

## **Portraiture of Muslim Women in Contemporary Indian Cinema: An Evaluation**

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**ABSTRACT:** Indian cinema is the only across-the-board contender to the popularity and clout of gargantuan tinsel town. Cinema in the artistic manner not only reflects the society but has the omnibus capability to influence the psychological as well as social realities existing in the social structure and reshape them into new horizons. Besides being the major source of entertainment in India and abroad too; it permeates the thread to lay the various dimensions in the society by nestling its protagonists and setting the real parameters in society. This essay is an attempt to depict the potpourris of quite quintessential condiments of contemporary cinema of Bollywood tinsel town of 21<sup>st</sup> epoch wheredue to incipience of liberalised, privatised and globalised era; Muslims are socially, economically and politically marginalised. While encapsulating the couple of movies and going through the contemporary film industry in India, this article tries to group the nature of stereotypical notions forming the gamut wherethere is scarcely any string distinguishing the real and reel aspects of cinema but in the essence it directly touches the sensibilities of Muslim minority. It will also critically search how and to what extent the Muslim women is being mis(represented) by the Indian filmdom as well as how such depiction of Muslim women has influence in reforming the lives and thoughts of oodles of people within the Indian cultural contexture. This paper would elucidate the portrayal of Muslim images in the contemporary Indian cinema after perusing the valuable observations.

**Keywords:** Cinema, Muslim women, Ideology, Courtesans, Valience.

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### **I. INTRODUCTION**

#### **The aesthetic value of cinema culture**

Cinema is uniquely an influential vehicle for culture, education, leisure and propaganda ubiquitously. It has conferred formidable as well as significant dimensions to cultural, social as well as political fundamentals of society over years from its incipience in terms of massive production of ideas, thoughts, believes being the pivot which stir and knit the various social relations and political interests and socio-economic accomplishments. It is a medium which has a much wider catchment area than any written literature or political debate. It is accessible to all sections of society and in order to be financially viable needs to incorporate within at all those condiments that may contribute to its success.

The Indian film industry is the largest in the world and has mushroomed in the rest of the world notably in the countries with population of expatriate Indians. Characters are the key to steer over the movies. They plunge into their roles well which has a direct as well as indirect influence on various patterns of living.

Islam in India reaches back millennium and the present Indian terrain is enriched by its cultural contributions that it is almost unviable to think of Indian cult without the Muslim influence and such all offers an endless source of material to writers and filmmakers. The Muslim community itself offers a cavernous well-spring of subject potential to the writers and filmmakers of Bollywood tinsel town. Circa 1920s Indian cinema had been producing films with Muslim protagonists and 1930s marked the thriving passage for Hindi movies and the organised manner of proliferating went on to 1940s, 1950s, 1960s so on encapsulating everything melodrama, love stories, familial issues, metropolitan crime thrillers, political issues etc. Then era of 1970 and later marked the passage of various other realistic socio-economic turmoil and annihilating worldly issues which gave new dimensions to the existing a bit of unrealistic and chimerical aspects of cinema. It also posed a new challenge on the depiction of protagonists in a fair and innate manner. There are umpteen fine films produced by Indian tinsel town to formulate the psychological ideology of people for Muslim and especially Muslim women.

The way in which Muslim women are treated on silver screen makes a quick and lasting impression creating a jingoist national edifice as well as pushing the community further towards the peripheral margins of Indian society.<sup>1</sup>

### **Bollywood cinema and portrayal of Muslim women:**

The incipience of cross country intercourse has inflicted the philosophy that everything in the world can be commercialised and commodities as well as mise-en-scene are made suitable to any extent cater to the exigency of the contexture. It is reinforced primarily through the mushrooming entertainment sector and most prominently film industry.<sup>2</sup> Muslim have long played a major role in Indian film industry. The Bollywood tinsel town has given us many female muslim iconic figures who have played quite exemplary roles in Bollywood as veiled beauty: speaking blossoming urdu, singing and dreaming of women as Madhubala (Mumtaz Jehan Dehalvi), Waheeda Rehman etc.<sup>3</sup>

There are many movies which have played an imperative role to set the ideology of muslim females depiction in minds of people of whole terrain.

