

MARKED FOR ERASURE

Necropolitics, Gender and the Spectacle of Violence

MEGHNA PRABIR

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Marked for Erasure: Necropolitics, Gender and the Spectacle of Violence

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INVESTOR IN PEOPLE

Contents

Chapter 1 Introduction **1**

Chapter 2 Towards a Theory of Erasure: Conceptual Frameworks for Reading Violence **9**

Chapter 3 Watching Her Die: Voyeurism and the Re-enactment of Violence **33**

Chapter 4 Stocked Victims: The Iconography of Mediatised Womanhood **53**

Chapter 5 Queer Ecologies of Erasure: Animals, Consumption, and Necropolitical Desire **77**

Chapter 6 De-queering Shakespeares: Canon, Sanitisation, and the Erasure of Desire **105**

Chapter 7 Signs of Power: Language, Appropriation, and the Politics of Recognition **127**

Chapter 8 Conclusion: The Sound that Lingers **155**

References *165*

Index *169*

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Chapter 1

Introduction

The Stories We Refuse to Tell

If a tree falls in a forest and no one is there to hear it, does it make a sound? This thought experiment has long been treated as a puzzle about perception. However, when I think about it in the context of violence, it becomes something else entirely. If a person is assaulted and the world refuses to hear their story, does that violence matter? If a community is evicted from their land, and no one records their struggle, has the injustice occurred in the eyes of the world? If entire populations live in precarious conditions yet remain invisible in public narratives, what does that say about the ways humanity chooses to define itself?

The point is simple: silence is never neutral. Silence can be a weapon. To erase a life from public memory is not to forget but to actively deny recognition. Erasure is one of the most insidious forms of violence. Unlike acts that leave visible wounds, erasure thrives on absence. It makes people doubt whether what happened really mattered, or even whether it happened at all.

This book begins with that recognition: that silence and erasure shape our world just as much as noise and spectacle. Today, erasure does appear not only in silences but also in the endless churn of headlines, hashtags, and 'breaking news' alerts. Noise itself has become a form of forgetting. Graphic images looped without context, clichéd stock photos recycled across continents, crime reports reduced to lurid detail rather than careful explanation: all of these create a spectacle that buries meaning under repetition. In this sense, noise and silence work together. One makes us numb; the other makes us oblivious.

Urbanisation makes the paradox starker. Across the Global Majority (a term scholars are increasingly preferring to the Global South), entire populations live in spaces that remain invisible. The label 'majority' is deliberate, because these are not peripheral communities: they are most of the world. Yet, urban expansion ensures they are displaced, cleared, and renamed in the service of progress. A Delhi slum is demolished to make way for a flyover, a Rio favela is flattened before the Olympics, Indigenous land is seized for pipelines in North America, and villages in Africa are erased for mining projects. In each case, the official narrative frames it as beautification, modernisation, or development, but what about the

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people who are removed? They vanish into silence, becoming ghosts in their own cities. The falling trees are always real. What is denied is the sound.

What pushed me to write this book was not just the abstract recognition of these dynamics but a visceral moment when the refusal of agency became impossible to ignore. In August 2024, reports from RG Kar Medical College and Hospital in Kolkata shocked India. The case itself was horrific, and so was the way it was mediated. Within hours, television channels and online outlets blasted 'breaking news' headlines, layering them with sensational graphics and speculative commentary. Details were repeated salaciously, as if the only way to make the event legible was to make it graphic enough to consume.

For families and communities already in trauma, this coverage was another wound. Instead of compassion, there was spectacle. Instead of care, there was commodification. Violence was narrated not to bear witness but to generate outrage clicks and Television Rating Points. The case is a reminder, for me, that erasure does not always mean silence. Sometimes erasure arrives dressed as visibility, disguised in the form of relentless headlines, and recycled stock images. When violence is sensationalised rather than contextualised, it is erased twice over: once in the act, and again in the coverage.

