InterViews: An Interdisciplinary Journal in Social Sciences
2021, Vol. 8, No. 1, pp. 48-68

ISSN: 2349-400X ©Saint Claret College, Ziro
https://doi.org/10.36061/IV.8.1.21.48.68

READING THE CONSTRUCT: AN APPRAISAL OF MUSLIM WOMEN IN CONTEMPORARY HINDI COMMERCIAL CINEMA

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Cinema is considered a cultural artifact that reflects and replicates reality. Image constructs of women as represented in cinema function as signs of ideological discourses in a patriarchal society. Since its inception, the relationship between cinema, society, and representation has been evident and dialectical. Indian cinema has a period of play of over a hundred years. It has been a major platform for representing various issues such as gender, women's rights, sexuality, religion and minority groups. In the contemporary social landscape, any discussion on cinema and its representation of minorities, particularly those associated with the Islamic world, is mediated by a certain graphic spectacle of the media. As media representation of minorities has been minimal, so issues of representation of religious minorities and stereotypical instances of gender and identity constructs have become an integral component in the disciplines of art, cinema, and visual culture.The construct of Muslim women and their portrayal in the narrative accounts remain clichéd, habitually or systematically excluded, and relegated to minor roles, or roles that match traditional stereotypes. Therefore, this paper seeks to assess traces of stereotypical depiction of Muslim women and their objectification for men's viewing pleasure, and if any, to what extent their social construct and representation in the contemporary Hindi commercial cinema have changed.

Keywords: muslim women, hindi cinema, social construct, stereotypes, gaze

Since its inception, the relationship between cinema, society, and representation has been evident and, to some extent, dialectical. In the contemporary social landscape, any discussion on cinema and its representation of minorities, particularly those associated with the Islamic

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world, is mediated by a certain graphic spectacle of the media both online and in traditional forms. Cinema is considered one of the foremost powerful media of storytelling, which, under the auspices of being a visual medium, has the ascendancy, control, and dominance, to elicit durable and sturdy emotions in an attempt to present dynamic images and pictures of social reality (Prasad, 1998). The moving image is the medium of mass culture and the universal art form of the twentieth century, which expresses our hopes and aspirations to help us imagine what might be. Cinema, therefore, is a popular medium of mass consumption that plays a key role in molding opinions, constructing images as well as in reinforcing a definite set of dominant and overriding cultural values and standards.

From commercials to movies and tablets to smartphones, we are constantly engaged with and surrounded by visual images. Academicians and scholars argue that the visual is central to the cultural construction of social life in contemporary societies, marking the move to post-modernity (Rose, 2001). Berger (1972) aptly points out that seeing comes before words, underlining that a child or an infant looks and recognizes way before it can even articulate or speak. That emphasizes the magnitude and significance of the visual form (Rose, 2001). It is supposed that almost everyone of us collects or receives around 80 percent of information through our eyes (Berger, 1972).

In the aegis of a visual culture other than films, the visual media or the moving image essentially caters to providing objective information. On the other hand, meaningful visual depictions or films apart from just 'providing' objective data may 'connote', 'imply,' or 'signify' various facets of politico-democratic events specific to a particular region. Besides, they are different from other visual media because of the 'human factor' associated with them. Cinema in visual culture has long protracted the mainstream entertainment appeal. Commencing from the mass media perspective, the substantial content in cinema is frequently classified vis-a-vis the standing and status of the society. Using this rationale, Wilkinson-Weber (2005) advocates that films create a visually historical and chronological experience for the viewers that can affect their memories of the event. There have been those films that mirror, emulate, and represent the life and times of the audience. Furthermore, its presence has been both regressive and progressive in bringing up themes into which productions can be categorised and connected to various lenses through which they can be understood.

The issues of visual media's representation of religion, stereotypical instances of gender and identity are being discussed today. As a result, they have become an integral component in the discipline of media studies and visual culture. The rationale may be attributed to the popularity and diversity of media as a source of mass consumption and its influence on constructing ideas and generating debates. Currently, the media scene in India has expanded, leading to superfluity and a plethora of media choices available to the audiences; and cinema has of late emerged as one of the most prominent and preferred choices.

From an Indian perspective, the media representation of minorities has been minimal in art, cinema, and visual culture. In the process of screening larger than life characters on screen, the depiction and portrayal of women remain clichéd. In the modernization of societies, cinema is considered to have played an important role and greatly affected women's image in today's world. Hindi movies are not screened for the outlay of gender biases. Still, to a certain extent, they stereotypically portray women as gentle, passive and tentative, occupying the role of caregiver, and career options rarely expanding beyond the women-dominated professions such as teaching, nursing, secretarial and clerical work (Kumari, 2004). Criticisms of such productions habitually include a symposium of how minorities, especially women, are systematically excluded and relegated to minor roles or roles that match traditional stereotypes. These types of representations play an important role in the social construction of reality among the general public, thereby perpetuating racism and sexism on a larger scale (Islam, 2007).

