Pigeons & Painters: Othering of Muslim Identity in Hindi Cinema

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Abstract:

Cinema, as a tool of influence and soft power has been studied and researched for the impact it has on the minds of the people. With even nation states using it as a tool of cultural diplomacy and soft power and as an important instrument of negotiation. This paper undertakes the examination of iconic Hindi movies and the prominent Muslim characters portrayed in them exploring the dominant stereotypes, which they created and propagated.As the debates heat up in an increasingly polarized world on race, gender, religion, ethinicity and nationality, and the world looks for easy answers to difficult problems of reduced economic opportunity, myopic political discourses, large scale migration and displacement of population, due to wars and trade sanctions, the need to create a fear of the 'other', has assumed giant proportions in politics and has been seen to be driving the agendas of not just smaller, local and regional parties but increasingly so, even of larger mainstream national parties, the world over. This paper explores the characteristics of the stereotypes in which Muslims are painted and pigeon-holed in Hindi Cinema, which is also popularly called Bollywood, the world over.

Keywords: *Hindi Cinema and Culture, Religion, Identity, Stereotypes, Muslims in Bollywood, Media and Society*

Introduction

There is little else, which unites India as a country other than politics, Bollywood and cricket. Movies and particularly Bollywood or Hindi cinema remains the life breath of a wide global audience. Consulting firm KPMG released it its annual report on the Media and Entertainment sector in India at the industry body FICCI convention in April 2017. With a distinct slowdown in the global economy due to muted growth in both the US and China the numbers stood at a mere 2.6%. Indian economy outperformed most countries with a projected GDP growth rate of 7.1% despite demonetization, according to the report. In 2016 the Indian Media and entertainment industry grew at an astounding 9.1% on the back of affordable mobile devices and data prices. The first experience of most online users on the Internet is usually entertainment content. The sale of digital rights emerged as an important revenue stream for the film industry. The KPMG Media report projects, industry growth at a CAGR of7.7percenttill2021 and the film industry is expected to beworthINR206.6billion. [1]The

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[1]https://assets.kpmg/content/dam/kpmg/in/pdf/2017/04/FICCI-Frames-2017.pdf

impact that movies have on Indians is tremendous. Most of the big stars align the release of their big budget films with major Indian festivals like Holi, Diwali, Christmas and Eid. Shahrukh, Salman and Aamir Khan, complete the trio which has ruled the heart of a billion plus Indians now for over three decades. Shahrukh or King Khan as he is fondly called has emerged as an important figure, especially from the 90's Bollywood, despite being a rank outsider, playing iconic romantic characters in movies, which have broken several records at the box office. He also headlined the movie, My Name is Khan" (2010), which also had the famous line, "And I am not a terrorist". Incidentally,Shahrukh Khan was detained for the third time at a US Airport in 2016, following which the US Ambassador to India issued a public apology, promising that the incident wouldn't be repeated again in the future.(BBC, 2016).Post the 9/11 attacks in the US there was a spate of movies, which showed and actively propagated stereotypes against Muslims both in India and across the world. The onscreen portrayal of the Muslims has usually followed major global events, train bombings, terror attacks, shootouts at public places, uprisings. And these influences have only been negative. Muslims make about 14% of the Indian population but Bollywood has always had an abundance of talented Muslim writers, stars, producers and directors. Given the tremendous impact that Bollywood has on Indian societystereotypes propagated by Bollywood require a deep understanding and the application of academic framework in their study and analysis.

Understanding Stereotypes

The oxford English dictionary defines a stereotype as, "a widely held but fixed and oversimplified image or idea of a particular type of person or thing". While the Cambridge Dictionary defines it as, "a set idea that people have about what someone or something is like, especially an idea that is wrong".("STEREOTYPE | meaning in the Cambridge English Dictionary,")There are several kinds of racial and sexual stereotypes, which exist today in a world full of simplistic ideas and riding on the multiplicity of channels, carrying all forms of content with little or no moderation and liberties with both material and form.