This same phenomenon appears globally. In the coverage of genocides, for example, the media often offers little more than decontextualised statistics or shocking images. Aerial footage of bombed villages, rows of bodies wrapped in shrouds, streams of refugees: these images circulate widely. What disappears are the histories, the structures, and the voices of those affected. Genocide is presented as horror but stripped of its politics, as if violence erupts from nowhere. The spectacle numbs rather than clarifies. Once again, the falling tree is heard, but its sound is distorted until it carries no meaning.

That is why, throughout this book, I choose to write certain words with an asterisk: *r*pe*, *su*c*de*, *cr*zy*. We have become too comfortable throwing these words around casually, without thinking about the pain they carry. We have become desensitised to the weight of violence. By marking these words, I want to reinsert a pause, a moment of discomfort. I want to remind readers that violence is not ordinary, not neutral, not something to be repeated unthinkingly. The asterisk signals a refusal to be complicit in the casual circulation of trauma.

Language is never neutral. The words we use shape who is seen, who is heard, and who is recognised. This is why I avoid broad, homogenising terms such as 'Western' or 'Indian' without qualification. 'Western' is not a natural category: it lumps together diverse societies and naturalises the dominance of Europe and North America as if they represented the world. I will instead use more precise phrases, such as Euro-American centres or Euro-Atlantic hegemony, which name both geography and power without pretending universality. Similarly, 'Indian' is a dangerous shorthand. To speak of 'Indian cinema' as if it were one thing erases the multiplicity of traditions across languages and regions. Worse still is the word 'Bollywood', which began as parody, mocking the commercialism of Bombay cinema, but has hardened into a global brand that erases diversity and ties Indian culture parasitically to Hollywood. When I write 'mainstream Indian cinema', I mean specifically the big-budget films that

dominate global perception, not the rich traditions of independent cinema that resist this flattening.

Such choices may seem minor, but they are not. They reflect the central claim of this book: erasure operates not only through silence but also through the repetition of distorted narratives. Words can erase. Categories can erase. To resist erasure, we must resist the homogenisations that sustain it.

To see how starkly this plays out, it helps to look back. In 1933, Devika Rani starred in *Karma*, where she kissed her co-star on the mouth. At a time when India was still under colonial rule, this was an extraordinary act of autonomy. The kiss lasted around two minutes, making it one of the longest in global cinema at the time. It was bold and unapologetic, and it presented a woman as a desiring subject, not a euphemised metaphor.

She was not alone. In Egypt, Faten Hamama in the 1940s brought autonomy and adult desire to her roles without hiding behind symbols. In Mexico's Golden Age, María Félix became famous for her unapologetic strength, playing women who refused to be infantilised. Across different contexts, women enacted intimacy and autonomy without needing euphemistic smokescreens.

Yet, in later decades, these portrayals were erased. Mainstream Indian cinema replaced intimacy with absurd euphemisms: flowers brushing against each other and cutaways to waves or shadows. Egyptian and Mexican cinemas, too, moved towards safer portrayals under the pressure of censorship and conservatism. What was once autonomy became infantilisation. What was once bold became coy. What was once real became metaphor.

The regression is not progress but retreat. It parallels a larger cultural trend: as women's autonomy was euphemised, audiences were simultaneously fed sensationalised violence, celebrity gossip, and commodified trauma. Intimacy was veiled, but violence was put on display. Agency was hidden, but suffering was paraded. This is the smokescreen of modern media: it distracts from structural injustice with spectacle. It erases by overexposing.

This book argues that these shifts are not accidents. They are part of a necropolitical logic that decides which lives are intelligible and which are disposable, which stories are told and which are refused. To study erasure is to study power: who gets to define reality, whose humanity is recognised, whose suffering is grieved.

If intimacy is veiled while violence is made spectacle, what does this say about the logics of storytelling in our time? It says that media systems are not neutral recorders of reality but filters that decide what counts as visible and what must remain obscured. They are not passive mirrors. They are architects of perception, constructing hierarchies of intelligibility.