A survey interprets that women are the major consumers of mass media. Therefore, the way they are represented or their image constructed in any domain of media coverage is a major concern for the feminist critique. Several international fora have recognized and distinguished the outcomes and ramifications of such a reworked and transformed media setting on women's access and admittance to media, their role within the media structures and therefore the presentation of their perspectives and outlooks in media coverage, especially in cinema (UNESCO, 2001).

Correspondingly, as the clamour for parity in terms of representation of the Muslim women grows louder, there is a concern as to what extent their

presence or portrayal in Hindi commercial cinema has changed. One needs to assess if there are still traces of stereotypical depiction of women and their objectification for men's viewing pleasure.

Hindi Commercial Cinema, Women, and the Indian Society

Long dismissed by academics and critics, Hindi cinema, prevalently acknowledged and imprecisely referred to as "Bollywood", serves as a metonym for India's publicized economic growth, an increasingly observable and powerful diaspora, and its global cultural influence. Being the flag bearer of one of the biggest film industries in the world, it has instituted relatively well the task of sketching and drawing the attention and interest of the people in the field of academics.

India is a multi-cultural, multi-racial, and multi-lingual country where family serves as the foundation of the social organization, which identifies and defines roles based on gender, age, and generation, and uses a system of patriarchy. This sense of family is very evident in Hindi cinema. Cinema plays an imperative role in shaping, questioning, and reinforcing the identities of man and woman, in addition to helping shape and outlining perceptions about gender relations and equality in society (Thapan, 2009).

According to some researchers, the growing reports of abuse and exploitation of women in India are an aberration, given the Indian ideal of women (Prasad, 1998). In India, family ties are well built, and the crucial point in these ties is women in the remarkable roles of a mother, wife, and sister. However, women are typically stereotyped by the media (Singh, 2007). There is a devaluation of the women's image. They are shown to be more passive than men and subordinate to men, with restricted status and limited power. In visual culture, images of women are consistently stereotyped, portraying them as performing domestic chores, as objects of sexual desire, or as natural victims of harassment and assault.

Various authors have routinely established it, and John Berger notes that men 'act' and women 'appear'. Men happen to look at women, and the womenfolk watch themselves being looked at (Berger, 1972). This bias suggests succinctly the position and status of women in the realm of the 'look', including within the mainstream Hindi commercial cinema. In the Indian film industry, particularly in Hindi Commercial cinema, women have

been relegated to inert and passive characterization, as the bearer, and not the maker of meaning, merely an appendage to the man, the wielder of power! (Berger, 1972).

The 2006 Sachar Committee Report, prepared by the Prime Minister's High-Level Committee, confirmed that a large proportion of the Muslim population of India suffered from severe and relentless deprivation in many social, economic, and educational fields. Even their patriotism was suspected. The Report stated that the Muslim community was labeled as anti-national. These have caused strong resentment among the Muslims towards their stereotypical representations perpetuated by the media (Sachar, 2006: 11-12).

Kandiyoti (1994) discusses the relationship and rapport between women and the nation and comments that the multi-religious nations like India structure the state policies under the name of a secular state that is substantially influenced by the norms, values, and lifestyles of the dominant and overriding religious group (Hindu), irrespective of the features of the other religions. The identity of a 'Muslim Other' contained within the public discourse is additionally influenced by the decade-long resurrection of Hindutva. (Islam, 2007). Ignoring the relentless and institutionalized deprivation of Muslims in India, Islam is viewed as the exclusive locus of the Muslim women's deprived socio-economic status in society. The Sachar Report (2006) furthermore states thus:

> The compulsive and fixative focus on the chosen and select cases of Muslim women passionately discussed within the media results in identifying and distinguishing the Muslim faith and belief as to the sole locus of gender injustice in the community. Consequently, the civil society in toting up, mark-out and establish the Muslim women's deprivation and dispossession not in terms of the 'objective' reality and veracity of the collective or shared societal discrimination, or the out of order, flawed and faulty development policies, but purely within the religious-community space only. This gives consent to the State to shift, modify, and re-allocate the charge and blame to the Community as such and to absolve and release itself of the disregard and neglect. (pp. 12-13)

As Hindi cinema has persistently been the foremost point of reference for Indian culture in the contemporary era, it has shaped the scenarios of modern India to the extent that no preceding art form could ever accomplish. Of late,

it has bestowed us with several women-oriented films. However, a number of post-2000 films on Muslim representation pivots on strong Muslim women characters, which has opened up much academic analysis and inquisition. With feminism and women empowerment emerging as a significant field of research worldwide, Hindi cinema is not far behind in promoting such topics. Debates and discussions about women representation and female-centric films have always been at the forefront. It is worth noting that such an important aspect is further pushed ahead and has been gaining momentum, as witnessed by a plethora of female-centric films which portray women in diverse colors and shades.

