

Research Article

Protagonists Who Must Lose: Sacrifice, Renunciation and Ethical Centrality in Contemporary Hindi Cinema

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Abstract

Romantic narratives in Hindi cinema frequently feature characters whose significance extends beyond the conventional fulfilment of love, occupying a space defined by ethical, emotional and psychological labour. This paper examines four such figures: Anirudh (*Yugpurush*, 1998), Dev (*Dhadkan*, 2000), Aman (*Kal Ho Naa Ho*, 2003) and Kundan (*Raanjhanaa*, 2013). Though central to their stories, none of them attains conventional romantic success. Each embodies a distinct form of sacrifice and moral engagement: Anirudh's renunciation emerges from childhood trauma and psychological fragility; Dev negotiates desire, social constraint and eventual ethical growth; Aman consciously relinquishes love to secure the happiness of others; and Kundan's obsessive devotion produces suffering and a delayed moral awakening that ends in ethical clarity. Across fifteen years of cinematic production, these narratives show that the power of such protagonists lies not in romantic union but in shaping the emotional and ethical trajectories of others and in driving narrative resolution. Together they exemplify the archetype of the "protagonist who must lose", in which personal loss is inseparable from moral centrality and relational influence. The paper argues that heroism in Hindi cinema can be measured through ethical labour, sacrifice and the transformative impact of love rather than through conventional romantic attainment.

Keywords

Hindi cinema, sacrifice, renunciation, ethical centrality, narrative ethics

1. Introduction

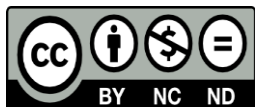
Hindi cinema has long positioned romantic narratives at the heart of its popular and cultural imagination, often privileging stories of union, fulfilment and emotional closure. Yet, alongside the lovers who attain happiness, these narratives repeatedly produce figures whose significance lies not in romantic

success but in emotional endurance, moral labour and ethical sacrifice. Such characters complicate conventional cinematic heroism, shifting attention away from possession and victory towards loss, restraint and responsibility. Scholars of narrative ethics argue that cinema frequently constructs moral meaning

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not through outcomes but through the emotional and ethical journeys that characters undergo (Nussbaum 19). In this sense, Hindi romantic cinema offers fertile ground for examining alternative forms of heroism that emerge through renunciation rather than reward.

Across decades, Hindi films have consistently foregrounded protagonists whose love remains unfulfilled yet central to the narrative's ethical structure. These figures function as emotional anchors, absorbing trauma, facilitating others' happiness and sustaining moral order even at great personal cost. Their suffering is not incidental but narratively productive, enabling transformation in other characters and resolution within the story world. Such portrayals resonate with classical understandings of the tragic hero, where loss arises not from moral failure but from an excess of commitment, misrecognition or ethical conflict. Aristotle's conception of tragedy emphasises error (*hamartia*) and emotional purification (*catharsis*), suggesting that audiences are invited to recognise virtue precisely through suffering rather than triumph (Aristotle 1453a–1453b).

At the same time, these cinematic figures are embedded within culturally specific ethical frameworks. Indian philosophical traditions have long privileged *tyāga* (renunciation) and *niṣkāma karma*¹ (action without attachment to reward) as modes of ethical fulfilment rather than defeat. Renunciation, in this context, does not signify withdrawal from the world but an active moral stance shaped by relational responsibility. As Bimal N. Patel notes, Indian ethical thought frequently locates virtue in restraint and duty rather than in individual desire (Patel 74). Hindi cinema translates these philosophical values into affective narratives in which protagonists relinquish personal happiness to sustain emotional or moral equilibrium.

The emotional labour performed by these characters also aligns with what contemporary ethicists describe as a relational or care-based moral framework. Carol Gilligan's ethics of care foregrounds attentiveness, responsibility and responsiveness as ethical acts rooted in relationships rather than abstract rules (Gilligan 30). Characters who choose silence over confrontation, withdrawal over possession or sacrifice over assertion exemplify this moral orientation, redefining heroism as the capacity to care even at the cost of self-erasure. This ethical positioning is further intensified when sacrifice is shaped by psychological vulnerability or trauma. Trauma theorists argue that unresolved loss often manifests through repetition, bodily memory and emotional compulsion rather than conscious choice (Caruth 4). Hindi cinema frequently visualises this condition, presenting protagonists whose ethical decisions are inseparable from psychological fracture.

Moreover, these figures challenge dominant constructions of masculinity within popular cinema. Rather than embodying power, conquest or control, they perform vulnerability, emotional openness and restraint, traits that destabilise hegemonic masculine ideals. In Roland Barthes's terms, the repeated

naturalisation of sacrificial suffering transforms such characters into cultural myths, rendering loss itself a marker of moral authenticity (Barthes, *Mythologies* 142). Through repetition across eras, the "losing" protagonist becomes legible as an ethical centre rather than a narrative casualty.