Arundhati Roy captures this distortion with striking clarity in *The Ministry of Utmost Happiness*. She describes the 'high-pitched, virginal, permanently adolescent voice that has come to dominate our collective imagination through Bollywood soundtracks': voices of female playback singers in mainstream Indian cinema are often deliberately made to sound eternally childlike (p. 86). These voices fill theatres and radios, but they deny women maturity, sexuality, anger, or complexity. They make femininity audible only as sweetness, innocence, and

submission. It is a strange contradiction: women are everywhere in sound but nowhere in substance. Their ubiquity is a form of erasure, stripping them of autonomy by fixing them in the role of perpetual girls.

This sonic infantilisation is not unique to India. K-pop industries in South Korea market girl groups with choreographies that emphasise school uniforms, cuteness, and high-pitched voices. In Euro-American pop, breathy 'baby voices' have long been rewarded, while lower, authoritative tones are dismissed as unfeminine. The cultural lesson is consistent: women are most acceptable when they sound childlike, dependent, and non-threatening. To sing with power, to sound adult, to project sexuality on one's own terms: these are treated as deviations.

What links these practices is not cultural difference but a shared grammar of disposability. By fixing women's voices in the register of girlhood, industries across continents deny women the right to be heard as full human beings. Their disposability is performed sonically, not by silence but by narrowing the range of what their voices can mean.

The history of playback singing deepens the point. For decades, the women whose voices dominated Indian cinema were kept separate from the actresses on screen. Their identities were deliberately hidden, their labour unacknowledged. Audiences heard them everywhere but rarely saw them. They were indispensable yet effaced, celebrated yet anonymised. In this way, they became ghosts in their own industry. The cultural soundscape was built on their labour, but their lives were erased from recognition.

Even the industry's label participates in this erasure. 'Bollywood' was coined as parody, a mocking diminutive of Hollywood that trivialised Bombay cinema's commercialism. Over time, it hardened into an uncritical global brand. Today, it erases the multiplicity of Indian cinematic traditions, reducing them to a derivative of Hollywood. It implies that Indian cinema is valuable only as mimicry, its identity parasitic on America's mainstream cinema. That is why I refuse the word. I write instead of mainstream Indian cinema, acknowledging its dominance but refusing to homogenise. Just as we must resist flattening women's voices into archetypes, we must resist flattening whole traditions into caricature.

This insistence on naming with care may seem minor, but it is not. Words are not ornaments; they are instruments of power. To repeat 'Bollywood' uncritically is to perpetuate colonial hierarchies. To repeat 'virginal' voices without critique is to perpetuate gendered erasure. Every repetition of such terms participates in the stories we refuse to tell.

The RG Kar case brings these threads together in searing clarity. Viewers were made complicit in consuming suffering without understanding it. This was erasure by overexposure. The humanity of the victim disappeared under the weight of spectacle. The structures that enabled the violence – gender inequality, institutional failures, systemic precarity – were sidelined in favour of salacious detail. The coverage exemplified the paradox of noise as silence. By telling the story in this way, the media refused it.

Furthermore, this strategy is not confined to India. When genocides are reported as statistics, when femicides are framed as isolated crimes, and when queer lives are reduced to tragic plotlines, the refusal is global. In Latin America,

coverage of femicides often collapses systemic gendered oppression into the language of 'crime waves'. In the United States, police killings of Black men are frequently framed as individual tragedies rather than products of structural racism. In Africa, queer communities are often shown as vulnerable victims but stripped of their agency, their activism ignored. Each of these is a refusal. Each is a tree falling in a forest, and its sound drowned out by clichés.

