were involved in the film and who are part of the underground hip hop scene in Mumbai.

Rap has often been associated clearly with a Black aesthetic but increasingly Indians have begun to tap into the resistance and rebellion encased in rap in order to articulate their own identities. The movement began with the diasporic Indians who felt invisible within mainstream white Europe, Britain and America. They used rap to empower themselves and find their identities. Thus Apache Indian and other rappers became well known abroad. Now rap has come to our coasts like a tidal wave. There are commercial reasons for the new found interest in rap. There is encouragement. And then there is Gully Boy, a film that uses rap to talk about social issues but also is a film that actively seeks to promote rap. It is India’s first sample of rap cinema.

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ⁱ<https://qz.com/india/1545251/watch-indias-election-campaign-is-now-a-rap-battle-between-the-bjp-or-the-congress>
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=meOqJ5iGzj8>

ⁱⁱ<https://www.bing.com/videos/search?q=bjp+rap+apna+time+aayega&view=detail&mid=49CB95DC3B215E56615449CB95DC3B215E566154&F>

ⁱⁱⁱ<https://www.siasat.com/news/congress-versus-bjp-azadi-rap-songs-go-viral-1465790/>

^{iv}<https://youtu.be/pGmbUdf6IEM>

^v<https://youtu.be/hI8a14Qcv68>

^{vi}<https://youtu.be/M81wne.SjQbA>

^{vii}<https://youtu.be/9Wsi&YT12nY>

^{viii}<https://youtu.be/QPGmwRNkffc>

^{ix}<https://youtu.be/iJwMkSII1sFY>

^x<https://youtu.be/cZSJRmd5gmg>

^{xi}Regina N. Bradley. “Introduction: Hip-Hop Cinema as a lens of Contemporary Black Realities” *Black camera* vol.8 no.2, 2017. Pg 141

^{xii}<https://youtu.be/3XpzKIk24YA>

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