This paper focuses on four such figures: Anirudh (*Yugpurush*, 1998), Dev (*Dhadkan*, 2000), Aman (*Kal Ho Naa Ho*, 2003) and Kundan (*Raanjhanaa*, 2013), whose narratives span fifteen years of Hindi cinema and yet converge on a shared ethical trajectory. The study examines how these protagonists, despite failing to achieve romantic union, remain central through sacrifice, renunciation and moral labour. It argues that they constitute an enduring archetype, the "protagonist who must lose", through which Hindi cinema redefines heroism beyond romantic fulfilment and reorients narrative value towards ethical and emotional transformation. The argument proceeds from a close reading of each figure, through the emotional labour, renunciation and revaluation of romantic success that they share, to their function as moral guides and the evolution of the archetype between 1998 and 2013.

3. Analysis and Discussion

Four Modes of Sacrifice

A closer reading of each protagonist reveals how sacrifice in contemporary Hindi cinema is not merely a narrative device but a sustained ethical position shaped by trauma, masculinity, cultural duty and moral self-fashioning. While all four figures lose romantically, the nature of their loss differs significantly, reflecting distinct psychological structures and ethical orientations that complicate the idea of cinematic heroism.

Anirudh in *Yugpurush* represents sacrifice as a deeply internalised moral stance rooted in psychic injury. His renunciation is not heroic flamboyance but a quiet withdrawal shaped by childhood trauma and emotional fragility. This condition can be illuminated through psychoanalytic trauma theory: Cathy Caruth argues that trauma is marked by belatedness and repetition, compelling the subject to relive loss without resolution (Caruth 11). Anirudh's refusal to claim love can thus be read as a defensive ethical posture, an unconscious effort to prevent the recurrence of abandonment or harm. His moral engagement aligns with what Freud terms melancholia, in which loss is internalised rather than overcome (Freud, "Mourning" 245). Yet this inward suffering is culturally legitimised through the Indian ethical framework of renunciation (*tyāga*), in which moral superiority is achieved through self-denial rather than conquest. Anirudh's sacrifice therefore exists at the intersection of psychological vulnerability and culturally sanctioned restraint.

Dev in *Dhadkan* embodies sacrifice through moral patience and emotional regulation within a rigid social order. His suffering is structured less by trauma than by negotiated

masculinity. R. W. Connell's theory of hegemonic masculinity, which emphasises dominance, possession and success, is subtly subverted here (Connell 77). Dev does not ultimately assert control over the beloved; instead, he accepts social defeat while preserving emotional fidelity. His moral engagement is marked by endurance rather than aggression, suggesting an alternative masculine ethic grounded in emotional discipline. This aligns with what Charles Taylor calls the "ethics of authenticity", in which moral worth arises from fidelity to one's inner moral compass rather than from external validation (Taylor, *Ethics* 26). Dev's sacrifice is ethical precisely because it resists entitlement, allowing him to mature morally even in loss.

Aman in *Kal Ho Naa Ho* offers perhaps the most consciously articulated form of sacrifice, in which loss is strategically embraced to secure the happiness of others. His moral engagement is future-oriented, anticipatory and relational. Drawing on Emmanuel Levinas's philosophy, Aman's actions exemplify ethical responsibility as infinite obligation to the Other (Levinas 83). His refusal of romantic fulfilment is rooted not in incapacity or social constraint but in ethical foresight: he chooses absence so that others may live fully. Unlike traditional tragic heroes, Aman suffers in a register aestheticised through humour and charm, with pain masked by performative optimism. This resonates with Judith Butler's notion of performativity, as Aman repeatedly enacts joy to stabilise the emotional world around him (Butler, *Gender Trouble* 179). His sacrifice becomes a moral performance that sustains communal affect, positioning self-erasure as an ethical act.

Kundan in *Raanjhanaa*, by contrast, represents a volatile and ethically ambiguous form of sacrifice. His devotion is obsessive, repetitive and resistant to transformation for much of the narrative. Psychoanalytic readings of compulsive repetition, in which desire persists despite repeated injury, are particularly relevant here (Freud, *Beyond* 18). Kundan's suffering initially lacks ethical clarity; it is self-centred, fuelled by wounded masculinity and emotional fixation. His eventual moral awakening, however, reframes his loss as ethical recognition rather than mere obsession. This delayed transformation echoes Aristotle's concept of *anagnorisis*, the moment of tragic recognition that converts suffering into moral insight (Aristotle 1452a). Kundan's sacrifice acquires ethical weight only at the point where he relinquishes ownership over love and accepts responsibility for the harm he has inflicted.

Taken together, these characters reveal that sacrifice in Hindi cinema is neither monolithic nor uniformly virtuous. It emerges through varied negotiations with trauma, masculinity, care and cultural ethics. Indian philosophical traditions, particularly *dharma*ⁱⁱ, *tyāga* and *niṣkāma karma*, provide an ethical vocabulary that legitimises loss as moral action rather than failure (Radhakrishnan 92). These protagonists do not merely lose love; they redistribute emotional energy, stabilise social worlds and enable others' fulfilment. Their moral engagement

transforms suffering into narrative authority, reinforcing the figure of the "protagonist who must lose" as ethically central rather than narratively marginal. Contemporary Hindi cinema thus redefines heroism through sacrifice, positioning loss not as negation but as a profound mode of ethical being.