Yet, erasure is never total. Cracks appear in the system. Resistance emerges. Fans have refused the trope of queer disposability in television. When beloved characters are killed off (think Tara Maclay or Ianto Jones), audiences organise petitions, launch online campaigns, and demand accountability. Hashtags trend, forums fill with critiques, and fanfiction reimagines erased lives. These are not trivial. They are refusals to let queer lives be written out of collective imagination.

Similarly, musicians and activists have resisted the infantilisation of voices. Playback singers who were once hidden now demand recognition. Independent musicians break free of restrictive norms, singing with depth, anger, and sexuality. Protest songs become spaces for voices long silenced to be heard in their complexity. These interventions show that culture is not fixed. It can be reclaimed.

Survivors of genocide and displacement resist erasure by naming. They insist on remembering not just numbers but people. Lists of the dead, testimonies of the disappeared, community memorials: these counter-narratives refuse anonymity. They rehumanise what the media flattens. To name is to resist. To remember is to puncture silence.

The point of this book is not to despair at erasure but to confront it, to name it, to resist it. Erasure is not an accident. It is a necropolitical practice: a way of deciding which lives count and which can be disposed of. To study erasure is to study power itself. To challenge it requires more than adding stories. It requires telling them differently.

This book is structured around sites where erasure is reproduced and where resistance emerges. It begins with voyeurism: the way cinema and television reenact the suffering of marginalised peoples under the guise of realism or entertainment. From *Bandit Queen* to prestige dramas, audiences are compelled to watch violence replayed as spectacle. The chapter asks how viewers can resist voyeurism and refuse its claim to authenticity.

It then turns to the iconography of stock images: the cowering woman, the looming shadow, and the grieving family. These clichés, repeated across Reuters, AP, and Guardian coverage, freeze women in permanent victimhood. Through critical discourse analysis, the chapter reveals how these tropes erase specificity. It also highlights activists who resist anonymity, insisting on names and contexts.

Another chapter explores queer ecologies, showing how necropolitics extends beyond the human. From caste privilege coded in vegetarian purity to leather marketed as sexy, to advertising that ties meat to masculinity, cultures erase animals and naturalise cruelty. By linking these erasures to gender and sexuality, the chapter shows how disposability extends across species and how activists resist.

The argument then moves to canon and sanitisation. A chapter on Shakespeare, Agha Shahid Ali, Vikram Seth, and Arundhati Roy shows how queer desire is erased in the process of canonisation. It demonstrates how sonnets to

male lovers are minimised, how Shahid Ali's queerness is sidelined, and how Seth's queer love and Roy's depiction of sibling intimacy are downplayed. By engaging adaptations and activist reinterpretations, the chapter asks how we might reclaim these erased desires.

Language itself becomes the subject of the next chapter. From the use of capitals in Black and Deaf, to the history of trans*, to the ethical use of asterisks in triggering words, to the casual disavowals in phrases like 'girl crush' or 'no homo', it shows how orthography shapes recognition. By tracing these struggles across online discourse, activist zines, and media, it reveals how even tiny typographic markers can police or liberate identities.

Together, these chapters argue that erasure is never neutral. It is reproduced not only in silences but also in spectacle, not only in absence but also in cliché. It sustains hierarchies of gender, caste, race, class, and sexuality by scripting who can be heard, who can be seen, and who can be remembered. To resist erasure is to insist on telling stories differently: with care, with specificity, with recognition.

This book does not pretend that storytelling alone can undo violence, but it insists that storytelling is never trivial. To tell a story badly is to refuse it. To refuse a story is to participate in necropolitics. To tell stories differently is to resist.

If there is one lesson this book insists on, it is that erasure is not a passive absence. It is an active practice, structured and sustained through countless repetitions. It appears in the way news headlines reduce atrocities to numbers, in the way stock images flatten women into silhouettes, in the way cinema replays violence as entertainment, and in the way voices are infantalised until they no longer register as adult or autonomous. Erasure thrives on these patterns. It is not simply forgetting. It is the shaping of memory itself.

