

# Revenge, Masculinity and Glorification of Violence in the Godfather

Abhilash B S

Senior Tutor, Department of Industrial Design, Faculty of Art and Design,  
M. S. Ramaiah University of Applied Sciences, Bangalore, Karnataka, India

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**Abstract:** Crime films have been the most enduringly popular genre since the dawn of sound era in Hollywood. Mob and gangster films are a sub-genre of crime films and deals with the mafia and their organized crime focusing on rise and fall of power. These films primarily have stacks of money, guns, flashy cars, illegal goods, cluster of goons, crime families, and a plot with a central theme coupled with violence. Hollywood gangster films in the 1930's had liberally drawn inspiration from the newspapers and books of the era. Films of gangster genre are strongly driven by themes such as power, loyalty, betrayal, rivalry, morality, revenge, masculinity, materialism etc. Motifs and symbols add structures and contrasts to effectively convey them. Gangster films, when viewed from an American perspective are to achieve the "American dream" that is to be rich and successful with the most power, one can obtain. The Godfather, a 1972 American crime film directed by Francis Ford Coppola exposes the dark side of the American dream. Betrayal, revenge, masculinity, morality, and violence are some of the predominant themes which drive the film The Godfather. This paper focuses on the study, portrayal and execution styles of three such themes, Revenge, Masculinity and Glorification of Violence and the motifs in the film The Godfather

**Keywords:** Crime, Mafia, Godfather, Revenge, Masculinity, Violence.

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## I. INTRODUCTION

Crime, as an act in real life or its portrayal in any form has always been a topic of prime discussion in social, political, economic and personal forums of society. Performing Arts such as plays and films have strongly drawn inspiration from the current and contemporary issues prevailing in the society. Productions from diverse film industries across the globe have symbolized the versions of criminal acts and gangsters.

Crime films illustrate a larger and a fictitious representation of criminals and gangsters who operate outside the law, focusing on their mannerisms, lives, lifestyles and their specialized modus operandi; glorifying their rise and fall of crime kingdoms. They also highlight the crime victim's life and their struggle to justice. Cinematic plot of these films portray real life situations and characters from true events and past crime records. Money, power, greed, revenge, gambling, drugs, murder, robbery, masculinity, violence, etc., are some of the central themes of crime and gangster films. Characters playing the role of gangsters and the bad guys are often personified with materialistic, immoral, and dishonest traits. "The first gangster film in the history of cinema was The Musketeers of Pig Alley, a 1912 American short drama film directed by D. W. Griffith."<sup>[1]</sup>

Early gangster films were produced from a non-criminal point of view or precisely placing it, a law-abiding view, i.e. the story is narrated from the perspective of a character or a system, which is trying to stop the crime.<sup>[2][3]</sup>

Later writers and directors started exploring the other side of the story. According to Dirks, first film which was shot from a gangster's point of view was Josef von Sternberg's Underworld (1927). Several film critics consider this as the first modern gangster film because it reveals and talks from the gangster's perspective. This paved a way for the growth of many sub genres (Mob/Gangster, Film-Noir, Neo-Noir, and Crime-Thriller) under the root genre of crime.

One of the most successful gangster films of all times is the 1972 film *The Godfather*, directed by Francis Ford Coppola. It is an American crime film based on the famous and successful crime novel *The Godfather* by Mario Puzo, an Italian American writer. This is considered a landmark film in the history of Hollywood considering the box office collection which was \$268,500,000 worldwide. *The Godfather* had won its own share of prestigious awards including the Academy Awards, Golden Globes and BAFTA Awards having an overall 32 wins and 19 nominations.<sup>[4][5]</sup>

*The Godfather* had inspired many directors and writers to produce high level of quality work in terms of characterization, story arc and overall cinematic excellence. It had laid groundwork for several other films that followed across different geographies. Especially Indian writers and directors in various languages have been influenced at different levels which paved the way for award winning movies both with commercial and critical acclaim. In terms of plot, characterization and screenplay, some films depict a close inspiration and similarity to the classic (*The Godfather*) and others showcase a moderate inspiration.

In this paper Revenge, Masculinity and Glorification of violence are studied intricately as themes and their execution styles in *The Godfather*.