The Burden of Sacrifice: Emotional and Moral Labour

In Hindi romantic cinema, the protagonist who must lose is repeatedly tasked with an intense form of emotional and ethical labour that sustains the narrative's moral universe. This labour is neither incidental nor passive; it involves the continuous regulation of desire, the suppression of resentment and the internalisation of responsibility for others' emotional well-being. Such figures function as what Arlie Hochschild describes as emotional labourers: individuals who manage feelings not for personal fulfilment but to maintain social harmony (Hochschild 7). In cinematic terms, this labour is rendered visible through restraint, silence and self-effacement rather than overt action.

Across the selected films, Anirudh embodies ethical steadfastness rooted in renunciation, in which moral duty overrides romantic entitlement. He sacrifices his sanity and personal happiness while supporting Sunita and Ranjan, ultimately descending into madness after Sunita's death. His emotional labour aligns with the Indian philosophical ideal of *niṣkāma karma*, which emphasises action performed without attachment to results (*Bhagavad-gītā* 2.47). Dev, by contrast, demonstrates emotional endurance and moral patience, sustaining love without reciprocity and finally relinquishing his desire when Anjali marries Ram, accepting her happiness as paramount. His suffering exemplifies Martha Nussbaum's notion that emotions can function as instruments of moral perception rather than as weakness (Nussbaum 37).

Aman performs emotional labour through humour and care, masking personal vulnerability while encouraging Naina's happiness. He renounces his own feelings because of his terminal illness and guides her towards Rohit, exemplifying Gilligan's ethics of care, in which moral action is situated within relational responsibility (Gilligan 31). Kundan absorbs emotional injury through his obsessive love for Zoya, inadvertently causes Akram's death, and later moves towards ethical atonement. His trajectory resonates with Caruth's trauma theory, which emphasises repetition and compulsion in response to loss (Caruth 4).

Collectively, these protagonists transform loss into moral currency. Their emotional labour stabilises social relationships, enables others' happiness and preserves ethical continuity within the narrative. Through sustained sacrifice, they reframe heroism as endurance rather than attainment, positioning emotional suffering as an indispensable narrative and moral force.

These sacrifices can also be understood as performances of cultural, ethical and gendered codes. If the preceding

discussion emphasised endurance and ethical centrality, the readings that follow attend to how each character negotiates social norms, masculinity, relational ethics and cultural scripts of duty and love.

Anirudh can be read through existentialist ethics (Sartre 42)- his voluntary withdrawal from conventional romantic fulfilment reflects a deliberate choice to define meaning through moral action rather than desire. His artistic pursuits, notably the creation of portraits, function as symbolic acts of bearing witness, paralleling Jacques Rancière's account of aesthetic politics, in which art becomes a site of ethical engagement and social recognition (Rancière 21). His psychic fragility amplifies the weight of *niṣkāma karma*, yet his choices signal active ethical responsibility rather than mere passivity.

Dev illustrates the intersection of hegemonic and counter-hegemonic masculinity (Connell 77) in a post-liberalisation urban context. His moral endurance is structured not only by love but by adherence to social norms and relational ethics. His attempts to reclaim Anjali, and his eventual recognition that he cannot, mark a mature negotiation of desire and social constraint, transforming personal suffering into a stabilising ethical force within the narrative.

Aman's future-oriented ethical labour, discussed above in Levinasian terms, also resonates with *dharma* and *loka-saṃgraha*ⁱⁱⁱ, in which moral action contributes to communal harmony and the welfare of others (Radhakrishnan 92). His anticipatory care extends well beyond immediate self-interest, ordering the lives of those around him towards a stability he will not live to share.

Unlike Aman or Dev, Kundan begins with an obsessive attachment that constitutes ethically ambiguous labour. His eventual transformation, in which he recognises harm, relinquishes possession and attempts atonement, positions him as a tragic ethical agent and shows that loss and moral awakening can coexist with human fallibility. His narrative also intersects with the Indian notions of *karma*^{iv} and *dharma*, which lend cultural validation to ethical sacrifice and moral correction.

Renunciation as Ethical Imperative

In contemporary Hindi cinema, renunciation frequently operates not as passive withdrawal but as an ethical necessity that reconfigures heroism beyond romantic fulfilment. The protagonists under discussion (Anirudh, Dev, Aman and Kundan) do not merely fail to achieve love; they are narratively compelled to relinquish it. This renunciation functions as an ethical imperative, positioning moral responsibility, emotional restraint and relational accountability above individual desire. Such a framework challenges the dominant cinematic logic of romantic attainment and aligns these figures with philosophical traditions that understand loss as a condition of ethical subjectivity.

