

MUSLIM WOMEN IN BOLLYWOOD: TRACING THE POLITICAL AND CULTURAL TRANSITIONS

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Declaration

I, Shani. A. Mopila, hereby declare that the work presented in the thesis entitled “Muslim Women in Bollywood: Tracing the Political and Cultural Transitions” is based on the original work done by me under the guidance of Dr. Sreepriya R., and has not been included in any other thesis submitted previously for the award of any degree. The contents of the thesis are undergone plagiarism check using iThenticate software at C.H.M.K. Library, University of Calicut, and the similarity index found within the permissible limit. I also declare that the thesis is free from AI-generated content.

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I also certify that the corrections/suggestions from the adjudicators have been incorporated into the revised thesis

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Abstract

Cinema as a cultural text functions as the roadmap in understanding the socio-political complexities of any nation. Bollywood exists in India as a nexus of the deceptive power play operated by dominant political structures over the Muslim minority subjects. The work attempts to read the representation of Muslim women in Bollywood as evolved out of the complex historical re-appropriations, majoritarian discourses and cultural nationalism in India. The study delves into an extensive research on the evolution of the character formations and narrative constructions in the films through which the popular images of Muslim women are constituted among the Indian spectatorship. The study has incorporated the critical perspectives and theories of Stuart Hall, Harold Lasswell, Louis Althusser and others. Through the exegesis of the film texts, the study postulates that the political transitions in the 1990s and the injection of cultural nationalism and Islamophobia into cinema have resulted in the misrepresentation of Muslim women and their lived experiences. By the foregrounding of Islamic religion as an oppressive agent and patriarchy as the exclusive domain of Muslim men, Muslim female characters are projected as reductive tropes of victims, nationalists and neo-liberal feminists. The research also contends that Bollywood, by nullifying the multilayered systemic oppressions faced by Muslim women, contributes to their erasure from cultural imagination and thus aligns with the majoritarian power politics.

Keywords: Bollywood, Muslim women, Cultural nationalism, Cinema, Power

സംഗ്രഹം

ഏതൊരു രാജ്യത്തിന്റെയും സാമൂഹിക-രാഷ്ട്രീയ സങ്കീർണ്ണതകളെ മനസ്സിലാക്കുന്നതിൽ ഒരു മാർഗ്ഗനിർദ്ദേശമായി സിനിമ പ്രവർത്തിക്കുന്നു. മുസ്ലീം ന്യൂനപക്ഷ വിഷയങ്ങളിൽ പ്രബലമായ രാഷ്ട്രീയ ഘടനകൾ നടത്തുന്ന വഞ്ചനാപരമായ അധികാര നാടകത്തിന്റെ ഒരു അവിഭാജ്യ ഘടകമായാണ് ബോളിവുഡ് ഇന്ത്യയിൽ നിലനിൽക്കുന്നത്. ഇന്ത്യയിലെ സങ്കീർണ്ണമായ ചരിത്രപരമായ പുനർനിർമ്മാണങ്ങൾ, ഭൂരിപക്ഷ വ്യവഹാരങ്ങൾ, സാംസ്കാരിക ദേശീയത എന്നിവയിൽ നിന്ന് പരിണമിച്ച ബോളിവുഡിലെ മുസ്ലീം സ്ത്രീകളുടെ പ്രാതിനിധ്യം വായിക്കാൻ ഈ പഠനം ശ്രമിക്കുന്നു. ഇന്ത്യൻ പ്രേക്ഷകർക്കിടയിൽ മുസ്ലീം സ്ത്രീകളുടെ പ്രതിച്ഛായ രൂപപ്പെടുത്തുന്ന സിനിമകളിലെ കഥാപാത്ര രൂപീകരണങ്ങളിലും ആഖ്യാന നിർമ്മാണങ്ങളിലും ഉണ്ടായ പരിണാമത്തെക്കുറിച്ചുള്ള വിപുലമായ ഗവേഷണത്തിലേക്ക് ഈ പഠനം ആഴ്ന്നുറങ്ങുന്നു. സ്റ്റേർട്ട് ഹാൾ, ഹരോൾഡ് ലാസ്വെൽ, ലൂയിസ് അൽത്തൂസർ തുടങ്ങിയവരുടെ വിമർശനാത്മക വീക്ഷണങ്ങളും സിദ്ധാന്തങ്ങളും ഈ പഠനം ഉൾപ്പെടുത്തിയിട്ടുണ്ട്. 1990 കളിലെ രാഷ്ട്രീയ പരിവർത്തനങ്ങളും സാംസ്കാരിക ദേശീയതയും ഇസ്ലാമോഫോബിയയും മുസ്ലീം സ്ത്രീകളെയും അവരുടെ ജീവിതാനുഭവങ്ങളെയും തെറ്റായി ചിത്രീകരിക്കുന്നതിന് കാരണമായതായി ചലച്ചിത്ര ഗ്രന്ഥങ്ങളുടെ വ്യാഖ്യാനത്തിലൂടെ പഠനം അനുമതിക്കുന്നു. ഇസ്ലാമിക മതത്തെ ഒരു അടിച്ചമർത്തൽ ഏജന്റായും പുരുഷാധിപത്യത്തെ മുസ്ലീം പുരുഷന്മാരുടെ മാത്രം മേഖലയായും മുൻനിർത്തി, മുസ്ലീം സ്ത്രീ കഥാപാത്രങ്ങളെ ഇരകളുടെയും ദേശീയവാദികളുടെയും നവ-ലിബറൽ ഫെമിനിസ്റ്റുകളുടെയും വാർപ്പമാതൃകകളായി ചിത്രീകരിക്കുന്നു. മുസ്ലീം സ്ത്രീകൾ നേരിടുന്ന പല തലങ്ങളിലുള്ള അടിച്ചമർത്തലുകളെ നിരാകരിക്കുന്നതിലൂടെ ബോളിവുഡ് അവരെ സാംസ്കാരിക ഭാവനയിൽ നിന്നും തുടച്ചു നീക്കുകയും അത് വഴി ഭൂരിപക്ഷ അധികാര രാഷ്ട്രീയവുമായി സമരസപ്പെടുകയും ചെയ്യുന്നുവെന്ന് ഗവേഷണം വാദിക്കുന്നു.

സൂചക പദങ്ങൾ : ബോളിവുഡ്, മുസ്ലീം സ്ത്രീകൾ, സാംസ്കാരിക ദേശീയത, സിനിമ, അധികാരം

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Chapter 1

Introduction

Where does a nation display its emotional life? Where does it express its anxieties, its personality, its relationship to others? Where does it reflect on (sometimes false) memories? Nations, like individuals, experience catharsis and joy. They also, like individuals, cope with or fail to tackle trauma.

(Halbwachs, qtd. in Karmakar and Catterall 1)

In any attempt to problematise the issues of the Muslim minority in India, firstly, we have to chart out how the dominant discourses have imagined the Indian Muslims in the popular cultural narratives. And cinema is undoubtedly one of the most privileged sites for investigating what a nation chooses to express or conceal from its people. Those who have watched *Patmaavat* (2018), directed by Bollywood's iconic director Sanjay Leela Bhansali, could hardly forget the chivalrous Rajput King Rawal Ratan Singh, his sacrificial wife Rani Patmavati, the bloodthirsty Muslim ruler Alauddin Khilji and his submissive wife Mehrunisa. *Patmaavat* not only presents an epic story but also the latent imagination of India itself. Each of these characters not only represents the historical figures but also symbolises the majoritarian conception about the men and women from the Hindu (includes Sikh in constitutional terms and similarity in portrayals) and Muslim communities. In her article, Barbara D Metcalf notes how the Indian public has internalised the belief that "there was once a Hindu Golden Age; Muslims came as foreign invaders; Muslims were oppressors who ultimately ushered in a period of

decline” (952). Thus, this extreme version of ‘popular history’ stereotypes Muslim men as invaders of the Hindu land and women, Hindu men as protectors and warriors, Hindu women as chaste and sacrificial and Muslim women as voiceless victims. *Patmaavat* is a prime example of how a film can privilege dominant ideology and endorse dogmatic views (Dwyer, “New Myths” 201). One thing specific about *Patmaavat* was that, among all these historical figures, Mehrunisa, Alauddin Khilji’s wife, was the most muted character in the film. She was portrayed as a naive, beautiful, submissive and objectified woman. The only function of her character was to exemplify Khilji’s sexual appetite for women. But what else does the muted character of Mehrunisa tell us?

The research "*Muslim Women in Bollywood: Tracing the Political and Cultural Transitions*" stems from this fundamental question of whether the Muslim woman is adequately and accurately represented in Bollywood. The first part of the title indicates that the focal point of the study concentrates on Muslim women in the representational space of Bollywood, and the latter part refers to the expansive locations where the study examines the transmutations and reconfigurations in the Indian cultural and political scenario as reflected in selected films. The study presents a comprehensive and multidimensional approach to the history, evolution, and construction of Muslim women’s identity as portrayed in Bollywood. Cinema in any context is a visual representation of the cultural, political and psychological formations of any nation, people, and localities presented through it (Kracauer 5). As a mass medium for communication, the immense power that cinema holds in representing identities is both complicated and questionable to a great extent. In his

essay on cultural identity and cinematic representation, Stuart Hall argues that cultural identity is subjected to the “continuous play of history, culture and power” and identity as “names we give to different ways we are positioned by, and position ourselves within, the narrative of the past” (70). Investigating the disparity between how the Muslim woman is positioned by the dominant discourses and how she positions herself within India’s past and present is the central idea behind this research. The disadvantaged position of the Muslims as a minority community in India since independence has been the major factor deciding the nature of their representation, whether it be in media, films, literature, or politics (Farooqui 154; Avinash Kumar 60). The intersection of gender, religion and nation further complicates the narratives formed around and on the Indian Muslim women in films. This thesis presents a diachronic study of Bollywood films, concentrating on the Muslim woman as the central character to trace the evolutionary transitions in the cultural and political aspects of representation from the 1930s to the present. A detailed study of eight films from the post-1990s is incorporated in this study, as the period signals a major shift in the Indian political climate and marks the rise of majoritarian ideology and the crisis of secularism in India (Rajan and Needham 16; Menon and Nigam 36; Salam 38; Varshney 228). The gradual transformation in the characterisation, narrative and structure of the selected films is examined to unravel the underlying political, cultural and ideological implications which contribute to the popularisation of Islamophobia and in reinforcing the majoritarian ideology in India. While existing literature has examined the representation of Muslims in Bollywood, a notable vacuum exists in the studies addressing the strategic omissions and deliberate narrative constructions of Muslim women and how it is weaponised as a

subtle tool for the validation of majoritarian discourses. The study posits that if the Bollywood films privilege and promote the dominant majoritarian ideologies and discourses, the characterisation and narratives of the films are likely to be biased towards the Muslim community in general and Muslim women in particular. It also argues that in the cinematic imagination of Bollywood, this privileging of the majoritarian is achieved by foregrounding Islamic religion as the most, if not the only, oppressive agent.

According to the Marxist interpretation, “every film is part of the economic system, it is also a part of the ideological system, and for 'cinema' and 'art' are branches of ideology” (Comolli and Narboni 45). The primary objective of this research is to examine the subtle functioning of Bollywood in disseminating majoritarian ideology through the representation or misrepresentation of Muslim women. For this, it will probe into how Muslim women are positioned in films which address nationalism, communal violence, and inter-religious relationships. The study will have a close look at whether the Muslim women characters, their appearance and functioning fit into popular taste or display any divergence. It will critically evaluate the ideology dormant in the emancipatory models offered to Muslim women in the films, which revolves around neoliberal feminist discourses. Most importantly, the study aims to explore the potential for a political and cultural shift in Bollywood, particularly in its portrayal of Muslim women. This study seeks to address the following research questions:

- How do cinematic texts respond to the post-1990 cultural and political shift?
- What are the strategies and narrative tropes used in representing the Muslim women?
- What are the recurring patterns of dominant discourses in the films?
- How does the reinforcement take place by repetition of tropes?
- How does the cinematic rendition of Muslim women contrast with their lived realities?

The central argument of the research is that the representation of Muslim women in Bollywood oversimplifies or erases the multi-layered oppression to which they are subjected as members of a minority community by foregrounding the meta-narrative of religion. The political paradigm shift in the 1990s reflects the strategic methods of stereotyping of Muslim women used by majoritarian discourses through the narratives of victimisation, nationalism and neo-liberal feminist emancipation.

As the study undertakes extensive research on the evolution and representation of Muslim women in Bollywood films, it draws on various disciplines, including history, sociology, film studies, gender studies, and minority studies. The parameters of the study are limited to the period from the 1930s to the 2020s, where the films from the post-1990s are selected for in-depth analysis. The criteria for selection were primarily based on the popular Bollywood films with Muslim women as central characters, which have achieved considerable success. The study employs a qualitative method of research, which looks into the details of

narrative structure, character representations, symbolisms and socio-political contexts in which the films are situated. This method aids in identifying similar patterns, stereotypes and underlying political messages in the films. The selected films were analysed using discourse analysis, narrative analysis and case study method. The historical contexts, power relations, gender representation and ideologies in the specific films were analysed using the aforementioned methodologies. The tools employed for analysing the films include the Muslim Women On Screen Test developed by Muslim Casting, the Geena Davis Institute on Gender in Media, and the Pillars Fund. It is one of the first ever objective tools developed for the study of Muslim women's representation in films, evaluating them against the presence of Islamophobia and general anti-Islamic cultural stereotyping.

Important works on Islamic feminism, post-structural feminism and decolonial feminism by Fatima Mernissi, Saba Mahmood, Sara Farris, Lila Abu Lughod and Ummul Fayiza are used to study the global politics and critical standpoints on marginalisation and bias against Muslim women, which form the theoretical backbone of the thesis. Works of Sherin B.S, Flavia Agnes, Paola Bachetta, Zoya Hasan, Tanika Sarkar and Ali Asghar Engineer are used as key texts for studying the status of Muslim women in India, forming the foundation for evaluating the cinematic representations. The studies of major film scholars, including Ruth Vanitha, Ira Bhaskar, Richard Allen, Nadira Khatun, Racheal Dwyer, Madhav Prasad, Aravind Rajagopal, Ravi Vasudevan and Roshni Sengupta, are used to analyse the ideological roots of Bollywood films, Islamicate culture, Islamophobia, Muslim women representation and its relationship with majoritarian

discourses in India. Theoretical perspectives of Stuart Hall on representation and stereotyping, Harold Lasswell's concept of propaganda, Louis Althusser's theories on Ideological State Apparatus and Rachel Pain and Lynn Staeheli's emerging theories on Intimacy Geopolitics are used to analyse the political ideology of the film narratives.

The thesis examines eight Bollywood films from the post-1990 period: *Bombay* (1995), *Gadar: Ek Prem Katha* (2001), *Fiza* (2000), *Veer Zaara* (2004), *Fanaa* (2006), *Lipstick Under My Burqa* (2016), *Secret Superstar* (2017), and *Raazi* (2018). The scope of the study is limited to the Hindi-language Bollywood films as the primary text for an in-depth examination of the socio-political and cultural strategies employed in the representation of Muslim women and the transitions visible in their portrayals. The thesis has depended mainly on textual and thematic analysis as the methodology for identifying the ideological implications of the films under study. The study has not explored the films using other methodologies like semiological analysis, linguistic analysis, formal analysis (focusing on technical aspects) or psychological analysis, which may unfold further insights on the subject, as it is beyond the scope of the study.

The study interprets the term 'Bollywood' beyond the production houses and industries, considering it as a broad 'cultural symptom' (Mulvey qtd in Thomas 5-6) consisting of several contradicting and complex conventions, practices, patterns and several registers of language itself. Thus, the thesis has included *Lipstick Under My Burqa*, which occupies the liminal space between Bollywood and independent films,

to understand the dominant/majoritarian narratives on Muslim women through a wide perspective.

The Bombay film industry, or Bollywood, is popularly identified as that complex cultural machinery that holds immense power to influence the mass audience, from the most common man in the streets of Dharavi to the elites in America. It was recently that the British Royal family was welcomed at Westminster Abbey during the Annual Commonwealth ceremony with a Hindu-Scottish pipe band playing the music from the famous Bollywood song "Dhoom Machale" from the film *Dhoom* (2004) (Jain, "Dhoom Machale"). This event showcases the wide reach of Bollywood culture across nations. Bollywood derives its power over its audience by offering the basic understanding of stories, mythologies, history, politics and most importantly, about the nation in the most captivating ways. As Racheal Dwyer observes, "its presence exceeds the screen, overflowing into other cultural forms like the internet, art, literature and music and becomes a synonym to 'style of excess, melodrama and kitsch' " (Dwyer, *Bollywood's India* 12). The study on the impact of Bollywood films on the Indian audience indicates its powerful influence over several cultural practices, including dressing styles, dance forms, relationship dynamics and even outlook towards religion, race and violence (Balabantaray 6)

Ajay Gehlawat traces the beginning of Bollywood studies to the 1970s and defines 'Bollywood' as a general term used to refer to films produced in Mumbai (formerly Bombay), and as a parody of Hollywood (xii, xx) while Racheal Dwyer identifies it as an "internationally recognized term for popular Hindi cinema made in

Mumbai” (*Bollywood’s India* 22). A considerable amount of literature has been added to Bollywood studies since then, where its various dimensions are discussed in detail. Tejaswini Ganti’s *Bollywood: A Guidebook to Popular Hindi Cinema*, Rachel Dwyer’s *Bollywood’s India: Hindi Cinema as a Guide to Modern India*, and Mihir Bose’s *Bollywood: A History* present a historical trajectory and foundation for studying Bollywood. Madhava Prasad’s *Ideology of the Hindi Film: A Historical Construction* looks into the Marxist reading of Bollywood, focusing upon its economic and ideological aspects. Prasad studies Bollywood from a transitional age where its dimensions shift from traditional/feudal orientation to modernity, where capitalism becomes completely dominant (237). Sumita S. Chakravarty’s *National Identity in Indian Popular Cinema, 1947–1987*, and Rachel Dwyer’s *Filming the Gods: Religion and Indian Cinema, The Melodramatic Public: Film Form and Spectatorship in Indian Cinema* by Ravi Vasudevan and *Politics after Television: Religious Nationalism and the Reshaping of the Indian Public* by Arvind Rajgopal look into how nationalism and religion play an important role in Indian cinema and how they create national myths which shape Indian spectatorship. Ravi Vasudevan’s work interprets the film form of Indian cinema as predominantly consisting of melodrama, which can be seen as a “dynamic, expressive vehicle of meaning; in particular, the articulation of personalised contexts of home, family, and other fields of primary attachment, with public registers” (*The Melodramatic Public* 16). His reading of *Bombay* (1995) and *Hey Ram* (2000) exposes the biased representation of inter-community differences and sectarian violence in films, which is formulated for privileging the Hindu majoritarian anxieties and centralising of the Hindu male as the authoritative and sacrificial figure refashioned as secular-nationalist (267).

Arvind Rajagopal's study examines how *Ramayan*, a Hindu mythology-based television serial, influenced Indian viewers and their political mobilisation towards the *Ramajanmabhoomi* movement and strengthened the right-wing political parties during the 1980s (15). The study not only analyses the Indian spectators but also gives insight into the unholy alliance between political ideologies and state institutions like *Doordarshan* in India, paving the way towards the disintegration of Nehruvian secularism, which maintained the state mechanisms separated from religion (73). The work also presents a detailed study on the historical and political progressions which culminated in the demolition of Babri Masjid.

Ira Bhaskar and Richard Allen's *Islamicate Cultures of Bombay Cinema*, published in 2009, can be identified as one of the earliest works on Hindi films that tries to delineate the category of 'Islamicate films' based on the kind of Muslim milieu portrayed in the respective films. They subdivide the film genres into Muslim Historicals, Muslim Courtesan Films, Muslim Socials and Muslim New Wave Social films. The work tries to examine the infusion of Islamicate cultural forms, mise-en-scene and language into Hindi cinema and how this resonates with a more extensive historic imagination and process, which is significant for the future as well (3). This thesis studies the representational history of Muslim women in Bollywood, utilising the film genres as categorised by Bhaskar and Allen. Rosie Thomas's work *Bombay Before Bollywood: Film City Fantasies*, based on the oriental and Islamicate elements in the early Bombay film industry, opens up the debate on the questions of Hindu cultural legacies followed by Bollywood and how the Islamicate elements were pushed into the periphery (8).

Nadira Khatun's *Postcolonial Bollywood and Muslim Identity* is an important work which analyses the representation of Muslim cultural and political identity in Bollywood, and the visible influence of majoritarian ideologies in the construction of their stereotypes. It looks into the narrative constructions in Bollywood which have privileged the dominant discourses of Hindu nationalism and vilified the Muslims as terrorists, communalists and misogynists throughout the evolution of Bollywood and Hindi cinema (8).

Works of Sherin B.S give an in-depth insight into the disparities between the mainstream gender politics and the rights of Muslim women in India. In *Gendering Minorities: Muslim Women and the Politics of Modernity*, the author presents her critical viewpoint on the difficulty of engaging with the Muslim women's identity as a "singular and unified point of reference" (3). She invites our attention towards the lived realities of Muslim women in India and the state policies related to the Uniform Civil Code, triple talaq and polygamy, which are said to have been formulated to 'save the Muslim women' with the hidden agenda of criminalising the Muslim men and to cover up the political and historical facts (5). She points towards the constant violence that the Muslim women have been subjected to in Kashmir, Gujarat and Uttar Pradesh, which feminism has failed to address (20-22).

Flavia Agnes's papers, including *From Shah Bano to Kausar Bano Contextualising the 'Muslim Woman' within a Communalised Polity*, take a closer look at the vulnerable conditions of Muslim women in India, especially regarding the Godhra riots, where they were subjected to horrible cruelties. She questions the dominant discourse that positions the Muslim women as victims of Islamic

patriarchy while erasing all other violence inflicted upon them by extremist majoritarian groups (50,51).

These works provide the foundational references for understanding the political and ideological construction underlying the Bollywood films and the portrayal of Muslim women. However, they do not directly address the key problem under investigation, which seeks to bring out the political and cultural manifestation of the majoritarian ideologues in the portrayal of Muslim women in Bollywood, which has immense capacity to influence the Indian audience, forming their understanding about the Muslim community and culture as a whole. The study tries to connect these existing works to bridge the gap in the analysis of the subtle strategies in Bollywood cinematic space in marginalising and stigmatising the Muslim women. The existing studies, even the more recent works, do not exclusively focus on the politics of representing Muslim women in Bollywood and address the mechanisms that privilege the majoritarian misconceptions and biases. Like the Bollywood cinematic space, which has placed the Muslim women on the periphery, the academic studies also haven't given centrality to the cultural and political impact of lopsided representations of Muslim women in Bollywood.

The Muslim representation in contemporary Bollywood hides beneath a long, messed-up history of exoticisation, marginalisation and otherisation of a minority. To understand this, one must travel through the evolution of narratives about Muslims on screen from the very early period of the Bombay film industry. Examining this evolution from a critical point of view can point towards the significant disparities in the politics of Muslim representation in Bollywood, which

is rapidly becoming a fertile ground for Islamophobia and anti-Islamic sentiments. Anti-Muslim sentiments, communalism and bigotry in India have been primarily rooted in the colonial divide-and-rule policy, which led to the partition in 1947 and that itself paved the path for religious polarisation in India. The majoritarian right-wing political organisations have perpetuated widespread anti-muslim attacks during the different communal riots and manipulated them into votes. But it was with the Kashmir insurgencies, terrorist attacks in places like Mumbai and the 9/11 attacks that the anti-Muslim sentiments in India were merged with global Islamophobia, which considered everything Islamic as dangerous or threatening. Runa Das, in her paper, points out that the phenomenon of cultural nationalism, which refers to a set of reductive Hindu nationalist ideologies and perspectives that reconstruct the Muslims as 'Other' to the Hindu India, proved to exacerbate the communal issues in India (370). She observes how this discourse "upholds a dualistic juxtaposition of the Hindu and the Muslim communities" where the Hindus are presented as models for muslims who are considered backward (287). Her work examines how the right-wing national consciousness is formulated according to the religious lines, by weaving in feminist politics into nationalist agendas to project Muslims as anti-woman and by taking upon the moral duty of protecting the Muslim women through pushing reformation in personal laws (371,387). In her interview, Ira Bhaskar notes the 1990s reflected this growing resentment against the Muslim community in Bollywood, which started to deviate from the earlier secularist traditions which was followed to a certain extent in filmmaking:

Two things happened in the early 1990s. [Film scholar] Ravi Vasudevan has spoken of the “secular discretion” of the Bombay film industry, which is that they didn’t show Hindu-Muslim conflicts, and the Muslim was always a good Muslim. That started to break in the late 1980s. The ban on depicting Hindu-Muslim relations was lifted, with increasing representations of Muslims as criminals, gangsters and later as terrorists. It was as if the lid had blown off a simmering cauldron. (Ramnath, “Muslim stereotyping”)

This unrestricted depiction of communal bias has only become stronger with the open endorsement of such films by the right-wing politicians, which threatens the secular and democratic principles of our nation, as this kind of biased and manipulated portrayal of minority groups has the strong potential to affect the audience's perception and approach towards its people. Muslim women are often drawn into this anti-Islamic political conundrum, projecting their victimisation and protection from their own community, as in the Shah Bano case. But when it comes to the real victims of majoritarian power abuse and aggression, like Bilkis Bano and Kauser Bano, the inaction on addressing their grievances becomes a bare injustice to the suffering of Muslim women. This study has tried to locate and analyse this continued neglect and appropriation of Muslim women as reflected in Bollywood through analysing their historical and contemporary representations on screen.

