IMAGINING “MUSLIM” IDENTITY: AN INTERPRETIVE STUDY OF HINDI CINEMA

While all Muslims are followers of Islam, they are not a homogenous community, either in India or elsewhere in the world. Although Muslims are heterogeneous, both in India and elsewhere, media, both print and electronic, represent them as a homogeneous community in terms of their food habits, clothing, language, and occupation. Thus, an essentialised identity of “the Muslim community” and even “the Indian Muslims” is ascribed to them. Nowhere is such essentialised and homogeneous representation of Muslims as ubiquitous and persistent as in the films. Given that such representations has far reaching consequences, both for Muslims and the society in which they live, films provide an important source of data for and point of reference to sociological and cultural research. Accordingly, in the instant study, I have sought to explore the representation of Muslims in Hindi films and its perception among the audience, which view them.

The representation of Muslim identity is prevalent in Indian cinema and specifically in Hindi film industry. Muslim identity has been represented differently in different era depending on the socio-political situation of the times. While the films of the 1950s and 1960s, the so-called, Nehruvian era, reflected the “tolerant” secularism of the state and also depicted an idealized Muslim world where nawabs lived with their grandeur and idiosyncrasies intact, the 1970s and 1980s saw the emergence of an alternative politics of minority representation. In this period, the aristocrats were pushed to hedonistic pursuits. The demolition of the Babri Masjid on 6 December 1992, and the riots that followed became the theme of many memorable films. As a result, new changes could be noticed in popular cinema after 1992. Moreover, the terrorist attacks on the World Trade Centre and a section of the Pentagon have left a mark worldwide on the way Muslims are perceived. Immediately after the attack, many movies were made on terrorism in Hollywood as well as in Bollywood. There are films, which have depicted the ideological conflict between the nationalist victim and the jehadi
terrorist. As mentioned earlier, media has an important role in moulding citizen’s identity, and Indian cinema plays a key role in that.

In this research, I have explored the position of Muslims in the complex representational scheme in popular Hindi cinema. Apart from that, I have tried to understand the perceptions of audience, film critics, and filmmakers regarding those films. This study has sought to capture the intricacies of Bollywood cinema which includes the factors such as stereotyped images of Muslims, changes in the representation of Muslims during the last six and a half decades, the socio-cultural background, the name of Muslim characters in the films, etc. All this has been done from a qualitative orientation to understand the film texts and the perceptions of the audiences. Thus, the driving objective of the study is to locate the representation of Muslims in the popular Hindi cinema particularly in the post Babri Masjid demolition period. To understand how audiences, filmmakers and film critic make sense of the representation of Muslims in popular Hindi cinema.

While analyzing films such as Bombay (1995) and Fiza (2000), Chak De! India (2007) and My Name is Khan (2010) this study deploys Edward Said’s (1981 and 1996) notion that representation and knowledge are imbricated with issues of power, class, and materiality. Much like Said’s theorisation of representing Muslims as Others in the Western media, a similar scenario is prevalent in the Indian media, specifically Hindi cinema, too. Muslims are represented as ‘Others’ in almost all the genres of Hindi cinema. ‘Muslim identity’ as ‘Others’ was marked by certain cultural symbols, which are sometimes irrelevant and inappropriate. These symbols such as clothing, food habits and etiquette are attached to the community to create a stereotypical and mystifying image of Muslims much like western media did to the people of Middle-East.

Methodologically, I used qualitative approach to understand the representations of Muslims in Hindi films through a reading of the films as cultural texts. Apart from that, I have captured the perceptions of select audience (16), film critics (8), and filmmakers (9) on the subject through in-depth interviews on the basis of an interview guide. The interviews were recorded using a tape recorder. Following this, the interviews were transcribed verbatim and later translated. The translated data was organised into themes and thematic analysis was made with the help of ATLAS. ti (qualitative data analysis software). The codes were first derived from the data, later codes used to form sub-themes and themes were
emerged from the sub-themes. Although many other regional films touch upon the proposed research theme, the study is confined to the Hindi cinema, as it is in Hindi cinema that Muslims are represented the most, and also because of Bollywood film’s pan-Indian appeal.