### **Courtesan or Tawaif:**

The dominant portrayal of Muslim women in Bollywood Tinsel town is tawaif. Courtesans were women who knew and performed songs and dances, were well versed with poetry, literature and possessed tactful and engaging conversational skills.<sup>4</sup> They have an enduring and immortalised appeal and their profession is such that they have to perform before men but later they fall in love with the male protagonists and men assert their right on them, use them as property. As an act of benevolence, a woman's desire to be possessed by a man and her emotional dependence on him has been focussed on. K. Asif's Indian epic historical drama film *Mughal-E-Azam* (1960)<sup>5</sup> set a record at box office. Rachel Dwyer comments it as the highest grossing film of the decade which shows a love angel between Anarkali, a courtesan dancer in the court of Mughal emperor Akbar and his son Salim. The dancer is struffed off her status and emotion for having fallen in love with the prince who belongs to the ruling elite. Kamaal Amrohis's *Pakeezah* (1971) Muzaffar Ali's *Umrao Jaan* (1981), Parkash Mehra's *Muqaddar Ka Sikandar* (1978) starring Meena Kumari as Mahjabeen Bano, Rekha as Amiran alias *Umrao Jaan* and Zohra Begum respectively. These women help the male protagonist relieving their pains and later fall into an unrequited love with the hero. They are also seen playing the role as a catholic. Then later the film *Umrao jaan* was made again and the role was essayed by Aishwarya Rai Bachchan in 2006.<sup>6</sup> These movies also reveal the disillusionments and heartbreaks a tawaif goes through her life. *Umrao Jaan* depicted the hypocrisy of society; the subtle and sensitive nature of women too.<sup>7</sup> The identity of Muslim women becomes synonymous with quawallis and mujras.<sup>8</sup>

### **Spook and Truculent**

There were movies in the recent past which enabled the women to play fairly with the capacity of being spooks. The roles were conferred as Muslim spooks who are merely associated with the Pakistan terrain. Though these were produced to present the extant affairs even after that attempt they have a negative impact of the mindset of mob. In movie *The Hero: Love Story of a Spy* (2003)<sup>9</sup> Preity Zinta essays Reshma who goes to Pakistan to spy on the activities of ISI head who is trying to build a nuclear bomb. In *Ek Tha Tiger* (2012)<sup>10</sup> Katrina Kaif essays Zoya an ISI agent herself who befriends the male protagonist; a spy and officer of RAW to accomplish the secret task assigned to her. Pooja Bhatt's *Dhokha* (2007)<sup>11</sup> reveals potential terrorists in which Tulip Joshi plays Sarah who despite being the wife of a police officer acts as a suicide bomber who is responsible for blast and demise of multitudinous folks.

### **Occult and Bedizen attire**

Women are either decked up in Bui-buis or begirded in heavy lehngas and ghaghras with full-fledged make over. In some movies, Muslim women (especially from Pakistan) have more positive images than negative. Movies depicting such roles are relatively few but include widely loved film in industry and Yash Chopra's *Veer-Zaara* (2004)<sup>12</sup> proved it to the mark which set an unfortunate love story. Zaara Hayat Khan essayed the main lead of a Pakistani woman hailing from a rich political family of Lahore who fell in love with an Indian Air force pilot and bore the long span separation of 22 years. Moreover, a Pakistani lawyer named Saamiya Siddiqui proved to be their savior. In the first half of the flick, Zaara is shown wearing very heavy attire as well as bulky jewellery. Another flick named *Mammo* (1994)<sup>13</sup> by Shyam Benegal where Farida Jalal played as burqa clad woman.