The thesis is divided into six chapters, including the introduction. The second chapter, titled *Muslim Women in India: Complexities in Representation*, attempts to present a historical overview of the Indian Muslim women, their

strategic omissions, critical invisibilities and their contemporary struggles in the Indian political scenario. The chapter traces the exclusions and marginalisation of Muslim women in the documentation of the freedom struggle, partition, nation-building and reformation movements. It depends on the works of Mahua Sarkar, Zoha Hassan, Rabia Umer Ali, Sherin B.S and Flavia Agnes to support the critical observations on the subject. The chapter seeks to study the changing status of Muslim women since the pre-independence period by studying the socio-political challenges faced by them with the aid of documents like the Sachar Committee Report of 2006. It analyses the Post-1990s majoritarian politics and its reflections on discourses surrounding Muslim women, focusing on issues such as the Shah Bano case, Godhra Riots and resistance offered by Muslim women, especially during the Anti-CAA protests. The chapter also discusses the significance of Islamic feminism as an academic theory and form of activism in countering majoritarianism, liberal feminism and Islamophobia. The chapter tries to analyse the socio-economic realities of Muslim women and the majoritarian politics of minority identity construction via the cultural tools, such as the cinematic representation. It aids in comparing the ground realities of Muslim women and the narrative discourses which are deliberately constructed in the selected films under study. Even though films are understood as constituting a fictitious world, the elements of that imaginary milieu and characterisation serve as important indicators of the politics of the real world.

The third chapter, *A Historical Overview of Muslim Women in Bollywood*, traces the evolution of Muslim women characters in films from the 1930s onwards till the 1990s. The chapter mainly depends on the works of Farid Kazmi, Ruth

Vanitha, Ira Bhaskar, Richard J Allen, Anuradha Dingwaney Needham, Tejaswini Ganti, Maria A. Souliotis and Aravind Unni. It subdivides the films from the 1930s to the 1950s as the early stage of Bollywood or the Bombay film industry. The films subjected to discussion in this section include *Pukar* (1939), *Najma* (1943), and *Anarkali* (1953), with a focus on oriental fantasy films and Muslim historical genres. The films from the period 1960s to 1970s indicate the influence of Nehruvian Secularism and include films such as *Mere Mehboob* (1963), *Pakeezah* (1971), *Amar Akbar Antony* (1977) and a few others. The 1970s to 1990s denote the emergence of Muslim New Wave Social films, which include *Nikah* (1982), *Bazaar* (1982), and *Anjuman* (1986). Films which contain a strong presence of Muslim women characters are used as reference points to study the evolution of characterisation and narratives, which shall serve as a base for comparing the Muslim women in the Post-1990 films. The chapter also focuses on the changing socio-political and cultural atmosphere in India, which is reflected in these films.

The fourth chapter, *Transitions in Representation of Muslim Women in Post-1990 Bollywood*, is an in-depth study of the political shift and rise of cultural nationalism in India as reflected in the representations of Muslim women in the selected films from the post-1990 period. The influence of several major events, including the demolition of Babri Masjid (1992), Godhra riots (2002), criminalisation of triple talaq, introduction of CAA (2019) and revocation of Article 370 (2019) in the film texts under study, is analysed in the chapter. The films are categorised according to the similarity in narrative and Muslim women's character stereotyping as Victims, Nationalists and Liberal Feminists. The films are subjected

to the Muslim Women's Onscreen Test for studying the general cultural bias and Islamophobic content. The films are further subjected to detailed analysis using the critical works of Saba Mahmood, Lila Abu Lughod, Mahmood Mamdani, Nadira Khatun, Shamsad Hussain KT, Stuart Hall, Harold Lasswell and others, to reveal the subtle functioning of majoritarian ideologies and strategies in the films. The chapter is a micro-analysis of the layered storytelling and progressive plots, which distort the film narrative and hide the bias as a normalised understanding of Muslim women and the community. The chapter looks into the gender politics employed by Bollywood within the larger framework of religion and nation to enquire how the Hindu-dominated perspectives are presented as the 'reality' of Muslim women. The fifth chapter concludes the findings of the thesis.

When situating this research in the broader context of the present Indian cultural and political scenario, it serves as an important guide in dissecting and understanding the popular forms of cultural texts, such as films, in disseminating bias and stigmatisation towards a specific group of people. The Muslim community, which has been marginalised and subjected to unwarranted violence since the partition, is also misrepresented and re-appropriated in the cultural spaces. Muslim women who suffer the double marginalisation as members of a minority group and as women in a patriarchal society find their identity, experiences and agency distorted in the media, literature and films. Dissecting the films on a deeper level enables the creation of an informed audience and film reviewers who can critically understand the covert hate politics running in Bollywood. It also serves as a reference point for scholars in academia to fill the crevices in cultural studies and

take the research to wider angles, which can address further issues in the realm of the representation of gender politics in India. The research also hopes to give a deeper insight into the general public in understanding the invisible voices and experiences of Muslim women, which should find an appropriate space and representation in the broad cultural platform of Bollywood.

Chapter 2

Muslim Women in India: Complexities in Representation

The bonding between people under siege is cemented through shared grief and suffering. In the struggle for day-to-day survival, gender concerns and patriarchal oppressions seem remote. It is here that community and patriarchal identities get forged. The secular and women's rights voices are too distant from their harrowing realities.

Flavia Agnes, "From Shah Bano to Kausar Bano" 50

When revisiting the literature on Muslim women in India, one can observe the deep-set discrimination in documenting their histories or acknowledging their contributions to the freedom struggle, nation-building, political movements or cultural formations. Mahua Sarkar sees history as "active participant in the production of knowledge that legitimizes the exclusion and subordination of subaltern groups such as Muslim women designated as non-modern in an ongoing process of producing and reaffirming a normative modernity" (2). By observing the accounts on freedom struggle and nation-building, one can infer that mainstream Indian history has always privileged the Hindu elite "which uses the common resource of a single national history of Hindus" (Chatterjee, "History and the Nationalisation" 112).

The works on the role of Muslims in nation building and reformation often place the Muslim women at the fringes, and the focus usually lies on the Muslim

political organisations or Muslim men. This historical invisibility of Muslim women has also been pervasive in the mainstream film industry which enthusiastically projects the contributions of non-Muslim women ranging from popular female boxer Mary Kom in *Mary Kom* (2014), freedom fighter Jhansi Rani in *Manikarnika* (2019), famous mathematician Shakuntala Devi in *Shakuntala Devi* (2020) to the popular chef Tarla Dalal in *Tarla* (2023) but chooses to shut its camera eyes upon the significance of Muslim women leaders, reformers and achievers. It is more than surprising that Bollywood managed to ignore the contributions of such remarkable Muslim women, including those who built the pillars of the Bombay film industry, like Fatma Begum (1892-1983), who was South Asia's first female filmmaker and producer (Sawhney 21). As Rashmi Sawhney observes, although there was much literature on the adversities faced by Phalke in materialising his dream of making Indian films, not much is known or documented on the experiences, difficulties or efforts of Fatma during the early period of her filmmaking journey (24). Even much celebrated and eminent actresses like Noor Jehan, Suraiyya (Suraiya Jamal Sheikh), Madhubala (Mumtaz Jehan Begum Dehlavi) and Meena Kumari (Mahjabeen Bano) couldn't become an inspiration for a biopic in Bollywood.

The dominant discourses surrounding Muslim women essentialise them into a stagnant and victimised group that shares more or less similar characteristics and experiences. The vastness, plurality and cultural distinctiveness of Muslim women, which transform according to their locality, class or experiences, are often taken for granted. The Muslim women's visibility and representation in India are usually determined by her reaction towards her religious identity, personal laws and feminist

politics, and conveniently brushes off other social issues and challenges to which she is primarily subjected. This chapter tries to situate Muslim women in the complex Indian political and cultural landscape, where several aspects affect the appropriation of their identity and marginalisation of their experiences. The examination of Muslim women's diverse roles in their engagement with the state, politics and religion can reveal the multifaceted existence of Muslim women in India, which is nearly invisible in Bollywood films.

Independence, Partition and the Nation: Muslim Women and Marginality

The existing literature on the Indian independence struggle and its political history has tactfully marginalised and silenced the accounts and experiences of Muslim women. The lack of studies on Muslim women's experience of colonial subjugation, political movement for independence and their role in resisting colonial hegemony points towards their intentional exclusion from Indian history. Among the few remarkable works which look deeply into this marginalisation, A.K. Gandhi's *Dance to Freedom: From Ghungroos to Gunpowder* opens up a rare study which traces the unofficial history of the *tawaifs* of north India and their role in the earlier stages of the Indian independence struggle. He observes how in the mid-nineteenth century, the settlement of English women and the 1856 Uprising turned the British against the *tawaifs* who were once their favourite (41-42). The church, as well as the Brahmo Samaj and Arya Samaj, contributed to the anti-nautch movement, which considered the *tawaifs* and similar performing artists as prostitutes and immoral agents polluting the English and Indian culture alike (43-44). Even Gandhi was strictly against the profession of *tawaifs*. Still, the formation of Tawaif Sabhas in

Banaras and Kashi and their financial contribution to collectives like the Tilak Swaraj Fund of Congress underscores their efforts towards the nationalist movements (Gandhi 45, Anurag Kumar et al. 5). The most applaudable attempt of the author is seen in bringing out the missing names of tawaifs in the annals of the freedom struggle, with detailed descriptions of Azizan Bai, Husna Bai and Dharman Bibi. His study also canvases the history and significance of Begum Hazrat Mahal and Begum Samru, who were tawaifs who transcended into efficient rulers. Aziz-un-Nissa had extended exceptional support to Shamsuddin, an Indian sepoy turned rebel who fought against the British troops in 1857 in Kanpur. She also used her profession to gather vital pieces of information from the officers who visited her kotha. Azizan even gets a mention in V.D. Savarkar's book on the First War of Independence, where she is described as giving up her profession for the freedom struggle (73-75). Azizan Bai has also been described as wearing a male uniform with medals and having direct involvement in the rebellion, where she used to distribute arms and ammunition to the rebels and care for the wounded (84). She is said to have been shot to death by General Havelock as the penalty for rebelling against the British (94). Husna Bai was the renowned tawaif and *chaudharayan* (chief of the tawaifs) from Banares, where she is said to have had contacts with Gandhi, who asked her to leave their stigmatised profession and participate in the non-cooperation movement (112). Dharman Bibi was a tawaif from Arrah in Bihar who had fought the British forces with her patron Kunwar Singh and the renowned freedom fighter Tanya Tope during the uprising of 1856-57 (361). Begum Samru (1753-1836) was a tawaif from Meerut who became the ruler of Sardhana, which was part of the Mughal Empire, and she fought the British army in the Battle of

Assaye in 1803 before surrendering (201). Begum Hazrat Mahal (1820-1879) was a former tawaif who later became the wife of Nawab Wajid Ali Shah, the last King of Awadh (Lucknow). After Nawab Wajid Ali was dethroned and exiled from Awadh by the British, Begum Hazrat Mahal coronated Birjis Qadr, Nawab Wajid Ali's son, as the new ruler and proclaimed Awadh's independence. She succeeded in uniting several *taluqdars*, like Raja Devibaksh of Gonda and Raja Shivdarshan Singh of Samrota-Chandapur, who contributed to her troops collectively forming a huge army of about 40000 units to fight the British army (276). She also openly criticised Queen Victoria's proclamation of general pardon to the rebels in 1858, stating that it was only their manipulation of Indians because the pardon didn't mean anything without restoring India to its people (301,302). She fought bravely with several commanders under her and displayed efficient warfare skills, including guerrilla attacks. She succeeded even in encouraging women to fight with her, but with British attacks gaining momentum and decreased troops, she had to escape to Nepal, where she subsequently fell ill and died (303-306).

Mahua Sarkar's study on Muslim women of late colonial Bengal sheds light on how the Muslims were left out of the cultural renaissance led by the *bhadralok* (urban middle class) dominated by Hindu Brahmo intelligentsia in late colonial Bengal, which later functioned as the bedrock of the Indian nationalist discourse (3-4). When we venerate numerous women freedom fighters like Rani Lakshmi Bai (1828-1958), Kasturba Gandhi (1869-1944), Sarojini Naidu (1879-1949), and Vijaya Lakshmi Pandit (1900-1990), we don't see much commemoration or academic discussions on Muslim women reformers or leaders who voiced against

the British. What can be the reason for such a great omission in the historiography of the independence struggle in India? Is it possible that there were no Muslim women who raised their voices against the empire or any such collectives which questioned the British atrocities? Were their contributions to the independence struggle so meagre that it was ignored? But, notably, the amount of academic literature on Muslim women's fight against the *purdah* system during the pre-independence period surpassed the literature on their contribution to Indian independence. Sarkar notes how the efforts of people like Jahan Ara Shah Nawaz (1896 – 1979), Sharifah Hamid Ali (1883 – 1971) and Abadi Bano Begum (1850-1924) were only recognised under the banner of either Congress or Muslim League and how the voices of even powerful Muslim women like Begum Shah Nawaz were considered as either nationalist or separatist (10-11). She also notes that even an important collective, such as the All India Ladies Association (AILA) founded by Nawab Sultan Jahan, Begum of Bhopal (1858-1930) was overlooked by the 'majoritarian logic' which governs much of the colonial writing on India even though the AILA had played a major role in cutting across religion and class in unifying women's efforts in India for a shared cause of independence and reform (11). The studies on the works of Muslim women writers in Bengal during the late nineteenth century, including Begum Rokeya Sakhawat Hossain (1880-1932), were often discriminatory, and it was read solely against Islamic communal restrictions and patriarchy rather than being appreciated for their intellectual and political value. It was assumed that Hindu elite women writers were more modern, educated and enjoying more freedom from their men when compared to these Muslim women writers(14). She also comments upon the pre-occupation of existing scholarship on

Muslim women during the colonial period with several reforms or transitions they underwent related to education, family and seclusion, which led them to 'enlightenment' in Western terms (15). Sarkar's work argues that the invisibility of Muslim women was inherently linked with the projection of Hindu *badramahila* as the ideal and modern Indian women who were educated, intellectual and free, unlike the Muslim women who are hidden away inside their *zenana*, unable to participate in the nationalist movements which required public appearance and participation which meant being in proximity of unrelated men, against the Islamic norms (9).

The ideals of Hindu organisations during the pre-independence period, like Arya Samaj and Hindu Mahasabha, handed out discourses which stigmatised Muslims as polluting agents of the Hindu Nationalist culture and projected the need for constructing Hindu masculinity not only based on physical strength and patriotism but also on their common goal of eradicating the Muslim 'other' (Bapu 79). The nation was idealised as the 'motherland' or *Bharathamata*, symbolised by the Hindu goddesses Lakshmi, Vani and Durga, often portrayed as a female figure in a red saree, adorned with jewellery, seated on a lion, and holding the national flag (Akbar Ahmed 1139; Leidig 30). Narratives relating to Partition, inter-community violence, and ideas such as '*Love Jihad*' have circulated alongside these representations (Charu Gupta 13). This imagery demarcated the borderlines between Hindu women and Muslim women and their positions in the rhetoric of nationalism, where the former represented the chaste Indian women and the latter represented the foreign and promiscuous women. Popular Hindu nationalist proponents like Savarkar disseminated extreme views on Muslim women as having an active role in

‘defiling’ Hindu women with Muslim men and ‘having no fear of retribution’ from Hindu men (Agarwal 49,59). The reform movements spearheaded by Arya Samaj also condemned the tawaifs, who were culturally accomplished artists and were forced to leave their profession, reducing them to prostitution. The Arya Samajis, who obsessed over traditionalism and purity, considered the tawaifs unfit for civil society (Neville,170).

The partition and the role of the Muslim League in the demand for Pakistan left the Indian Muslims with a permanent stigmatisation of dividing the nation into two. Even though the Muslim League didn’t represent the whole of the Indian Muslims, the impact of the demand was felt across generations of Muslims who chose to live in India after partition. Mushirul Hasan observes how this proved to be harmful even to Muslims who opposed partition:

There were still others who were committed to a secular and democratic polity. They were the people who were neither swept by appeals in the name of Islam nor lured by the prospect of improving their material fortunes in the promised land of plenty. Even those who were supportive of Jinnah's political initiatives were unable to sever themselves from their socio-cultural moorings. (49)

The anti-Muslim sentiments thus gained momentum through the popular misconception of viewing all Muslims as ‘communalists’ who worked for a divided nation, with its loyalties residing with Pakistan, which contained the Muslim majority population. Even the secular ideologies of Jawaharlal Nehru couldn’t save the Indian Muslims from this biased approach. Hasan notes how even Sardar

Vallabhai Patel, then home minister, believed that Muslim officials would be disloyal. Mohanlal Saxena, Union Minister for rehabilitation, ordered the sealing of the Muslim shops in Delhi and UP and Govind Vallabh Pant, then Chief Minister of UP, announced that Muslims would not be employed in government service (52). This biased approach had put them in a position of further disadvantage, alongside being a minority group in India. The disintegration of royal patronage and the Zamindari system, loss of property and mass migration during the partition had already robbed the economic status of Muslims. The communal bias, which had formed after Independence, labelling them as traitors, had led to further ideological and political marginalisation of Muslims, resulting in social backwardness and ghettoisation. Despite being an independent and democratic nation, realising the bleak circumstances of the Muslim community in India, the reform movements which had started during the pre-independence period were progressing. The Western-educated Muslim elites wanted their community to step up with the newly independent nation, and also to put an end to superstitions and orthodoxy and to integrate with the modern state, making them acceptable. Like the Hindu reform movements aimed at abolishing *Sati* and such superstitions affecting women, the Muslim reform movements focused on abolishing *purdah* and gender segregation. The combined effort of Christian missionaries, westernised liberal Muslims and the Gandhian outlook created a general discontent against *purdah*. Gandhi stood against traditions and conventions like *purdah* and dowry, which bound women to ignorance and hindered their potential to participate in nationalist movements and activities (Thapar 86). And there were several Muslim women writers and social reformers like Ismat Chughtai who, being part of the Progressive Writers Association,

advocated the need for modernising the Muslim women and opposed the purdah system as an obsolete practice:

It was the first time that I was forced to wear a burqa, and I cannot begin to express the humiliation I felt—I wanted to kill myself. I was extremely agitated. Azeem Bhai had only recently created an uproar with his articles ‘Quran and the Veil’ and ‘Hadith and the Veil’. Voices were raised in passion for and against the veil. In Bombay, Begum Atiya Faizi, Zohra Faizi, Begum Humayun Mirza and a handful of intrepid ladies created a stir by storming into a conference session where ladies were not allowed. Even though they wore burqas, the Muslims felt greatly disgraced. (Chughtai 432)

Regarding the education and reformation of Muslim women, there were several contradicting streams with major ideological differences. The Progressive Writers Association, formed in 1935, consisted of rebellious, left-leaning Urdu and English writers, including prominent figures like Saadat Hassan Manto and Kaifi Azmi. The Muslim women writers who were part of the movement, like Ishmat Chughtai (1915-1991), Rashid Jahan (1905-1952) and Razia Sajjad Zaheer (1918-1979), condemned the institution of purdah and seclusion and wrote about the plight of the Muslim women inside the domestic space. Their works aligned with their manifesto, which focused on the Marxist mode of emancipation of women in general and Muslim women in particular, from the religious and patriarchal bondage in forms of customs and practices (Mahmud 454). The reformers associated with the Aligarh Movement followed more of a conventional outlook regarding education and the upliftment of Muslim women, in which they didn't entirely break away from the religious

convention because of their connection with the earlier Deoband School of reform, which emphasised the Islamic *ulema* (xiv). Reformers like Sayyid Mumtaz Ali and his wife, Muhammadi Begum, played a decisive role in imparting Western education to Muslim women through their various efforts in the female education section in the All Indian Mohammedan Education Conference established by Sir Sayyid Ahmed Khan in 1886. Muhammadi Begum was also the editor of *Tehzib un-Niswan*, the first Urdu newspaper for women (Minault, "Women's Education" 92). Thus, these reform movements didn't disregard or speak against *purdah* as such but emphasised the development and upliftment of Muslim women through education and knowledge, bringing them out from seclusion and not from modesty. When Muslim women's reform movements and efforts are read as a fight against seclusion or *purdah*, the essence of such historical milestones is rather lost. The women involved in the Aligarh movement didn't disregard *purdah*; instead, they tried to modify its adherence progressively so that they didn't have to compromise with modesty or education. Following this, many women's journals, groups and associations led discussions on the multiple interpretations of the implications of seclusion and *purdah* in Islam and Sharia (Minault, "Women's Education" 96). The continued commitment to *purdah* and associations like *Anjuman i-Khawatin-i-Islam* (All Indian Muslim Ladies Association), which focused on the camaraderie between Muslim women from different regions, later invited criticism for separatism, compromising feminist goals and privileging the Muslim identity (Hurley, "Fostering Sisterhood", 43). The various approaches towards Muslim women's education, gender roles and reformation not only raised the question and possibilities of Islamic feminism but also exposed the impossibility of a unanimous perspective

or a collective reading on Muslim women in India. The aforementioned Muslim women's names acquired comparative visibility only because they were under the umbrella of some established parties or organisations. Still, the questions regarding how the remaining vast population of lower-class Muslim women responded to the reforms at the national level or whether they became part of it were left in oblivion. Furthermore, the historical silence on the negotiations of Muslim women marginalised their less visible efforts, whether it be in the form of their perspectives on partition, purdah and education or participation in nationalist movements because they were unable to attach themselves to a party or organisation.

The historical bias and invisibility towards the Muslims have been equally reflected in the partition studies and narratives, forming a discourse which presents a lopsided view where the loss and trauma of the women from the Hindu and Sikh communities are more projected and the experiences of Muslim women are rather invisible (Virdee 467; Hurley, "Narrating Trauma" 117, Umar Ali 429). Rabia Umar Ali, in her paper, comments upon the "virtual anonymity" of the Muslim women from India, Pakistan and Bangladesh in the partition historiography and studies produced after 1947, which is a compounded form of historical silence and familial silence (Umar Ali 428). If the nationalist and majoritarian discourses perpetuate historical silence, the familial silence is often tied to the constraints of honour and dignity. However, some authors like Siobhan Lambert Hurley and Ritu Menon have tried to unearth the Muslim women's experience of partition with their studies focused on autobiographies, memoirs and novels which served as valuable resources of personal experiences. Siobhan Lambert-Hurley examines how the

autobiographies and fiction written by the Muslim women who survived the partition were important sources of alternative history. She studies the autobiography of Jobeda Khanam from Bangladesh, titled *Jiban Khatar Pataguli* (Pages From My Life), which was published in 1991 and contained an unapologetic narration of the partition horrors. She recalls witnessing mutilated and hanging bodies during the violent days of partition and also how others narrated about the naked bodies of men and women found burnt or disfigured (Hurley, “Narrating Trauma”130). The author also mentions novels by Muslim women like Attia Hosein’s *Sunlight in a Broken Column*, Mumtaz Shah Nawaz’s *The Heart Divided* 1948, Khadija Mastur’s *Aangan* (Courtyard) 1952 and Zaheda Hina’s *Na Junoon Raha Na Pari Rahi* (When neither you exist nor I, muy trans.) where partition experiences were treated as historical re-imaginings which enables the study of memory and how it is ‘structured, articulated and materialised’ (120). In *No Women’s Land*, Ritu Menon tries to bring together the autobiographical excerpts of women who survived the partition and the turbulence of the time where Begum Anees Kidwai (1902-80), who belonged to a nationalist Muslim family, observed how the Muslims in Lahore and Sikhs in Amritsar were taking turns for revenge on each other and the police took no action even after reporting the incident (Kidwai 146). Even though the fragments of experiences from these studies give a minimal understanding of the traumatic experiences of Muslim women during partition, the greater share of their memories, stories and testimonies lie buried underneath the forgetfulness and bias of the nation’s history. This invisibility not only brushes their experiences to the fringes but also leaves the ground for manipulating history to

project the Muslims as the sole aggressors in the communal violence which followed partition.