Women have often been projected as an object of visual pleasure in Hindi cinema from the early times. Mulvey (1988), in her essay "*Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema,*" introduced the concept of "*Male Gaze*" as a feature of power asymmetry and opined that in cinema women are represented as objects of the gaze because the control of the camera is decided by the assumption that the heterosexual men are the default target audience for most of the film genres. Mulvey asserts that the cinema contributes to the male power by enabling men to make women objects of a controlling gaze, which she identified as scopophilia. According to Mulvey, scopophilia is about using another person as an object of sexual stimulation through sight and is one of the primary pleasures of the cinema (Derne & Jadwin, 2000). Mulvey also argues that in the conventional mainstream cinema, the male gaze typically takes precedence over the female gaze. The concept of the *Male Gaze* since then has been strongly influential and powerfully authoritative on feminist film theory and film or media studies. Mulvey (1989) mentions that in a film, there are three kinds of gaze. First, the viewpoint of the camera or how the camera follows the characters; second is the gaze of the audience; and thirdly, the gaze of the characters within the film. She contends that the look, glance, or gaze of the characters within the film subordinates other looks. It essentially follows the existing socially gendered practice wherever any woman plays a minor role and is essentially the source of voyeuristic pleasure. Mulvey (1989) establishes that the contentment and pleasure in looking, staring or gazing, has been ripped off between the active male and the passive female in a world, ordered by sexual discrepancy and imbalance. The decisive and determining male gaze puts forward as well as projects its desires and fantasies onto the female body, which is styled accordingly. In their customary ancient or

traditionally exhibitionist role, women are concurrently checked out, looked at and displayed, with their coded for strong and sturdy visual in addition to the erotic and titillating impact and collision that they can be aforementioned to imply or connote to-be-looked-at-ness (McGowan, 2003).

French psychoanalyst and cultural theorist Jacques Lacan first introduced the term '*gaze*' as a psycho-analytical expression to describe the anxious, agitated and fretful state that comes with the attention, awareness or understanding that an individual receives from the other (Lacan, 1960/2006; Rosa, Antonucci, Siracusano, & Centonze, 2021). In cinema, the male gaze occurs when the audience is positioned into the perspective of a heterosexual man. The camera may now and then keep lingering on the curves of a woman's body, as a case in point. Rosemary Betterton (1985) asserts that the images of female sexuality in this culture are multiplied endlessly as a spectacle for male pleasure. What kinds of pleasure are offered to women spectators within the forms of representation? Which ones have been made mainly by men, for men?

In the early 1970s, the initial attempts of voicing opinions centered largely on concerns relating to mediation issues and ideological discourses relating to women surfaced in the United States. Those were by and large based on the sociological theories that focused on the function of women characters in particular film narratives and of stereotypes as a mirrored image of a society's outlook on women. These aspects of gaze, sex, and sexuality have ever since also been dominating Hindi cinema. The penetration of western ideals, pre-set standards, and principles hooked on to a film play a crucial role in naturalizing images of women for one's consumption. The digital era thus ushered the images of the Indian women into our homes, be it on our television sets, computer screens, or via visual sketches of media (Ahmed, 1992).

To the enchantment of the rational and progressive human beings, issues of feminism, empowerment, and emancipation of women in different forms are time and again chosen by contemporary Indian filmmakers. Cinema contributes to social transformation by rejecting social divides in the name of caste and community. Just as many films portray the issues of representation of women, others delve into the issues of misrepresentation as well as under-representation in the narratives. Despite the advancements that Hindi cinema

has made with the increasing accessibility and ease of understanding, things have not changed significantly for Muslim women. These continuities are shreds of evidence of the ongoing influence of western neocolonialism, most often invested in the circulation of cultural products that articulate western or racist ideals of women and femininity (Gokulsing & Dissanayake, 1998).