### **The dauntless being and the 'other woman' plot**

Ismail Merchant's *Muhafiz* (1994)<sup>14</sup> reflects not less than a dying feudal culture but also portrays the Muslim woman's revolution against the conservative feudal order and Islamic orthodoxy. Shabana Azmi acted as Intiaz Begum, a prostitute turned poetess who earns by singing Ghazals in musharays. The treatment of the Muslim woman protagonist is not fundamentally different in the new cinema. Director Shyam Benegal gets accolades from heaven for his distinguished characters. He is famous for showing the other positive side of stout heartedness in the womanfolk i.e. the strong Muslim character. In his *Sardari Begum* (1996)<sup>15</sup> the strong

character is played by Kirron Kher who acts as a popular singer and courtesan as well as reflects how the character is disowned by the family for learning music from concubine. Even though she continues to lead the life being dignified even living as the confronted nook of the society. Moreover there are movies which depict the emotional trauma of loneliness and dejection being unfortunate ladies called 'other woman'. Mahesh Bhatt's *Zakhm* (1998)<sup>16</sup> was a controversial religion epic where Pooja Bhatt essayed a Muslim woman protagonist who is represented as 'other woman' of film director. She is expressed as simple, vulnerable and subdued Muslim wife and mother and being in relation with a married man is treated coldly. Shyam Benegal's *Zubeida* (2001)<sup>17</sup> is the reflection of sexual politics and social mores. Karishma Kapoor undoubtedly portrays more as a pious wife of prince but at the same time she is presented as 'other woman' to Manoj Vajpayee.

#### **Distorted portrayal and the impact:**

The images of woman from films act as sign of ideological discourse in patriarchal society. The influence of the films is more than other way round. They way the characters are depicted in the films and the consistency of such portrayal can bring about changes in society's perceptions over a period of time. Infact people follow the flicks respectively without grasping the realities. The impact is on the psychology of women as well as other strata and segments of the society. People perceive the negatives aspects pronto and neglect the other side of pain, harassment, discomfort, loneliness, disillusionment as well as misery.

In the words of Mohammad Ali Jinnah, "India is not a nation, nor a country. It is a subcontinent of nationalities."<sup>18</sup> So such depiction may bring brawls as well as disorganisation in the different communities in the nation. The flicks on the one hand set up the glimpse and couture of Muslim woman in the mind of other women as well as it has led to creating strenuously vehemence in the relationships across the border. The negative images are ingrained so fathom that the stereotypical roles are catalysed and now appear normal even to the muslim audiences.

## **II. CONCLUSION**

This paper hereby tries to grasp the nature of stereotypical concepts and image formation of Bollywood tinsel town in relation to Indian cinema. Cinema acts as an instrument of escapism leading people into their fantasies which are restrained by what is or is not acceptable socially. Cinema being very powerful medium of visionary confabulation needs to go deeper into the characterisation so that women of India could develop an understating their compulsions sensitively. Though attempts have been made by some film-makers to uphold the message of communal harmony.<sup>19</sup> Cinema must focus on causes for social understanding and greater awareness. A good cinema can go a long way in educating people through entertainment towards the grass root level as well. It must also work for the grave issues regarding the equality of women because the Muslim women are also equal to other women of the society. Art of equality is also applicable to them.<sup>20</sup> In this 21<sup>st</sup> epoch, it has become the pace-setter and the trend-setter and it must support sentiments of women, steer towards nation building, arise national as well as self consciousness by valid popular matters and sentiments. Films are the mirror of social image of various aspects in the terrain. "Indianness" in cinema needs to be broadened in scope and made more inclusive in nature.<sup>21</sup>

Therefore, it must be kept in mind that foundation of nation must go ahead in a positive manner keeping all the dynamic aspects hand in hand. Cinema must pay heed to positive ideology of mind of people towards grave matters as the images are worth their measure in gold.

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