Muslims in Post-Independence India and the Minority Status

The post-independent India offered many more challenges to the Muslims who were left behind. The disintegration of princely states and the zamindari system, large-scale migration, riots, damage to property and unavailability of jobs created a social barrier to progress for the Muslim community (Mushirul Hasan 51). Shahida Lateef, in her study, explains how the migration of Muslims to Pakistan and the enactment of the Evacuee Property Act of 1950 disintegrated the economic base of Muslims who stayed back in India. The absence of leadership provided by the strong figures of the Muslim League left ample space for orthodox leaders, and the secular promises provided by Congress were seldom met (260,261). Along with the eroded socio-economic status, and loss of wealth, property and leadership, the Muslim community in India was entangled in a deprived situation where the lower class within the community was more and more marginalised with no social security or safety. Even though the Indian constitution provides special provisions to the minority sects of India to protect their individual and collective rights like Article 21 which ensures personal liberty (INDIA CONST, arts. 21), Article 25 which gives freedom to 'profess, practice and propagate religion' (INDIA CONST, arts. 25), Article 26 which allows managing religious affairs (INDIA CONST, arts. 26) and Article 29 which will enable minorities to conserve their language and culture (INDIA CONST, arts. 29), these rights were largely violated through explicit

communal rivalry and subtle anti-Islamic ideologies propagated by the majoritarian groups in India.

The Sachar Committee Report of 2006, prepared by the committee constituted under then Prime Minister Manmohan Singh and headed by Justice Rajendar Sachar, brought out many significant findings on the socio-economic, educational, and religious status of Muslims in India. It presented a holistic study on the marginalised condition of Indian Muslims, the factors preventing them from achieving social progress, and recommendations for overcoming the same. The report observed that Muslims were only able to achieve a low level of education, where the literacy rate of Muslims was recorded as 59.1% in 2001, which was lower than the national average (65.1%) (50,52). It notes how Muslims are labelled as ‘anti-national’ and ‘terrorist’, which subjects them to extreme suspicion not only by specific social groups but also by the government structures themselves (11). The share of Muslim workers in the public sector/government undertakings is reported to be lower than 5% (94). The report also observed that areas with large Muslim concentrations suffer from poor physical and social infrastructure and a lack of educational institutions and medical facilities (149). Where social inequality and insecurity lead to a large population of Muslims living together in closed urban spaces without adequate access to basic infrastructure, this leads to ghettoisation, preventing them from sharing common spaces with the rest of the public (14).

In *Muslims in Indian Cities: Trajectories of Marginalization*, the authors study different Muslim clusters and ghettos in India and the socio-economic and political factors leading to such inequalities, where the most visible examples of this

condition can be spotted in Mumbai, Ahmedabad and Delhi, where communal strife and segregation are common (Jeffrelot and Gayer, “Introduction” 21). Qudsia Contractor observes how the Shiv Sena’s divisive politics and communal violence following the demolition of Babri Masjid led to the transformation of the social geography of places like Mumbai, leading to Muslim segregation and the formation of ghettos and clusters (136-137).

Through the Sachar Committee report, it was evident that since independence, the Muslim community in India was subjected to visible marginalisation, stigmatisation and socioeconomic deprivation, leading them into a position of disadvantage compared to the members of other communities. The report also made many relevant observations on the status of Muslim women in India. It commented on the media and the state’s collective effort to escape the blame for the deplorable condition of Muslim women by projecting the role of religion:

The obsessive focus on select cases of Muslim women passionately discussed in the media results in identifying the Muslim religion as the sole locus of gender injustice in the Community. Consequently, civil society and the State locate Muslim women’s deprivation not in terms of the ‘objective’ reality of societal discrimination and faulty development policies but in the religious community space. This allows the State to shift the blame to the Community and to absolve itself of neglect (12-13).

The report observed that most Muslim women felt unsafe beyond their community space or ghettos, which delimited their exposure and opportunities (13), and the adverse impact of communal riots in the form of sexual violence affected the

mobility and education of Muslim women and girls (14). Contrary to the popular belief that the religion prohibits Muslim women from achieving education, the report commented that poverty, financial constraints and discrimination in secular institutions played a major role in the deprivation of proper education for these groups (20). Muslim women in poor localities are deprived of clean drinking water, adequate sanitation and healthcare, are discriminated against in availing government benefits or assistance, and have nearly no presence in policy-making even in minority welfare institutions (24). Another major observation in the Sachar Committee, which had several unforeseen impacts on Indian communal politics, was the implication of a slightly higher fertility rate among Muslims than in other communities, which indicated further growth of the Muslim population in India in the future (39). The higher fertility rate among Muslims is often translated as a threat to the Hindu population, which means that Muslim women were capable of bearing more children than women of other religions. This ‘number game’ was politically well appropriated by the Hindu right to instil fear among the Hindu community of Muslims outnumbering them and turning them into a minority in their own country (Jeffery and Jeffery, 1806-1808).

However, the Sachar Committee Report was a path-breaker in several aspects, where it exposed the deplorable socio-economic conditions and marginalisation of Muslims in general and Muslim women in particular and put forward several recommendations to uplift their position in mainstream society. These recommendations included legal mechanisms to address discrimination against minorities (239), addressing the inadequate participation of minorities in

governance (240), focusing on girls and women's education (243) and providing financial assistance to initiatives which support Muslim occupations (252), among other suggestions. The report was also an antidote to the Hindu Right's rhetoric of 'Muslim Appeasement' which gained popularity in Indian politics during the 1980s with the controversies related to Muslim personal laws and the Shah Bano case of 1985 ("Engineer, "Muslims in Hindu Nationalist India" 2).

Muslim Women's Rights, Personal Law and Indian Secularism

Contrary to the constant invisibility and marginalisation to which Muslim women are generally subjected, the political parties and media focus is automatically turned towards them in issues related to Muslim women's rights and Personal law. Almost all discussions of Indian Muslim women are generally hinged upon some overused subjects hovering around triple talaq, polygamy or hijab. But these political upheavals surrounding the personal law, religious beliefs and practices of Muslims also reveal the irony of Indian secularism. The Shah Bano case of 1985 was a landmark event in Indian judicial history, where a Muslim woman from a disadvantaged background was held answerable to the state, various religious groups, feminist organisations and political parties for fighting for her legal rights. The legal battle, which she began in 1978, at the age of 62, to obtain maintenance from her husband, Mohammed Ahmed Khan, who had evicted her from his house and pronounced triple talaq, led to a controversial judgement in 1985 granting her the right to maintenance under the Criminal Procedure Code of 1973. Khan disagreed with the decision, stating that, as he had divorced her, he could not be forced to pay maintenance beyond the *iddat* period as per the Muslim Personal Law

(Mody, 937). But the new Supreme Court bench headed by Justice Chandrachud declared in the judgment that Muslim women come under the purview of Section 125 of the Criminal Procedure Code of 1973, overruling the personal law. Thus, Shahbano was rightfully entitled to the maintenance. With this, the court also recommended the implication of a Uniform Civil Code, which would erase the disparities of the personal laws and bring uniform justice to the citizens (939). This sparked widespread discontent among the orthodox Muslim organisations and the Muslim Personal Law Board, as the constitution gives minorities the right to follow their personal laws in issues relating to marriage, divorce and other familial issues. Soon in 1986, due to political pressures and disagreements, the Rajiv Gandhi government passed the Muslim Women (Protection of Rights on Divorce) Act in May 1986 which curtailed the period of maintenance to be provided to the divorced Muslim wife up to the completion of a period of *iddat* and also the application for maintenance under Sections 125 to 128 of the Code of Criminal Procedure, 1973 now required the divorced woman to give a joint declaration with the former husband (949). This created a major uproar where Hindu groups vehemently criticised the Congress party for ‘Muslim appeasement’, which was assumed to be aimed at attaining Muslim votes. It was also seen as a measure to minimise the displeasure of Muslim groups on the reopening of the disputed sites of Babri Masjid for Hindu worshippers. Thus, the Muslim Women Act was considered an act of pacification (Zoya Hasan, “Minority Identity” 68). Later, during the Ayodhya controversy, the right-wing factions deliberately brought up the Shah Bano Case. They lamented that when Hindus demanded their rights, they were condemned as ‘bigots’. At the same time, when Muslims stood for their rights, it was praised. L.K.

Advani even stated that the Shah Bano case was a 'watershed event' for mobilising the Hindu sentiments (Thakur 650).

Shah Bano was not the first Muslim woman to demand maintenance in India. Still, her case became a central issue, which became a critical juncture in Indian political and judicial history where the rights of the minority to profess their religion stood against the interests of the women, the judiciary and the majority. The widespread hate campaigns against the Muslim community led by right-wing groups and the large criticism against Islam by feminists and secular Muslims compelled Shah Bano to request the Supreme Court to revoke the judgment (Kishwar 5). As a Muslim woman, Shah Bano had to give up her rights, not because she was devoid of agency, but because fighting a legal battle of about ten years required a lot of courage for a Muslim woman in the Indian political scenario, but also because of the insecurity and threat to which a Muslim woman is subjected in a communalised society. The media, with other political agencies, instead of focusing on the real issues of Muslim women and offering them support, tried to spread anti-Muslim sentiments, projecting injustice done to her by her religious law (Mody 10). This led the Hindu fundamentalists and related organisations to take advantage of the situation in the garb of protecting Muslim women. They tried to project the stereotypes of the Muslim woman as invariably destitute, and the Muslim male as polygamous, callous, and barbaric, demanding the removal of personal laws (Pathak and Rajan 566). Critically observing the other cases relating to Muslim women's maintenance which emerged later, Flavia Agnus observed that the Act which was vehemently criticised as anti-women protected the rights of the divorced Muslim

women by including the provision of a lump sum amount as a settlement where the Section 125 only allowed a claim of 500 Rs per month which was conveniently ignored (Agnes, “From Shah Bano to Kausar Bano” 38). Instead, the Muslim Women Act was perceived as a threat to the secular values of India because it was widely presumed that pressures from the Muslim religious groups, the Muslim Personal Law Board and the Muslim League had made the Congress government compromise with the progressive judgement of the Supreme Court.

Shah Bano Case not only aggravated a general anti-Muslim feeling in India, where the community was seen as enjoying unwarranted privilege in the name of Personal law, but a demand for enactment of the Uniform Civil Code recommended in Article 44 of the constitution was also raised among the secularists, feminists, progressive Muslims and mostly among the Hindu right. As Zoya Hasan observed, for the Hindu Right, the enactment of the Women’s Rights Act symbolised the ‘crisis of secularism’ because they always imagined building a Hindu nation grounded on Hindu culture and civilisation. This also brought personal laws, especially those concerning Muslim women, into central discussions where her rights became central to the debates of conservatism, modernity, pluralism, national integrity, Uniform Civil Code and equality (“Introduction” xix).

Indian secularism has witnessed several transformations following specific historical periods and the ideology of the ruling party, which are important determinants in the Muslim community’s personal and political rights in India, especially those relating to Muslim women. Unlike the Western notion of secularism, which was primarily associated with separating the church (religion) and

state, controlling and defining the limits of religion in public life and managing religious or anti-religious views democratically, the Indian secularism is far more complex, where several religions, castes and indigenous tribes co-exist (Bhargava 9-10; Taylor 79). In India, each of these groups nurtures different interests, which sometimes contradict the nature of secularism. Partha Chatterjee opines that this multiculturalism makes the state's neutrality towards religion impossible in that the state is compelled to involve itself in the affairs of religion, not merely manage or limit its boundaries (Chatterjee, "Religious Minorities" 27). The crucial grounds where secularism and religion often collide in the Indian context are the case of Muslim personal laws. In a nation with numerous religions and cultures co-existing together, binding every citizen under a single set of secular laws was neither practical nor sensible. Thus, from the Mughal and colonial periods, Islamic laws persisted in India alongside secular laws. According to the study by Julia Stephens, the *Sharia* Laws or Islamic legal practices popularly known as 'Mohammedan Laws', a common law during the Mughal period, were reformed and restricted to personal law by the British during the mid-nineteenth century (Stephens 7-8). After the legal reforms, these laws were limited to Muslims in domestic matters like inheritance, marriage and religious dealings. She also argues that the British 'aggressively secularised' the state power where the religious authority was further marginalised compared to the reforms done in Britain where the state and religious power centres went more or less hand in hand (10)—from both the colonial and early nationalist perspectives, Muslims and their culture always stood in opposition to the secular values of the Indian state, unlike those of Hindus which were deemed to be at par with the nation's secular sensibilities. The basic assumption of Islamic

law as anti-woman, Muslim women lacking agency and being ignorant of their rights, is inculcated within the larger Western judicial perspective and pours down into the Indian law discourses as well.

They (the colonial judiciary) were unable to believe that Muslim women were subject to more progressive laws than their English counterparts, who only gained the right to marital property during the late nineteenth century. Emerging case law therefore, invented new legal principles which treated any woman who observed *pardah*, a term used in South Asia to refer to different forms of religious and cultural seclusion, as presumptively unable to act as a fully independent economic agent (17).

In 1937, the Muslim Personal Law (Shariat) Act was passed by the Indian Legislative Assembly. The act envisioned limiting several contradicting religious customs. It resulted in the formation of a ‘uniform body or religious personal laws’ which would govern the familial and religious matters of Muslims as per the *Sharia* (167), and the Dissolution of Muslim Marriages Act was passed in 1939, which accommodated more conditions based on which a Muslim woman could obtain a divorce (172). After the independence, only two major changes were introduced within the framework of Muslim Personal Law, one was the introduction of the Muslim Women (Protection of Rights on Divorce) Act in 1986 and the Muslim Women (Protection of Rights on Marriage) Act in 2019, which criminalised the pronouncing of triple talaq by a Muslim husband to his wife. The Muslim personal laws often become the linchpin of political debates on secularism and communalism, where women’s rights and religious identity occupy the oppositional positions.

In her work on nationalism, feminism and the politics of counter-discourse, Sherin B.S. puts forth some crucial points that interrogate seemingly progressive actions like the ban on triple talaq and the hate politics behind it. She argues that state measures like this emerge from the assumption that any progressive change in the lives of Muslim women can only be brought about through Personal Law reforms, which are tied to Islamic practices. This assumption runs the danger of cancelling out the influence of factors like culture, race and locality, which play an important role in the lives of Muslim women (Sherin, “*Deshiyatha, Feminism, Muthalaq*” 93). The discourses on triple talaq, translating it as an instrument of victimising the helpless Muslim women, are aimed essentially at criminalising the men from the Muslim community and assuming the role of protectors of the women. The major handicap in the popular understanding of women’s rights in Islam is that most of the people who comment upon the victimisation of Muslim women do not understand or try to understand the scriptures properly, but rely upon the long-persisting opinions and accounts of Western orientalist, liberal feminists, secularists or majoritarian Hindu Right. These highly biased discourses on the victimisation and exploitation of Muslim women tap into popular historical stereotypes in the form of imperial harems or Mughal quarters and instances from the Quran or Hadith, which are entirely misinterpreted or stripped from the context and elaborated upon to suit specific purposes of stigmatising Islam as a whole. Mohja Kahf, in her studies on the history of the Western representation of Muslim women, traces the emergence of the ‘victimised, submissive and oppressed’ stereotype to eighteenth-century Europe, where the image of innumerable concubines confined inside the Sultan’s *harems* enters the Western imaginary, reproducing them in their literature and propagating it

through their colonial knowledge production of East (6). The very image of multiple wives or sexual partners of a Muslim man who is veiled and confined under his command, who is 'disposable' at his will, governed the Hindu Right and secularist rhetorics alike. Thus, it was already fixated that Islam treats Muslim women as disposable commodities under a marriage contract, unlike Hindu or Christian marriages, where the female spouse is treated as the 'better half'. This unwarranted fixation prepares the ground for most debates surrounding triple talaq, where the popular notion circulates that the mere utterance of the word 'talaq' repeated three times severs all the marital contracts between a Muslim husband and wife and relieves the former from all liabilities over the latter. But in opposition to this 'common knowledge', the Quran contains adequate guidelines on the institution of marriage and how women should be treated within it. It explains how separation, divorce, waiting period and maintenance are to be carried out lawfully and impartially. The second Surah of the Holy Quran directs the Muslim believers:

So if a husband divorces his wife 'three times', then it is not lawful for him to remarry her until after she has married another man and then is divorced. Then it is permissible for them to reunite, as long as they feel they can maintain the limits of Allah. These are the limits set by Allah, which He makes clear for people of knowledge (2:230).

Verses 227 to 237 clearly instruct that the woman shouldn't be ill-treated, harmed or deprived of her rights in the marriage. But the Muslim Women (Protection of Rights on Marriage) Act, implemented on 2019, criminalising the practice of triple talaq by entailing a punishment of three years for the husband

evolved out of a survey conducted by the Bharatiya Muslim Mahila Andolan (BMMA) which was based on a tiny sample of 4710 participants who were taken as the whole representatives of the Muslim community in India (Sherin, “*Deshiyatha, Feminism, Muthalaq*” 94). Another survey undertaken by the Centre for Research and Debates in Development Policy (CRDDP) with a sample of 20,671 Muslims, comprising 16,860 men and 3,811 women, found that only 311 divorces were reported, and only 1 case involved the pronouncement of triple talaq (Sohaira Siddique 9-10). The public interest litigation filed by Shayara Bano from Uttar Pradesh alongside four other Muslim women, Afreen Rehman, Atiya Sabri, Gulshan Parveen and Ishrat Jahan in 2016 against triple talaq, polygamy and *nikah halala* to the Supreme Court was a crucial event that eventually led to the criminalisation of triple talaq in 2019 (Fayiza, “From Shah Bano to Shayara Bano” 5-9). The issue of triple talaq was considered a common issue affecting every Muslim woman in India and around the world, which conferred Muslim husbands with unilateral power to abandon their wives. The exaggerated political and media discourse further enhanced this opinion as a violation of both human rights and constitutional rights alike through the dominance of religious patriarchy. In opposition, Ummul Fayiza argues that the debate on triple talaq is multifaceted and dynamic, where each position holds its relative power, which also denotes a shift from the Shah Bano Case (2). She analyses the position of three prominent Indian feminist scholars, Zoya Hasan, Flavia Agnus and Nivedita Menon. She observes Zoya Hasan’s position as appreciative of the Supreme Court verdict and the secular state as the sole agent who can reform Muslim personal laws (11). While Flavia Agnes believes in the possibilities of internal reforms by Muslim organisations without state or

judicial intervention (11). On the other hand, Nivedita Menon places herself as favouring the Muslim personal law, perceiving its provisions as advantageous to women, which are absent in the Hindu personal laws (12). Even though these are different outlooks on triple talaq, there is one converging point among these three positions. All these feminist scholars agree upon the role of Hindu majoritarian forces in exploiting the weak points of Muslim personal law against the minority community as a whole in the name of women's rights, which in turn challenges the political autonomy of the Muslim community (14). She also concludes that the majoritarian Hindu nationalist power has a stronghold on feminist politics in India, which determines the discourse on debates such as triple talaq (14). These observations point toward the political agenda of the Hindu nationalist powers exploiting gender politics when it comes to Muslim women, often casting aside the issues which concern non-Muslim women or Hindu women in particular. These clamours against the 'misogynist' practices in Islam are often a political tool which is used to criminalise Muslim men and to cast Muslim women, secularists and feminists against them. But amidst the protest against triple talaq, the serious concern of the Muslim wives whose survival will be at stake after the imprisonment of their husbands pronouncing triple talaq was largely ignored. This does more harm than benefit to Muslim women, leaving them in a more disadvantaged position (Sohaira Siddique 27). The need to criminalise a practice which was already declared as 'unIslamic' and 'unconstitutional' in the Supreme Court judgement also raised suspicion about the interests of the ruling party regarding the act.

Both the Muslim Women (Protection of Rights on Divorce) Act of 1986 and the Muslim Women (Protection of Rights on Marriage) Act of 2019 led to the evocation of the need for a Uniform Civil Code, which would remove all personal laws and replace them with secular law, which would be equally applicable to all Indian citizens, irrespective of caste or religion. But when examining the election manifestos of 2019, we can see that criminalising triple talaq was much more of a calculated political schema than a natural unfolding of an act which would uplift and drastically transform the lives of Muslim women. The manifestos of right-wing political parties emphasised the modernisation of Muslim personal laws for eliminating practices like triple talaq and polygamy (Adhikari 12). These rhetorics of saving Muslim women often aim at pitting Muslim women against the Muslim men whom the majoritarian forces have already framed as misogynists, communalists and terrorists. Flavia Agnes in her paper, notes how the debates over triple talaq had its communal angle, where the divorce and destitution issues of women in the Hindu community never achieved such attention from this party and how ministers such as Yogi Adityanath compared triple talaq to the disrobing of Draupadi to create an impression of grave injustice being committed against the Muslim women (Agnes, “Triple Talaq-Gender Concerns” 430-431).

Keeping in focus on the crucial impediments and challenges like economic deprivation, lack of educational and employment opportunities, as well as under-representation in government and political positions, the projection of identity and gender-based issues like triple talaq and polygamy pinpoints the right-wing agenda of communal politics. Personal laws are crucial in a multi-religious and multi-

cultural nation such as India for ensuring equal provisions for its citizens in a secular and democratic way. As for Muslim women, it is also part of their identity and their religion, which the constitution gives them the right to practice. The political parties which seem eager to safeguard the rights of Muslim women can be seen in an oppositional position to them in several other circumstances when the same women question their unwarranted authority encroaching upon their rights. The ideology and practice of secularism on which the Indian polity operates can also be seen at war with itself when the minority question is brought to the centre. In the context of state power and communalism in India, this crisis of secularism can be seen with stark visibility.

Communal Violence, Majoritarian Politics and the Muslim Women

The manipulated history of Islamic rule in medieval India by colonial anthropologists and historians, the divisive policy of the British which created a mutual hatred between Hindu and Muslim communities, the partition which divided the nation among communal lines and the tactics of the political parties which utilised communal vote banks for political power and growth were some of the major reasons which fuelled the Hindu-Muslim communalism and violence in India (Gopal Sarvepalli et.al). Asgar Ali Engineer blames both the Bharatiya Janata Party and Congress equally for exploiting communal politics by endorsing casteism and communalism (“Communal Riots”, 3). The rivalry often resulted in large-scale violence, which involved mass murder, arsenals, gang rapes and uprooting whole residential areas. But as the minority and less privileged of both, mostly the Muslim community suffered a significant share of violence, leading them to further

deprivation and pushing them to the most extreme margins of society. The vulnerability to communal violence also led to widespread ghettoisation, where the members had to cope with low standards of infrastructure and neglect of governmental aid. Zoya Hasan, in her paper, observes that although communalism is rampant in India, communal riots are not spontaneous and not caused by simple religious animosity (“Communalism”, 33). She points toward reasons like the perception of the Muslim population as competition in the job market and business, anti-muslim propaganda perpetuated by communalist organisations like RSS, and prejudice by police and district administration towards minorities contributing to the rivalry towards them (33,36). The economic growth and political aspirations of the Muslim community to achieve any progress cause aggression on the part of the extremist communal and political organisations, often culminating in communal violence, which aims at uprooting the economic base of Muslims, like in Moradabad, Jabalpur, Bhiwandi and Godhra (Engineer, “Communal Riots” 37, Imtiaz Ahmed 904).

The growth of Hindu nationalism in the form of different organisations like RSS, Arya Sabha, Hindu Mahasabha, Rama Rajya Parishad and Bharatiya Jana Sangh crystallised in the form of Bharatiya Janatha Party in 1980. The existing discourse of Muslims as outsiders, invaders, separatists, extremists and terrorists flared and gained increased circulation in political debates, election manifestos, literature, media and films with the growth of the political power of these organisations. The majoritarian ideology rooted in anti-Muslim propaganda has often created imaginary threats involving a call to action against Muslims taking

over the Nation with increased political power, population and conversion. Protecting Hindu women, dharma, culture and religious structures was often prioritised in political speeches and manifestos. The combined effort of majoritarian groups in spreading anti-Muslim propaganda through hate speech, print media, manifestos and political campaigns has resulted in several major and minor communal riots after partition. The major riots included the Jabalpur Riots in 1961, the Bhagalpur Riots of 1989, the Bombay Riots of 1992, the Godhra Riots of 2002 and the Delhi Riots of 2020.