Cinema and Representation

Cinema is believed to be a popular medium of mass consumption which plays a significant role in molding opinions, constructing images, reinforcing dominant cultural values as well as bringing about key changes in society. Cinema is one of the most admired popular media forms, which is still an extremely effective, potent, and persuasive entertainment and socializing medium, and as such warrants an extensive understanding and investigation (Linton & Jowitt, 1977; Kurtz & Turpin, 1999). According to Thapan (2009), Cinema plays an imperative role in shaping, questioning, and reinforcing the identities of man and woman, and helping shape and outline perceptions about gender relations and equality in society. Consequently, cinema depicts innumerable images of various races, groups, and communities on-screen, which have the potential to drive audiences to generate thoughts, views, and opinions based on what they perceive to be true or credible (Gerbner, 1969).

The relationship between reality and representation is the first concern we reflect upon when considering the relationship between the media and society. As an accepted and popular cultural medium, Hindi cinema has created and shaped stereotypical images of Muslims with clichéd forms of cultural and religious symbols like 'beard' and 'caps' for men and conservative Islamic headscarf, '*hijab*' or '*burkha*' for women, creating a monolithic portrayal of the community (Islam, 2007). These portrayals have completely ignored regional and socio-economic differences within the Muslim community. The portrayal of Muslim men as terrorists, villains, and gangsters has also been a recurrent theme in Bollywood movies (Islam, 2007). The Hindu-Muslim sagas of romances are furthermore a widespread theme in Bollywood (Hirji, 2008).

To a great extent, like the demonized Muslim man, the Muslim woman as well has been incorporated into the imagination of the Hindi cinema as the inferior or substandard 'other' to that of the 'ideal' upper-caste Hindu woman. This may be illustrated by the examples of the nationalist classic,

Mother India (1957), and the romantic classic *Mughal-e-Azam* (1960). In *Mother India*, the de-sexualized character of Radha is the archetypical representative of the dignified and noble Gandhian mother who is submissive, dutiful, chaste, virtuous, selfless, patriotic, and self-sacrificing. This sharply contrasts with the character of Anarkali in *Mughal-e-Azam*, who is a *Tawaif* (courtesan) and the ultimately decorous seductress and dancer with whom the Mughal Prince Jahangir falls in love and for whom he rebels against his father, Emperor Akbar. The representation of Radha in a nationalistic sari, symbolically binding and obligatorily protecting and shielding her body from exposure, vulnerability, and permeability to men. At the same time, as for Anarkali, regardless of her fully covered body, her breasts are frequently accentuated and highlighted by the cut of her dress. Her swirling dances reveal her full legs even though they are covered up, and the only exposed parts of her body, her palms, and feet are fetishized through long nails painted red, and with jewelry and elaborate and intricate dancing gestures of her hands and feet (Dyer, 1982; 1988/2004). If the ideal model of the coherent, consistent, but the gendered nation is represented through Radha, then the disruptive, rebellious, and erotic presence that disrupts the *status quo* of power, authority, and supremacy is represented through Anarkali (Ansari, 2008).

The representation of the veiled Muslim woman has achieved and been successful in gaining an iconic status. It has become a trope in support of the conflict of the civilizations' argument flanked by the civilized Hindus and the barbaric Muslims in India. The women's dress in India is produced, performed, and interpreted throughout in the course of the opposition of putatively 'Hindu' thus the Indian sari, and 'Muslim' thus the un-Indian 'veil' (Osella & Osella, 2007). Muslim women's preference and choice of clothes became a symbol of their rejection of the nation. The perspectives arising out of such understandings discounted an analogous ideology of the Muslims, whereby intimidations to the Muslim communities' identity, survival, or existence, resulted in the conceited and proud declaration of their communities' characteristics on the bodies of their women (Menon, 2005).

Such dichotomized accounts of the representation of Hindu-Muslim women come into sight in the descriptions and imageries of the docile, submissive, and subservient veiled women, evoked in the movie *Veer Zaara* through the character of the Muslim woman Zara who constantly covers her head and wears a *salwar-kameez*, and who is passive and in need of

protection from the brutish Muslim man. Unlike the dangerous Muslim man, the Muslim women in Bollywood, particularly post 9/11, are shown to have some possibility of redemption through allegiance to the nationalistic agenda. For instance, Zooni in *Fanaa* sacrifices an earthly love for her lover, who is a terrorist/separatist, for a larger and superior transcendental love of the nation, to a large extent like in the movie *Mother India*. Zooni, whilst doing so, constructs autonomy, liberty, and space for herself and her son as the depoliticized 'good Muslims' contained by the nationalist legroom and space of the Indian nation (Khan, 2009).