Understanding Muslim Stereotypes and Identity in Bollywood

Samuel Butler once rightly said, *"A blind man knows he cannot see, and is glad to be led, though it be by a dog; but he that is blind in his understanding, which is the worst blindness of all, believes he sees as the best, and scorns a guide."* The context of understanding is of immense significance as we take a deeper look into the characters that have portrayed a Muslim identity in the Bollywood film industry. Broadly the concepts of stereotypes, prejudice and discrimination are interrelated.("Core Concepts,"). Stereotypes reinforce prejudices, after individuals are categorized into groups on the base of age, race, gender, religion, nationality or ethnicity, and when socio-economic standing is added to this mix the combination is a lethal mix leading to various degrees of discrimination in society. Stereotypes lead to a set of beliefs about individuals just by virtue of the fact that they belong to a certain group.("Core Concepts,") Once strong feelings are associated with this group it results invariably in affecting the treatment, which is meted out to this group. The behaviour is cyclical in nature and thrives on a continuous reinforcement of exaggerated and often unfounded claims about a particular group.

Stereotypes very often constitute learnt behavior, and are unconsciously activated, generalizations, which may include commentary traits, performance, abilities and interests, physical characteristics, and expected role behaviors.("Core Concepts,") Popular gender stereotypes have included commentary on men and women and attributes which are given to them include, men being more independent, arrogant, good at sports, physically strong business managers and women being more nurturing, whiney, good with children, graceful homemakers. (Deaux& Lewis, 1984).

Monoculturalism in Bollywood

Hindi Cinema in general also reflects a noticeable bias towards "the principle of monoculturism"while representing Muslim characters and it is often projected in scripts with liberal doses of Islamophobia thus reducing the identity of Muslims to mostly a hostile maladjusted minority group. In an article titled *Bollywood and the Minority Question*, a statement throws light on the still strained relations that the dominant group shares with the marginalized community. A dinner table conversation with his wife landed even the very popular Bollywood actor Aamir Khan in a sea of troubles and is testimony to this issue, when he went on to say that his Hindu wife worries for his children and feels insecure in India. This resulted in the actor loosing his endorsement deals, being removed as the face of several popular advertisement campaigns and the apps that he was endorsing being down rated by users online and him being the subject of several vitriolic twitter trends for day at an end.(Hindu, 2016)

 "Othering" is a term that not only encompasses the many expressions of prejudice on the basis of group identities, but we argue that it also provides a clarifying frame that reveals a set of common processes and conditions that propagate group-based inequality and marginality("The Problem of Othering," 2017).

Fear of the other thrives on unfound beliefs, biases and prejudices based on characteristics attributed to the roles that Muslims essay in Hindi cinema. Each trope further fuels the same fears, and thrives on misinformation and disinformation often justifying instances of large mobs avenging imaginary wrong doing against an entire community. While the lack of strong female characters and uni-dimensional portrayal of women as cardboard cutouts in the media has often been attributed to the lack of female voice and agency, & the lack of female directors and writers in the industry. However Hindi cinema has always had a strong presence of Muslim producers, directors, actors, and scriptwriters but it has continued to play into the mainstream expectations of a predominantly Hindu audience. Notable exceptions have included movies from parallel cinema, which have shed light on the socio-economic plight of Muslims, like the Salim LangdePe Mat Ro (1989) directed by Saeed Akhtar Mirza. Who also made Naseem in 1995 putting the Shahbano case and issues around alimony for Muslim women firmly in the spotlight. Nikah (1982) and Fiza (2000) are the two rare Muslim socials, which were made at a commercial scale with popular mainstream actors in leading roles. GarmHava, the critically acclaimed 1973 film directed by MS Sathyu and BalrajSahni had a formidable script by KaifiAazmi and Shama Zaidi, based on an unpublished story by IsmatChugtai bringing to life the horrors of partition for an Agra based Muslim business man.

Sensitiveportrayal of Muslim characters and the disintegration of his family as a unit post the partition made the film not just iconic but also the finest work on Partition ushering in a new wave of meaningful cinema in India.

Framework and Characteristics of Stereotypes

Such is the power of stereotypes that once the entire group gets identified with them individual identities cease to matter against a homogeneous understanding seeped in prejudice, and learnt behaviour. Stereotypes in movies and in the real world thrive on simplistic ideas which are mostly unfounded like "Muslims have a lot of children", "All Indians are good at Math", "All terrorists are Muslims", "All men are strong and silent", "All women are nurturing", "Women are bad drivers", "There is more crime in black neighborhoods", "All Hindus believe in God", etc. What stereotypes effectively do is to reduce our world into simple constructs and thereby reduce the complexity of thinking that we need to do for ourselves.(McLeod, 2015)Sometimes effectively undoing the need to question altogether. One of the oldest experiment for understanding racial stereotypes was conducted by Katz and Braly in 1933 when they deployed a questionnaire to students of Princeton university who were all white. Katz and Braly (1933). Most of the students remained perfectly at ease with the constructs of industrious, intelligent and honest Americans and negative constructs for almost all other nationalities including Jews, Japanese, and Blacks.

