Portrayal of Muslim Characters and Culture in Hindi Cinema: from Syncretism to Stereotype

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ABSTRACT

This paper explores the evolving portrayal of Muslims in Hindi cinema, particularly through the genre known as *Muslim Socials*, which emerged during the Golden Era of Indian filmmaking. It investigates how cinema, beyond being a source of entertainment, has functioned as a cultural and ideological apparatus in shaping and reflecting Indian society's anxieties, aspirations, and national identity. While scholars like Ashish Rajadhyaksha, Rosie Thomas, and Ravi Vasudevan have long argued for cinema's value as a socio-political document, this study situates Muslim representation as a crucial, yet often overlooked, aspect of that narrative tradition. In post-independence India, Hindi cinema contributed significantly to the nation-building process by endorsing Nehruvian ideals of secularism, modernity, and social equity. Amidst this larger ideological framework, *Muslim Socials*—films centering on Muslim protagonists, culture, and familial values—offered a unique window into the cultural complexities of Indian Muslims. These films, such as *Najma* (1943), *Chaudhvin Ka Chand* (1960), *Pakeezah* (1972), *Nikah* (1982), and *Garam Hawa* (1973), engaged with themes such as purdah (veiling), talaq (divorce), patriarchal codes, and the decline of Nawabi culture. While often confined to the elite, aestheticized Muslim milieu, these films did occasionally highlight the struggles of the Muslim underclass, as seen in *Yad* (1942) and *Naukar* (1943). The study also traces the historical roots of Islamicate aesthetics in Indian cinema to early productions such as *Alam Ara* (1931), *Shirin Farhad* (1931), and *Noorjehan* (1931). Drawing from Parsi theatre and Urdu-Persean storytelling traditions, these films embedded Indo-Islamic motifs into costume design, dialogue, art direction, and musical styles—contributions that were not limited to Muslim filmmakers alone but extended to directors like Sohrab Modi, Guru Dutt, and Shyam Benegal. However, as the political climate in India changed, so too did cinematic representation. A parallel narrative emerged in mainstream cinema from the late 1990s onwards, marked by hyper-nationalist spectacles like *Tanhaji*, *Padmaavat*, and *The Kashmir Files*. These films often depict Muslims through reductive binaries—as invaders, traitors, or terrorists—mirroring contemporary political discourses that marginalize Muslim identity. In these narratives, history is simplified to a battle between good and evil, with majoritarian Hindu protagonists defending the nation against a villainous "other". By contrasting this modern wave with the pluralistic spirit of earlier *Muslim Socials*, the paper argues that Indian cinema has become a contested space—one where inclusive storytelling increasingly coexists with ideological polarization. At a time when cinema could serve as a platform for reconciliation, empathy, and historical introspection, it is often used to assert dominant narratives that exclude alternative perspectives. The paper thus calls for a critical re-evaluation of how Muslims have been represented in Hindi cinema over time, not just to recover lost narratives but to understand the broader implications of cultural representation in shaping the idea of India itself.

Keywords: Hindi cinema, Muslim Socials, Purdah, Talaq, Nawabi culture, Nationalism, Islamicate aesthetics, Cultural representation, Indian Muslims, Post-independence India

INTRODUCTION

Cinema in India, though present for over a century, has only recently been acknowledged as a crucial narrative source reflecting the nation's socio-political history. With its vast reach, especially in a largely illiterate society, Hindi cinema has emerged as a powerful medium of cultural representation, shaping and reflecting the aspirations,

anxieties, and ideologies of the Indian middle class. Scholars like Ashish Rajadhyaksha, Rosie Thomas, and Ravi Vasudevan have highlighted the importance of film as more than just entertainment—an important site of anthropological, political, and historical inquiry. In the post-independence period, Hindi cinema was deeply involved in the project of nation-building, echoing Nehruvian ideals and constructing narratives of modernity and national identity through culturally resonant codes and images.

Films are the binding force for people across all ages, customs, regions and religion, cutting across boundaries and cultures. As noted film historian Mihir Bose puts it, 'only two institutions created during British rule were truly all India in scope: cricket and films' (Bose, 2008:167). The social effect of cinema also should not be ignored, in a country like India which practised several traditional forms of inequalities, including the caste system. Hindi cinema challenged these inequalities and propagated values of a new nation and society. As Meghnad Desai puts it, 'In a caste-based society with strict rules as to who you could eat with and sit with, who was untouchable and who was not, cinema created opportunities for communal (community) viewing' (Desai, 2014:49).