By conveying an extreme and powerful image of the 'dangerous other' or the 'inferior other', the representation of a Muslim in the Indian films has sociologically broadened and expanded the classification and definition of Islamic terrorism (Kumar, 2013). Reducing the discursive space for Muslims in India and elsewhere have made them more exposed and vulnerable to social banishment, ostracism, state violence, or mob fury.

> The depravity and wickedness of the present discourses are such that it has Muslims eternally on the defensive part, which is explicitly the agenda and outline of the Hindutva in addition to all such forms of authoritarian, assertive and dictatorial ideology (Kumar, 2013, p. 464).

An analogous scenario, to a great extent like that of Edward W. Said's (1978) theorization of representing Muslims as '*Other*' in the Western media, is the extensive representation of Muslims as the '*Other*' in the Hindi cinema. A few cultural symbols such as clothing, food habits, and etiquette are used to mark out the 'Muslim identity' as the '*Other*'. These were clubbed into a particular community to construct a mystifying, baffling, and clichéd image or a stereotypical representation of Muslims – significantly a lot like what the western media did to the populace of the Middle-East.

In Hindi commercial cinema, the representation of the Muslim women's identity is problematic too. In different periods depending on the socio-political circumstances, the Muslim identity has been represented in different ways. While the films of the 1950s and 1960s, the so-called Nehruvian era, reflected the "tolerant" secularism of the state and depicted an idealized Muslim world where *Nawabs* lived with their grandeur and idiosyncrasies intact, the 1970s and the surfacing of an unconventional politics of minority

representation was witnessed in the 1980s. In this period, the aristocrats were pushed to hedonistic and self-indulgent pursuits (Hirji, 2010).

Preceding literature confirms that, across different genres (the Muslim historical, the Muslim social, and the Muslim political), popular Hindi cinema has achieved minimalism of the Muslim Other in the nation space by representing Muslims in stereotypical ways. Worse, the contemporary films depart from such earlier mainstream films' stereotypical representation of Muslims to one in which Muslims are depicted as "evil" and alien to the nation (Taher & Gopalan, 2007). The films examine narratives that represent Muslim characters without any symbol or identification where indicators such as language, cloth, and etiquette do not smear Muslim identity. Though these films do not carry any extra baggage of religion, there are films in this category. Muslims are made to repeatedly prove their allegiance to the nation despite their liberal, modern, and secular images.

Throughout the 1990s, the portrayal of rogue Muslims was restricted to Kashmiri separatists and their sympathizers alongside the underworld concentrated in Mumbai. Throughout this period, many of the films tried to present the picture the story of the Indian (predominantly Hindu) families threatened by Islamic terrorists, thus demonising the Muslims as the 'other' (Hirji, 2008; Jain, 2011; Rajagopal, 2011). In most of the movies, Hinduism and its cultural symbols came across as 'the norm' by eliminating the other religions in the country (Rajagopal, 2011). The 'Muslims as terrorist' genre of cinema became popular in the 1990s. Since then, the themes have since then evolved and diversified in recent times with specific references to the trans-national nature of dread and terror since the events of 9/11 in the USA. For example, in *Fanaa* (2006), Amir Khan played the role of a Kashmiri separatist character named *Rehan,* acting violently against the Indian nation. Although the political ideology of *Azadi* (independence) from India is mentioned in passing in the film, it is framed from the beginning as being in contrast to the patriotism of the Muslim women character- Zooni and her school teacher parents. They are portrayed as the co-opted de-politicized 'Good Muslims', according to Mahmood Mamdani (2004). Even though it is pointless to note that the character of Rehan in the plot is the embodiment of Mamdani's fanatical 'Bad Muslim' that habitually contests "the national mandate of things" (Malkki, 1992, p. 34). The plot of *Fanaa* appears to suggest itself in isolation from the complex political realities and people's ideological

positioning on Kashmir, by labeling all forms of political dissent from the Kashmiris as terrorism or anti-nationalism towards India. This premise has frequently been replicated in many movies churned out by the Hindi cinema in the 1990s, 2000s; and from then on, where the Kashmiris have been replaced by the Indian Muslims and the acts of political dissent and disagreement in the Indian state is labeled as anti-nationalism, constructing a *patriot in opposition to a terrorist* dichotomy.