The 1990s witnessed the convergence of majoritarian organisations, fueling the Hindu wrath erupting against Muslims, which culminated in the demolition of Babri Masjid on December 2, 1992, followed by the most intense period of communal tension after partition (Aijaz Ahmed 17). Aijaz Ahmed, in his paper on Ayodhya, calls it a ‘carefully choreographed mass hysteria’ which appeals to ‘the masculine virility, national pride, racial redemption, contempt for law and civility’(20). He points towards the masculine violence inflicted and reiterated on Muslim women to retain the gross memory of aggression:

As if the event itself was not enough, video cassettes not only of the event but of many subsequent acts of violence, including the actual rape of Muslim women by goons in Surat, were then distributed throughout the country, so that they could be re-lived, over and over again, vicariously, by a whole host of men throughout the land, as so many moments of re-gained Hindu virility, as re-defined by the *Parivar*. (20)

This aggression over the bodies of Muslim women continued to be a major tool during communal riots, which aimed at subjecting them to inhumane torture and murder, where it became a symbol of Hindu chauvinist masculinity triumphing over the Muslim community, marking an act of historical revenge. The projection of the growing Muslim population as a threat to the Hindu majority and its power structures had infiltrated into the Hindu mass psyche that the annihilation of the Muslim 'womb' and 'fetus' became a violent solution for this. Tanika Sarkar observes this pattern, which manifested in its cruellest form during the Godhra Riots: 'There is a dark sexual obsession about allegedly ultra-virile Muslim male bodies and over fertile Muslim female ones, that inspire and sustain the figures of paranoia and revenge' (2874). The act of rape functions as a tool of physical control and punishment, where it is set as an example which intends to 'discipline' the community as a whole. In feminist theories, rape is considered a political form of aggression and a form of social power (Kirby 799). Rape as a weapon for political control and defeating the enemy has a long history and has been reiterated in several wars and ethnic violence throughout the world. The large-scale use of rape as a gruesome weapon of subduing the enemy community with silent authorisation from the state was not an uncommon phenomenon in the modern world. Ruth Seifert, in her study on sexual violence against women during wars, observes that mass rape, sexual torture and massacre were reported before, like in the Chinese city of Nanking by the Japanese army, in Italy by the French army and by the Pakistani army during the Bangladesh Liberation War (Seifert, "War and Rape" 63-64). But this inhumane practice came to international attention with the Serbian invasion of Bosnia in 1992, where the Bosnian Muslim women were subjected to inhumane rape

and murder in large numbers. The men were attacked and imprisoned, and the defenceless women were molested and degraded in inhumane ways before their families. There were 'rape camps' which retained Muslim women for sexual slavery, and the whole plot aimed at an 'ethnic cleansing' which sprang out of a political paranoia (Gutman, "Foreword", x). Sabalic and Seifert comment on the strange obsession over grotesque violence on the bodies of women in the case of Bosnia as "atrocities of a quasi-ritualistic nature centred on the femininity of the body" (Sabalic and Seifert, qtd in Seifert, "The Second Front", 38). The rape and genocide of Muslim women during the Gujarat riots marked a dark chapter in the history of India, where the extremist Right-wing organisations used it as a tool for communal mobilisation and even openly called for brutal violence against Muslims (Tanika Sarkar 2875). Bilkis Bano was a living martyr of the chilling sexual sadism and inhumane violence inflicted upon the Muslims by the hysterical mobs. During the anti-Muslim pogrom, Bilkis Bano was subjected to brutal gang rape and her fourteen family members were murdered in front of her (Kanjilal 209-210). In Naroda Patia, one of the most affected areas, Kausar Bano, a pregnant woman, was attacked and murdered by the violent mob (Agnes, "From Shah Bano to Kausar Bano" 48-49; Dayal21). Similar details of grotesque gang rapes, and inhumane mass killing of men and women through different means collected from eye-witnesses appear in the magazine *Communalism Combat*. The investigative report with photographs and testimonials gives a harrowing picture of the grave violence which erupted in Gujarat. The reports address the role of the politicians and police in perpetuating the riots, who, instead of taking immediate action to curb the violence,

resorted to either fanning the mob's anguish or protecting the culprits (Dayal 116-120).

Purushottam Agarwal, in his study on Hindu nationalism based on Savarkar's philosophy, observes that the mass rape, sexual torture and murder of Muslim women during the communal riots in India cannot be simply defined as war crimes. Still, it has its historical roots in the constructed narrative of the invasion of Indian territories by Muslim dynasties during the past (46,49). The majoritarian narratives place Muslims as the invaders and aggressors who abducted chaste Hindu women:

They were not raping innocent female individuals but were punishing the active abettors of crimes against the Hindu nation, particularly against Hindu women. They were not rioting, but they were fighting a battle in a millennium-old war. Their acts had less to do with religious ritualism and more with a ferociously authoritarian nationalism (54).

Thus, it was an inbuilt hatred towards the Muslim community as a whole, and every Muslim as answerable to the 'wrongs' committed by their 'forefathers', converging at points of aggression where they are punished and annihilated for an ethnically cleansed Nation.

Resistance and Protest: Muslim Women as Enemies of the State

Unlike popular media narratives that portray Muslim women as merely oppressed and confined by patriarchal religious structures, their lived reality reflects daily struggles with the hegemonic power exercised by the state and expressed

through certain cultural nationalist discourses. Their unwavering resistance and protest of the real oppressive forces never find a mention in those narratives. Sexual or physical violence against Muslim women was not a peculiar practice limited to communal riots, but was essentially used as a tool for subjugating the Muslim community in India whenever strife was imminent. The women became the primary target of aggression in any case. In *Do You Remember Kunan Poshpora*, the authors observe that the mass rape and violence committed in places like Ballipora, Pazipora and Kupwara during the occupation in Kashmir in the 1990s by the Indian army was justified by the military as a primary tool for subjugation against terrorism and militancy (Batool et al, Sherin, “Gendering Minorities” 117). According to the victims, in February 1991, the Indian army vested with the Armed Forces Special Power Act (AFSPA) burst into the houses in the two villages Kunan and Poshpora located in Kupwara valley where the men were dragged away and tortured by the army accusing them of antinational activities and about 31 women were subjected to brutal rape and the accused were protected by the State (Batool et al). It is an irony that all the while advocating for the rights of Muslim women and implementing various policies for their well-being, the state itself functions as a brutal, oppressive force against Muslim women when they express protest against the state. The women were targeted because of their involvement in support of the Kashmir resistance groups and street protests against the Indian army (Batool et al). The Right-wing political groups in positions of power maintain an explicit double standard in their approach towards Muslim women, unlike the constant hatred towards Muslim men. Even while maintaining an extremely misogynistic and anti-Muslim philosophy at the core, the Hindu nationalists have at times faked a pro-

Muslim women stance to frame Muslim men as oppressors of women and Islam as a sexist religion, as in the Shahbano case and the triple talaq ban. But when Muslim women raise their voices against the atrocities committed against them by external forces, they are faced with brutal oppression, often with the silent consent of the state. Several Muslim women stood strong against the injustice committed against them and made their protest visible, demanding justice. Bilkis Baano, the rape victim and eyewitness to the gruesome murder of her family during the Gujarat riots, had to fight a long way for justice. Six years after the incident, 11 were convicted by the Bombay High Court, and they were sentenced to lifetime imprisonment (Kanjilal 9). But in 2022, with the directions of the Gujarat government, all of the 11 convicts were released just before the election as they had close ties with the majoritarian political parties, and this invoked widespread protest, leading to the cancellation of the release (212). This not only shows the grave aggression committed against Muslim women but also the delay and manipulation in providing justice to the victim. Zakia Jafri represented the hundreds of Muslim women who suffered the violence of right-wing extremists during the Gujarat riots. Her filing of a protest petition in the Supreme Court with the organisation Citizen for Justice and Peace against the direct involvement of Right-wing political parties and leaders in instigating the communal mob resulting in the riots was a historic contestation against the right-wing fascism and political propaganda as a whole (Setalvad 10-12). In 2020, Safoora Zargar, who was a research scholar from Jamia Millia University, was arrested by the Delhi police and sentenced to jail for 3 months for protesting against the Citizenship Amendment Act. She was also subjected to solitary confinement for 38 days despite being pregnant at the time (Lalwani). Ayesha

Renna and Fatima Ladida, postgraduate students from the same university, alongside other protesting students, had also been subjected to police brutality for the protest (Dutta).

The Shaheen Bhah protest became a historic moment in Indian politics where Muslim women, including students, professionals, housewives and even elderly women, were taking over the streets with peaceful demonstrations. The visibility of Muslim women's bodies in the Indian political spaces dominated by Hindu masculinity challenged the narrative of submissive Muslim women and subverted global stereotypes (Bhatia and Gajjala 6287). The coming together of Muslim women from different fields and classes also represented their political awareness and engagement with State policies, where they demanded their rights as Indian citizens. The use of secular and national symbols alongside religious symbols like Purdah, hijab and niqab also projected their religious identity, which was the basis of discrimination in CAA.

During the anti-hijab rows in Karnataka in 2022, where the Karnataka education department and the Karnataka High Court upheld the stand against Muslim students wearing hijab in government educational institutions, stating it affects the uniformity of the students and Hijab is not an essential religious practice (Karpuram). Bibi Muskan Khan became the face of the protest against the right-wing supporters trying to oppress the female Muslim students wearing hijab at educational institutes. However, she was portrayed as a communalist who was involved in anti-national activities by several right-wing political leaders (Dhar).

Secular Feminisms Vs. Islamic Feminisms

In the modern debates on gender, Western feminism and its offshoots like secular feminism, liberal feminism, and neoliberal feminism have been considered inadequate in studying and understanding the experiences of women from post-colonial nations, as the problems faced by women in these places cannot be studied or evaluated with the theoretical formulations or phases of Western feminist discourse. As the prominent post-colonial feminist Zillah Eisenstein observes:

Western feminism, when equated with liberal feminism, as it was articulated in the nineteenth century, stood as a critique of the exclusion of white women from the bourgeois revolution overtaking England and France. These women wanted the new freedoms being promised, white propertied men. To claim these rights, these women first had to see that they were excluded as a sexual caste, as a homogenised collective with no individuality. They then used this ascribed status to challenge the engendered exclusivity of bourgeois rights. These feminists did not speak of slave women or slaves in general. They did not speak of nonpropertied women or colonised women. They were exclusionary by the silences they allowed. They instead utilised the abstract/inclusive promissory of individual rights and demanded democracy for themselves. (Eisenstein 193-194)

The intellectual base of Western feminism was essentially built on the wealth of colonial invasions and oriental knowledge production, which conveniently brushed aside the history, experiences and struggles of women from post-colonial nations rooted in oppression and violence. What Western feminists saw as limiting

and oppressive, such as household, family and reproduction, were the rights for which the African or Algerian women were fighting. The secular feminist reading of the lives and experiences of religious women limited the understanding of the politics of agency and negotiation of religious practices and cultural participation, which determined their identity. Furthermore, neo-liberal feminism gravitates from liberal feminism, sets certain models based on work-family balance as determining the ideal feminist subject, which is promoted through the success stories of high-achieving women (Rottenberg 421). Asma Barlas argues that the essential problem with feminism itself is that it functions as a metanarrative where its inclusivity tries to subsume and assimilate all the discourses on equality, which oversimplifies diverse experiences (Barlas 22).

Islam and Muslim women started occupying a central position in Western discourses in the nineteenth century as a aftermath of Orientalism and colonial power exertion over the Muslim countries (Leila Ahmed 150). Western feminist discourses played a major role in reproducing the colonial stereotypes of the oppressed and submissive Muslim women with politically loaded images in the twenty-first century. The phenomena have been more pervasive after the 9/11 attacks and the American ‘war on terror’ which created the international Muslim terrorist figures framed as enemies of humanity and oppressors of their own women folks (Mahmood, “Feminism, Democracy, and Empire”, 194). Thus, saving the Muslim women from the clutches of the Muslim men became the moral responsibility of the Liberal/neoliberal feminists backed by Western nations. This project becomes deeply problematic when these feminists try to ‘delink’ Muslim

women from their religion to construct an 'autonomous feminist subject' (Choudhury 16). The complexity of experiences of Muslim women, which is deeply enmeshed with their gender, religion, nation, ethnicity and family, is overlooked by these feminists. They often isolate gender equality and human rights formulated with white women in focus, while measuring the quality of life of Muslim women. Not only are there crucial differences between whites and non-whites, and privileges existing for the whites as a result of the colonisation are not taken into account, but the struggles of women in the East are conveniently brushed aside (20). Like Western Feminism, Islamic feminism also has a significant history behind it, even if its theories are still evolving. And as much as Islam is a multicultural religion, Islamic feminism also runs in multiple streams.

Islamic feminism as an academic discourse tries to address the converging points of both Islam and feminism, which are often understood as contradictory ideas (Fayiza, *Islamika Feminism*, 13). According to Margot Badran, the term Islamic feminism evolved and gained currency in the 1990s among scholars from Saudi Arabia, Türkiye and South Africa (243, 244). She observes that the 'producers' and 'users' of the discourse of Islamic feminists include religious Muslims, secular Muslims and Non-Muslims (244). She also notes that Fatima Mernissi, the Moroccan socialist and author of one of the founding texts of Islamic feminism, *Women and Islam: An Historical and Theological Enquiry*, is a secular feminist and not essentially an Islamic feminist (244). But according to Sherin B.S, the works of secular feminists, including Fatima Mernissi, Nawal E Sadwi, Asma Barlas, and Asra Nomani, carry the hegemony of progressive liberalism and

prejudices against Islam (*Deshiyatha, Feminism, Muthalaq*,133; *Gendering Minorities*, 11). As an area of study under Islamic feminism, many scholars were involved in feminist reading and interpretation of the Quran and other Islamic scriptures like *Hadith* (approvals of the Prophet). This includes scholars like Amina Wadood, Rifath Hassan, Asma Barlas, Keshiya Ali and Ayisha Hidayathullah. More than the Quranic text, these scholars were trying to study the patriarchal interpretations of the verses and the gender politics constructed through them (Fayiza, *Islamika Feminism*, 52). But many critical aspects of Islam and feminism were brought to attention by later post-secular critics like Saba Mahmood, Lila Abu Lughod and Wendy Brown, who not only connect the studies on Muslim women to colonial hegemony but also the dominant narratives of secular discourse. Their studies analyse global and local political movements, which are crucial in determining the lived realities of Muslim women and how they negotiate with them. Religion is taken as an organic component in the cultural fabric of Muslim women's lives and identities such as in the women's mosque movement in Egypt studied by Saba Mahmood (*Politics of Piety*, 3) or Lila Abu Lughod's study on the Bedouin women navigating through the tension between emotional expression and cultural values through love poems (*ghinnawa*) ("Modest Women",159) rather than limiting it to the feminist analysis of Quran and *Hadith*.

The mainstream feminist movements and academic research in India were essentially dominated and coloured by upper-caste Hinduism (Sherin, *Deshiyatha, Feminism, Muthalaq* 125; Kirmani 79). These movements, whose primary concern was patriarchy and oppression, overlooked the intersection of gender, religion and

nation and thereby were oblivious to the grave issues faced by the Muslim community and Muslim women. The Muslim women were mostly invisible in these studies, and the existing ones mostly focused on their plights surrounding the purdah system or the lack of education among Muslim women rather than contributing meaningfully to the lived realities and their experiences as members of a minority group (Minault, “Making Invisible” 1). However, with the increased global and national political awareness and the formation of networks among Muslim women, Islamic feminism has gained relevance in the Indian political and academic scenario.

Islamic feminism as a distinct discursive practice among Indian Muslim women can be seen as an increased awareness of religious identity, which gives them a unique voice for their right to practice religion in the face of the majoritarian fascist aggressions forcing them to give up all the religious practices and markers to align with the unified Indianness of Hindu India. Islamic feminism as activism manifested in the Indian context largely through collectives like the above grassroots activists and social organizations like *Awaaz-e-Nizwaan*, The All-India Muslim Women’s Rights Network (MWRN), Women’s Research and Action Group (WRAG), Bharatiya Muslim Mahila Andolan or BMMA, South Indian Women’s Organization (STEPS), were formed with focus on Muslim women’s rights and challenges in India without compromising with their religious identity (Schneider, 64). The All Indian Muslim Women’s Personal Law Board (AIMWPLB), formed in 2005, functions as a platform for protecting the rights of Muslim women in compliance with Muslim personal law and Sharia in several areas like marriage and

divorce (Sherin, *Gendering Minorities* 7). Mass movements and protests like the anti-CAA march and the Shaheen Bhag movement in Delhi, involving Muslim women from all walks of life and serious discussions around Islamic feminism in academia and campus, also widened its possibilities as a counter-narrative to mainstream feminism. It is also interesting to note that the academic discussions around Muslim women also diversify to a great extent where critics like Zoya Hasan hold both community and State as oppressive forces which subordinate Muslim women into traditional gender roles alongside the majoritarian threats where each displays an essential patriarchal character (Zoya Hasan, “Introduction” xiii), while Sherin B.S and Ummul Fayiza stress on the importance of examining the role of Islamic identity of Muslim women as an expression resistance and protest at the face of growing majoritarian fascism, through a post-secular lens (Sherin, *Gendering Minorities* 10; Fayiza, *Islamika Feminism* 32-33).

Being an important spokesperson for Muslim women in India, Flavia Agnes argues that religious identity and institutions are a shelter for Muslim women in the volatile existence in a communally charged nation where violence can erupt at any moment:

“The genocide in Gujarat, as well as the earlier communal riots, has taught a painful lesson to Muslim women: when threatened with a life-and-death situation, and in the face of bloodthirsty mobs, places like mosques, dargahs, and madrassas are transformed into oases of security and solace. Women in relief camps have narrated incidents of camp organisers helping out with arrangements of food and first aid, and with cleansing, bleeding, and

extracting wooden splinters buried in the deepest crevices. While women gave birth in the open in those traumatic days, the men had no choice but to help in the birthing process. Before the meagre aid declared by the government could be accessed, hungry children were fed only through hurriedly put-together community resources” (Agnes, “From Shah Bano to Kausar Bano”, 49-50).

The minority position and vulnerability in the face of communalism and oppression from the Hindu nationalist movements also push Muslim women towards embracing their religious identity and receiving support from their men, forming collectives and widening their network to create a feeling of safety. Thus, liberal feminist advocacy for criminalising triple talaq or implementing a Uniform Civil Code, emphasising the secular thesis of equality regardless of religious identity, tries to erase the systemic inequalities and violence already faced by Muslim women. Instead of placing their issues in a wider socio-political intersection, the feminist discourses project gender and religion as the core oppressive factors in the lives of Muslim women. But any discussions surrounding women in general also exclude the practising Muslim women, as she doesn't fit into the liberal or secular imaginations of the mainstream feminist movements of India.

The complexities in representing Muslim women lie in the intricate socio-political, cultural and economic diversity, which forms the identity of each Muslim woman in India. The historical and contemporary realities of Muslim women presented in this chapter point towards the evolutions and challenges faced and negotiated by them, which seldom appear in mainstream Bollywood films. The

stereotypes of victimhood and suffering of Muslim women under the patriarchal and misogynist community are projected throughout media images and mainstream literature. The women who are portrayed as escaping Islamic patriarchy are popularised as global feminist icons who hand out testimonies of the cruelties of Islamic communities and the need for interventions and transformations on behalf of Western nations, which provide shelter to them. For instance, when the Taliban shot Malala Yousufzai, she became an international metaphor for female victimhood instigated by Islamic fundamentalism and was hailed by Western nations, media campaigns and feminists. She rose to popularity, appearing in every U.S.-based top magazine because her story aligned perfectly with their liberal feminist, anti-terrorist, and Islamophobic discourses. While Malala was celebrated in leading newspapers like the New York Times, the news about the large number of Afghan civilians and children who were killed by NATO was tactfully hidden away (Hesford 146).

The obsession of Western media and feminists with the burqa-clad women of Afghanistan, whose stock images are used throughout any issues surrounding Muslim women, also points towards their recurrent stereotyping where a burqa/purdah connotes subjugation. Similarly, the stories of figures like Nadia Murad, Mukhtar Mai and Nujood Ali became representatives of Muslim women from the Islamic nations who survived their abuses. The secret obsession with these women was based on their tragic experiences, which functioned as testimony to the common narrative of the inherent misogyny of Islam and its incompatibility with the modern world and human rights.

In Bollywood, narratives on a Muslim woman who has fought in the freedom struggle, who is passionate about her career or who holds a politically significant position, are strangely absent. The intentional invisibility of the empowered, politically aware, believing Muslim women not only magnifies the Muslim community as backwards but also emphasises the majoritarian assertion of Muslim women as victims to be redeemed by them. The political realities of Muslim women, their marginalised position in society and their lack of opportunities are never mentioned in any mainstream Bollywood movie. Her vulnerability to communal violence and hate politics of Hindu nationalists, and her traumas as a victim of these repeated aggressions, are tactfully erased even from films built around communal issues. Even if the issues are addressed rarely, the Muslim community is assumed to have an equal hand in the perpetuation of violence in those movies, according to the secular logic of assumed neutrality. This reinforced narrative of the victimised Muslim women who can only be saved and walk to liberation by Hindu masculinity, liberal feminists, and secularists helps in effectively hiding the achievements and contributions of Muslim women to Indian politics, culture and nation-building. We can see the gravity of this marginality and invisibility when delving deeper into the innumerable achievements of Muslim women in versatile fields, which never find a mention in mainstream media. Rising Beyond The Ceiling (RBTC) was a groundbreaking initiative by the Supporting Action For Advancement and Rights (SAFAR) foundation, which aimed at challenging this long-existing stereotyping and invisibility of Muslim women in India. The initiative conducts elaborate research throughout India and abroad and documents the achievements and contributions of Muslim women in politics, public administration, culture,

entrepreneurship, sports, media, arts and social sectors, to name a few. The compilation in the form of books disseminates the details of Muslim women achievers and their talents to the public, shattering their misrepresented image.

Rising Beyond The Ceiling (RBTC) was born out of the need to change the stereotypical narrative about Muslim women in India. The hundred million Indian women, who identify themselves as Muslim, reach across a spectrum of ethnicities and languages, states, and union territories, do not look the same or sound the same, and contribute to nation-building in a wide variety of ways. Rising Beyond The Ceiling celebrates the achievements, endeavours, and diversity of Muslim women in India, aiming to drive a new narrative. The initiative aims to make inspiring stories of Muslim women more visible, provide positive role models for future generations, and nurture young women's confidence and ambition in all spheres (Rising Beyond The Ceiling).

RBTC have documented important names such as badminton player Sania Mirza, freestyle footballer Hadiya Hakim, weight lifter Majhiziya Banu, global brand owners like Shahanaz Hussain, film icons Shabana Azmi and Farah Khan, journalists like Rana Ayyub and V.P.Rajeena, academicians like Shamshad Hussain K.T., young politicians like Najma Tabsheera, Fatima Tahliya and many more. Their upcoming projects aim to highlight the contributions of Indian Muslim women who are settled in the UK, the US and the Middle East. Their project also conducts mentorship for young Muslim women and art exhibitions for social change.

When going through the many facets of Muslim women's history, politics, life experiences and achievements, we can see how much intentional invisibility has been imposed on them and how incomplete and manipulated the representation of Indian history in Bollywood narratives is. Bollywood's ideological project contributes to the grand narrative history of secular India that marginalises the experiences and lives of the nation's largest minority and reframes the narratives of freedom struggle, partition, independence and nation-building to suit the cultural nationalist and majoritarian rhetorics of a Hindu nation built by an exclusive Hindu leadership. The discourse formation underlying Bollywood films itself is a vast area to explore, where it comprehensively builds an intricate metanarrative which glorifies the Hindu myths, cultures and nationalism through either marginalising or excluding non-Hindu cultures and identities. Both the ground realities and achievements of Muslim women are denied any serious mention in Bollywood. The findings accentuate the deep-seated contradictions in the representation of Muslim women in Bollywood, exposing the mechanisms through which the industry reproduces and legitimises hegemonic discourses that constitute the very fabric of Indian secularist rhetoric. Such portrayals strategically deploy selective historical and cultural claims to sustain false narratives that reinforce majoritarian ideologies, while simultaneously erasing the complexity of Muslim women's lived experiences. The pervasive soft power of Bollywood ensures that these reductive representations are not merely consumed as entertainment but are internalised by mass audiences, thereby consolidating cultural dominance and normalising exclusionary worldviews. Public perceptions of Muslim women, and of Islam more broadly, are profoundly shaped by their systematic misrepresentation and exclusion in Bollywood. This

exclusion operates not as a neutral omission but as a deliberate strategy within the ideological apparatus of Hindu nationalists, serving to legitimise its political schema and entrench majoritarian hegemony. The next chapter looks into the evolution of Muslim female characters from the very beginning of the Bombay film industry, to evaluate the politics of representation and its aestheticisation in the cinematic imagery, which are subjected to continuous transformations according to the socio-cultural context of the changing times. The chapter shall also serve as the elaborate background for comparing the representations of Muslim women and their political dimensions in the post-1990 Bollywood.