The present paper focuses on Hindi cinema as a mirror of societal transformation in the years following independence, with particular emphasis on the portrayal of Muslimsin this cinematic journey. While films of that era took up nationalist themes, they also offered a space where complex identities, especially that of the Indian Muslim, were negotiated. This study seeks to review the dominant portrayal of Muslim culture and characters in Hindi cinema including not only stereotypical representations but also inclusive roles and representations. At a time when Muslims are often portrayed as the 'other', revisiting their cultural contributions helps reframe the discourse on nationhood, loyalty, and identity in India.

While the current crop of films have been portraying Muslims as either a terrorist (Kurban-2009) or a lovelorn kajal wearing stud (Kalank, 2019), the depiction of Muslim culture and characters was varied, diverse and interesting during the Golden Era of filmmaking. Though some Muslim Socials— a genre in Hindi cinema — could not keep themselves away from presenting a stereotyped version of the Muslim culture and the film plots revolved around dominant cultural codes prevalent in the Muslim way of lives. This genre of Hindi cinema depicted the life, culture, and emotional world of Indian Muslims, often

set against the backdrop of declining Nawabi culture, and engaged with issues like purdah (veiling), talaq (divorce), polygamy, and women's rights. According to Roy, 'A new genre called the Muslim social appeared which featured social stories in Melodramatic style. Their functional space was confined to the limits of a secluded Muslim society' (2015:171). Though most of the Muslim socials focused on the life and culture of the elite Muslim class, Bhasker and Allen (2009:67) point to earlier films in the genre, which focused on the protagonists from the Muslim underclass. Films like Mazhar Khan's *Yad* (1942) and Shaukat Hussain Rizvi's *Naukar* (1943) narrated the romance of the street, where the protagonists were either tongawallas (horse carriage pullers) or household helps (Mukhopadhaya, 2013: 172).

Owing to the socio-political environment, thematic changes were also visible in film making during this time. Communally sensitive themes comprising of Hindu mythological films as well as medieval romances, were now handled in a more careful manner. The *sant* films produced during this time were more like social genres with plots and music, politics and religion, did not feature as prominent themes in them. Since film-makers were reluctant to make films based on medieval or Mughal representations, in order to keep away from religious or political controversies, they came up with this new genre of Muslim socials. The thematic shift in such socials is visible in films like *Najma* (1943), *Phool* (1944), *Elaan* (1947) and *Kaneez* (1949), which discussed woman protagonists but only within the confines of a domestic settings. This depiction according to Fareed Kazmi, 'Led women protagonists in Muslim socials to become doubly marginalized, in terms of community as well as gender. By projecting a homogenous identity of the Muslim as well as the woman, these filmic depictions did not effectively articulate the problems within Muslim socio cultural conditions' (Kazmi, 1994:239).

Some other prominent Muslim Socials of the Golden Era were *Chaudhvin Ka Chand* (1960), *Shama* (1961), *Mere Mehboob* (1963), *Pakeezah* (1972),),*Garam Hawa* (1973)*, Nikah* (1982). The films explored the notions of Nawabi culture and etiquettes, and the strict observance of purdah, triple talaq, patriarchal limitations, courtesan culture and partition. While *Garam Hawa's* plot revolved around partition of the country and its impact on a Muslim family, rest of the Muslim socials were based on visual celebrations of Muslim culture and purdah as a poetic mystery rather than a social constraint. *Garam*

Hawa is one of the most powerful post-Partition films featuring a Muslim family's trauma including scenes dealing with female agency and forced talaq, reflecting how larger political currents affect personal relationships. In the other films Nawabi culture is shown in decline, representing a bygone era of refinement clashing with modernity, Talaq begins as a traditional element but gradually becomes a point of social concern and reform and Purdah is often romanticized or critiqued, symbolizing both beauty and oppression.

However the very contribution of the Muslim {or termed Islamicate- by Ira Bhaskar, Richard Allen and more recently Mukul Kesavan} ethos on early film production in terms of themes, language, art direction, costumes: the whole aura, has seldom being discussed. It is also imperative to note that these Muslim motifs were present not only in the work of Muslim directors or producers but were actively promoted in the work of directors like Sohrab Modi, Guru Dutt and more recently Shyam Benegal.