The finding reinforces the stereotyped representation of Muslim identity. They have been represented differently in different era depending on the socio-political situation of the times. The films of the 1950s and 1960s, the so-called, Nehruvian era, represented the exoticism of the Mughal rulers in the Muslim Historical genre in this period and thus participants also mentioned that Muslims are positively stereotyped. *Ganga – Jamuna Tehzeeb* or shared culture is another important reason for homogenised Muslim representation claimed by filmmakers in this genre. The ‘tolerant’ secularism of the state was also reflected through this genre. Moreover, *tawaif* (courtesans) lived in ill-reputed *kothas*. They are mostly seen in elaborate cloths and dazzling jewellery as a subject of ‘male gaze’. Men who were the visitors of those *kothas* generally spoke in flowery stylised Urdu language and suffered disappointment in love. The genre articulates the conflict between modern (reform, education, progress) and tradition (honour, dignity, devotion).

While the genre of the Muslim Social reflected an idealized Muslim world where *nawabs* lived with their grandeur and idiosyncrasies intact, the 1970s and 1980s saw the emergence of an alternative politics of minority representation. In this period, the aristocrats were pushed to hedonistic pursuits. Apart from that, the portrayal of Mumbai’s underworld characters mostly as Muslims is noteworthy. At the end of 1980s and beginning of the 1990s, the Hindu right wing movement began taking shape aggressively. The Babri Masjid was demolished on the 6th of December 1992 and the incident was one of the major turning points in Indian history as it hardened the communal veins. It was followed by many communal riots. Riots in Bombay in the year 1992 were one of the most prominent in recent Indian history. Post-Babri Masjid destruction was the period when communalism and nationalism were the two major themes of Indian popular culture. As the major agenda was to create a national identity, Hindi cinema started portraying a monolithic image of the country undercutting diverse identity (gender, religion and cultural). As a result, new changes could be noticed in popular cinema after 1992. Filmmakers were bound to make someone an enemy to portray the protagonist a hero. As a result, a number of films were released which were jingoistic in nature.
Those were basically war films. India produced the maximum number of war films between 1997 and 2006. Apart from representing Pakistan as an enemy, terrorists were introduced as the new enemy of India. The terrorist attacks on the World Trade Centre and a section of the Pentagon have left a mark worldwide on the way Muslims are perceived. Immediately after the attack, many movies were made on terrorism in Hollywood as well as in Bollywood. There are many films, which have depicted the ideological conflict between the nationalist victim and the jehadi terrorist. As mentioned earlier, media has an important role in moulding citizen’s identity, and Indian cinema plays a key role in that.

We have noticed through different genres (The Muslim Historical, The Muslim Social and The Muslim Political) that the popular Hindi cinema has dealt with the liminality of the Muslim Other in the nation space by representing Muslims in stereotypical ways, but the Muslim Contemporary films depart from earlier mainstream films’ stereotypical representation of Muslims to one in which Muslims are depicted as “evil” and alien to the nation. The Muslim Contemporary films examine film narratives that represent Muslim characters without any symbol or identification. In these films, indicators such as language, cloth, and etiquette do not mark Muslim identity. Though the Muslim Contemporary films do not carry any extra baggage of religion but there are films in this category, in which Muslims are made to prove their allegiance to the nation repetitively in spite of their liberal, modern and secular images. For example, Nagesh Kukunoor’s Iqbal (2005), Shimit Amin’s Chak De! India (2007), Karan Johar’s My Name is Khan (2010), Raj Kumar Gupta’s Aamir (2008). From locating all these films and the detailed textual analysis of the films — My Name is Khan and Chak De! India, we can delineate that Muslims do not wear religion on their sleeves. The above-mentioned films represent Muslims as people who do not offer namaz five times a day; like other citizens, they also face day-to-day economic and social hurdles. In most of the films, the word ‘Muslim’ even is not pronounced once. In these films, Muslims are not the nation’s enemy like the Muslim Political genre, but in most of the cases, they are bound to prove that they are nationalist, patriotic and innocent. The films — My Name are Khan, Chak De! India, Amir — where Muslims play the role of central protagonists, they are bound to prove their allegiance to the nation. These films reiterate the social rhetoric by which Muslims are guilty until proven innocent.
The most crucial point that emerged from the analysis is that while popular cinema can be labeled as ‘escapist’, ‘fantasy’ and ‘entertainment medium’, it acquires a hegemonic and ideological role to play. Though films are always inspired by social reality, they mould and articulate the reality to represent certain perspectives. From the early history of Hindi cinema, in the case of representation of Muslim, a dominant discourse is always constructed. Thus, throughout the history, filmmakers tried to project the issues and problems concerning to the Muslims but ultimately, they stereotyped them by representing them as exotic like kings and nawabs and as villains like terrorists, anti-nationalist, underworld don, and ultra-nationalist person. They are always portrayed as ‘Others’ in popular culture and represented according to the dominant notions of the society.

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