Chapter 3

A Historical Overview of Muslim Women in Bollywood

“Behind the candle is a dancing figure who seems to emerge from it as she dances, and her body in movement at times seems to fuse with it. As the dance proceeds the credits roll and the shot stabilizes into a static long shot of a kotha in partial darkness. The flame continues to burn in the foreground, and around it dances the courtesan Nargis, now beneath the chandelier.”

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From the early periods of conception of Indian cinema, the idioms of Islamicate cultures existed within it due to the proliferation of oriental legends, myths and folktales that were popularised through the oral storytelling culture of the natives and also through the printed materials that were first made available for British officers in India with the intention of learning about the language and culture of the Orient. With the translations from Arabic to other languages, the authentic form of Arabian tales was eventually lost, but the cultural imagination that it enabled was to stay forever in Indian visual media through films (Thomas 35). Later, the amalgamation of Mughal court culture and aesthetic continuity of the sophistications of Awadhi traditions (based on Lucknow) alchemised the aesthetic landscapes of Bollywood. This chapter situates the Muslim women inside these oriental-islamicate narratives, which later develop into Muslim historical, social and new wave film genres, each of them constitutive of different historical and social structures and narrative schemas derived out of the respective periods. It analyses the progression

and evolution in the rendition of Muslim women characters from the nascent years of the Bombay film industry to the 1980s, as accentuated in the complex geographies of representations.

A Short Introduction to Islamicate Culture in Bollywood

The art of cinema was introduced in India by the Lumiere Brothers of Paris through the presentation of the first cinematograph in Bombay in 1896, which was much longer before Dadasaheb Phalke's *Raja Harischandra* (1913), which is hailed as the first Indian feature film. According to Sumita S Chakravathy, Baba Saheb Phalke saw cinema as a 'nationalist undertaking' which was inherently linked with the Nation's culture, which is based on the Hindu mythologies and legends (35-36). With the Lumiere brothers, many other foreign-owned theatre companies like 'Gaiety', 'Tivoli' and 'Star' started screening moving images, scenes and shorts in India (Rangoonwalla 11). The Star Theatre was started by Prof. Stevenson, who brought the first ever 'Bioscope' to India and also exhibited oriental scenes from the *Arabian Nights* Opera. Framji Cowasji Institute, aka the Wellington Theatre, screened *Aladdin and the Wonderful Lamp* in 1902 and *Alibaba and 40 Thieves* in 1903 (19). These scenes and shorts, which were repeatedly screened in different parts of India during the budding period of the development of cinema, created long-lasting images of the exotic Islamicate culture.

Marshall Hodgson, in his first volume of *The Venture of Islam*, studies the development and spread of the 'Islamicate culture'. He differentiates the two concepts, Islamic and Islamicate and suggests that the adjective 'Islamic' must be restricted to Islam in the proper religious sense. Hodgson defines Islamicate as

“referring not directly to the religion, Islam, itself, but to the social and cultural complex historically associated with Islam and the Muslims, both among Muslims themselves and even when found among non-Muslims” (59). Thus, the term Islamicate doesn’t limit itself to the religious connections with Islam but indicates the cultural synthesis developed out of the many influences of Islam as a source of artistic inspiration and a vast repertoire of traditions that emerge not out of any single geographical location or people.

Rosie Thomas dedicates an entire chapter to the origin and popularity of oriental fantasies like *Arabian Nights*, which provided endless sagas of tales for Indian cinema in her work *Bombay Before Bollywood Film City Fantasies*. The author delves into a possible alternative to the already established film history, which glorifies Dadasaheb Phalke as the ‘Father of Indian cinema.’ Instead of the genre of Indian mythologies, the focus is placed on fantasy films that draw inspiration from the *Arabian Nights* and folktales that were circulated among the Indian audience. Hiralal Sen’s short from *Flower of Persia*, an 1898 *Arabian Nights* opera and K.P. Vidyavinode’s *Ali Baba and the Forty Thieves*, screened in 1901, are identified by the author as the first among the fantasy film genre made by Indians (31).

The author also states that the term ‘Arabian night films’ in India generally referred to all films with Arabian ethos, settings or themes with supernatural incidents and set in quasi-Persian/ Arabic or Islamicate culture, which was also known as Mahomedan films (34). The genre included numerous films, including *Princess Budur* (1922), *Hoor-e-Arab* (1928), *Aladdin* (1931) and *Ali Baba* (1932) by

J.J. Madan, *Gul-e-Bakavali* (1924) by Kanjibhai Rathod, *Aladdin and the Wonderful Lamp* (1927) by B.P. Mishra, *Gul Sanobar* (1953) by Aspi Irani, *Alibaba and the Forty Thieves* (1954) and *Hatimtai* (1956) by Homi Wadia.

These films laid out the foundation of the Islamicate imagination for the Indian spectators along with the oral folk tales, Urdu/Persian literature and popular print media. The exotic settings of these films not only connected the viewers with the Islamic lands and cultures beyond India but also gave a generalised understanding of the basic tenets, customs and traditions of Islam. These films also established the templates for the construction of later historical and fantasy films in Bollywood.

The arrival of the first sound movie or talkie was introduced in India by Ardeshir Irani through his 1931 film *Alam Ara*. The talkies made possible what the silent movies were unable to do: singing and music. *Alam Ara*, which contained seven songs, carried the catchphrase “All talking, singing and dancing” on its posters. This song and dance had been an inevitable part of the Indian cinema tradition from the beginning. The oriental musical representations developed by the British were reframed and utilised in the early Hindi films, which infused dance forms like belly dance with added eroticisation.

When sound came to cinema, films made in Urdu could gain a wider appeal than regional films, which faced the barrier of language. Urdu was the administrative language and common dialect of North India before independence, thus making it credible to express any public context (Kesavan 248). The Parsi-Urdu theatre in Bombay and Calcutta also influenced Indian popular cinema in its distinct

form, which made Urdu prominent. Most films before independence used Hindustani language, which was a blend of Urdu and Hindi (Lunn 2).

The impact of Partition was a decisive factor in the history of Bollywood, where its consequences were felt across all walks of life, and cinema was no exception. With partition, the film industry was also split between India and Pakistan. Many film artists had to flee India, while many film artists from Pakistan found refuge in India. After independence, in 1949, Hindi was declared the official language of India, sidelining Urdu. This led to the gradual demise of the language, which had dominated not only the Bombay cinema but Indian literature and music as a whole. But Bollywood even today couldn't do away with Urdu altogether, for its aesthetic significance was deeply ingrained and irreplaceable in its film culture. The song lyrics, dialogues and even film titles borrowed Urdu words and idioms for their poetic and dramatic effects (Kesavan 248). Thus, the Islamicate culture with its *mise-en-scène*, Urdu vocabulary, music, architecture and aesthetic functions became an inevitable representation of the Muslim life in Bollywood, trying to re-invent a nostalgic past of religious harmony and synchronicity.

Muslim Women in Early Hindustani/Hindi Films (1930-1950s)

The early Indian films consisted mostly of fantasy films and historicals, which reflected the Islamicate elements with Arabian night stories and Mughal history forming the major narratives. Fantasy films such as Kanjibai Rathod's *Gul-e-Bakavali* (1924), J. B. H. Wadia's *Lal-e-Yamaan* (1933) and Mehboob Khan's *Al Hilal* (1935) with supernatural elements set in an imaginary Islamicate landscape, which was also referred to as 'Arabian Night Films'. Meanwhile, the historians

assumed an important role in projecting the 'undivided nation' and narratives of its foregone glory. The legends and lore from the Mughal empire, Rajput and Maratha kingdoms and other princely states proved to be an abundant reservoir for providing resources for historical films. Their early talkies also included Muslim socials like *Khandan* (1942), *Najma* (1943) and *Elan* (1947), which signalled the changing social spheres of the North Indian Muslim community after the decline of the feudal systems and their aristocratic prestige. Anisur Rahman observes that these films produced during the colonial decade proved that the Muslim subject was worthy of attention and had a considerable number of viewers in the market (84).

The influence of transnational orientalism, which had deep roots in India during the 1920s and 1930s, formed the foundation of the Arabian Night genre, also known as 'Mahomedan pictures' (Thomas, 32,34). The early oriental romances and fantasy films like Mehboob Khan's *Alibaba* (1940) and Homi Wadia's *Aladdin and the Wonderful Lamp* (1952) visualised the East and Muslim women as mysterious and exotic. Rosie Thomas opines that the Arabian Nights genre had constructed a looser Islamicate world which was different from the other genres. These films weave together fantasy, fairy tales and magic set in a non-existent land bearing similarities to the Arab geography and culture. The Muslim women characters consisted of fairies, princesses, dancers and slaves. The fairy or '*pari*' could perform various miracles where they were seen traversing through the earth and heaven and changing forms. The female dancers invoked the oriental charisma of belly dance with costumes closely resembling Persian styles rather than Indian (Thomas 32). The films focused on mysteries, magic and adventure, and these female characters

often appear as surreal, performing many supernatural actions. The films indicate a popular genre of fantasy films with importance attached to the visual spectacle rather than characters, appealing to the Muslim subaltern class. The Muslim female characters gained increased visibility and clarity through the genre of Muslim historicals and Socials.



Fig. 1 “The Exotic Queen”, shot from *Aladdin and the Wonderful Lamp* (00:19:43)

Muslim Historicals consisted of the legendary narratives connected with the Mughal emperors such as Mirza Nasir-ud-Din Muhammad aka Humayun (1530-1556), Nur-ud-Din Muhammad Salim aka Jahangir (1605-1627), Abu'l-Fath Jalal-ud-din Muhammad Akbar (1556 - 1605), and Mirza Shahab-ud-Din Baig Muhammad Khan Khurram aka Shah Jahan (1628-1658), which were mostly situated in the period of pre-colonial India. *Adl-e-Jahangir* (1930), *Pukar* (1939), *Humayun* (1945), *Shah Jahan* (1946) and *Mirza Ghalib* (1954) are some films

which are included in this genre. The empire, which had persisted from 1526 to 1862, had left its vast legacies in the form of chronicles, records, artworks and architecture, which mark their significance in South Asian history (Fisher 225, 227). These historical accounts, legends and stories provide enough subject matter for Bollywood to weave fantasy tales based on the bygone period of Mughal rule. Apart from the heroic narratives of battles, court romances and conflicts, Bhaskar and Allen recognise the capacity of Muslim historicals to converse with the conditions of the colonised people by asserting the cultural superiority of Indian culture and presenting hopes of future liberation (23). The films on Akbar, Jehangir and Shah Jahan, who made efforts to unify the warring groups, pioneered the Hindu-Muslim brotherhood and patronised the rich cultural heritage of India, are considered significant in post-independent India to affirm its national unity (Bhaskar and Allen 26,27; Dwyer, *Filming the Gods*, 115). These films portray various Hindu-Muslim relationships, especially among the Mughals and Rajputs like Emperor Akbar, Jodhabhai and Raja Man Singh in films like *Pukar* (1939) and *Mughal-e-Azam* (1960). According to Thoraval, *Pukar* celebrated communal tolerance by highlighting Emperor Jahangir's relationship with Rajputs during a period of conflict between Hindus and Muslims (34). The nostalgic elegy on an undivided 'Hindustan' and about the past unity of both its geographical entity and communal identities are rewritten through these narratives.

In Muslim historical films, the Muslim female characters are predominantly depicted as subjects under the empire. These characters commonly assume roles such as Empresses, Begums (wives), servants, and entertainers, including

courtesans, dancers, and singers. According to Annemarie Schimmel, the Muslim dynasties that ruled India recognised the significance of their women, who played pivotal roles in the affairs of the empire(143). The films which portray Muslim royal women negate the popular orientalist narratives which devalue the royal harems as centres of lawless sexual practices. The historical portrayals of the *harems* as disciplined spaces of femininity, culture and art with splendid architecture and amenities.

The chronicles contain a wealth of documentation on women in the imperial household, who were often as powerful as their husbands; acting as patrons of architecture, art and science; sometimes playing a role in government; having the right to issue edicts, intervene on behalf of prisoners; and much more besides. This was also the case with the dynasties which preceded the Mughals or were contemporaneous with them (143).

Among other Mughal women, Nur Jahan, Mumtaz Mahal and Jahan Ara wielded considerable power in the empire. Their importance in Mughal history, the legends and lore associated with them, made them a favourite subject in Bollywood. Nur Jehan had enough authority and influence in the empire that she had vast land in her custody, built many monuments and gardens, and even had coins minted in her name (149).

Mehr-un-Nissa, aka Nur Jahan (1577-1645), was the daughter of Mirza Ghiath Beg and Asmet Begum and belonged to the Persian nobility. After the death of her first husband, Sher Afghan, Emperor Jahangir married her in 1611 and later was bestowed the title 'Nur Jahan' or 'Light of the World' (40). After her marriage

to Jahangir, she rose considerably in power in the Mughal dynasty. According to Ellison Banks Findly, Nur Jehan had the authority to approve all orders (*farmans*), to grant appointments and to have her name attached to the imperial signatures(46). She also conducted trade and engaged in international diplomacy (47). Her power in the empire rose to the extent that she formed a faction of influential and trustworthy people around her who would support her in exerting her authority, which was popularly known as the '*junta*'(Soma Mukherjee 138).

Sohrab Modi's *Pukar* (1939) is based on the legendary tale of Jahangir's 'Bell of Justice', which was established by him as the symbol of immediate justice imparted in the Mughal empire. Still, the focus of the narrative is placed upon the impartial nature of law through the test of Nur Jahan. The plot concerns two storylines: the first is a feud between the Rajput prince Mangal Singh, his beloved Kunwar's brother Ranjit Singh and her father Uday Singh, which ends with Mangal Singh killing her brother in self-defence and fleeing to escape punishment. Uday Singh seeks justice from Emperor Jahangir by ringing the 'Bell of Justice'. The second storyline is about Empress Nur Jahan accidentally killing a washerwoman's husband with her arrow, and Sankaram Singh, Mangal Singh's father, arousing the washerwoman to seek justice to prove his son's murder of Ranjit Singh was accidental and not intentional, similar to Noor Jehan's. The character of Noor Jahan is quite impressive in the film, with both the authority wielded by her and her firm belief in impartial Mughal justice. When entering the *darbar* (royal court), Empress Noor Jahan walks along with Jahangir, and during the defence of Mangal Singh, she is seated behind him, listening carefully to the people's petitions. When Jahangir is

furious over Mangal Singh, she places her hand over his shoulders as a gesture of controlling his temper (1:11:46-15:59). When she is accused of murder by the washerwoman, she convinces Jahangir that forgiving her as an empress will weaken people's belief in Mughal justice. She insists that the law should apply to both common folk and rulers. Thus, despite being the Empress, Noor Jahan is brought under the inquisition, declared a culprit and arrested before being pardoned due to the public plea and compensation to the washerwoman. Noor Jahan is persistent in her dedication to justice and is daring to surrender herself to it. Her representation is legendary and heroic in the film, even eclipsing the character of Jahangir himself.

Arjumand Banu Begum, aka Mumtaz Mahal (1593 –1631), appears in several Bollywood films but is a central character in the films *Shahjehan* (1946) and *Taj Mahal* (1963). She was the daughter of Asaf Khan and was married to Shah Jahan in 1612 A.D. She was endowed with the title *Malika-e-Zamaani* (Queen of the Age). Mumtaz had a great influence on the empire and over Shahjahan, so that the royal seal bearing the emperor's name was kept under her custody, and she also had the right to appeal for pardon for serious crimes. She was also known for her benevolent and humanitarian nature (147,148). Even though her reign was short, she is remembered for the most beautiful mausoleum built in her name, the Taj Mahal, and the infinite literature it inspired.

The central plot in both *Shahjehan* (1946) and *Taj Mahal* (1963) is the romance and marital bond between Shahjehan and Mumtaz Mahal. In Abdul Rashid Kardar's *Shahjehan*, the story revolves around Shahjehan's love and admiration for Mumtaz, which she tests through Jwala Singh's daughter Ruhi, who was renowned

for her beauty. Shah Jahan seeks advice from Mumtaz to solve Ruhi's predicament, who cannot decide on a suitable groom because of the huge number of suitors. She makes Ruhi stand in the hallway when Shah Jahan arrives, but Shah Jahan walks towards Mumtaz without acknowledging her. Mumtaz Mahal is shown as a loyal wife who devotes her life to Shah Jehan and who becomes an irreplaceable person in his life. Her character in the film reinforces the legend of Shah Jehan and Mumtaz's undying love. Notably, the other wives of Shahjehan were often erased from film narratives to project a monogamous relationship between him and Mumtaz Mahal to suit the conventions of Hindi cinema. After Ruhi's test, Mumtaz tells Shahjahan:

Today, an exceptionally beautiful woman was presented at Shahjahan and Mumtaz's residence. Everyone expected that 'Saheb's steps would falter upon encountering her. However, Mumtaz's unwavering faith was so profound that not even the most enchanting fairy descending from heaven could disrupt Shahjahan's resolute stride (00:27:48-00:28:09, my trans).

Mirza Ghalib (1954), directed by Sohrab Modi, is included in the Historical genre by Bhaskar and Allen, as it evokes the period of the last Mughal ruler, Bahadur Shah Zafar and his court, which was on the brink of decline with the British conquest (124). Like other Muslim historians, *Mirza Ghalib* also introduces the viewers to the magnificence of Mughal architecture, like the Qutub Minar, Jama Masjid and the Red Fort, which dominated the old city of Delhi. The voice-over introduces the important court poets of the period, including Mirza Ghalib, denoting the privilege given to poets in Bahadur Shah's court. Moti Begum/ Chaudhvin Begum is the film's central character with Mirza Ghalib. She is the inspiration and

object of Ghalib's spiritual love and the only person who can grasp the larger implications of his verses. Despite being an ordinary *domini* (belonging to the dancer/singer group of the time), Chaudvin has great taste in ghazals and poems. Her singing of his ghazal attracts the dispirited Ghalib returning from the *shahi mushaira* (poets' gathering in the royal court), and he gradually develops deep feelings for her. She is self-determinant and unheeding to the pressures of her mother and the *kothval* (the police officer under the British administration), who forces her to marry him to escape from poverty. She would rather die than be sold for money. She has dedicated herself to Mirza Ghalib even before she met him in person, but is oblivious to the fact that he is already married to Umrao Begum. She performs one of the ghazals of Ghalib before Bahadur Shah Zafar, which moves him immensely as it resonates with his state of loss and melancholy. He summons Ghalib to the court and confers the title of *Tabir-ul-Mulk* (secretary of state) and *Najm-ud-daula* (star of the state). Even though the story is largely fictionalised, the character of Chaudvin embodies the zest of Ghalib's poetry, which denoted the end of an era, a world which could be. Chudvin's realisation of Umrao Begum as the true claimant to Ghalib more or less reflects Bahadur Shah's dethronement before the British. Like the emperor, Chaudvin quietly withdraws herself, accepting it as an inevitable change of time or fate. It was too late when Ghalib came to realise the depth of Chaudvin's affection for him. Even though Ghalib writes the verses, they resonate with Chaudvin's emotional turmoil and loss:

I accept that you won't be
 Inattentive to me. But
 Until you come to know

I would have turned into ashes.

(01:34:54- 01:36:16; my trans)

The character of Anarkali was quite celebrated in early Bollywood. Even if there is no evidence of the slave girl named Anarkali, the tragic love story between Prince Salim, aka Emperor Jahangir and Anarkali was quite well known. Her story was depicted in an Urdu play by Syed Imtiaz Ali Taj in 1922. The story was adapted into two films: *Anarkali* (1953) by Nandlal Jaswantlal and *Mughal-e-Azam* (1960) by K. Asif. In both films, the character of Anarkali is a seductive yet innocent slave girl who falls in love with Prince Salim and faces the wrath of Emperor Akbar for it.

Anarkali (1953) by Nandlal Jawantlal is a historical fantasy with the imaginary love story between Anarkali, the slavegirl and Prince Salim (Jahangir) set during the reign of Akbar. The film shows a cheerful Anarkali singing and Akbar taking notice of it, asking what she wants as a reward for her talent. She asks just for the blossom of Anar, which Akbar has in his hands, and he bestows her the name ‘Anarkali’ (Pomegranate blossom). The relationship with Anarkali is kept a secret until the court maiden Gulnaz intoxicates Anarkali, and she approaches Prince Salim with romance while performing at Sheeshmahal. She is arrested, and Prince Salim rebels against his father. Both Prince Salim and Anarkali are given death sentences. While Salim is pardoned by Akbar, Anarkali is ordered to be entombed alive. The film is a bildungsroman where Anarkali’s character transforms from an innocent village girl to a martyr of love. She questions the logic of the poor having no rights: “You are the culprit, who weighs love on the scales of wealth. God has created all men as equals” (01:21:31-37, my trans). Anarkali also reminds Akbar that he would

be answerable to the judgment of Allah about the judgment he is making here. The scene of the entombment of Anarkali becomes the re-iterated symbol of tragic love in Bollywood. The film was re-adapted as *Mughal-e-Azam* in 1960 with many changes in the plot.

The Muslim social genre reimagined the Muslim world, divorced from the empire and its legends. The films focused on the Muslim aristocratic families, which were slowly diminishing after the British conquest. The first generation of Muslim socials includes films like Mehboob Khan's *Najma* (1943) and *Elaan* (1947), Shaukat Hussain Rizvi's *Khandaan* (1942), A.R.Kardar's *Dard* (1947) and B.R Chopra's *Chandini Chowk* (1954). Ravi Vasudevan situates the early socials of the 1940s as harbingers of modernity among the declining Muslim aristocracy in the form of characters in new professions like doctor and lawyer, and as a critique of the past decadent Muslim culture ("Film Genres", 36). As Vasudevan observes, most films in Muslim social genres served a didactic function by criticising the obsolete practices of aristocratic Muslim culture in colonial/ post-colonial India. The scene in *Khandaan* where the anglophile character of Iqbal Miyan addresses Zeenath and criticises the practice of *purdah* in Hindustan contrasting it to the freedom of women in 'Englishstan' (Britain), evokes the advent of colonial modernity amongst the educated Muslims (00:14:34-00:15:22). The film also warns against the vilified 'modern courtesans' who ensnare wealthy youngsters for their advantage. The character of actress-courtesan Noor Jehan is juxtaposed with the submissive Zeenath, who is divorced from the modern world. Zeenath argues that docility and coyness are appropriate qualities for respectable Muslim women against the material

pleasures Iqbal offers. Most female characters in early Muslim socials more or less resemble Zeenath, Najma in *Najma* (1943) or Naaz in *Elaan* (1947), who pines for the affection of her husband or lover. But women starting to come out of the zenana/purdah system in pursuit of education are emphasised in the films from the Muslim social genre. These films clearly reflect the efforts of the Muslim ulema and social reformers in educating Muslim women during the late 19th century in India. When the ulema tried to enlighten Muslim women with religious knowledge, the reformers focused on Westernised education and transformation in traditional practices (Metcalf 6,10). Reformers such as Sayyid Mumtaz Ali (1860-1935), Sheikh Abdullah (1874-1965) and Rokeya Sakhawat Hossain (1880-1932) played an important role in educating Muslim women.

Mehboob Khan's *Najma* portrays Muslim characters emerging as professionals like Dr Khan and slowly shedding their aristocratic past. Dr Khan's son, Yousuf Khan, is also pursuing his medical degree and the medical college and his clinic are shown as spaces of modernity. Yousuf considers education an essential quality to look for in his future wife, making Najma even more attractive to him. The educated Najma is set against his illiterate cousin, Razia, whom Yousuf is forced to marry. When Najma can come to terms with her marriage to Nawab Mukkaram and wisely mends his careless lifestyle, Razia is berated as illiterate by Yousuf and in turn, she becomes jealous, trying to destroy his peace. Najma can find out the discrepancy in the accounts prepared by Munshi and ask Mukkaram to recheck them. She is also good at chess, where she often outplays Mukkaram. Najma represents the ideal wife/begum of the Nawab, who is the epitome of loyalty

and chastity. Najma ignores and tolerates all the waywardness of Nawab and remains unwavering in her dedication to him. The refined character of Najma, devoid of jealousy or despair, is credited towards her education. But Razia is juxtaposed to the qualities of Najma, where she is characterised as jealous, wicked and always finding pleasure in taunting Yousuf and Najma.