From a Western ethical standpoint, renunciation resonates strongly with Aristotelian tragedy, in which the hero's fall is

not accidental but ethically instructive. Aristotle argues that tragedy produces catharsis through the spectacle of suffering bound to moral error or limitation (*hamartia*) (Aristotle 1449b). In this sense, Anirudh's withdrawal, Dev's acceptance, Aman's deliberate self-erasure and Kundan's final self-sacrifice constitute ethically meaningful losses that generate moral clarity rather than nihilism. Their renunciation is not weakness but a narrative mechanism through which ethical insight is produced.

Emmanuel Levinas's philosophy of ethics as responsibility to the Other further illuminates this imperative. Levinas asserts that ethical subjectivity begins not with freedom but with obligation: an asymmetrical responsibility that precedes desire (Levinas 83). Aman's renunciation most explicitly embodies this position, since his refusal of love is motivated by an infinite responsibility towards others' futures rather than by personal fulfilment. Similarly, Dev's emotional restraint reflects an ethical prioritisation of the beloved's well-being over possessive entitlement, transforming renunciation into an act of moral care.

Judith Butler's work on vulnerability and ethical relationality offers a further lens. Butler argues that ethical life emerges from recognising one's own precariousness and the interdependence of human bonds (Butler, *Precarious Life* 23). Renunciation, in this framework, is not self-negation but an acknowledgement of shared fragility. Anirudh's retreat from romantic assertion, shaped by psychological vulnerability, exemplifies an ethics grounded in self-awareness rather than domination. His renunciation signals an ethical refusal to impose his wounded self on another's emotional life.

The ethics of renunciation can also be read through Charles Taylor's notion of moral frameworks, in which individuals orient their actions towards what they perceive as higher goods (Taylor, *Sources* 26). For these protagonists, romantic fulfilment is subordinated to moral goods such as care, responsibility and social harmony. This is particularly evident in Dev and Aman, whose sacrifices are framed as ethically coherent choices rather than tragic accidents. Their losses articulate a moral horizon in which love gains value precisely through relinquishment.

Psychoanalytic ethics further complicate this terrain. Freud's concept of sublimation suggests that renounced desire does not disappear but is redirected into socially meaningful action (Freud, *Civilization* 53). Kundan's trajectory, especially in its latter phase, reflects this movement: his destructive obsession is eventually transformed into political commitment and ethical accountability. Although delayed and fraught, his renunciation ultimately acquires ethical significance through recognition of harm and acceptance of consequence, aligning with Paul Ricoeur's account of narrative identity, in which selfhood is shaped through responsibility for one's actions (Ricoeur 114).

Indian philosophical traditions provide a culturally resonant

ethical grammar for understanding such renunciation. The concept of *niṣkāma karma* in the *Bhagavad Gītā* emphasises action without attachment to results, framing renunciation not as inaction but as ethical detachment (*Bhagavad-gītā* 2.47). Aman's and Dev's sacrifices closely mirror this principle: love motivates ethical action but does not demand personal reward. Their renunciation is thus not a denial of desire but its ethical purification.

Similarly, the ideal of *tyāga* within Hindu ethical thought positions self-sacrifice as a pathway to moral elevation rather than loss. Radhakrishnan notes that renunciation in Indian philosophy is not the negation of life but the transcendence of selfish desire (Radhakrishnan 92). Anirudh's quiet withdrawal aligns with this tradition, in which moral authority emerges through restraint and inward discipline. His refusal to compete for love situates him within an ethical economy that values inner equilibrium over external success.

The concept of *dharma* further reinforces renunciation as ethical duty. *Dharma*, as moral order and responsibility, often requires personal sacrifice for collective harmony (Sharma 61). Kundan's eventual acceptance of responsibility, despite its tragic cost, reflects a late but significant alignment with *dharmaic* ethics. His death is framed not as romantic martyrdom but as ethical reckoning, in which renunciation becomes the final means of restoring moral balance.

Across these narratives, renunciation functions as an ethical imperative that redefines cinematic heroism. These protagonists do not lose because they are inadequate lovers; they lose because the narrative assigns them the ethical labour of restraint, care and responsibility. Their sacrifices expose the limits of possessive love and foreground an ethics in which moral worth is measured by what one is willing to relinquish. In doing so, contemporary Hindi cinema reclaims renunciation as a powerful ethical act, one that transforms loss into moral centrality rather than narrative defeat.

Love and Loss: Reframing Romantic Success

Romantic success in Hindi cinema has traditionally been measured through attainment: union, marriage and the social legitimisation of love. The narrative arc conventionally rewards perseverance with possession, reinforcing romance as a teleological journey culminating in fulfilment. The protagonists examined in this paper (Anirudh, Dev, Aman and Kundan) disrupt this paradigm by redefining romantic success not as possession but as emotional influence, ethical transformation and narrative centrality. Their stories suggest that love, when severed from attainment, acquires a different kind of value, one rooted in affective depth and moral consequence rather than closure.