If films co relating to that era like *Mother India* (1957), *Naya Duar* (1957) and *Leader* (1964) talked about the emergence of a new Modern India, simultaneous efforts were made by film makers to depict the crumbling of the medieval nawabi culture in Sohrab Modi's *Sheesh Mahal* (1950), Satyajit Ray's *Jalsahgar* (1958) and Abrar Alvi's *Sahib Biwiaur Ghulam* (1962). Thus during the initial phase of nation building, cinema performed the ideological task of justifying the contemporary through the invocations of the past. (Mukhopadhyay, 2013:248).

The first Indian Talkie *Alam Ara* (1931) by Ardeshir Irani, was a breakthrough in more than one way. While the silent films were dominated by themes based on Hindu Mythology, *Alam Ara* (1931) challenged this very concept of film making. As Roy remarks, 'the release of the first talkie *Alam Ara*, by a Parsi director, Ardeshir Irani, introduced disjuncture in the Hindu tradition of film making …..when Wazir Mohammad Khan sang the first song of Indian Cinema *De de Khudakenaam par*, in the garb of a fakir [mendicant] in Irani's film, the subcontinent's syncretic Sufi heritage was reaffirmed' (Roy, 2015:11). Based on a Parsi play written by Joseph David, The film starred Master Vithal, Zubeida and Prithviraj Kapoor. The film was a grand costume drama, a hallmark of Parsi theatre. The sets and costumes in *Alam Ara* displayed strikingly Islamicate features. The next film to display these features, following *Alam Ara,* was Madan Theatre's *Shirin Farhad* (1931), which adapted a legend from Shah Nama. This tragic Persian love story between the sculptor Farhad and queen Shirin was a popular theme in Parsi theatre in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, mostly due to its musical appeal Imperial also produced the ûrst Farsi language sound feature in 1933, *Dukhtare-Lur,* and thus an aspect of Iranian ûlm history can be traced to Bombay (Ganti, 2004:16).

Courtly love stories of the Urdu Parsee theatre are probably the reason behind Indian cinema's dependence on romantic Islamic themes and the way they link love, obstacles and tragedy. Another popular genre of this period was the historical film, based on stories of real characters or legendary heroes. Ezra Mir's *Noorjehan* (1931) was the first Hindustani historical talkie. It followed a storyline similar to the successful stage play produced by Madan, later adapted into a film during the silent age (*Nurjehan*, 1923) (Mukhopadhyay, 2013:110). Bhagwati Prasad Mishra, who was a known name in the world of North Indian traditional theatre, in collaboration with Nanubhai Patel, tried his hand in the business of film making, choosing the story of Razia Sultan, the only women ruler of Medieval India.

Talking about courtly or Mughal romances, Mukhopadhaya explains, 'despite resistance from a small group of the traditional elite, the courtly romances remained popular among film going audiences. Its popularity led Ardeshir Irani, a man with long experience as a producer and exhibitor to use his name for the directorial credit in *Shahjehan* (1924), a film based on Shah Jahan, the celebrated figure of Mughal romance' (Mukhopdhyay 2013:88). Returning back to the genre of medieval films, Frank Osten with HimanshuRai made *Shiraz* (1928). The film was based on a fictional love story around the Mughal monument Taj Mahal, the story of the slave girl Selima and the emperor Shah Jahan. According to Mukhopadhyay, 'a series of stereotypical images associated with the Islamic, medieval orient may have come together to form this unique plot' (Mukhopadhyay, 2013: 91). Inspired by the medieval film genre, famous actor Charu Roy, directed his own version of the Mughal romance, titled *Loves of a Mughal Prince* (1928). It featured the playwright Imtiaz Ali in the role of Emperor Akbar, while Sita Devi, whose performance in a historical role in the Osten-Rai production had already earned her fame, appeared as the Heroine' (Rajadhyaksha and Willemen, 1994:230). However, the inspiration for Mughal romances came after the grand

success of Nandlal Jaswantlal's version of *Anarkali* (1953). Talking about the film Mukhopadhaya observes, 'scriptwriter Nassir Hussain wrote a unique screen play in modern melodramatic style in Hindustani, abstaining from the courtly embellishments typically expressed in the Urdu –Persian language' (Muhkopadhaya, 2013:227).