Cinema rests on suspension of disbelief, from the moment the viewer enters the theatre and looks upon the lit screen in a completely dark auditorium; he has come seeking an escape from reality. Bollywood is the perfect escape, with larger than life spectacles, stunning performances, visual effects that leave you gasping and multiple changes of dresses, campuses so unreal that students in India wish they had just one basketball court that mirrored remotely what is shown on the screen. But above all is the lead actor usually a brash young man who may or may not come of age but more often than not gets the girl. In this world good always triumphs over evil and the hero and the villain are two distinct binaries. From early Indian cinema where mythology religion was the major themes, to the time of national integration, unity, peace, to action thrillers and romantic melodramatic films of the 90s Bollywood has seen it all. The source of conflict is usually an evil mad scientist, a well meaning but devious rich father, an over the top villain who lives on an island, another devious suitor and now increasingly the Muslim terrorist or a young man gone rougue.

Painting pictures with the Muslim Stereotype

However despite an astounding number of extremely talented filmmakers actors, directors and scriptwriters, the Indian Muslim has been reduced to fallen nawabs, terrorist, painters, tailors, courtesans, kawaals, sidekicks, and dysfunctional young boys. The six step process of stereotyping often begins with characterization onscreen which more often than not includes, the young man to wear a *Salwar Kameez* or a *pathan suit*, a scull cap, carry rosary beads, have deep Kohl Rimmed eyes, and carry a *Keffiyeha,* or a checked scarf across the shoulders, befitting a man from Saudi Arabia.

First Roja (1992) and then Mission Kashmir (2000) brought to the front the separatism and misguided youth who had suffered great trauma. But like stereotypes Bollywood over the years has thrived on less good, more bad and ugly when it comes to Muslim characters.

The types of Stereotypes have certain broad characteristics and most Hindi films with Muslim Characters fall within this framework.

Firstly you may not have to believe that all members of a social group have a certain attribute in order for it to be a stereotype. The adage "one bad apple", literally does the trick. Shahid Amin who is subaltern historian and has studies late 19th and 20th century text has written extensively about "othering" of Muslims in the works of BharatenduHarishchandra and Balkrishan Bhatt, who also resort to active caricaturisation of Muslims. An easy tool to chip away at that valuable human emotion of empathy, if the onscreen character is made so exaggerated or unrelatable, each time he takes a fall the audience hoots their approval.

Earlier Muslim characters were portrayed mostly as kings, nawabs or feudal lords, and the films mainly dealt with historical episodes. BaijuBawra (1952), Anarkali (1953), Mirza Galib (1954), Mughal-e-Azam (1960), Taj Mahal (1963), Jahan Ara (1964), and Noorjehan (1967) were typically based on characters connected with the Sultanate or the Mughal court. (*Muslims and Hindi Cinema*, Chapter 2.) These were mainly movies of the historical genre. The social genre movies involving Muslim representation included films like Chaudhvinka Chand (1960), Mere Mehboob (1963), Bahu Begum (1967), and Pakeejah (1972), which depicted an idealized Muslim world. In the 1970s and 1980s, parallel cinema in the Hindi film industry influenced the cinematic representation of Muslims with iconic films such as GaramHawa (1973), Salim Langdepe Mat Ro (1989), and Anjuman. These films also ushered a new wave Hindi cinema known as art cinema. The portrayal of Muslims here was sensitive, contextual and holistic, putting the spotlight on changing equations of a struggle underdeveloped and confused section of Indian society. But with the beginning of the 1980s and 1990s, the socio-cultural climate changed with the advent of some extreme Hindu right-wing factions. With this, the genre was further bent to films, which portrayed a new reality, one that were called the 'Muslim-Political' films.