Denis de Rougemont's account of romantic love is instructive here. Rougemont contrasts the "passion" of the Tristan legend, which thrives on obstacles and suffering, with the love that marriage and fulfilment stabilise (Rougemont 43). These

protagonists inhabit the space of passion, in which loss sustains emotional intensity. Aman's unfulfilled love, for instance, remains narratively potent precisely because it is denied resolution. The absence of romantic closure does not weaken his love but renders it ethically and emotionally expansive.

Roland Barthes's *A Lover's Discourse* (1977) further re-frames romantic success as a subjective experience rather than a social outcome. Barthes suggests that love exists most intensely in language, longing and anticipation rather than in fulfilment (Barthes, *Lover's Discourse* 21). Anirudh's silences and emotional restraint exemplify this condition: his love is never actualised, yet it structures his identity and the emotional landscape of the narrative. Romantic success, here, is measured not by reciprocity but by the depth of affective inscription.

The Freudian understanding of melancholia also offers insight into love structured around loss. Freud differentiates mourning, which resolves loss, from melancholia, in which loss becomes internalised and constitutive of the self (Freud, "Mourning" 249). Kundan's trajectory exemplifies melancholic love: his inability to relinquish Zoya does not result in romantic fulfilment but shapes his political identity and ethical reckoning. While destructive in its early stages, this internalised loss ultimately generates narrative meaning, suggesting that romantic success may lie in transformation rather than possession.

Narrative theory reinforces this shift. Peter Brooks argues that narrative desire is driven not by endings but by the tension between anticipation and delay (Brooks 52). These protagonists sustain narrative momentum precisely because they do not "win". Aman's continued presence after romantic defeat, Dev's moral evolution and Kundan's delayed ethical awakening all demonstrate that romantic loss can intensify narrative investment. Their emotional endurance becomes the story's driving force, redefining success as narrative indispensability.

Audience reception further complicates conventional notions of romantic triumph. Affect theory suggests that viewers are often more deeply moved by loss than by fulfilment, as unresolved desire invites empathy and identification (Ahmed 119). Aman's death, for instance, generates enduring cultural resonance precisely because his love remains incomplete. The audience's emotional attachment depends not on romantic closure but on perceived moral sincerity and sacrifice. Romantic success thus shifts from diegetic fulfilment to affective impact.

Indian philosophical traditions offer parallel frameworks for understanding love detached from attainment. The ethic of *niṣkāma karma* in the *Bhagavad Gītā* (*Bhagavad-gītā* 2.47), extended from action to affection, suggests a model of love without attachment to outcome, which reframes romance as ethical action rather than reward-driven desire. Aman's and Dev's emotional journeys align with this vision, in which love motivates care and responsibility without demanding reciprocity. Romantic success, within this framework, is measured

through ethical alignment rather than possession.

The concept of *viraha* (separation) in *bhakti* and classical Indian aesthetics further elevates loss as a site of emotional and spiritual intensity. Scholars note that longing often surpasses union in devotional and romantic traditions, as absence sharpens affective experience (Hardy 67). Anirudh's restrained affection and Kundan's obsessive devotion resonate with this tradition, in which love achieves profundity through separation rather than fulfilment.

Additionally, the *Nāṭyaśāstra*'s theory of *karuṇa rasa* (the aesthetic of sorrow) legitimises loss as a source of emotional richness rather than failure. *Karuṇa rasa* transforms suffering into reflective empathy, allowing audiences to experience loss as meaningful rather than empty (Bharata 298). These protagonists function as vessels of this *rasa*, inviting audiences to re-evaluate romantic success through emotional depth rather than narrative victory.

The notion of *dharma* also shapes this reframing. *Dharma* prioritises moral duty over personal desire, often requiring renunciation for collective or relational harmony (Sharma 74). Dev's acceptance of loss and Aman's deliberate withdrawal exemplify this ethic, in which romantic sacrifice ensures ethical coherence. Their success lies not in winning love but in upholding moral order.

Collectively, these narratives dismantle the equation of romance with attainment. By privileging emotional labour, ethical influence and narrative centrality, they propose an alternative model of romantic success, one rooted in how love transforms others, sustains narrative meaning and resonates with audiences. Loss, rather than negating love, intensifies its ethical and emotional significance. In reframing romantic success through love and loss, contemporary Hindi cinema acknowledges that some protagonists must lose not because they fail at love, but because their love exceeds the limits of fulfilment.

The Protagonist as Moral Compass

In the romantic narratives under consideration, Anirudh, Dev, Aman and Kundan function not merely as lovers or tragic figures but as moral compasses whose actions, silences and sacrifices guide the ethical trajectories of those around them. Even when positioned outside the final romantic union, these protagonists exert a decisive influence on narrative resolution, shaping outcomes through restraint, renunciation and ethical action. Their heroism emerges less through triumph or dominance than through moral calibration, enabling other characters, and the narrative itself, to arrive at ethical clarity.