In the *patriot-terrorist* binary, at the same time as in the *Good Muslim-Bad Muslim* binary, it appears that the only reliable Muslims are those who position India first. Remarkably, the designated title and the lead characters in *Fiza, Sarfarosh's* Salim, *Mission Kashmir's* Inayat Khan, and *Fanaa's* Zooni are all religiously devout, pious, and uncritically patriotic. The *good in opposition to the bad* dichotomy also encompasses the *tradition opposed to the modern* and *the religious in opposition to the secular* dichotomies. The Muslims are embodied by the terrorists, the mafia dons, the lecherous *Nawabs*. They are almost immediately presented as intrinsically incompatible with the values of modernity, democracy, and secularism that the post-colonial Indian state espouses (Gokulsing & Dissanayake, 1998).

Implications of the Portrayal of Women in Hindi Cinema

Cinema is considered to be the cultural artifact that supposedly reflects and replicates reality. The images of women represented in the Hindi commercial cinema function as signs of ideological discourse in a patriarchal society. People follow the film's narrative without grasping the full picture of the lived reality. People perceive the negatives aspects straight away and neglect the other side of pain, harassment, discomfort, disillusionment, and misery.

The Hindi commercial cinema, as an influential cultural product, constructs the important paradigm of the 'Indian-ness' and 'collective identity' in its representation of the Muslim women (Mishra, 2006; Ansari, 2008). Its all-encompassing local and global reach heightens its significance as a persuasive and discursive contrivance that provides the rationale of legitimizing the assured uniqueness and identity claims (Osuri & Ghosh, 2012).

Cinema acts as an instrument of escapism, leading people into their fantasies conditioned by what is or is not acceptable socially. Whereas it is true that movies impersonate the discernible reality and are becoming more

inclusive with time, it is also true that the evident reality is often demarcated by stereotypes. Cinema, being an influential medium of imaginative and creative confabulation, therefore, needs to go deeper and into the characterization and roles, especially of women (Kaur & Sinha, 2005).

The stereotypes attached to Muslim characters are still prevalent as Hindi cinema has largely chosen to be patronising as well as alienating the Muslim women in their depictions. The portrayal of Muslim women predominantly in the representative accounts of the Hindi cinema has been inadequate, insufficient, and meager. There have been barely any films exclusively or solely dedicated to them. In the films where they can be found as envoys, their roles, images, and characterizations are often consistently diminished and habitually clichéd, conventional or stereotypical (Kirmani, 2009).

Distinguished scholars have observed that starting from the 1970s and until now, Hindi commercial cinema has stuck to a representation of Muslim women that has been quite rigid and unchanging, even when such profiles have changed on the ground (Hirji, 2010). When one looks back in time to how the Muslim women were represented in the narrative chronicles of the Hindi commercial cinema, the most common representation has been in the form of a tawaif. Films such as *Mughal-e-Azam* and *Umrao Jaan* are ideal examples of the same, where characters of Anarkali and Umrao Jaan were explicitly sexualized despite being covered from head to toe. The storylines framed for such characters would almost always entail that they are into the profession because of lack of a proper family, or economic stability but on no account out of choice or alternatives. And even as they explore the world of attraction or appeal, they do so whilst maintaining their chastity and purity (Khan, 2017).

The second most common type of representation is the silent Muslim woman, subservient and docile and easily oppressed. The character of Zara in *Veer Zara* is an idyllic example, with a very stereotypical representation of women where Zara is exposed as the inert and passive woman who her lover must fight for (Khan, 2017).

The third most common portrayal of Muslim women in Hindi cinema can be traced to movies like *Fiza* and *Mission Kashmir* and in more contemporary movies like *Raanjhanaa*, where the woman who is potrayed as patriotic, devoted, loyal and decisive in her ideals. They are different from the most

common or familiar portrayal. Nonetheless, a closer observation of these Muslim women characters' roles in the movies makes us understand how these characters are exceptional yet stereotypical. Further, the apparent associations between Islam and terrorism in such movies have been exceedingly knotty and challenging. The only place where the Hindi commercial cinema tried to explore the lives of women with political opinions and views, it did so merely through the stereotypical representation of their religion (Khan, 2017).

The argument can further be substantiated through the vignettes from the eighties, in the light of Shah Bano's high-profile legal battle that generated debates on the minority's devout religious practices versus gender justice in the public discourse. This prompted the 'Muslim woman' to be pulled from the yesteryear nostalgia into the contemporary realities depicted in a visual culture specifically that of Hindi cinema. In the movie *Coolie* (1983), the decade also saw an exceptional Muslim everyman's hero. Still, the same defiant or insolent spirit did not extend to the arena of Muslim women characters who remained soaked in victimhood. With *Nikaah's* (1982) indictment of triple-talaq came an early signposting of Hindi cinema's preoccupation with saving Muslim women from a variety of crises, which usually involved the regressive and violent tendencies of Muslim men.