Thus on the silver screen too, representation (based on a socio-cultural based genre) of this community has largely been negative and compartmentalized. The challenge that is facing Bollywood today and will continue to call into question its earnestness to depict the real, is its treatment of 'Muslims'- miss-represented, under-represented or ill represented. Such a notion invariably portrays a constructed image of a community. Much of the 'reality' about Muslims that Hindi cinema has been depicting, and still depicts, is superficial, lacking perspective and playing to the gallery. Hindi cinema has carefully avoided talking about livelihood problems of Indian Muslims and as a cultural medium, has worked more in favor of perpetuating the mistrust and suspicion of the majority community - every Muslim is a suspected agent of the Pakistani intelligence since an average Muslim is a devout religious fanatic first and then an Indian. His patriotism is often a garb that shields him from the prying eyes of suspicion, yet he is never out of the 'list'. Global Muslim issues (i.e., themes of terrorism, conflict, and fundamentalism) quantitatively overshadow local accounts of Muslim affairs.(Derek M. D.,

2017)and such conflict-based understandings of Islam presented in media are then reified by continuous reference to images of extremism, terrorism, and irrationality which portray Muslims as 'backwards,' static, and pre-modern(Derek M. D., 2017).

Further perpetuating stereotypes that a characteristic associated with a group often does not have to be wrong for it to be a stereotype. For example a lot of Muslims regularly attend Friday prayers at Mosques but do not congregate there to plan terrorist activities, or immediately set out to burn their neighborhoods after the call to prayer. Lone, isolated incidents even if true should not define communities or religions but films and advertisements regularly rely on them and ride on these incidents to get a ton of inaccurate information across to people in the shortest time possible.

Thirdly Stereotypes also do not exist as binaries, it is important that we recognize them as both positive, negative, or even with both positive and negative elements. They are still selective half-truths being pedaled as reality because they are simple to process and easy to understand. The trajectory of Muslim artists in India is a case in point. A morphed and a selective representation of Islam in myriad number of ways have portrayed the community in cultural stereotypes and popular discourse has always helped consolidate it. They live in ghettos, if they're rich and have a public face with a good public record, the twist in the tail is them, invariably turning out to be secret double agents or spies for our not so friendly neighbors. If they are gangsters who are good and Muslim at the same time they will enviably have a bad Muslimgangster who will betray them and do them in, taking away the very attribute of loyalty from the community. In many ways similar studies on violence and learnt behavior which have been perpetuatedthrough cartoons and video games Bollywood has done more harm than good to the Indian Muslim, while ironically the three biggest stars of Indian cinema still remain the three Khans, Aamir, Shahrukh and Salman. But they rarely ever pick on any major roles with as Muslim Characters themselves. Since all three of them are now producing large scale and commercially successful movies it is an active choice that they make.

Fourthly Stereotypes can also be both explicit and implicit. We often make the mistake of thinking that some amount of clever scriptwriting may disguise the fact that it is still a stereotype but we know better. Taking note of the fact that the Muslims as a community has largely been carrying the double burden of being labeled as 'anti-nationals' and also being 'appeased' at the same time. But authentic data on basis of the Sachar Committee Report brings to the fore bare-bodied abysmal conditions of India's largest minority breaking down the myth of 'Muslim appeasement'. For most of us legendary Pakistani folk singer Reshma is unknown, but we do connect with the immensely popular LambiJudaai track of SubhashGhai'sHero, or let's say the foot tapping 'Dama Dam Mast Kalandar'. The artist of such soulful and rhythmic tracks has always been behind closed curtains and the song's identity largely eclipsing the identity of the Muslim artist. Once a celebrated singer having immensely contributed to the Bollywood entertainment industry and also to music, Reshma later suffered immensely and died in obscurity without much recognition and aid. Today we have a handful who knew this once immensely talented singer of a rare voice quality.