Directed by K. Asif, another Hindi epic drama*Mughal-e-Azam* came out in 1960. The film broke all the previous records at the box office. Besides becoming the highest-grossing Hindi movie, *Mughal-e-Azam* was also critically acclaimed, and is counted amongst the greatest Bollywood classics. The story of the beautiful but ill-fated Anarkali and the handsome and staunch Prince Salim, fuelled the imagination of the common masses as well as film makers, for many generations to come.

Films of seventies attempted to capture the angst amongst the youth of the nation. However, amongst the most popular and successful movie of the decade was *Pakeezah* (1972). With beautiful dialogues in chaste Urdu and lavish sets, Kamal Amrohi, the director of the film, narrates the despairing tale of a courtesan, played by Meena Kumari, to perfection. Ghulam Mohammed and Naushad composed the exquisite music for the movie that played an enormous part in the film achieving spectacular success and attaining cult status for itself.

However, this progressive current runs parallel to another dominant trend in mainstream Indian cinema— one marked by hyper-nationalistic spectacles. This parallel trend in mainstream Indian cinema reflects a distinct ideological shift where films increasingly serve as cultural instruments of political affirmation. Big-budget historical dramas such as *Padmaavat* (2018), *Tanhaji* (2020) and *The Kashmir Files* (2022) have not only found commercial success but have also tapped into the emotional and political sentiments of a polarized society. These films often frame history through a lens of heroism tied to religious and cultural identity and depict minority characters or communities in villainous or regressive roles. The narratives tend to glorify a mythic past, where valor, honor, and sacrifice are associated with majoritarian warriors defending their land or faith against a foreign or "invading" other, typically coded as Muslim.

Films like *Gully Boy* (2019) and *Raazi* (2018) on the other hand offer nuanced portrayals of Indian Muslims, breaking away from stereotypical or vilified representations common in mainstream cinema. In *Gully Boy*, the Muslim identity of the protagonist Murad is organically integrated into the narrative, portraying him as an aspiring rapper from a poor Mumbai neighborhood whose struggles are more about class and opportunity than religion. The film also features a strong Muslim female character, Safeena, who balances faith with ambition and assertiveness. *Raazi*, on the other hand, tells the story of Sehmat, a Kashmiri Muslim woman who becomes an Indian spy during the 1971 war. Her patriotism challenges the frequent conflation of Muslim identity with disloyalty, and the film treats even her Pakistani in-laws with empathy and complexity. Both films emphasize human stories and individual choices over religious binaries, offering a more inclusive and layered representation of Muslim characters in Indian cinema.

However these two films are an exception and not a norm. This cinematic "othering" mirrors the broader political discourse in the country, where minority communities—especially Muslims—are increasingly portrayed as outsiders or threats to national unity. These films rarely encourage historical complexity or nuance; instead, they simplify conflicts into binaries of good versus evil, native versus invader, us versus them. The result is a powerful, emotionally charged form of storytelling that resonates with a majoritarian audience and reinforces nationalist ideologies. When backed by state support or informal endorsements from political figures, such films blur the line between art and propaganda, shaping public opinion and cultural memory in ways that can marginalize or erase alternate perspectives.

At a time when cinema could serve as a medium for healing, introspection, and plurality, these hyper-nationalistic narratives instead deepen divides. They contrast starkly with the more inclusive and introspective storytelling of independent and Video on Demand-era films, where diverse voices and lived realities find space. Thus, Indian cinema today stands at a crossroads— simultaneously serving as a mirror to the nation's anxieties and aspirations, while also becoming a battleground for the contestation of its cultural and political identity.

Conclusion :

In conclusion, the trajectory of Muslim representation in Hindi cinema mirrors the broader socio-political evolution of the Indian nation—from inclusive narratives during the Nehruvian era that emphasized cultural plurality, to the present-day binaries shaped by majoritarian nationalism. While early films celebrated the rich contributions of Muslim culture through nuanced

portrayals and the genre of Muslim Socials, contemporary mainstream cinema often reduces Muslim identity to stereotypes, contributing to their symbolic marginalization. Exceptions like *Gully Boy* and *Raazi* demonstrate the potential of cinema to humanize and complexify minority identities, but these remain rare amidst a dominant trend of hyper-nationalistic storytelling. As Hindi cinema continues to shape public discourse and cultural memory, it bears a crucial responsibility: to resist reductive portrayals and instead embrace its legacy of syncretism, empathy, and critical engagement with India's pluralistic identity.

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