Amidst the surge of communalism in the 1990s, Hindi cinema explored an illicit criminal underworld disproportionally populated by Muslim men, and where Muslim women were either missing, unimportant, inconsequential, or disposable. They did come into focus, like in *Henna* (1991), *Bombay* (1995), *Mission Kashmir* (2000), where the cross-border tensions became a prerequisite for their sheer presence. Thus, relegated to the margins of the society, specifically concerned with representations of race and gender, the Hindi movies were instrumental in presenting to the viewers the stereotypical Indian Muslim women whose stories were about the longing for uprightness and respectability, constantly sought in a man's love and the domesticity of marriage. Khaled Mohamed's *Mammo* (1994), *Fiza* (2000) and *Zubeidaa* (2001) symbolise a pointed departure for their susceptible, sensitive and considered a representation of a cross-section of Muslim women, and they best encaptulate the transition and evolution from the nineties to the third millenium. By the 2000s, these representations had a comprehensive global framework, where 9/11 was a turning point that made the 'Muslim terrorist'

a pop-cultural foundation and mainstay. Muslim men became public enemies, embodying evils of Islamic fundamentalism, both existent and perceived.

The Post-9/11 Islamophobia only compounded existing communal fault-lines and the saviour-complex displayed its own individual strain and twist in the Hindi cinema. At the dawn of the millennium, Muslim women portrayed in the films such as *Refugee* (2000) and *Gadar - Ek Prem Katha* (2001) were less fully realised characters than heavy-handed allegories about the distress, trauma, and futility of war. *Gadar* depicted a Pakistani Muslim woman being saved by a bold and valiant Sikh man in the context of the post-Partition communal riots. The film was soaked in stereotypes. Whereas Sikh bravery was positively reinforced, the narrative of Muslims as betrayers and riot-instigators was set in stone, to be repeated in recent films like *Kalank* (2019).

Islam (2007) criticised Hindi commercial films for misrepresenting the Indian Muslims as feudal characters, anti-nationals, terrorists, villains, as well as for their mythical constructions. To replace the negative imaging of Muslim characters with more positive portrayals, he recommends that "the bias in projecting the image of Muslims as 'terrorists' or 'anti-national' should be resisted both inside and outside the film industry by the secular-democratic and politically conscious people (p. 419)."

Chenoy (2002) claims that during the last two decades, Indian women have revealed that they would not surrender themselves to any attempts to remove them from the public sphere or diminish their social, economic, political, and legal rights. In recent times, there have been several cinematic attempts to re-cast the Muslim women characters as the new age girl who does not cease from meandering and bending the conventional (Muslim) societal customs and norms. Ideal examples of such characters who have been assigned such roles can be seen in the representative accounts of notable Hindi movies such as *Ishaqzaade, Lipstick Under my Burkha, Secret Superstar*, and *Naam Shabana.*

In the narrative chronicles of *Ishaqzaade*, the representation of Zoya has been like an ordinary young Indian girl caught up between family expectations, an inter-religious love story, and an aspiring political career. What stands out in the narrative is the least portrayed political identity or personality conferred to the character of Zoya. Moreover, her vocation in politics rose only out of her association with the males in the narrative accounts: firstly, her father,

and secondly *Parma*, the man with whom she is in love. She is depicted as a gullible fool for love, who cannot fulfill her dreams of either making it big in politics or her love-life. Also, when considering the movie distinctively from the point of analysing the representation of Muslim women, there is only limited success. The character of Zoya could have been represented as belonging to any other religion where the storyline would have come out the same. Since the movie explicitly centers on the facets of the woman's religion, it does not stay away from stereotyping the woman's role in the representative accounts, where her religion and faith as a "Muslim" is blatantly embedded. With its assorted characters in the representative accounts and the inter-faith romance, the narrative has the prospect of exploring in depth the life of a Muslim woman in a Muslim household, something which *Ishaqzaade's* narrative does not explore to a great deal. Even though a bold character is sketched through Zoya, a holistic representation of a 'Muslim woman' as such is lacking in the narrative.

Life for a woman in a patriarchal society is profoundly prescribed. In such an off-putting and restrictive mode of existence, could one be an undercover or stealthy rebel and realise one's unfulfilled wishes and then if such a leeway materialises, would it be still acceptable to the prevalent social order of a particular society? On the whole, how does a college student who wears a *burkha* but also loves Miley Cyrus reconcile her 'schizophrenic' life? How does a modest woman, married to a careless man, find the courage to change the situation and how does a small-town woman, who seeks pleasure or enjoys ecstasy and is smarter than her suitors, find a way to make her dreams come true? These are some of the pertinent concerns that *Lipstick Under My Burkha* addresses. The *lipstick* and the *burkha* establishes a woman's identity in the public spaces and liberates them in the concealed private estates. Broaching many crucial subjects that impact women, both across India and beyond, Alankrita Shrivastava beautifully knits a rebellious world of women amid the stereotypical 'mankind' and ensures that the film initiates a conversation that has long been overdue (Galani, 2017).