Fig 2. “The Ideal Wife” shot from *Najma* (01:13:04)

Even though the film *Elaan* (1947) by Mehboob Khan criticises the wayward sons of rich nawabs who wasted away with their decadent lifestyle and their wives, like Naaz, who silently suffered under these men, it was ahead of its time in emphasising the importance of education for the Muslim community, especially for women. The uneducated and rich Sajjad’s downfall is juxtaposed with the educated Javed, who is poor but could rise to the mainstream of society by becoming a lawyer. After her husband’s death, the widowed Naaz comes out of her domesticity by converting her home into a school. The closing song in the movie serves as an appeal for education among the community by Naaz in a burqa. The people

gathering around her repeat the anthem, which emphasises the importance of education in the enlightenment of the Muslim community.

Dard (1947) is a musical romance in the Muslim social genre with a love triangle between Iqbal, Suriya and Hamida. The film shows the intricacies of a typical aristocratic Muslim family at the juncture of modernity, also underscoring the shift towards professions. The Nawab takes great interest in educating the orphans, and he not only contributes financial assistance to them but also adopts Iqbal, an orphan, seeing his intelligence. He grows up and becomes a doctor with utmost dedication to his profession. But he gets enmeshed between the love of Suraiyya, the Nawab's daughter, and Hamida, who is the daughter of the Nawab's friend. Suraiyya represents the new Muslim aristocracy, where women have started taking great interest in reading and writing. But Hamida represents the common class who are left behind in educating themselves because of poverty. The class differences between Suraiyya and Hamida are evident in the housing, lifestyles and even the attire. But at the same time, the film represents both characters as divorced from the outside world. Both are emotionally dependent upon Iqbal and pining for his approval, reflecting the common theme in Muslim socials and Bollywood romance in general.

Chandini Chowk (1954) by B.R Chopra is set in 1920s Delhi. The film begins by showing the Mughal historical monuments such as the Red Fort, Jama Masjid, Humayun's tomb and Qutub Minar, which are the residues of an elegant past. The conversations indicate the decline of the golden age of Delhi. Nawab Safdarjung talks about the change in times and the fall of the Nawabs. As he is a

descendant of the Mughal line, he is determined to marry off her daughter to an equal elite family only. Thus, when the vegetable vendor's son, Yousuf, approaches the Nawab to ask for Zarina's hand in marriage, he not only refuses but also degrades him because of his humble origin. For seeking vengeance, he hatches a plan to trick Safdarjung by presenting Akbar, a simpleton, as Nawab Akbarudhau from Awadh. Nawab Safdarjung, as a typical Nawab, spends lavishly on his guests despite his declining wealth. Soon, marriage is fixed between Zarina and Akbar, but when Nawab finds out that Akbar is the son of a gardener, he cancels the marriage. Zarina is a devout wife who has fixated on Akbar as her husband. Thus, she goes to live in Akbar's poor household despite Akbar having left her and reached Egypt. Zarina writes to Akbar only to receive the news that he is dead in a letter composed by Noorie, an Egyptian dancer who tries to seduce Akbar. When Yousuf proposes marriage to Zarina, his mistress Laila exposes his true intention to Nawab Sarfardjung. Akbar eventually returns from Egypt and reunites with Zarina. Zarina resembles many of Meena Kumari's later tragic characters, who are deprived of marital bliss or love, left for long periods of waiting and yearning for the lost lover, as in films like *Bahu Begum* (1967) and *Pakeezah* (1971).

The Period of Nehruvian Secularism (1960s-1980s)

The wounds of partition, the formation of a new government with a socialist inclination and the aggravating communal discontent were the defining political features of the period. When the first Prime Minister of independent India, Pandit Jawaharlal Nehru nurtured a truly secular outlook in both his political philosophies and practices to bring together the warring communities of the nation to form a

united India committed to equality and progress, his daughter India Gandhi with her controversial political moves including the Declaration of Emergency in 1975 and Operation Blue Star in 1984 left a bleak period in Indian history. The introduction of television was an innovative step in Indian mass communication, which helped the state in dispersing informative and cultural content to a wider audience, especially to reach out to the rural masses. The films of the period thrived towards projecting religious harmony and patriotism through melodrama and realism, while the television producers were focused on programmes which privileged the Hindu mythologies like Ramanand Sagar's *Ramayana* and *Mahabharata*, which promised them an unprecedented hike in the number of audiences. But for the first time, ordinary subaltern Muslims were also visible on screen as peaceful neighbours of Hindus and many directors tried to include a Good Muslim character to appease the audience (Dwyer, "Representing the Muslim", 83). The period also saw a hike in Muslim women's representations through the genres of Muslim courtesan films and Muslim socials, which explored the aesthetic and political dimensions of Islamicate culture in Bollywood.

Chithananda Das Gupta identifies the nation in popular cinema as a 'visual shorthand' of landscape, maps, dressing styles and language which are incorporated to inspire identification (14). The Indian films had to maintain their own cultural and national identity in opposition to both British and Hollywood productions. The rural populace found major representation in nationalist films like Mehboob Khan's *Mother India* (1957), which symbolised the rural farmer as the true inheritor of land. The film presented the Indian Hindu woman as the 'Mother India' who toils in the

soil to make the Nation. She was chaste and dedicated to the family and served as the prototype for the ideal Indian woman. Various films from the period reflected the Indian nationalist ethos and communal harmony influenced by Nehruvian Socialism. According to Shyam Benegal, the films strived to create a secular Muslim who was characterised as sane, sensible, good and devout for achieving political correctness and for the fear that negative portrayal of any minority community can attract the unwanted intrusion of the Censor Board (231). Prime examples of films with secular portrayals of Muslims include *Dhool Ka Phool* (1959), *Dharmaputra* (1961), *Amar Akbar Antony* (1977), *Kranti* (1981) and *Deshpremi* (1982). In *Dhool Ka Phool*, the son abandoned by the Hindu woman (Meena) is brought up by a Muslim man (Abdul), while in *Dharmaputra*, the son of a Muslim woman (Husn) is brought up by a Hindu couple (Dr Amrit Rai and Meena). *Kranti* tells the story of Hindu and Muslim freedom fighters joining together against British rule.

Amar Akbar Antony (1977) by Manmohan Desai can be described as a well-crafted commercial film on secularism in India during the period. Within the narrative, the characters of Amar, Akbar, and Antony symbolically represented the three major religious groups in India (Hindu, Muslim and Christian), reinforcing the idea of 'Bollywood brotherhood' which projected the unity of all religions despite the differences in belief systems, culture and practices. *Amar Akbar Antony* tells the story of three children of a Hindu couple who are separated by some tragic event and adopted by three people belonging to the Hindu, Muslim and Christian communities. They grow up oblivious of their true Hindu origin and live their

imbibed religious identity. At last, they realise they belong to the same mother and the three brothers are united. The plot is reminiscent of an often clichéd pattern of secular brotherhood that reappeared in multiple versions in Bollywood, and even got a diligently critical revision with magical literary fineness in Salman Rushdie's fictional world in *Midnight's Children*. While the film endorsed Nehruvian secularist ideology and the recuperation of Muslims into the fabric of the nation, the contrasting discourse in the film maintained the majoritarian idea of following strict demarcation between the religious identities beneath the superficial harmony: "*Amar Akbar Anthony* celebrated the nation-state under the sign of an enlightened *dharma*. As politics, it affirmed the liberal ethos of India; as allegory, it demonstrated the underlying origins of all Indians, one mother but different beliefs, a variation on Savarkar's original version of Hindutva" (Mishra 206).

The character of Salma, the lady love of Akbar in the film, is an extension of the stereotyped version of the docile Muslim woman in Muslim societies. But Salma's character can be the first-ever portrayal of a Muslim woman as a Doctor in a Hindi film. Salma doesn't wear a veil or Islamic dress at her workplace but wears a burqa when with her father, Ayyub Ali. The other female members of the family, including her, are controlled by him. She is in a relationship with Akbar, which her father disapproves of, and Akbar decides that he won't wed Salma without his approval. The song *Parda hein Parda* and Akbar's efforts to unveil Salma connote the Indian secularist ideas on modernity, which try to erase the 'obsolete segregating practices' such as veiling (Souliotis 168).

The Muslim historical genre still had its audience, and 1960 saw the release of the ever-remarkable Mughal epic and blockbuster: *Mughal-e-Azam* by K. Asif

with Dilip Kumar as Prince Salim (Jahangir), Prithviraj Kapoor as Emperor Akbar and Madhubala as Anarkali. The film was based on the legend of Anarkali, which inspired *Anarkali* (1953) by Nandlal Jawantlal. Dwyer opines that even though *Mughal-e-Azam*'s plot hinges upon the family history of Mughals and the rivalry between Akbar and Prince Salim over Anarkali, the portrayal of their close interactions with Hindus points towards the religious tolerance practised by Akbar. This is also indicative of the Congress party's and Nehru's idea of Indian history with Akbar as one of its heroes (*Filming the Gods* 116).

Mughal-e-Azam was one of the few blockbuster Bollywood movies to focus on a Muslim woman. The film celebrated the female defiance against the supreme male authority of Emperor Akbar through the character of Anarkali. Even if she addresses herself as a humble *kaneez* (slave), her honour is not subdued before Akbar's arrogance. In the song sequence '*Tere Mehfil Mein*', when Anarkali confronts another court maid, Bahar, in a *qawwali*, she is determined to win Prince Salim's love even if it means perishing in it.

I agree that love destroys your life

But isn't it enough that the world remembers you after death?

I will also see what happens by sacrificing the world for someone's love

(00:57:42-00:58:26, my trans)

The famous song sequence in *Mughal-e-Azam* titled *Pyar Kiya to Darna Kya* (When one has loved, what is there to fear?) portrays not only one of the most beautiful manifestations of Islamicate mise-en-scène in Bollywood with the *sheesh*

mahal (mirror hall) and decorated court stage, but also presents the open challenge of Anarkali against Mughal emperor Akbar. Anarkali welcomes her doom with dignity and stoic resignation and becomes the epitome of sacrificial love in Bollywood film history. Anarkali transcends to a higher moral position than the vilified Akbar when she is subjected to imprisonment and exile. This enables her to pardon the emperor himself, a power which rests only in God.

The character of Nur Jehan and her steadfast belief in justice reappear in the film *Nur Jehan* (1967) by Mohammed Sadiq. The progress of her character from the Iranian nobleman's daughter to Jehangir's lover, Sher Afghan's wife and widow, to become the Mughal Empress is shown as a bildungsroman. Her character, played by Meena Kumari, is shown as committed to truth and justice. She raises her voice against the misuse of power by Emperor Jehangir in the murder of her husband, Sher Afghan and asks for justice from the Sharia court. It was also one of two rare biopics based purely on a historical Muslim female figure. The other one being *Razia Sultan* (1983) by Kamal Amrohi, which was based on the only female sultan to rule Delhi - Razia Bint Iltutmish, who belonged to the Mamluk/Slave dynasty. She was a fascinating figure in Islamic history in India, as she defied the monopoly of male rule and participated in battles, causing her to be compared to Roxana or Cleopatra by the orientalist (Mukhopadhyay 103). The film portrayed the heroic ascent of Razia to the throne, her controversial affair with the Abyssinian slave, Jamal-Ud-Din Yakut and the battle which ensued after that. The film stands apart as the rarest rendition of a Muslim woman as a ruler and warrior on a battlefield amidst the plethora of Hindu-dominated nationalist legends (103).



Fig 3. “The Muslim Warrior Empress” shot from Razia Sultan (02:18:24)

The numerous films on Muslim courtesans or *Tawaifs* result in combining them into a separate genre. Ira Bhaskar and Richard Allen define the courtesan genre as films with a ‘depiction of the lifestyle and milieu of the singer-dancer courtesan who is a figure of ancient lineage in Indic culture’ (44). The Muslim courtesan films shift the cultural settings of this female singer-dancer to Islamicate milieus where she is juxtaposed with the chaste begums/wives of respectable families. The Muslim courtesans represented in Bollywood are often trained elite *Tawaifs* who are valued for their art rather than merely for their sexual attractiveness. They reside in elegant *kothas* with all luxuries, appearing richly dressed and bejewelled. It is a closed space, yet she is available for the gaze of unrelated men, and her art is on sale in these ‘*kothas*’.

The cultural significance of the Muslim courtesan is connected with Awadh (Lucknow) as the capital of Islamicate artistic efflorescence under the reign of

Nawab Wajid Ali Shah. Nawab Wajid Ali Shah's regime was extremely different on screen from the orientalist narratives, which described his decadent and sexually bizarre performative practices and his failure as a King. In films like Satyajit Ray's *Shatranj ke Khilari* (1977), Wajid Shah himself is shown as a man of art and music with a beautiful vision beyond the power politics of the crown and sceptre. He had patronised several literary, musical and performative art forms, including dance forms like *kathak* and *mujra* for which courtesans were valued. Wajid Ali Shah had attracted artists of all kinds to Lucknow, and *tawaifs* or elite courtesans were regarded with high esteem during the period. Many of Wajid Ali Shah's wives were former courtesans, thus earning him the notorious image of being sexually promiscuous (Jones 3). Veena Talwar Oldenburg, in her article *Lifestyle as Resistance: The Case of the Courtesans of Lucknow* conducts an interesting study on the *tawaifs* of Lucknow, which reveals their cultural dominance, political influence, and elite lifestyle during the heydays in Lucknow. She also points towards the financial and sexual independence enjoyed by *tawaifs* in contrast with ordinary prostitutes. At the same time, the Muslim *tawaifs* were also portrayed as accomplished women trained in music, dance, poetry (Persian and Urdu), Arabic grammar, and etiquette. Thus, according to Mukul Kesavan, the Muslim courtesan or *tawaif* taught the sons of elite nawabs proper appreciation of music, dance, conversation and *tehzeeb* (etiquette), and he identifies *mujra* as not an erotic performance but a 'choreographed ritual of salutation' (243).

Mujra was originally the dance form practised by the North Indian courtesans, especially in Lucknow. This dance form borrowed mostly from the

court-oriented dances in the Mughal period and the dance moments and stylistics associated with *Kathak*. *Mujra* is the term used to refer to the performance by a courtesan or *tawaif* in a court gathering called *mehfil*, where elite men gather to appreciate the dance. The dance form consists of delicate foot movements and *chakkars* (whirling/spinning), accompanied by *ghazals* and short poems like *thumri* or *dadra*. Thus, the *mujra* performance consisted of both dance, singing and reciting of poetry. Rugula Burckhardt Qureshi states that “*Mujra* is really a heightened musical frame for a dialogue between one woman and many men—but only the *tawaif* is privileged with the language of song” (321). The art of *Mujra* diminished after 1947, but the *tawaif* and *Mujra* were adopted and popularised through the medium of cinema. The character of *tawaif*, her art and her life became the staple of numerous Hindi films.

The courtesan and her dominance in the public and cultural sphere were a problem of moral significance for both British administrators and Indian nationalists as well. During the annexation of Oudh in 1856, the British troops robbed not only the Nawabs but all of their dependents, including the courtesans. Loss of property and respect in society gradually led even the elite *tawaifs* into prostitution.

Pran Neville, in his remarkable work on courtesans of India titled *Nautch Girls Of India: Dancers, Singers, Playmates*, observes the gradual erasure of courtesans from the cultural maps of India in which the English Christian missionaries, elite-educated Indians and Indian nationalists played an important role under the banner of anti-nautch campaigns and related publications:

It was no longer considered fashionable to visit *kothas* or salons of these artists. Any sort of liaison with a tawaif was socially condemned. The freedom movement was dominated by reform-minded Indians who preached social purity and temperance. Then there were the emerging Arya Samajis who condemned the Nauch girl's profession, saying it deserved no place in a civilised society (170).

The post-independent India required a moral cultural image to be projected through the Hindu values in contrast with the coloniser's. For this, the 'immoral' elements were to be removed from society. The Indian nationalist discourses projected the image of the pure, chaste Hindu woman in contrast to the sexually licentious courtesans and *tawaifs* who were to be excluded from mainstream Indian society. She was identified as the source of uncontained sexuality, which threatened the structure of the family unit (Tula 56).

In the post-independence period, many tawaifs and courtesans found the film industry as a platform for continuing their artistic careers even if they were not appreciated in many public spheres. They took over the roles of singers and actresses because then these careers were regarded as unsuitable for elite women (Arfeen, 1688). Ruth Vanita, in her work, traces the lineage of Jaddan Bai, mother of Nargis, actresses like Fatima Begum and singers like Gauhar Jan, Zohrabai Ambalewali and Amirbai Karnataki as connected to courtesan families (6).

Bollywood has immortalised the art, aesthetics and ethos of the courtesan's life through many classical films which imagine her as the tragic beauty and muse of all her admirers. Ruth Vanitha examines the gendered aspects in the portrayal of

courtesans in Hindi cinema, where she argues that the excessive emphasis given to films like *Pakeezah* and *Umrao Jan* results in relating most cinematic courtesans to Muslim identity (163). The argument points towards the long-term fixation of Bollywood towards Muslim courtesan characters. Kamal Amrohi's *Pakeezah* (1971), Muzaffar Ali's *Umrao Jaan* (1981) and *Tawaif* (1985) by B.R.Chopra were immensely popular films in Bollywood and were able to create a typecast for all Muslim courtesans. Not only the Lucknow-based Islamicate *mise-en-scenes* but also the conflicted relationship with nawabs, the societal stigmas and the unification of the *mujra* with the emotional predicaments of the courtesan were also endlessly reproduced in films.

The irony of the Muslim courtesans in films lay in the attribution of purity and loyalty to the character of the courtesan, who was considered morally defiled and unfit for conjugal relationships. The term *Pakeezah* itself referred to 'pure' or 'chaste', thereby connoting that virtue is not a bodily feature but an attribute of heart or mind. Whether it be *Pakeezah*, *Umrao Jaan* or *Sultana*, the courtesans were tragic heroines caught inside the intertwined worlds of desire and loss. The songs and *mujra* performed in these films were poetic articulations of the courtesan, addressed to her lover, who was helpless before society. The song sequence from *Pakeezah* '*Unhi logo ne hein cheena dupatta mera*' translates to 'These same people had taken away my veil', which is an accusation towards the people who had forced the courtesan to live a disgraceful life, and they are the very people who are defaming her. In opposition to Oldenburg's observation of the tawaif's position as agential with no obligation to commit to a single partner nor to take over the familial duties

of a homemaker, the tawaif characters in films were subdued and entrapped, who tried to preserve her 'chastity' for her beloved. She longed for marriage and an honourable life outside *kotha*, dreading even the utterance of the word 'tawaif'. Characters like Pakeezah submissively suffered instead of facing adversities like the historic tawaif (Khoyratty 145).

Pakeezah (1971), directed by Kamal Amrohi, re-imagines the world of Lucknow with its tawaifs, kotha, mujra and the stigma of her profession, which thwarts the dreams of marital relationships in most Muslim courtesan films. We see the character of Nargis inside a darkened *mehfil* (gathering) where she is compared to the moth dancing around the flame, connoting her tragic end. Nargis falls in love with Shahabudhin, a nawab who rescues her and takes her home as his wife. But when his father is unwilling to accept a tawaif as his daughter-in-law, Nargis runs away and takes refuge in a graveyard. Unable to face the outside world, she chooses to live there and gives birth to Shahabudhin's child. When Nargis's sister comes to know about her, it's too late, and Nargis has already passed away. She rescues the child, who grows up to be Sahibjaan, following in the same footsteps of her mother, becoming a tawaif. Similar to Nargis, rescued by Shahabudhin, Sahibjaan is rescued by Salim, a forest ranger, in a boatwreck. He had seen her on the train before and left a note praising her beautiful feet. But afraid of him knowing her identity as a tawaif, she pretends to have lost her memory. Later, Salim again saves her from a suicide attempt and takes her home. His grandfather, who once stood between Nargis and Shihabudhin, once again disagrees with the union of Sahibjaan and Salim. But Salim decides to marry her anyway. The stigma and shame of being a

tawaif engulfs Sahibjaan when Salim gets in a fight with a Nawab and all three are taken to the police station. The onlookers ask, “Who is she?” and the reply comes as “She is some courtesan” (02:04:05-02:04:16, my trans). She refutes the marriage and runs away, just like what Sahibjaan had once done. She compares the *kotha* to a pink graveyard where her corpse has returned to be cremated. Salim decides to marry another woman, and as an act of revenge, he invites Sahibjaan to perform a *mujra* at his wedding and sarcastically hints towards her identity as a tawaif. But when Sahibjaan dances over the broken glass and collapses, Nawabjaan reveals that Sahibjaan is Shihabudhin’s daughter. Shihabudhin’s father shoots her but accidentally hits and kills Shihabudhin. As a penance, he makes Salim agree to marry Sahibjaan. The film's climax defies the conventions of the courtesan narratives when Salim arrives with the bride’s palanquin at the *kotha* to wed Sahibjaan. The *nikahnama* uttered by the Maulavi silences all the chatters around the *kotha* as if it marks a rare historical moment. Nargis’ and Shihabudhin’s unfulfilled dream is realised through Salim and Sahibjaan, connoting the absurdities of tradition and prejudices.



Fig 4. “Dancing on the Broken Glass.” shot from *Pakeezah* (02:20:30)

Muzaffar Ali's *Umrao Jaan* (1981) was based on Mirza Hadi Ruswa (1857–1931)'s Urdu novel titled *Umrao Jaan Ada*. Ameeran was kidnapped and sold to a *kotha* where she became a talented mujra performer, singer and poet and came to be known as Umrao Jaan. She was highly appreciated and acclaimed for her art and beauty. But then she falls in love with Nawab Sultan, only to be forsaken by him for his family's honour. Then she elopes with the bandit Faiz Ali, but he is killed by the police. When the British invaded Lucknow in 1857, Umrao, with the other members of the *kotha*, had to leave the city. On the way, she identifies Faizabad, to which she belonged. She finds her family there, only to be rejected and defamed by her brother because she is a tawaif. She returns to Lucknow once the mutiny is over and finds the *kotha* completely looted.

Unlike *Pakeezah*, in *Umrao Jaan*, the focus is given to the experiences and realisations of Umrao Jaan, where, though suffering from rejection and humiliation, she negotiates her position in society. The emphasis is also placed on her talent in poetry and dance performances. Even though Umrao dreams of escaping from the *kotha*, at one point, she realises that she cannot escape her identity and accepts it. She is tutored in Urdu poetry, *kathak* and various musical forms similar to *thumri* and *dhrupad*. The matron of the *kotha*, Khanum Jaan, her daughter Bismillah, the elderly couple Husseini and Maulvi Saheb and the helper Gohar Mirza all together transform the *kotha* into a substitute family to Umrao, where she is educated and socialised into a life of privilege and subjugation at the same time. The *kotha* is both a place of refuge and a place of confinement for her (Bhaskar and Allen 189). Her relationship with Gauhar Mirza, Nawab Sultan and Faiz Ali teaches her love but

does not consummate into a conjugal relationship. Umrao is unapologetic about her relationships, and the film doesn't fetishise the heroine's purity (200). The isolation and alienation from society are glaringly visible in *Umrao Jaan* as in *Pakeezah*, especially in the scene when she realises that Ramdai, the girl who was kidnapped with her, was married to Nawab Sultan. Rather than a critique of courtesan traditions, the focus is placed upon the journey of Umrao Jaan, from an innocent girl to a woman who has learnt the ways of the world.

B. R Chopra's *Tawaif* (1985) is set in contemporary Bombay, decades away from the heydays of Nawabs and courtesans. The locale is a Muslim residential area where common people reside. It is in this space that Sultana, the *tawaif*, enters to disrupt the life of Dawood. The film is entirely a rescue narrative of Sultana, who was kidnapped and forced into the disrespectful profession by Rahim Shiekh. Dawood Mohammed Ali Khan Yusufzai, who works in a publishing house, rescues her from Rahim Sheikh by allowing her to stay at his place in the pretence of his wife. Even though he is in love with Qainat Mirza, a young writer, eventually Dawood falls for Sultana and marries her. Sultana's character is that of a victimised courtesan who has to hide her identity from society, and Dawood is portrayed as his angelic saviour. But compared to Sultana, the dignity and freedom enjoyed by Qainat, who comes from a respectable family, are highlighted. When Sultana lives a life of confinement and fear, Kaynat moves freely, even with Dawood and Sulaiman, his boss. Qainat has written a novel on Tawaif, which Dawood helps her publish. Thus, the film and Qainat's novel both frame Sultana as a subject for sympathising and rescuing. The film ends with a moralising remark on the

exploitation of women in a society where she is forced into selling her body. The film criticises the social evil of prostitution, which is regulated by men, but where the brunt is always placed upon the women.