Western moral philosophy provides a useful framework for understanding this function. Alasdair MacIntyre's conception of narrative ethics posits that moral agency is intelligible only within the context of lived stories, in which individuals orient others through exemplary action rather than abstract principles (MacIntyre 217). These protagonists embody such

narrative ethics. Aman's consistent prioritisation of Naina's happiness over his own desire, for instance, becomes the ethical axis around which Rohit's transformation unfolds. Rohit's eventual maturity and acceptance are not self-generated but catalysed by Aman's moral example.

Similarly, Levinas's ethics of responsibility emphasises the primacy of the Other, arguing that ethical subjectivity begins when one places the needs of another before one's own (Levinas 83). Aman's refusal to claim Naina's love, even when it is reciprocated, exemplifies this ethical orientation. His restraint compels others, particularly Rohit and Naina, to re-evaluate their own desires and responsibilities. In this sense Aman does not merely withdraw; he ethically reorders the narrative, allowing relationships to stabilise around responsibility rather than passion.

Dev's trajectory in *Dhadkan* offers a more overt illustration of moral guidance through transformation. Initially driven by wounded pride and possessive desire, Dev later redirects the narrative away from revenge and towards reconciliation. His final withdrawal restores ethical balance, permitting Ram and Anjali's marriage to survive intact. From a Hegelian perspective, this movement reflects ethical recognition, in which selfhood matures through acknowledging the legitimacy of others' claims (Hegel 111). Dev's recognition of Ram's moral integrity allows the narrative to resolve ethically, even though it entails personal loss.

Narrative theory further clarifies the moral function of these protagonists. Seymour Chatman's account of character as a set of traits that organises narrative coherence (Chatman 126) makes it possible to read certain characters as moral centres, whose choices determine the story's ethical shape rather than merely its plot. Anirudh's quiet withdrawal in *Yugpurush* exemplifies this role. His refusal to disrupt the social and emotional equilibrium, despite personal suffering, allows other characters to pursue stability. Though narratively subdued, Anirudh anchors the story's ethical gravity through restraint.

Kundan presents a more conflicted version of the moral compass. His early actions destabilise lives and relationships, yet his later acceptance of consequence restores ethical order. Ricoeur's account of narrative identity suggests that moral identity is shaped through accountability and the narrative re-evaluation of past actions (Ricoeur 179). Kundan's eventual willingness to face death, fully aware of Zoya's betrayal, signals ethical lucidity. His moral authority stems not from innocence but from the conscious acceptance of responsibility.

Indian philosophical traditions reinforce this understanding of restrained heroism. The concept of *dharma* emphasises moral duty over personal desire, often requiring self-effacement for collective harmony (Sharma 92). All four protagonists, in different measures, enact *dharma* by subordinating individual fulfilment to relational or social order. Dev's final renunciation, Aman's sustained self-denial and Anirudh's emotional withdrawal each represent ethical alignment rather

than defeat.

Niṣkāma karma, action without attachment to results, further illuminates their moral function. Krishna advocates action performed as duty, not for reward (*Bhagavad-gītā* 2.47). Aman's interventions in Naina's family and relationships exemplify such detached action: his moral authority derives precisely from his refusal to convert ethical labour into personal gain. Romantic success is irrelevant to his ethical stature.

Classical Indian aesthetics also recognise restraint as heroic. In the *Nāṭyaśāstra*, the ideal hero (*nāyaka*) need not dominate the narrative but must embody emotional and ethical balance, guiding the *rasa* experience of the audience (Bharata 304). These protagonists generate *karuṇa* (pathos) and *śānta* (tranquillity), allowing audiences to process suffering as ethically meaningful rather than chaotic. Their restraint invites reflection rather than spectacle.

Importantly, their moral influence extends beyond characters to audiences. Affect theorists argue that viewers internalise ethical cues through emotional alignment rather than explicit moralising (Plantinga 58). The restrained heroism of these protagonists fosters empathy and ethical contemplation, positioning loss as morally productive. Audiences are encouraged to value ethical coherence over romantic victory, reinforcing the protagonists' role as moral guides.

The heroism of Anirudh, Dev, Aman and Kundan thus lies not in conquering obstacles or securing love, but in stabilising ethical meaning within the narrative world. Through restraint, accountability and moral action, they direct others towards resolution, embodying a form of heroism that privileges ethical clarity over romantic success. As moral compasses, they demonstrate that some protagonists must lose precisely because their function is not to possess love but to orient it ethically.

Across Time: Evolution of the Archetype (1998–2013)

From Pathology to Ethical Consciousness

Between the late 1990s and the early 2010s, Hindi cinema witnessed a gradual yet significant transformation in the portrayal of the romantic protagonist who must lose. While earlier narratives often framed loss through psychological fragility or social marginality, later films increasingly positioned renunciation as a conscious ethical choice. This temporal shift reflects broader changes in cinematic storytelling, in which interiority, moral deliberation and self-awareness replace sheer emotional excess as markers of heroism.