## II. REVIEW OF LITERATURE

In the late 19th century and early 20th century, Italians, mostly farmers, craftsmen and unskilled labourers immigrated to America for better financial and economic opportunities. According to historian Thomas Repetto, New York City alone had 500,000 immigrants by 1910 which rose from 20,000 in 1880. They slowly grew in number and started contributing to the country's population. They were the first generation of Italian Americans.<sup>[6]</sup>

In 1920's, U.S. constitution banned the sale, manufacture and transportation of alcoholic beverages and was termed as the Prohibition era. Italian-American gangs started acquiring liquor businesses and transformed themselves into sophisticated criminal enterprises, skilled at smuggling, money laundering, drugs and other illegal activities.<sup>[6]</sup>

At almost the same time in the city of Sicily in Italy, criminal groups started operating with a common enterprise of protection racketing. They were called Mafia who were a criminal syndicate. Each group known as "family", "clan", and "cosca" claims power and control over a territory (town or a village) and operates its rackets. They were often called as Sicilian Mafia in Italy. This Sicilian mafia who was under the attack of Fascist regime of Benito Mussolini (1883-1945) escaped to the U.S. and became a part of growing American Mafia.

Late 1950's and early 60's saw the rise of organized crime and violence in America which resulted in court trials and had raised public's curiosity towards mafia and their operations. In the same decade, Mario Puzo, an Italian American author wrote a crime novel, *The Godfather*, and was published in 1969. It was a story about a fictitious Italian-American family mafia involved in organized crime based in The New York City. It went on to become a best seller. Inspired by this book, Francis Ford Coppola, directed the film *The Godfather*, in 1972, which was an adaptation of the novel written by Mario Puzo.

One of the key reasons for the film's unmatched success was its representation of Italian-American families and their struggle for the American Dream ("Life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness" as stated in the United States Declaration of Independence, is the basis for the idea of the American Dream). Many Italian's saw the reflections of their families for the first time. American's also saw them too. Though it wasn't a pretty image but it was never a dull one either.

The film also brings a great amount of cultural value by portraying the struggle of an Italian immigrant for the American Dream and representing Italian and Italian-American culture in cohesion. It also reminds audiences of their ancestors struggle in America.

Films prior to the release of *The Godfather* had always portrayed gangsters as murderers and cruel men but *The Godfather* showcased these men as family men and patriarch's attending weddings and baptisms, having daughters and godchildren. They were people who would give utmost importance to their families and are committed. They would dine with their families and still not discuss crime and family business at the table. Audience could experience the so called human side of a gangster. The film brought out this contrast evidently which was one of the few main reasons for its success.<sup>[7][8]</sup>

The characters portrayed in *The Godfather* seemed to give a sense of legitimacy to the gangster. To a certain extent they were no longer shame of the nation. They were no longer a monster, rather a gangster with rightful human traits. They were considered as an alternative to law and a parallel house of justice.

### III. ANALYSIS OF REVENGE, MASCULINITY AND GLORIFICATION OF VIOLENCE IN THE GODFATHER

Gangster films are usually loaded with rise and fall of criminals and their activities leading to their aftermath. Massive crimes (which might have strong legal repercussions) are carried out by gangsters working with a trusted group of individuals functioning to implement it. Loyalty towards each other in a gang and to the central power running it is always considered a religion with utmost priority. Betrayal in any form is not accepted and if performed, gives birth to vengeance. Films of gangster genre have revenge as an integral part to the plot which takes the story forward to climax.

### IV. REVENGE

In *The Godfather*, it is Michael Corleone's vengeance to the fatal attack on his father Don Vito Corleone. Initially, Michael (a U.S. Military personnel), is not interested in the family's business. He wanted to lead a more Americanized life. Kay Adams, a non-italian, with whom he was in love with and wanted to marry, symbolizes Michael's initial desire to live a more Americanized life. His father, Don Vito Corleone also wanted him to be away from the mafia and hoped his son would enter politics. Michael's disorientation towards the family's business was revealed in parts on several occasions such as the dialogue between Michael and Kay Adam's, during the wedding of his sister.