The similarity in narratives and characters binds together the films of the Muslim courtesan genre, not to mention the settings, attire and ambience. The courtesan/tawaif is often a woman who enters the profession due to some unforeseen tragedy. Sahibjaan had to follow her mother's profession, but Sultana and Umrao Jaan were kidnapped and brought into it. All these characters go through similar predicaments of being stigmatised because of their identity as courtesans. The resemblance in symbolic representations of existential dilemmas and anguish of the courtesan can be seen in the scene of dancing over the broken glasses by Sahibjaan and Sultana (Koyratty 115).

The heydays of the Muslim courtesan genre were over by the 1990s, with later reappearances limited to dance performances unrelated to the plot, often referred to as 'item number' in Bollywood, which made no considerable contribution or difference to the narrative. The delicate moves of *mujra* derived from *kathak* were gradually replaced according to the changing music and dance culture. Now the *tawaif* was neither considered an accomplished artist nor a subject of enigmatic romance. She was no longer treated as the aesthetic reminiscence of a glorious Islamicate past and was completely torn off from her traditions and cultural associations. The characters of Muslim courtesans became a meagre part of Bollywood dance sequences, which over-sexualised and glamourised them to objectify the body and turn them into a mere spectacle.

Muslim socials that emerged during the early 1940s continued with their popularity during the 60s and 70s. These films reflected the social changes brought into the Muslim aristocratic households in a modernising world (Bhaskar and Allen 8,9). Movies belonging to this genre mainly focused on the declining power, decreasing financial stability, and the challenges experienced by them during the emergence of a recently established nation. Typical themes include the newer generation of feudal nawabs transitioning away from their aristocratic roles in pursuit of careers, along with women increasingly seeking education and moving out of the *purdah/zenana* system. The Islamicate architecture, language, music and costumes of Lucknow or Delhi are incorporated into the exclusive worlds of Muslim societies. Ravi Vasudevan describes Muslim socials as a framework of a traditional Muslim order defined by aristocratic habituation and cultural practice, including excess of drink, gambling and kite flying inside a popular world composed of mohalla, communal piety, mosques, madrassas and new professions as modern impulses (Vasudevan, "Film Genres", 36).

The Muslim female characters in Muslim societies relate to their identity through a particular negotiation where they begin to pursue modern education and enter modern spaces, but still regulate their conduct through a partial segregative distance by wearing *purdah*, which is different from the strict *zenana* system of the past, which restricted women inside the household and didn't allow communication with unrelated men. When discarding the old *zenana* system and entering new spaces outside the home, the Muslim women characters use *purdah* as a means of avoiding direct interaction with the male folk, yet facilitating their mobility.

Chaudvin Ka Chand (1960) by M.Sadiq can be considered a remarkable film in the Muslim social genre, which resembles *Mere Mehboob* (1963) in terms of the misrecognition caused by the purdah/veil. The film manoeuvres through the inner corridors of the Muslim aristocratic families in Lucknow, set during the heydays of the Nawabs. The film begins with the discreet following of a purdah-clad woman through Lucknow's Islamic architectural sites, which halts at a crowded *dargah*. The protagonist of the film, Jameela, accidentally lifts the niqab from her face. This is the face that later her husband Aslam compares to the '*Chaudvin ka Chaand*' or the full moon visible on the 14th day from the New moon. It is also a popular expression in Urdu poems for addressing or describing one's lover. Nawab Pyare Miyan accidentally catches a glimpse of Jameela's beautiful face at the instant of lifting the niqab and falls in love with her. He also transgresses the *zenana* or the women's quarters, where the male entrance is restricted. He peeps into the quarters where he sees Jameela and gets a torn piece of her dupatta, with which he entrusts a maid to find out her identity. When his mother brings up the alliance with Jameela to him, unaware of her identity, he not only refuses the proposal but also arranges his close friend Aslam's marriage with her. After many hassles caused by many veiled women, Nawab recognises Jameela at Aslam's house, taking her for Aslam's wife's friend. Aslam realises that Nawab has been in love with Jameela only after this incident, which shatters him. He tries to destroy his reputation by visiting courtesans, whereby Jameela can divorce her and Nawab can marry her. But when Nawab understands that Jameela is his dearest friend's wife, out of guilt, he commits suicide. The film is not a critique of purdah, but it delves into the complications caused by misrecognitions leading to fatal consequences. But at the same time, it

aesthetically constructs the traditions, practices and experiences of the veiled Muslim women. Triangular love stories of misrecognition were also a familiar plot in cinematic narratives, cutting across regions and languages. More than a critique of the purdah system, films like *Chaudhuvi ka Chand* utilised the contexts of the veil to suit the typical aesthetics of mistaken identities in Bollywood romance. For example, the misrecognition caused by the veil can also be seen in non-Islamic contexts and even in recent films like *Lapata Ladies* (2023), where two Hindu brides mistakenly follow the wrong groom because of the veil.

The defining features of a begum, like coyness, chastity and loyalty towards the husband, are present in Jameela. When her brothers come to attack Aslam, she protects him, stating that: “Mother, you have taught me from childhood that at the husband’s feet lies the heaven (of a wife). Today, when I want to claim that same heaven for me, how can you stop me?” (02:07:27-34 my trans). Jameela is treated like the jewel in Aslam’s parable, where the two friends decide who it belongs to. But with her agency, she chooses to remain loyal to Aslam, who is her husband by Islamic law, even if he has been treating her wrongly. The inevitable persona of the courtesan is also highlighted through Tameezan, to whom Aslam goes to tarnish his self-image. The heartbroken nawab and the *mujra* complete the perfect blend of the Muslim society.

Bahu Begum (1967) by the same director is a reiteration of *Chaudvin ka Chand* in a different scenario. The character of Zeenat Jahan Begum belongs to a respectable family. Zeenath meets her lover Yusuf every Thursday at the *durgah*. The *durgah* emerges as the location where their spiritual love finds expression, while

the purdah functions as the barrier between them. When Zeenath goes to jewellery, Nawab Sikandar Mirza happens to see her and falls in love. He fixes his marriage with Zeenath through her father, and she agrees, thinking that her marriage is fixed with Yousuf. Zeenath realises this grave misunderstanding only during her wedding ceremony when her friend informs her of this. She escapes from there in the bridal attire and falls unconscious when she doesn't find Yousuf at the *dargah*. Zeenath is saved by a courtesan, and she takes her to her *kotha*. Nawab Sikandar Mirza is devastated by finding the bride's caravan empty, but doesn't disclose this to save his reputation and instead finds a woman from the same *kotha* to act as his bride, who happens to be Zeenath herself. When Yousuf returns from his journey, he realises his uncle has cheated him, and he meets Zeenath at Nawab's *haveli* to take her back. Overhearing their conversations, Nawab sacrifices himself for Zeenath by setting fire to the *haveli* with himself.

Bahu Begum is a classic from the Muslim social genre with Lucknow, Nawab, *haveli*, *kotha* and begum aligning together to form its essential ingredients. Meena Kumari, known as the 'tragic queen' in Bollywood, has played several similar roles where fate turns cruelly against her. Like Pakeezah, Zeenath also has a pure heart, which is torn between two men, one representing her love and the other duty. Despite what she has done to them, she is helpless before the affection and honour offered to her by Nawab and his sister. She performs the duty of a *bahu begum* (daughter-in-law) with the utmost dedication, so that she becomes attached to the *haveli* and its people. Both *haveli* and the begum function as the centrality of honour and prestige to the Muslim aristocracy, but Zeenath becomes the cause of the

destruction of both. She not only taints the position of Bahu Begum but also shatters the honour of the *haveli*. Bhaskar and Allan observe that by the 1960s, the social order represented by the nawabs was fast disappearing, and the destruction of the *haveli* by fire at the end of *Bahu Begum* is associated with the demise of this specific social order (76).

The character of Husna in H.S. Rawail's *Mere Mehboob* (1963) portrays Muslim women in modern spaces like a university. Husna is shown as a student at Aligarh University who observes purdah in public, even though not regularly. Aligarh University itself assumes great significance in the history of Muslim women's education in India. The Aligarh Movement (1875), the establishment of the Women's College of Aligarh University (1929) and various efforts of reformers like Sheikh Abdullah and Waheed Jahan Begum facilitated the entry of Muslim women into colleges and universities. Still, the film romanticises Husna's physical appearance rather than her intellectual skills, downplaying the importance of Muslim women's education. The film throws light on the double standards of society, which segregates between Husna, who is Nawab's sister and Najma, who is a courtesan. Even though Najma is morally chaste, she is degraded due to the stigma attached to her occupation. But the film takes an empathetic position towards women who become courtesans due to unfavourable circumstances, such as in H.S. Rawail's other film *Mehboob Ki Mehendi* (1971).



Fig 5. “The Veiled Romance” shot from *Mere Mehboob* (00:09:24)

The song ‘*Mere mehboob tujhe mere mohabat ki kasam*’ (My love, I swear upon my love, my trans) keenly associates the identity of Muslim women with the purdah/veil. The song portrays the veil as a barrier to the intermingling of sexes in modern spaces. But the song is also a remnant of the long-lasting influence of Urdu poetic imageries, which positions the veil as a symbol of unravelling of love, a romantic symbolism that the Hindi film music industry has cherished and preserved through multiple instances and which is continued even today (Gopal and Moorti 23). The veil also marks Muslim women apart from the women of other communities, subtly challenging the process of Westernisation among Muslims. The purdah remained inevitable for Muslim women’s education at Aligarh University as it was mandated to avoid criticism from the orthodoxy and to safeguard the elite position of the men (Bano 611). However, there were several efforts from within the

community itself against veiling, hijab and the purdah system. Progressive activists and writers like Rokeya Sakhawat Hossain(1880-1932) and Ismat Chughtai (1915-1991) vehemently criticised the extreme observance of purdah (Metcalf 12; Bano 612).

Mere Huzoor (1968) by Vinod Kumar serves the didactic function of criticising the excesses among affluent Nawabs, their association with courtesans and the resultant predicaments of begums. Salthanat resembles the character of Zeenath in *Bahu Begum*, where she is entrapped in a complicated love triangle. Both Nawab Salim and Akhtar Hussain are in love with her. As Salim is a wayward Nawab who indulges in drinking, visiting *kothas* and following a Westernised lifestyle in opposition to Islamic tenets, Salthanath refuses his proposal and marries Akthar. But gradually, Akthar also falls into the trap of a courtesan named Firdous. Akthar realises his deception by Firdous only after he divorces Saltanat. Nawab Salim, who transforms into a gentleman, marries Salthanat for the sake of her son Munna. In an attempt to reunite Salthanat and Akthar, Salim meets with an accident and dies. Like other Muslim socials, the film creates a binary between the innocent begum and the promiscuous courtesan. Salthanat is not attracted to Nawab's wealth but to Akthar's manners. She is secluded and not in the company of unrelated men. While Firdous, through her fake affection and affliction, ensnares Akthar, extracts money from him and moves to another man immediately when she sees that Akthar can't afford anything to spend on her. Gregory D Booth's paper analyses the binary created between the Begums and courtesans as 'culturally constructed polar identities' where the begums belong to the stock character of *devis* who are sexually

chaste, interact with familial men only and are shocked with immoral behaviours as opposed to the courtesan/tawaif who interacts with unrelated men, are assertive and encourage men for smoking or drinking (8). The division of women based on the nature of their sexuality, as virgin/whore is a common binary found in every culture and literature. Jonathan Gottschall and others observe that the stereotype of ‘virgin’ includes women who express their sexuality inside the confines of conjugal relationships or monogamy, while the ‘whore’ consists of women who are immoral or promiscuous (Gottschall et al. 1-2). This binary is often used in literature and films to emphasise the contrast in the sexual characteristics of the females involved, usually to idealise the moral woman and stigmatise the immoral ones, as done in *Mere Huzoor*.

Most Muslim socials from the period shared common themes, mise-en-scenes and stereotyped characterisation, but it had opened the windows to the world of Islamicate aesthetics, especially emerging from the locales of Delhi and Lucknow, and showcasing the architecture, etiquette (*tehzeeb*) and poetical Urdu language and songs inspired by the tradition of *gazals* and *qawwali*. When the characters of poor *shayar* (poet) and the affluent nawabs were pitted against each other, the characters of chaste begums and promiscuous tawaifs were similarly positioned in opposition. The new generation of previously affluent nawabs were witnessing the end of an era, as in *Mirza Ghalib* and were found negotiating with the new order of things, dedicating themselves to education and professions. The cultural and political changes of the period were reflected in the portrayal of Muslim women characters, where the experiences of tawaifs, begums and women who

entered the new academic spaces were brought into the focal point. The disintegration of the traditional zenana system based on gender segregation and seclusion was visible in most films where the women were seen mediating their movements, social interactions and gender roles through purdah/burqa/niqab.

The Emergence of the New Wave Socials (1970s-1990s)

In 1968, filmmakers Mrinal Sen and Arun Kaul put forward a manifesto for a New Indian Cinema movement, which would be a state-sponsored alternative to commercial cinema (Ganti 214). The commercial Bollywood cinema was an unrealistic representation of life, which followed a romanticised and fictitious vision of the world for entertainment purposes. The abundance of dance and song sequences drew the audience further away from the everyday social realities of India. When Satyajit Ray's films were acknowledged for their realistic strains and genius at the global level, the New Cinema movement (also known as art cinema or parallel movie) gained momentum in India. These films, unlike the commercial cinema, discussed important political questions such as poverty, sexuality, exploitation, class and caste issues. The new wave films were also keen on bringing out the issues of nation, identity, community and gender. The Film Finance Corporation was established in 1960 on the recommendation of the S.K. Patil Film Enquiry Committee Report of 1951. It aimed at funding independent directors to uplift the quality of Indian cinema. By 1968, the FFC funded about fifty films (Bhaskar, "The New Indian Wave", 20). Among the New Wave films, the Muslim New Wave focused on the specific experiences of Muslims in India. *Dastak* (1971), *Garm Hawa* (1973) *Shatranj Ke Khilari* (1977), *Junoona* (1978), *Nikah*

(1982), *Bazaar* (1982), *Anjuman* (1986), *Saleem Langade Par Mat Ro* (1989) and the Muslim Women Trilogy by Shyam Benegal which include *Mammo* (1994), *Sardari Begum* (1996) and *Zubeidaa* (2001) were some of the important New Wave Muslim socials. The New-wave Muslim socials detach from the early Muslim socials by the focus placed on ordinary Muslims who were traumatised and marginalised after the partition, instead of brooding over the declining aristocracy. They moved away from the nostalgic undertones of the past grandeur of the Islamic empires and the stereotypes of tragic nawabs, tawaifs and melodramatic romances set in *havelis* and *kothas*. The shift in subject matter in the depiction of Muslim social life, focus on the middle and working class, realistic mise-en-scène and centrality of history were observed markers of New Wave Muslim Socials (Bhaskar and Allen 92,93).

Shatranj Ke Khilari: The Chess Players (1977) by Satyajit Ray and *Junoon* (1978) by Shyam Benegal were remarkable films which dealt with the events of colonised India, where the first strands of resistance and rebellion were springing up from the Muslim rulers and aristocrats against the British occupation. Both films displayed stark contrast with the classic Muslim Socials involving romance and nostalgia. *Shatranj Ke Khilari* eternalised the persona of Mirza Wajid Ali Shah (1822-1887), the last King of Awadh and the tragic loss of his kingdom to the British in 1856. Wajid Ali Shah is portrayed as a poetically oriented ruler who cared less about his throne than his passion for art, literature and music. The film portrays the close relationship shared between the King and his subjects in a way unimaginable to the British where he orders his people to restrain from violence or

resistance when the troops come to take over Awadh (01:32:06-33:12). A parallel narrative shows two nawabs indulged in a game of chess, unaware of losing their wives and the kingdom being taken over by the British. *Junoon* was an adaptation of Ruskin Bond's novella *A Flight of Pigeons*, based on the Indian Rebellion of 1857. The film shows aristocratic Muslims like Sarfaraz and Javed Khan actively organising and fighting against the British and realising the impending failure which will mark the end of Muslim nobility. The character of Mother of Miriam, played by Ishmat Chughtai, explores the plural identities of Muslim women. She belongs to a royal family of nawabs but has married an Englishman. Thus, she maintains multiple identities and cultures of Muslim, Christian, English and Indian.

Garam Hawa (1973) by M.S.Sathyu was one of the early films funded by FFC, and it was based on a short story by Ismat Chughtai. Bhaskar and Allen observe how the film set the tone for the New Wave Muslim socials by drastically differing from the location of Delhi and Lucknow and stock images of Mughal architecture in the opening scenes of the film. The film begins with images of the historical moment of India's independence, followed by the gruesome tragedy of partition, migration, communal riots and Gandhi's assassination (283,284). The film portrays the existential dilemma and alienation of Salim Mirza, a shoe trader who is witnessing the loss of his family members, business, property, citizenship and nation altogether during the Partition. Halim Mirza, Salim Mirza's elder brother, who is a prominent leader of the All India Muslim League, opposed leaving India in public but had secretly arranged his migration to Pakistan as he believed that no Muslims would have any rights, employment or future in India. As it's impossible to stay back

in India in this grave situation, Salim Mirza also unwillingly decides to migrate to Pakistan, but when he sees people protesting against unemployment and discrimination, Salim decides to stay back and join the protest with his younger son Sikandar, merging into the new social reality of India. Salim Mirza represents the millions of Muslims in India who were economically shattered during the Partition. The Muslim identity even puts him under the shadow of suspicion for espionage, as he had sent the plan of their haveli to his brother in Karachi.

The havoc of partition is reflected significantly through the female characters of Salim Mirza's mother, Badar Begum, his wife Jameela and his daughter Amina, who experience a parallel sense of loss amidst fractured relationships. Badar Begum is an aged woman nearing her last days, clinging to the feeble memories of her youth when she was married and brought into the haveli, which was now lost to them. Her sense of existence is deeply attached to the haveli, and she rejects the reality of partition. She is brought back to the haveli at her last moments before death, where she recollects all her memories. The scene was later inserted into the film *Mammo* (1994), which also tells the story of partition. Opposed to Salim Mirza, Jameela sees through the reality of the turbulent period, taking its toll both inside and outside their household. She tries to persuade her husband to migrate to Pakistan like other Muslims, as she realises that the family is being broken apart and the future of their children is also bleak. Sikandar was stranded without employment, and Amina without a suitor.

Amina represents the numerous women whose prospects of marriage were left in uncertainty with the mass migration. Amina was engaged to Halim Mirza's

son, Kazim Mirza, and she was involved in a romantic relationship with him. Kasim is forced to accompany his father to Pakistan, and even when he comes back to India to marry Amina, he is arrested and deported by the Indian government as he doesn't have enough documents to stay in India. Amina is traumatised by this and secludes herself in the house, left without any hope of marrying Kazim. After a while, her father's sister, Akhtar Begum's son Shamzad, tries to court her and become engaged in a serious relationship. Amina is heartbroken again when Shamsad also leaves for Pakistan, like Kazim, promising to return. She learns that he is getting married to another woman in Pakistan when her aunt visits them. She wears her bridal dress and imagines Shamsad as her groom standing beside her and slits her wrist to commit suicide.

Amina undergoes forms of psychological trauma in contrast to the severe physical violence which was inflicted during Partition on all women, regardless of their communities. Women were murdered, abducted, raped and forcefully married and repatriated. The female characters in the film, including Amina, are thrown out of their homes and dreams. When Salim Mirza and Sikandar find the strength to stay back and merge with the bleak reality, Badar Begum and Amina find the trial too heavy on them.

Dastak (1970) by Rajinder Singh Bedi was an attempt to portray the stigmatisation attached to the names of tawaifs/dancers/singers, which would never disappear. The film focuses on the intersection between communal and gender issues faced by a Muslim couple moving to a city like Mumbai. The film was based on Bedi's radio play *Naql-e-Makaani* (Moving to a New House, my trans.). When

Salma and Hamid move to an apartment previously occupied by a courtesan named Shamshad Begum, the couple has to face constant knocks on the door and voyeuristic gaze from the other men in the building. The stigma was attached to the courtesans as sex workers by the British, Indian nationalists and reformers alike, which continued into independent India. The criminalisation and destitution gradually pushed the courtesans/tawaifs to prostitution (Vanita 6). This stigma is carried forward to Salma, who comes to occupy the same space where the courtesan once resided. She is subjected to the same voyeuristic male gaze which supposedly Shamshad Begum would also have undergone. Thus, the film brings together the experiences of two women from different periods into a common plane. The alienation, claustrophobia and sexual anguish experienced by Salma are vividly portrayed in the film. When she tries to relieve her frustration through music, Hamid forbids it for fear of society associating her with the 'nauch girls' or prostitutes who rented the apartment earlier. The taboo associated with the *tawaifs*, *Baijis* or singers and the neglect they faced in the nationalist cultural space of India where only classical forms of music and dance associated with the high-caste Hindu were preserved and considered respectable is visible in the documentary *The Other Song* by Saba Dewan and Rahul Roy, the activists who were at forefront in the anti-CAA protest at Delhi (Dewan and Roy, "Documentaries by Rahul Roy and Saba Dewan"). The contents of the documentary later led to the work *Tawaifnama*, where the fluid nature of the religious identity of tawaifs is surprising:

The family, however, has a unique identity that sets it apart from Muslim Kanchan tawaifs elsewhere. While the daughters in Chanda's family have

always identified as Muslims, the sons have customarily been brought up to be Hindus. When I once asked Chanda the reason for this, she mumbled about a mannat or promise that one of her ancestors had made to 'Ganga-ji' in exchange for returning alive her son, who had been swept away by a strong current while bathing in the river. Desperate with grief, she had prayed to the Ganga for his life to be spared and promised that, in return, all the sons in the family would henceforth be dedicated to the river and would follow the Hindu faith. (Dewan)

Bazaar (1982) by Sargar Sarhadi centres around the impoverished Muslim community in Hyderabad, where economic depravity forces them to sell their daughters to potential 'grooms' who may exploit them or force them into prostitution. It follows the life of Najma, who is Akhtar Hussain's partner. She longs for their marriage, but he doesn't give in because of his financial instability. As a way out, Najma and Akhtar agree to arrange a bride for Shakir Khan, a businessman in his fifties, for which they would receive benefits. They manage to fix his marriage with Shabnam, an acquaintance of Najma in Hyderabad who is very young and attractive. The marriage was agreed upon as a means to solve the financial crisis faced by Shabnam's family, as they would receive money from Shakir bhai. Only later, Najma realises that Shabnam and her childhood friend Sarju shared mutual affection and that he intended to marry her. Shabnam commits suicide on the wedding night, and the guilt-stricken Najma leaves Hyderabad, realising her grave mistake. The film explores the issues of poverty, prostitution and exploitation. The deprived families are unable to educate, look after or marry off their daughters and

men like Akhtar and Shakir bhai exploit these circumstances by ‘buying’ the bride. The film shows the deplorable situation of the lower-class Muslim community, where the mothers from respectable families are waiting outside Shakir Bhai’s place to ‘sell’ their daughters like in an auction or market, where the voice-over narrates:

The auction house is well-decked. The bidding has begun for the tired, gloomy, young bodies. Decent, veiled women are waiting with their daughters and sisters for their turn. Waiting for some customer, some buyer. Age is not an issue. Honour, decency, and dignity are being auctioned in this bazaar. (58:16-53, my trans.)

Hyderabad was once ruled by Nizams, the descendants of the Mughal governor Asif Jah I (1671-1748). The Muslim society in Hyderabad flourished under the last Nizam Mir Osman Ali Khan (1886 – 1967), who was a great patron of art, literature and education (Akbar S.Ahmed 59,65). Post-independence, the Muslims in Hyderabad were grappling with poverty and backwardness due to large-scale migration, communal segregation and unemployment. The people who were left behind after the partition were detached from modern India (70). The Bride trafficking in Hyderabad is linked to the Arab migration, where women from poor families were married to outsiders who made fortunes in the Middle East. *Bazaar* exposes the malpractices adopted in a society when faced with a lack of education and poverty (75). Najma’s ancestry belongs to the class of Nawabs who were deprived of their titles, property or pension after the British invasion and Indian independence. Her mother complains that the male members of the family are unwilling to take up other employment, as it would affect the status quo of ‘nawabs’.

Ironically, Najma is asked to discreetly work as a prostitute to earn for the family, which she outrightly refuses and elopes with her lover, Akhtar, to Mumbai for a new life. There, too, they struggle with unemployment, and they have to live at the mercy of Shakir Bhai. Even if Najma is involved in a complicated relationship with Akhtar and Salim, she can stand by her choice of fleeing from her family. But Shabnam, who is a minor, is offered no choice as she is ‘sold’ for 5000 rupees to Shakir bhai for marrying off her younger sisters. Najma understands how she is also entrapped in the web of ‘bride trafficking’ when she witnesses the queue of deprived women standing with their daughters. She is also intensely guilt-ridden when Salim accuses her of being both a perpetrator and a victim of the scheme of men who sell and buy women like commodities. Ultimately, she leaves Akhtar to figure out her life on her own, realising that she has been living a disrespectful life in the name of love and false hope.