Anirudh in *Yugpurush* (1998) represents an early articulation of this archetype, grounded in trauma and psychological vulnerability. His renunciation is less volitional than circumstantial, emerging from unresolved childhood loss and mental illness. From a psychoanalytic perspective, Anirudh's withdrawal reflects what Caruth identifies as trauma's compulsive repetition, in which the subject remains trapped in unresolved

affect rather than progressing towards narrative closure (Caruth 11). The protagonist's ethical position here is implicit rather than articulated; loss functions as inevitability rather than moral stance.

By *Dhadkan* (2000), the archetype begins to shift towards ethical evolution. Dev's initial aggression and entitlement gradually give way to self-reflection and restraint. His final renunciation is framed not as incapacity but as moral growth. This aligns with Charles Taylor's argument that identity is shaped through evaluative frameworks that distinguish higher from lower goods (Taylor, *Sources* 34). Dev's loss becomes ethically productive, marking a transitional phase between pathological suffering and conscious renunciation.

Renunciation as Choice: The Rise of Ethical Masculinity

The early 2000s mark a decisive turn in the representation of the losing protagonist, most clearly embodied by Aman in *Kal Ho Naa Ho* (2003). Unlike Anirudh or Dev, Aman suffers a loss that is entirely self-willed, grounded in foresight, responsibility and ethical reasoning. His heroism lies in choosing absence rather than being forced into it. This transition can be read alongside R. W. Connell's account of masculinities as plural and historically shifting, within which male identity may be organised around care, emotional labour and restraint rather than dominance (Connell 162).

Aman's renunciation is narratively foregrounded as sacrifice rather than failure. In Levinasian terms, his actions prioritise the happiness of the Other over the fulfilment of the self (Levinas 89). Importantly, the film grants Aman narrative centrality despite denying him romantic completion. This indicates a maturation of cinematic ethics, in which the moral weight of a character is decoupled from narrative reward.

The continuity across these films lies in the protagonist's emotional centrality; the difference lies in agency. Whereas late-1990s narratives frame loss as tragic inevitability, early-2000s cinema increasingly frames it as ethical authorship. The protagonist who must lose begins to resemble a variant of Aristotle's tragic hero, whose fall stems less from a fatal flaw than from an excess of virtue, particularly compassion and foresight (Aristotle 1453a).

Obsession, Guilt and Political Consciousness

By the time *Raanjhanaa* appears in 2013, the archetype has undergone further complication. Kundan's journey qualifies the moral clarity seen in Aman by reintroducing obsession, violence and political entanglement. Yet, unlike Anirudh's trauma-driven loss, Kundan's suffering culminates in ethical awareness. His final acceptance of death, fully conscious of betrayal and consequence, signals what Ricoeur describes as the refiguration of experience through narrative, in which the subject reassesses a life through ethical retrospection (Ricoeur 183).

Kundan's arc suggests that the losing protagonist can also function as a site of critique, of possessive love, ideological

rigidity and political manipulation. While earlier films idealise sacrifice, *Raanjhanaa* interrogates it, revealing the costs of delayed ethical awakening. Yet continuity persists: Kundan, like his predecessors, stabilises narrative meaning through loss. His death restores moral balance, exposing injustice and compelling confession.

This later portrayal reflects a cinema increasingly comfortable with moral ambiguity. The archetype no longer guarantees ethical purity but insists on accountability. In this sense, the evolution from 1998 to 2013 traces a movement from silent suffering to reflective loss, and from psychological enclosure to ethical exposure.

Continuities and Contexts: Loss as Narrative Necessity

Despite temporal shifts, a consistent thread binds these protagonists: their inability or refusal to secure romantic fulfilment is essential to narrative resolution. Drawing on Roland Barthes's notion of the "writerly" text, these characters invite interpretation rather than closure, compelling audiences to engage with ethical meaning rather than emotional gratification (Barthes, *S/Z* 5). Across fifteen years of Hindi cinema, the protagonist who must lose evolves in form but not in function. Whether traumatised, reforming, sacrificial or guilt-ridden, these figures anchor the narrative's moral universe. Their loss is not incidental but structurally necessary, ensuring that love, ethics and social order are recalibrated through absence rather than possession.

The evolving portrayal of the protagonist who must lose between 1998 and 2013 is inseparable from broader social, cultural and cinematic transformations in India. The late 1990s, marked by post-liberalisation uncertainty, often depicted emotional vulnerability and psychological rupture as individual crises. *Yugpurush*, emerging from this milieu, reflects a society grappling with instability, in which trauma and marginality remain largely private and untreated. Anirudh's withdrawal mirrors what Ashis Nandy identifies as the inward turn of Indian masculinity during periods of social dislocation, in which suffering is internalised rather than politicised (Nandy 63).