*Michael Corleone: My father made him an offer he couldn't refuse.*

*Kay Adams: What was that?*

*Michael Corleone: Luca Brasi held a gun to his head, and my father assured him that either his brains or his signature would be on the contract. That's a true story.*

*Michael Corleone: That's my family Kay, that's not me.*

Michael and Kay Adams are seated away from the family during the wedding also symbolizes Michael's disinterest in the family's business. But eventually he is forced to take charge after his father was nearly killed in a shootout by the drugs and narcotics dealer Sollozzo just before Christmas of 1945.

Sir Francis Bacon, an English philosopher, statesman, scientist, jurist, orator, essayist, and author who served both as Attorney General and Lord Chancellor of England coined at least three 'revenge' proverbs: "Revenge is a kind of wild justice", "A man that studieth revenge keeps his own wounds green, which otherwise would heal and do well" and "Revenge triumphs over death"<sup>[9]</sup>

Subtext and inner meanings of these three proverbs can be seen and felt clearly in the sequences which showcase the vengeance of Michael. Michael killed Sollozzo and the corrupt NYPD (New York City Police Department) Captain McCluskey (who has been bribed to protect his father), thinking that Sollozzo will take another run at his father. He did justice according to the family's eye for an eye policy by taking the revenge. This act of his got him deep into the mafia world and his stature rose from being U.S. Military personnel to a gangster/murderer. This followed a series of other murders which he administered and got executed after coming back from Sicily. Michael got rid of the killers of his brother Santino and joined the family's criminal enterprise as Vito's heir after Santino. Later to make his family strong in the mafia business, he order's the killings of five New York mafia families on the day he stands godfather to Connie's (Michael's sister) son. His revenge and wish to acquire complete power didn't stop here. He plot's a trap for Carlo Rizzi (Connie's abusive husband and Michael's brother in law) who had setup Santino to be murdered. Michael was a far more ruthless and immoral man when compared to his father. His initial traits and actions did establish that he never wanted to be a part of the criminal activity but when he decided to enter and take on the business, it was a different Michael.

It was the love and affection of Michael towards his family and especially for his father which made him took up revenge and pushed him to join the family business. He could not keep himself away from the two assassination attempts on his father, first in the street and later in the hospital. Revenge for him was more important than any other experienced member of the Corleone family because he never took the fatal attempt on his father as business. It was personal for him. Sonny,

Clemenza and Tessio who were close counters to Don Vito Corleone had laughed at Michael's scheme of killing Sollozzo and Captain McCluskey. They had thought Michael is motivated by his desire of revenge against Captain McCluskey who punched him and broke his jaw outside the hospital while he was guarding his father.

*Sonny Corleone: You're taking this very personal. Tom, this is business and this man is taking it very, very personal.*

*Michael Corleone: Where does it say that you can't kill a cop?*

*Tom Hagen: Come on, Mikey...*

*Michael Corleone: Tom, wait a minute. I'm talking about a cop that's mixed up in drugs. I'm talking about a - a - a dishonest cop - a crooked cop who got mixed up in the rackets and got what was coming. That's a terrific story. And we have newspaper people who are on the payroll, don't we Tom?*

*[Tom nods]*

*Michael Corleone: And they might like a story like that.*

*Tom Hagen: They might, they just might.*

*Michael Corleone: [to Sonny] It's not personal. It's strictly business.<sup>[10]</sup>*

The revenge quotient grew as the time passed and he cleared off all the enemies of his family who were directly or indirectly related. His love for his family can also be seen during the wedding day of his sister, when he talks about his family and the criminal business they are in, to Kay Adams. He speaks the truth but never expresses a single bad word about them. Don Vito Corleone also shares the same amount of love towards Michael and can be seen in a sequence when he refuses to take a picture without him on the day of his daughter's wedding.

*Don Corleone: [to Sonny] Where's Michael?*

*Sonny: Don't worry. He'll be here.*

*Don Corleone: We're not taking the picture without Michael.<sup>[11]</sup>*

As a father, Don Vito Corleone never wanted Michael to enter the family business; rather he wanted him to hold a high position such as a Senate.