We have biopics and documentaries made on artists for their significant contributions but when it comes to creating meaningful work we are at a loss to locate any such of considerable quality. There is a dearth of serious work on Muslim artists which can inspire the nation and convey the immense struggle and dignity that some of their lives held. There is not a single film on Maulana Abul Kalam Azad or on the struggles of the absolutely phenomenal APJ Abdul Kalam, a scientist of great stature. The portrayal of Muslims has been largely lopsided, and we have to scourge in the dark to find a Muslim protagonist who is either an honest police officer, a lawmaker, an inspiring teacher or let's say anyone who holds a respectable position on silver screen, unprejudiced and unsullied by communal colour. Role models have a deep impact on young impressionable minds that throng to see their favourite actor onscreen. A Muslim is either a gangster or leads a band of henchmen, wears a white skull-cap and sports kohl-rimmed eyes. Such is the charisma of the personality that even well-known stars like Shahrukh Khan are drawn to play such characters. His film 'Raees' may harp on 'baniye ka dimag aur miyan bhai ki daring' (brain of a trader and audacity of a Miyan (a Muslim honorific) but as before, fails miserably to depict to any lived experiences and social reality of the community; mired in commercialization, sporting a highest overseas grosser of Bollywood in 2017 still falls short. And this is Shahrukh's body of work who is the risk taker in the triad, having started his Bollywood career by playing a negative character early in life in the commercially successful Baazigar (1993), which gave us prophetically the lines, " *Haar Kar Jeetne Waale Ko Baazigar Kehtein hain" which literally mean* the one who knows how win by loosing is a true champion of the game.

Conclusion

Teaching us all, lastly that power and privilege matter in stereotypes and cultural stereotypes are often all pervasive and implicit in nature. Whether it is criminal investigations or access to rental accommodation, employment opportunities discrimination is rampant based of cultural affinity, identity, race, religion or gender. Bollywood has singular power and actors are hero worshipped with even temples dedicated to them. It is therefore important that in every sphere a conscious effort if made for affirmative action and enhancing diversity of characters and creators. From stars to the studio system it is incumbent upon decision makers to be more inclusive when picking casts as well as creative and production teams. Lived experiences are an important part of the creative process and a thorough study of even the top three Khan's filmography reveals other than a few cameo roles where they have played themselves the roles that they have essayed are rarely from their own community. Positive reinforcement has usually come in the form of a loyal friend or a low ranking police inspector who is also tested for his loyalty despite being good at his job in Sarfarosh (1999). Continuing the theme of nationalism Sarfarosh had Aamir Khan in the lead role and a convincing and charming Naseeruddin Shah, who played a poet of Indian origin, essayed the role of the villain. Predictably worked at the behest of Pakistan's intelligence agency and actively colluded with Pakistan's High Commissioner to India. Prejudice and bias against the Muslims in everyday life further gets enhanced when they fall into more than one bracket, a poor Muslim man, is portrayed at the absolute bottom of the pyramid in the movies and

would usually be shown as killer for hire. What started with perhaps the 1993 Bombay blasts post the demolition of the Babri Masjid, has now assumed epic proportions as a mega trend, creating almost an entire sub genre in Hindi cinema of underworld dons,*bhais* and even accomplished hackers and cybercriminals. Sharply contrasted against Karan Johar's larger than life spectacles of the 90's cinema where businessmen and entreprenuers go to work in choppers and schools and colleges are run singularly for basketball matches or intercollege fests and competitions. As a young India aspires for a better life and turns to cinema for escape breaking stereotypes and countering speech with more speech is the only option for removing fear of the other. The public broadcaster can also play a vital role encourage productions which show Muslims in everyday life at everyday jobs and in inspirational roles, facing the same struggles which every other Indian experiences. A recent film which fought these stereotypes is the commercially successful and critically acclaimed Baby (2015), an espionage thriller, which also has TaapseePannu, Rana Daggubati, Danny Denzongpa, AnupamKher, Mikaal Zulfiqar, Kay Kay Menon, MadhurimaTuli, Rasheed Naz in supporting roles along with Akshay Kumar in the lead. A diverse cast and Danny as Feroz Ali Khan, the upright and savvy head of a special counter terror unit not only helped the film in breaking some stereotypes and reclaiming the discourse in an increasingly polarized world where "othering" is the norm and not the exception.(Derek M. D., 2017). It was especially heartening to see Danny articulate the ease with which Pakistan is able to recruit young men in India, where he poignantly expresses the fact that a lot of young Muslim men have a tremendous sense of alienation in the country and irresponsible rhetoric is not helpful day in and day out in the media.

Therefore both positive and negative stereotypes which pigeon-holing hole the largest minority community in India are dangerous and active measures must be undertaken to counter propaganda, hate speech as well as myopic representation that an entire community has been receiving. Building bridges instead with sensitivity training, creation of more positive role models and better scriptwriting and story telling is recommended.

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