By the early 2000s, Hindi cinema increasingly aligned with aspirational middle-class values shaped by globalisation. Films such as *Dhadkan* and *Kal Ho Naa Ho* reflect a cultural shift towards emotional expressiveness, ethical negotiation and therapeutic resolution. Romance becomes a site of moral instruction rather than mere fantasy. This period also coincides with the rise of what Tejaswini Ganti terms "new Bollywood", characterised by polished narratives that privilege emotional maturity and moral clarity (Ganti 118). The losing protagonist, particularly Aman, resonates with audiences navigating the competing demands of desire, duty and self-actualisation.

By 2013, *Raanjhanaa* situates romantic loss within explicitly political and ideological contexts. The narrative reflects a post-2008 cultural climate marked by heightened political consciousness, disillusionment and ethical anxiety. Kundan's

journey exposes the dangers of obsessive love entwined with identity politics, aligning with Sudipta Kaviraj's observation that contemporary Indian narratives increasingly foreground ethical ambiguity and fractured subjectivity (Kaviraj 215–21).

Across time, then, the archetype adapts to shifting cultural sensibilities: from private trauma to ethical self-fashioning and finally to political accountability. The protagonist who must lose remains central, but the meaning of loss evolves alongside India's changing social imagination.

4. Conclusion

This study of Anirudh (*Yugpurush*, 1998), Dev (*Dhadkan*, 2000), Aman (*Kal Ho Naa Ho*, 2003) and Kundan (*Raanjhanaa*, 2013) underscores the enduring presence and evolution of the "protagonist who must lose" within Hindi cinema. Across fifteen years, these characters collectively exemplify an archetype that transcends the conventional paradigms of romantic fulfilment. Their significance lies not in attaining love but in mediating ethical and emotional trajectories, influencing other characters' growth and stabilising narrative resolution. This aligns with narrative-ethics theorists such as MacIntyre, who emphasises that moral agency emerges through lived storytelling, and Ricoeur, who situates ethical reflection in the refiguration of narrative experience (MacIntyre 217; Ricoeur 183).

In synthesising the findings, it becomes evident that the archetype operates on multiple interlocking levels. First, the protagonists embody emotional and moral labour, in which personal sacrifice enables others' flourishing. Anirudh's trauma-inflected withdrawal, Dev's ethical recalibration, Aman's deliberate self-effacement and Kundan's reconciliatory acceptance illustrate that moral authority in Hindi cinema is often proportional to the protagonist's willingness to endure loss. Second, these figures function as narrative anchors, guiding ethical trajectories and resolving relational tensions, and thereby demonstrating Aristotle's insight that the tragic hero's suffering is not only inevitable but ethically meaningful (Aristotle 1453a). Their heroism is realised not through conquest but through restraint, reflection and relational influence.

The archetype further reveals itself through narrative structure, which cues audiences to interpret suffering and absence as central rather than ancillary. Romantic loss becomes a vector for audience engagement with ethical dilemmas and emotional catharsis. In doing so, these films illustrate the productive tension between tragedy and moral pedagogy, suggesting that heroism in Hindi cinema is performative, relational and ethical rather than strictly romantic.

From a broader perspective, this archetype informs both film studies and narrative ethics. Theories of affect and reception highlight how audiences internalise ethical models through empathic engagement with protagonists (Plantinga

58). Historicist approaches reveal that such characters reflect the social anxieties, moral expectations and evolving notions of masculinity and relational ethics of India from the late 1990s to the 2010s (Nandy 63; Ganti 118). By situating these narratives within shifting cultural, political and economic contexts, one can trace a dialogue between cinematic representation and ethical imagination, demonstrating the medium's capacity to negotiate societal values and individual subjectivities.

Finally, the cultural specificity of the archetype deserves emphasis. Rooted in *dharma* and the ethics of renunciation, these characters enact moral labour that aligns with Hindu and broader Indic philosophical frameworks. Whether expressed through *niṣkāma karma* (*Bhagavad-gītā* 2.47), relational duty

or narrative restraint, the protagonists' losses reflect a culturally embedded understanding of heroism in which ethical centrality, social responsibility and relational sacrifice supersede personal gain. In this light, Hindi cinema's "protagonist who must lose" emerges as a model not only of tragic romance but of ethical agency, demonstrating that the moral arc of a story can be as compelling, instructive and culturally resonant as romantic resolution.

ⁱ*Niṣkāma karma*: in the *Bhagavad Gītā*, action performed without attachment to its results, motivated by duty rather than personal gain.

ⁱⁱ*Dharma* (from Sanskrit *dhṛ*, "to hold" or "to sustain"): in Vedic thought, the moral duty and ethical order that guide right conduct in personal, social and cosmic life.

ⁱⁱⁱ*Lokaśaṃgraha*: in the *Bhagavad Gītā*, action undertaken for the welfare, harmony and moral stability of society as a whole.

^{iv}*Karma*: in Vedic–Upaniṣadic thought, the principle of action and consequence, by which deeds shape moral responsibility and future outcomes.

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