## V. PORTRAYAL OF MASCULINITY

Crime and mobster films have primarily revolved around a male gender dominating the roles and depiction of gangsters and mafia clan. Societal projection of men has always been associated with power, domination, authority and strength. Since time immemorial, in human race and the so called ancestors according to the Darwin theory, men in families have always been potential protectors and bread winners while women have been care takers and bearers of progeny. In the Stone Age era, men in groups, used to traverse through dense forests in search of food and proper habitat which required immense physical strength to fight odds and mental power to trace the path back home. In case of any human/animal attack on the family, men possessing the physical power are expected to do the rescue job. Masculinity, in Stone Age days had more or less been connected to safeguard the surroundings and the people around. (Behavior of men and women differ and this is due to the ancestral reason mentioned in the books of Allan and Barbara Pease- books on Body Language, Behavior and Interpersonal relationships) (Had read these books long back and will try and find the source to include)

In The Godfather, it is the love, responsibility and the protective nature towards the family that is seen with the characters of Don Vito Corleone and Michael Corleone. In real world, there is nothing more attractive than a man willing to do anything to protect his family, who has the brains and strength of will to remain balanced in even the direst of situations. Radical change in Michael (when he came forward to kill Sollozzo corrupt cop) was due to the fact that his father was attacked and to settle things, his brothers had not come forward strongly. Fredo was a coward and Sonny thinks that its business and nothing personal. Out of the three son's Vito had, Michael was the dearest and closest and that's the reason Vito always wanted him to be out of the crime business and become a senator, perhaps even president. For Michael, two assassination attempts on his father and his personal hurt from the corrupt cop (though he never mentions) was never business, it was personal. Vengeance erupting from a personal hurt is always coldblooded.

Vito's way of balancing the crime business and family had never burdened him by responsibility. He had shuffled with ease between the "family" (blood relations and crime family). Unlike Michael, Vito was a modest man with warmth of humanity. He was admired as a husband, father and a godfather. Michael, though he had remarkable success and had constructed safe horizons for his family by executing ruthless and coldblooded murders, he lacked human touch and organic behaviour. Both had delivered their protective behaviour towards their family but a naïve viewer would empathize strongly with Don Vito Corleone than Michael.

Domination with power, a human trait, is often coupled up with male gender, is rampantly prevalent in the story of The Godfather. Don Vito Corleone is the head of an Italian-American crime family and has all the judges and politicians of America in his pockets. This is evident through various conversations on different occasions such as the meeting of Sollozzo with Don Vito Corleone to discuss narcotics and drugs.

*Sollozzo: Bene, Don Corleone. I need a man who has powerful friends. I need a million dollars in cash. I need, Don Corleone, all of those politicians that you carry around in your pocket, like so many nickels and dimes.*

Vito's denial to deal with Sollozzo also reflects the mental status of the Corleone's ethics. Though they are a crime family and settle matters out of the law, they would never deal in drugs and prostitution.

*Don Corleone: I said that I would see you because I had heard that you were a serious man, to be treated with respect. But I must say no to you and let me give you my reasons. It's true I have a lot of friends in politics, but they wouldn't be so friendly if they knew my business was drugs instead of gambling which they consider a harmless vice. But drugs, that's a dirty business.*

*Sollozzo: No, Don Corleone...*

*Don Corleone: It makes no difference, it don't make any difference to me what a man does for a living, you understand. But your business is a little dangerous.*

Another instance where power with domination can be seen is when Don Corleone calls a meeting with the five crime families in New York. Peter Tatalliga complains that Corleone "had all the judges and politicians in his pocket. He refused to share them." Vito does so to dominate and have an upper hand over all the other crime families.

Domination with physical and mental abuse is the nasty side of masculinity. Abusive and dominant behavior of Carlo (son-in-law of Don Corleone) towards Connie (Don Corleone's daughter) personifies his mental status. When the shot-tempered, emotional and impulsive Sonny Corleone (Connie's brother) witnesses and hears of the beating of his sister, he takes the task of teaching a lesson to Carlo and thrashes him on the street. He doesn't kill him, for the fact that he would be widowing his sister and it's not justice. Corleone family believes in an eye for an eye which is learnt during the opening sequences of The Godfather, Vito denies killing the boys who had brought pain to the daughter of the Bonasera as she was still alive.