Lipstick Under My Burkha captures the resentments and silent languishment that Muslim women endure daily. Furthermore, the characters of Shireen and Rehana push the envelope on social issues and physical intimacy. These Muslim women are openly articulate, expressing their dreams and desires

and seeking freedom from the social, cultural, economical, and bodily clutches. They are depicted with a diverse array of expressions that range from lyrical to humorous, eccentric, dramatic, cutting, or intricate in style, using creative loaded tropes and a rich ideological and psychological web. Their empowerment is reflected in their rebellion against society's set and pre-conceived sexual roles and standards. These empowered women thereby represent the emergence of the new woman who is no longer passive or submissive but is rather assertive and self-assured and therefore tries to sketch new equations of equality (Khan, 2017). Through the commanding portrayal of the women characters, the narrative has dealt with the filth of patriarchy, vehemently opposing the idea of having set roles for a woman (Galani, 2017). The narrative also challenges the deep-seated and regressive Islamic practices and religious conservatism. It carefully shreds the shackles associated with Muslim women or female sexuality in a country that is very often weighed down with a surplus of set cultural norms, morals and values as '*Sanskaar*' (sacraments).

These ardent and devoted 'new' representations of the Muslim women characters in the recent Hindi commercial cinema neither sufficiently challenge the stereotypes about Muslim's subsidiary or subordinate position through their portrayals as the stereotypical or the 'other' (Hirji, 2008; Jain, 2011; Khan, 2009; Kumar, 2013) nor do they present a nuanced portrayal of the association of the Muslim religious practices with that of women's experiences of gender injustice (Agnes, 2012; Kandiyoti, 1994; Sachar, 2006).

Conclusion

The issue of identity is central to female emancipation. When this facet is attached to gender relations in a male-dominated society, especially to that of the Muslim community in India, it acquires multiple dimensions. Identity is an important issue for Muslim women as they are frail in power ratio. But it is not the power ratio only; in fact, it is applicable to every sphere of life whether it be domestic, societal, or the professional arena (Kaur & Sinha, 2005).

Regarding the depiction of women in films, British feminist film theorist Laura Mulvey observed that within their conventional exhibitionist role and position, the women are concurrently looked at and displayed, with their

appearances coded for a strong visual and an erotic brunt in the order that they can be said to connote to-be-looked-at-ness, which contends that in the film, a woman is merely the bearer of meaning and not the maker of meaning (Mulvey, 1988).

Some scholars argue that the representation of women characters within the narrative of the films has various treatments wherein they are no longer subject to the male gaze or mere silent spectators who are subjected to the dominance of patriarchy. Mulvey concludes that alternative filmmakers could counter the dominant discourses by "transcending outworn or oppressive forms or daring to break with normal pleasurable expectations to conceive a new language of desire" (Mulvey 1989, p. 16).

On a similar note, several scholars have resolutely contended that the mediation of the televisual creates complications in the relationship between the 'cinematic' and the 'real'. Therefore, the roles of Muslim women characters in Indian cinema have been largely flat, representing parts of the whole. There are hardly any movies that explore ideas such as the conscious sexuality of Muslim women or their political identities (Singh, 2007).

In the narrative accounts of the Hindi cinema, be it Muslim women as heroines, protagonists, side-characters, empowered women, deviated women, disempowered women, or Muslim women in comparison to women of other communities or Muslim men, only in a handful of recently produced Hindi films the audience has witnessed Muslim women in the roles of breaking the conventional perceptions and making their voices heard, asserting their presence in public, and defining their own social and political identity. Films such as *Dor, Pink, Lipstick Under my Burkha, Raazi, Gangs of Wasseypur, Well Done Abba, Taj Mahal, Kalank,* and *Secret Superstar* have busted the stereotypical portrayal of Muslim women characters in their representative accounts.

Even though Muslim women have made some advancements in their representations compared to their earlier portrayals as analyzed above, they still are under-represented in leading roles in the narrative accounts of Hindi commercial cinema. Their portrayals are often consistent with traditional stereotypes. In the absence of holistic representations, these characters lack articulation, and various changing facets of a Muslim woman's life are still left untouched by mainstream Hindi commercial cinema.

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