This is why I use asterisks throughout the book when referring to terms that carry histories of violence. We live in a culture that throws these words around casually, as if their weight has been drained away. But violence is not trivial. Each of these terms carries the gravity of lived suffering. To repeat them without care is to participate in desensitisation and to contribute to the very erasure I seek to critique. The asterisk is a reminder that language matters. It is a refusal to normalise violence in speech, a small disruption against the tide of carelessness.

The refusal to tell certain stories is most obvious in the news cycle, but it saturates every level of cultural production. Resistance matters because erasure is never total. Cracks appear in the structure every time every time survivors name perpetrators, every time singers refuse to let their voices be stereotyped, and every time fans rebel against the 'bury your gays' trope. The cracks may be small, but they matter. They remind us that erasure is not destiny. It can be challenged.

Erasure takes many forms, but all share a common thread: they decide whose lives matter. A community displaced for urban 'beautification' is erased not because the violence was invisible, but because the narrative cast it as progress. A woman reduced to a stock silhouette is erased not because she cannot be seen, but because she is seen only as a cliché. A queer character killed on screen is erased not because their story is absent, but because it is told only in the grammar of disposability. These are not accidents. They are choices embedded in political economies of media and culture. They are necropolitical practices that mark

some lives as intelligible and others as expendable. This is the logic of erasure in its starkest form: violence repeated not to honour but to commodify, stories retold not to humanise but to titillate. To narrate violence without care is to refuse it twice over: once in the act itself, and again in the telling. That double refusal is what this book seeks to resist.

This book is organised around exposing these practices and amplifying the resistances that counter them. Each chapter focuses on a different terrain where erasure operates, from the voyeurism of cinema to the clichés of news imagery, from the erasures of queer ecologies to the sanitisation of canons, and from the policing of orthography to the appropriation of marginal voices. Together, these terrains reveal that erasure is not marginal but central to how our world is narrated.

Finally, the book confronts the appropriation of marginal voices by privileged actors. It examines how publishing industries elevate transmisic narratives under the guise of inclusion, how caste privilege is repackaged as progressive visibility, and how queer weddings and naming ceremonies are sanitised into reproductive performativity. By situating these appropriations in wider genealogies of literary and cinematic co-option, it shows how privilege performs marginality while reasserting hierarchy.

Taken together, these chapters argue that erasure is not confined to one region, one medium, or one community. It is global, though its expressions vary. In mainstream Indian cinema, it appears in sonic infantilisation. In U.S. procedurals, it appears in the endless recycling of women's corpses. In Latin American coverage, it appears in the flattening of femicides into crime reports. In African reporting, it appears in the framing of queer lives only as victims. In each case, the grammar differs, but the logic is shared: to mark certain lives as disposable.

But if erasure is global, so too is resistance. Across continents, people refuse to be erased. Survivors insist on naming. Fans demand accountability. Activists create counter-narratives. Musicians reclaim their voices. Communities build memorials. Writers and artists disrupt clichés. These refusals may not dismantle necropolitics altogether, but they puncture it. They remind us that erasure is never absolute.

The task of this book is not only to critique erasure but also to insist on these cracks. It is to argue that even small refusals matter, that they accumulate, that they disrupt. To resist erasure is not to guarantee justice, but it is to refuse complicity. It is to insist that lives marked as disposable are, in fact, central.

If a tree falls in a forest and no one hears it, the sound still exists. But without recognition, it changes nothing. Violence, too, exists whether or not it is covered. But without care, without specificity, and without recognition, it remains erased. The point of this book is direct: to insist that the sound matters, to insist that stories matter, and to insist that refusal is not an option.

This is not a book of solutions. It does not claim to end erasure or to offer easy answers. It is a book of refusal: refusal to accept silence, refusal to accept clichés, and refusal to accept disposability. It is a book of insistence: insistence on specificity, insistence on the right to life, and insistence on resistance. Above all, it is a book that refuses to look away.