Males in the Corleone family are more powerful and a privileged gender. They take all the decisions. Women in The Godfather are projected to be non-participants in the family business, the organized crime. Women of the Corleone family are involved in cooking, household activities, managing children and raising babies. They are mere spectators to the criminal activities of the larger agenda of organized crime. Virtually, women hold no power over any decision that is made professionally in Corleone family.

## VI. CONCLUSION ON GLORIFICATION OF VIOLENCE

Violence in films is shown under various sub domains of domestic, gender, physiological, psychological and many others to mention. The Godfather depicts most of the sub domains mentioned. Violence in The Godfather certainly exists but it's the glamour and aestheticization of violence that makes the film exciting. It has been portrayed in many ways on various instances in the film.

The death of Sonny at the toll plaza is horrific and is violently destructive. It's probably the most violent scene in the whole film. Sonny is a person of all heart, no brains. Due to his recklessness, rash and impulsive behaviour, he lands himself in a death trap by hurrying out of the house without bodyguards. The murder was harsh and gruesome. Few men with machine guns at the toll gate had punctured his body. There was no remorse for his body as they shot him in the face and had kicked his body.



The assassins sent by Michael for brutal slaying of the Dons of mafia families at the time when he is standing as a Godfather to his sister's son is a spectacular portrayal of violence, driven by an evil mind. Use of intercuts and montage editing in the baptism and murder scene; with juxtaposition of shots of violent killing with religious ritual; added with an overlay of an organ track over the entire collection of shots adds suspense and excitement to the scene. With every killing, the music and the voice of the priest gets loud.

The double murder scene at the restaurant, executed by Michael is another instance of violence being glorified in The Godfather. The restaurant conversation between Sollozzo, Michael and the corrupt cop is a tense scene, as the meeting is organized to decide on the further course of action after the assassination attempt on Vito Corleone. The director chose to have a chunk of conversation between Sollozzo and Michael in Italian instead of English. This might seem an odd choice to many but the absence of subtitles, pushes the audience to focus hard on the body language. The terror and anxiety prevailing in Michael's mind is very well portrayed by Al Pacino. The tiniest movements of his eyes coupled with his facial expression really added up to the unbearable tension of the whole sequence.

Perturbed thoughts added with agitation can be felt by the audience, in the restaurant and the restroom sequence. Three times, the scene cuts back and forth from the restroom to the restaurant table, where the corrupt cop and Sollozzo are sitting. Long restroom shots showing Michael, searching for the hidden gun are the ones which evoke nervous and anxious feelings in audience's mind before the actual murder. Shots which show corrupt cop looking for Michael's return are cleverly placed in the middle of the restroom shots; indirectly suggesting to the audience that Michael had spent fairly extended time inside. The camera slowly tracks close to Michael just before he commits the murders, added with a piercing and irritating sound of a train, signifying the internal turmoil, panic and anxiety.

Metaphors and symbols used frequently in a film can help the audience understand abstract concepts that cannot always be translated or conveyed through words. They can play a pivotal role in establishing a channel of communication between the director as a visual storyteller and the audience.

Orange, the colour and the fruit played a significant role as a symbol of violence and death in The Godfather. It appears and reappears far too many times throughout the movie. It symbolizes an upcoming death or a threat of violence for the character interacting with it. The scene having a conversation between Jack Woltz, a movie producer from Hollywood and Tom Hagen, Consigliere to Corleone's family regarding Johnny Fontane's role in a war film had a large bowl of oranges. Next morning, Woltz wakes up to find the severed head of his prized stud horse in his bed with him. Don Corleone was buying a bag of oranges a few seconds before the assassination attempt on him and he topples on the street. A top angle shot reveals the spilled oranges on the street. Sonny drives past a billboard promoting Florida Oranges just before he is brutally killed and gunned down. Don Corleone dies while eating an orange, as he plays with his grandson. Orange, as a colour, had been used for similar purposes as the fruit Orange. Carlo wears an orange suit when Sonny beats him up. Michael wears an orange tie when he talks with Moe Green.

The film shows us a lot of "nasty" and ugly death scenes but the real sense of violence, tension and fear in the minds of the audience is created by the director with the help of slow passage of time, performance, body language, editing and the interplay of sound and silence.

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