Fig 6. “The Corpse of the Bride”, a shot from *Bazaar* (01:59:19)

Anjuman (1986) by Muzaffar Ali closely aligns with *Bazaar* in bringing out the issues of exploitation of women in the margins of society. *Anjuman* deals with the labour exploitation of the chikankari embroidery workers in Lucknow, with Shabana Azmi in the central role. The character of Anjuman breaks the usual stereotypes of submissive Muslim women in classic Muslim societies. When the Moulana asks her consent for Nikah with Banke Nawab, she refuses and states that she is asserting the right given to her as a Muslim woman (01:31:24-01:33:07). She brings together other chikankari workers and organises protests under All India Lucknow Chikan Workers Association with the support of All India Women's Association. Even after getting injured in the conflict perpetrated by Lala Naubat Lal and Banke Nawab against Anjuman's union, it only further strengthens the movement, where more and more women join the protest. The film stands apart for the reason that the political role of a Muslim woman is seldom portrayed in Hindi cinema as a whole. The film also shows the secular spirit of the period in the coming together of women from all communities for a common cause.

Fareed Kazmi studies the Muslim women characters in courtesan films, socials and new-wave socials as distinctly portraying their socio-cultural environment. According to Kazmi, the courtesans in Muslim courtesan films and Muslim socials like *Pakeezah*, *Umrao Jaan*, *Tawaif* and *Mere Mehboob* are equivalent to the persona of 'hetaira' proposed by Simon de Bievoor. The "hetaira" is a woman who is sexually attractive and has an independent personality, where she is not owned by anyone, and she uses her sexuality to satisfy the male fantasy (237). He argues that this particular portrayal of independent women in exquisite and

ornate bungalows who never ‘work’ is a stereotyped fantasy of the majoritarian public. These fetishised romances only gloss over the real crisis of marginalised Muslim women. In contrast, new-wave socials like *Anjuman* and *Bazaar* try to depict the real problems of women in the community(241).

Saleem Langade Par Mat Ro (1989) by Saeed Akhtar Mirza was one of the first films among both commercial and New Wave genres to explore the complex relationship of the subaltern Muslim minority in a metropolitan space like Mumbai. Aravind Unni, in his paper *Reading the “Muslim Space” in Bombay (Mumbai) Through Cinema*, studies how New wave films like *Dastak*, *Saleem Langade Par Mat Ro* and *Naseem* have been crucial in filming the glaring realities of everyday life of the marginalised Muslims in the ghettoised space of Mumbai. He argues that the locations which comprise the ‘Muslim spaces’ in Mumbai have always been witness to the continued violence in its history. The spate of violence includes intra-religious conflicts, inter-religious riots and gang wars growing out of the absence of State interference and interest (189,196). The marginality of the Muslim space dominated by poverty, population, illegality and violence has only found its reflection in the New Wave films, while the commercial films successfully glossed over the ground realities of Mumbai and the Muslims. The film unfolds as a bildungsroman centred around Salim Pasha, who tries to break free and evolve from his identity as a physically handicapped goon of the Mumbai underworld. He constantly questions the injustice and marginalisation of his community and his place in this world. The narrative is set during the period of mobilisation of right-wing extremism in the 1980s. After seeing the documentary on the Bhiwandi Riots

of 1984, he decides to give up violence and finds a job as a mechanic to start his life afresh. But as he refuses to instigate a riot, he is killed on the day of his sister's engagement. Salim represents the lives of numerous Muslim youngsters who are unable to come out of illiteracy, poverty and violence, which drags them further downward in the ghettos like Mumbai. The Muslim women characters like Salim's mother, his sister Anees and his lover Mumtaz are also marginalised in the metropolitan space where they are denied basic education or decent jobs and have to live in the fear of riots or violence which may erupt at any moment. Mumtaz is an ambiguous character whose profession sways between that of a dancer and a prostitute. Even if Salim disapproves of it, Mumtaz has to stick to her job for her livelihood. She represents the numerous women who are involved in prostitution in the red-light area of a metropolis like Mumbai. When Salim proposes to her, she is unsure if she can form a family with him because the last time they met, Salim remarked on her profession as shameful. Even though Salim disapproves of her job, Mumtaz defends her profession because it helps her survive.

Nikah (1982) was released in the same year and directed by B.R. Chopra. The film discussed the grave issue of triple talaq, which to date is considered a controversial topic in Islamic politics and the women's rights scenario in India. The film's introduction, beginning with the voiceover "*Mein aurat hum*" (I am a woman, my trans), narrates the injustice done to women from the ancient period, irrespective of culture or religion, where she is treated as an object to be rejected or redeemed. Using the reference to figures like Eve, Sita, and Panchali and the diverse role of women from mother and sister to that of courtesan and slave, the voice-over

contempts the hypocrisy of the world which worships and despises her at the same time (00:01:28- 04:09). The film situates the central character of Nilofar as an educated woman with Masters in Art from Osmania University. She is an Urdu writer with the pen name Shabnam Rahmani. She gets married to her cousin Wasim, who is a Nawab and owns a plywood company. Even after the marriage, he stays entangled in his work and is not able to give enough attention and time to Nilofar, who gets lonely and sick of waiting in his huge mansion. During their first wedding anniversary party, Wasim fails to turn up, and in the ensuing quarrel, Wasim gives triple talaq to Nilofer, which is irrevocable according to the Islamic Sharia law. Nilofer eventually moves on and tries to earn an income by writing for a magazine. To her surprise, she realises that the magazine's editor is none other than Haider, who had a romantic interest in her during college. Haider, who still loved Nilofer, was happy to marry her. But as Wasim was guilty of giving her talaq, he wants to remarry her. As per *Sharia*, a woman who has been divorced can only be remarried by the same man after she has married another man and got divorced by him. This is known as *Nikah-Halala* or *Tahleel* Marriage in Islam. Due to some misunderstandings, Haider comes to believe that Nilofar is still in love with Wasim and has married him to fulfil this condition for *Nikah Halala*. Thus, Haider brings Wasim to their home and announces that he is ready to give up Nilofar for Wasim. This surprises and infuriates Nilofer, who bursts upon both the men, cursing the fate of women who are treated like property of men, who are asked consent for marriage but not for divorce. Filled with remorse, Wasim reunites Haider and Nilofer and leaves.

The film criticises the misuse of marital laws like triple talaq and *Tahleel* marriage in Islam, which were codified for the proper conduct of conjugal relationships and regulating the related issues arising from them. Even though Triple talaq is discouraged in Islam and should only be implemented cautiously with several conditions, the film narratives portray it as a common practice in Islam. As Maulavi in the film mentions, the conditions of Nikah Halala also remind the men that casual usage of triple talaq is irrevocable and has heavy consequences. The character of Nilofar and Wasim, despite being well-educated and belonging to an elite family, has to undergo the predicaments of triple talaq. Wasim neither resorts to physical violence nor has any grave reason for divorce, but the fit of anger leads him to divorce her. As the three talaqs are uttered together, it becomes irrevocable. Nilofar's character functions in a modern space, and she can search for employment as she is educated, which shows her independence. Still, at one point, after the molestation attempt from Salim, the editor of another magazine, she loses her confidence and realises her need for a man who can offer her security. The stigma associated with a divorced woman is visible in the scene where Nilofar attends the interview for a teacher in a girls' school. The interview board, which includes Salim, despises her divorcee status, hinting that it can be a negative influence on the moral standards of the female students. Nilofar is a victim of the misuse of Islamic laws, but she is vocal about the injustice done to women. She doesn't criticise the religion but the men exploiting it for their own purposes. And in the climax scene, she retreats to the Holy Quran for guidance.

Even though the film replicates the stock narrative of classical Muslim socials based on love triangles and misunderstandings like *Chudhvin ka Chand*, the conventions of New Wave Muslim socials are prominent mainly through the absence of an exclusive Islamic milieu. The film is set in the city spaces of Hyderabad, Mumbai and Agra. The film comments on the exploitation of women with the aid of laws which were originally conceived to protect their rights. The film was released during the period of the Shah Bano controversy, gaining public attention, which turned the whole Indian media debate towards scrutinising misogyny in Islam. The petition was filed in 1978 by Shah Bano for maintenance after divorce, which became a benchmark legal case in Indian history, focusing on Muslim women's rights. Likewise, the film initiates a discussion on Muslim women's rights regarding marriage and divorce. But the flawed understanding of the legality of *Triple Talaq* and *Nikah Halala*, as understood by Wasim, also points towards the general ignorance of people regarding Islamic laws, which has often resulted in a biased outlook on Islam itself as an extremely misogynistic religion, as in the case of Shahbano. And the abuses suffered by women in marriages and domestic spaces were not an exclusive problem inside Muslim households but common among the Hindu community also, as we see in films like *Amar Prem* (1972), *Sharda* (1981) and *Biwi Ho To Aisi* (1988).

Through examining the genealogy of representation of Muslim women in Hindi films from roughly the 1930s to 1980s, we can see characters from fictionalised fairies, Queens, *begums* and *tawaifs* to ordinary workers, students and

professionals. The influence of oriental/Arabian night fantasy tales and costume dramas from Parsee theatre had been visible in the characterisation of Muslim women as fairies and supernatural beings with magical powers. Rather than resembling Indian Muslims, the characters were more closely aligned with Persian/Arabian culture. The 1940s saw the rise of Muslim Historicals with characters and themes from Mughal legends and the rise of early Muslim socials, which emphasised the beginning of the decay of the privileged Muslim aristocracy. The female characters were popular legendary figures like Noor Jahan and Mumtaz Mahal, who had left their imprints in the historical chronicles, often becoming the converging point of the imperial laws and familial bonds. The Socials emphasised the gradual disappearance of the zenana system, which limited the movement of women to the household spaces, and the practice of wearing purdah/burqa, which enabled their free movement. The films also underscored the role of education in uplifting the Muslim community in the changing social and political scenario. The period from the 1960s to the 1980s in Bollywood generally preserved the ethos of Nehruvian secularism, highlighting nationalism and communal harmony through films like *Mother India* and *Amar Akbar Antony*. The period saw the celebration of Muslim courtesan films, which configured a specialised Islamic world derived from the cultural space of Delhi and Lucknow. The courtesans/tawaifs were often portrayed as victims of patriarchy and the social system, which exploited the naive women entrapped in the kothas. It also showcased the art and contribution of the courtesan tradition to both Islamicate cultures and Bollywood aesthetics. The socials during the period focused on the disappearing feudal nawabi culture and the

emergence of modern spaces like universities and hospitals, which situated the Muslim women as students and professionals. It was the New Wave Muslim socials which signalled a shift in the portrayal of Muslims and Muslim women in particular, moving away from the traditional idioms of Islamicate films. The New Wave genre, which emerged during the 1980s, brought the ordinary Muslim caught in the plight of Partition and communal tensions of different forms. The unsophisticated Muslim women from the margins of society gained more visibility in films like *Bazaar* and *Anjuman*, reflecting the bare reality of Muslim women in India.

The trajectory of Muslim women's representation till the 1990s presents them addressing domestic and social conflicts, indicating reforms inside the community. But. But from the period of the 1990s, with the distorted portrayals of Muslims and Islam in political genres, Muslim women's characters also signalled similar transitions where the films began to politicise gender, religion and nationalism for new character formations of Muslim women. The upcoming chapter explains this critical shift of Bollywood towards politicised representation of Muslim women using specific film texts, where a detailed analysis will be conducted to understand the patterns, tropes and narrative strategies functioning in the selected films.

Chapter 4

Transitions in the Representation of Muslim Women in Post-1990 Bollywood

Once the Muslims have been stereotyped, it is fairly easy to manage them. Only those problems are articulated as can easily be contained; the more fundamental ones that threaten to rupture the facade of a happy liberal pluralism are ignored.

Fareed Kazmi 240

Majoritarian Politics and the Muslim Women

The 1980s and 1990s were the decades in which Hindu nationalism became more prominent as a political force in India, particularly in the Hindi belt (Muralidharan, 28). During this period, the Nehruvian model of secularism, which had emphasised religious plurality and harmony in the years following independence and partition, came under increasing strain (Khatun, “Imagining Muslims as Others” 42; Anuja Bose 17; Leidig 228). Ali Asghar Engineer notes that from 1980 onwards, Indira Gandhi’s political approach included engaging with the Vishva Hindu Sabha, particularly after the conversion of several Hindu lower-caste families to Islam in Meenakshipura in 1981 (“Introduction”, 10). The experience of the Emergency, which restricted the activities of opposition parties, also provided space for Hindu political organisations to become more active in public life. At the same time, while the Congress was often associated with dynastic leadership, the RSS projected its

model of 'selfless service' through the work of its full-time *Sangh Pracharaks* (Bacchetta, "Sacred Space in Conflict in India", 263).

The implementation of the Mandal Commission (1979), the Shah Bano Verdict (1986), and the Ramjanmabhoomi Movement (1984) are often cited as key developments that shaped the trajectory of the Hindu nationalist movement. These events coincided with broader shifts such as the challenges encountered by the Congress party, the beginning of economic liberalisation, the growing presence of the Hindu diaspora, and the wider circulation of cultural nationalism. The 1990s are generally noted as a period of considerable political change, with the demolition of the Babri Masjid in 1992 and the communal tensions surrounding it becoming defining moments of the decade. The demolition has been interpreted by scholars as a turning point in Indian politics that raised questions about the role of religion in public life and the position of secular democratic values (256). It also drew attention to issues of minority rights, representation, and the contested interpretation of history and politics in the Indian context.

Bacchetta describes Hindu nationalism as a form of 'micro-religious nationalism,' noting its focus on the systematic construction of a Hindu nation in which upper-caste, educated Brahmins played a prominent role despite forming only a small percentage of the overall Hindu population (259). Hindu nationalism has often been discussed in contrast with other forms of secular nationalism in India and is described as drawing on ideas of discipline and order, distinguishing it from more diverse strands within traditional Hindu practice. Narratives concerning the Islamic invasions of India and the destruction of temples by Muslim rulers in earlier periods

were also brought into public discourse. Controversies around religious sites such as the Somnath Temple in Saurashtra, the Babri Masjid/Ramjanmabhoomi in Ayodhya, the Shahi Idgah Masjid/Krishna Janmabhoomi in Mathura, and the Gyanvapi Masjid/Kashi Vishvanath Temple in Varanasi came into focus during the 1990s, with several disputes continuing in the present. Political mobilisation around these issues, together with episodes of conflict, contributed to the rising profile of Hindu nationalist groups and was reflected in electoral outcomes. In the 1991 Lok Sabha elections, the Bharatiya Janata Party secured 119 seats and formed governments in Uttar Pradesh, Himachal Pradesh, Madhya Pradesh, and Rajasthan. In Uttar Pradesh, the state government was closely linked with the Ramjanmabhoomi movement (Ludden 16). The Rathayatra led by L.K. Advani in connection with the Ramjanmabhoomi movement brought national attention to the issue and increased the visibility of majoritarian politics. The movement involved the use of language, culture, and media to reach a wide section of the Hindu population. During this period, the RSS and the Bharatiya Janata Party expanded their political presence, which was reflected in subsequent developments in Indian politics.

The 9/11 attacks in 2001 contributed to the spread of global anti-Islamic and Islamophobic sentiments, with Muslim communities often being associated with terrorism irrespective of nationality. In the early 1990s, Samuel Huntington's thesis had identified Islam as lying along some of the world's most violent civilisational fault lines and described it as a potential challenge to the West (Huntington 183). In India, these global narratives intersected with pre-existing religious tensions. Discussions around Islam as a threat extended beyond national boundaries to the

international stage, influencing perceptions within India as well. Reports suggest that Muslims in certain regions, particularly in North Indian states, experienced increasing marginalisation. Incidents of mob violence related to allegations of beef sale or cow slaughter also drew widespread attention. The deaths of Mohammad Akhlaq in 2015 in Uttar Pradesh and Pehlu Khan in 2017 in Rajasthan were widely reported cases, in which attackers, identifying themselves as *gau rakshaks* (cow protectors), acted on rumours circulated through social media (Rahul Mukherjee 4; 11; Ishan Gupta 152).

Iyer and Srivastava note that the period from 1981 to 2001 recorded the highest incidence of religious riots in India (6). Their analysis of Hindu–Muslim riots over 21 years concludes that “riots occurring in the year preceding an election increase the vote share of the Hindu nationalist Bharatiya Janata Party in the election” (44). Accounts of these riots also include reports of sexual violence affecting Muslim women and children (Kausar 361; Deshmukh 8). Studies highlight that incidents of violence against Muslim women during communal riots drew attention to issues of justice and accountability (Tanika Sarkar, 2875–2876). Paola Bacchetta, in *Gender in the Hindu Nation: RSS Women as Ideologues*, records how Muslim women were represented in RSS thought under Golwalkar, ranging from depictions of high fertility and unrestrained sexuality to portrayals of victimhood under polygamy and a need for protection (106–108).

In 1985, the Shah Bano case brought questions of personal law and women’s rights into the national spotlight. Following the Supreme Court’s ruling, the government introduced the Muslim Women (Protection of Rights on Divorce) Act

of 1986, which gave precedence to provisions of Sharia law in matters of maintenance. The decision prompted debates across communities and political groups, with Hindu organisations criticising what they termed as unequal treatment and raising demands in relation to the Ramjanmabhoomi issue (Engineer, “Introduction”, 11). The discussions also generated wider debates on the position of personal laws in India and their implications for women, with Muslim women often portrayed in public discourse and media debates in terms of vulnerability and the need for reform (Sherin, “Gendering Minorities”,5).

In 2019, a series of new bills, amendments to existing laws, and constitutional changes were introduced, many of which had significant implications for the Muslim community in India. The issue of triple talaq, which had been debated since the release of the Bharatiya Muslim Mahila Andolan (BMMA) report in 2015, identifying triple talaq and polygamy as key concerns for Muslim women (Parveen 102), became central once again. In 2017, the Supreme Court, in *Shayara Bano vs. Union of India*, declared triple talaq unconstitutional. Following this, a bill criminalising the practice was introduced by the government and was passed in July 2019. The measure was presented as a step toward securing Muslim women’s rights and was highlighted as a major policy achievement by the Bharatiya Janata Party in line with its 2019 election commitments (93, 97). The legislation also revived discussions on the earlier *Shah Bano* case and the different political positions that had shaped responses to Muslim women’s rights over time. In August 2019, shortly after the passage of the Triple Talaq Bill, the government announced the abrogation of Article 370 and Article 35-A of the Constitution, which had granted special status

to Jammu and Kashmir. The decision drew both national and international attention, as it altered the constitutional relationship between the state and the Union. The changes were accompanied by restrictions on movement, communication, and access to basic services in Jammu and Kashmir for several months. Scholars have noted the wide-ranging economic, social, and political impact of these measures on the region, which has a Muslim majority population, including disruptions to livelihoods and reports of increased insecurity (Rather et al. 510–512; Khan et al. 81).

The Citizenship Amendment Act (CAA), passed in December 2019, made distinctions between Muslim and non-Muslim refugees from neighbouring countries such as Afghanistan and Pakistan and placed requirements of proof of citizenship that also applied to Muslims born in India. Alongside this, the government announced plans for a National Register of Citizens (NRC), modelled on the exercise in Assam, which raised concerns that many individuals might not be able to establish their citizenship status. Commentators noted that these measures carried the possibility of creating categories of citizens who could face detention. The CAA and NRC together prompted widespread protests across the country, as critics argued that they challenged the secular principles of the Constitution. The protests drew significant public attention and were led in many places by Muslim women, including university professors, students, and rural farmers, with Shaheen Bagh in Delhi becoming a prominent site of mobilisation. Scholars have observed that this movement highlighted a new phase of political participation among Muslim women,

marked by a greater emphasis on rights and citizenship in contrast to earlier moments when state policies had defined their public position.

The visibility of Muslim women at the Shaheen Bagh protest site marked a departure from earlier patterns of women's participation in both politics and public life. Their presence in what had often been regarded as restrictive public spaces contributed to redefining these spaces as inclusive and democratic arenas of engagement. This reconfiguration made public areas appear more accessible to groups at the margins and challenged prevailing patriarchal norms. (Bhatia and Gajjala 6292)

The protests were accompanied by police action, and there were reports of vandalism by groups supportive of government policies. Observers noted that the Shaheen Bagh movement brought new prominence to Muslim women in protest spaces, where they articulated their position through visible public participation. This moment also signalled a form of political self-assertion of Muslim identity, with women appearing in Islamic dress practices, which countered earlier stereotypes of Muslim women as passive or confined to domestic spheres. The role of Muslim women in these protests was also contrasted with earlier contexts, such as the discussions surrounding the Muslim Women (Protection of Rights on Marriage) Act of 2019, when they were presented largely as recipients of legislative protection.

This period marked a broader change in the configuration of Indian politics, with the decline of the Nehruvian model of secularism and the growing visibility of majoritarian ideology. These political shifts were accompanied by measures and practices that had significant effects on Muslims in general and Muslim women in

particular, who were increasingly affected by state and social dynamics. At the same time, Muslim women began to move beyond the established image of the passive or oppressed subject. They entered new political spaces, voiced their perspectives, and challenged the representations that had often circulated about them in media and public discourse.

Bollywood, Cultural Nationalism and Muslim Women on Screen

Cultural and political representations of Muslims in Bollywood have been studied and categorised into different genres by various film scholars and academicians like Ira Bhaskar, Richard Allen, Racheal Dwyer and Nadira Khatun. Bhaskar and Allen, while placing the films with themes exclusively related to the Muslim community under the title “Islamicate films”, sub-categorise them into the Muslim historical, Muslim courtesan films, classic Muslim social and Muslim new wave social (ix,x). Racheal Dwyer follows a similar method in categorising the Islamicate films with minor deviations: Arabian-night style fantasies, historicals, courtesan films, devotionals and the Muslim socials (Dwyer, *Bollywood’s India*, 139). Even though in the Muslim historicals, the characters were stuck in a time warp of the Mughal era, the narratives of these films helped in establishing and acknowledging the cultural legacy of Muslim rulers in India against the resentment by majoritarian groups. Despite the stock plots and characters, Muslim societies also appreciated the aesthetic and literary values of Islamicate cultural legacies, which associated the Muslims with high refinement in language, art, attire and etiquette.

But the repertoire of themes for Muslim socials diminished notably with the decline of Nehruvian socialism.

Nadira Khatun identifies the Muslim historicals and Muslim social genres with the addition of two new genres of films, which emerged amidst the rise of cultural nationalism and the religio-political context of the 1980s and 1990s, as ‘the Muslim Political’ and films after 2005 with positive portrayals as ‘the Muslim Modern’ (Khatun, “Postcolonial Bollywood”, 114). Khatun identifies the Muslim Politicals as films which project the tension between the Muslim militant and the nationalist victim by merging religion and politics and producing “fictitious Muslim identities”(144). But the Muslim Modern films re-imagined the Muslim characters as ordinary people often lacking religious markers and dealing with mundane life in opposition to the extremist or jingoist portrayals (202)

Roshni Sengupta, in her work, studies the Muslim stereotypes as ‘communal’, ‘terrorist’ and the ‘secular’ muslim (19). She identifies films such as *1947-Earth* (1998), *Pinjar* (2003), *Bombay* (1995) and *Dev* (2004) as cases of stereotyping where the Muslim men are only evaluated surrounding their approach towards communal violence, ie, nationalists, radicals, manipulative politicians and victims (111). She also notes how secular, progressive and free-thinking Muslims are positioned against their communal families and characters like Aslam in *Rang De Basanti* (2006) emerge as the sacrificial icon who performs the penance for his ancestors (243). Likewise, Nadira Khatun analyses the character of Kabir Khan in *Chak de India* (2007), which was inspired by Mir Ranjan Negi, who was the coach of the hockey team that lost the Asian Games Final (1982) to Pakistan. He was held

responsible for the loss, alleging his loyalty to Pakistan. His act of coaching and leading the Indian Women's Hockey team to victory not only became a penance for the betrayal of the Nation, but also emerged as a moment of redemption (Khatun, "Postcolonial Bollywood", 227). A similar role can be found in *My Name is Khan* (2010), where the character of Rizwan has to constantly prove that he is not a terrorist and is a 'good muslim', which satisfies the authoritarian ideology of majoritarianism (Sanjeev Kumar, 464).

Owing to several security and political issues like Kashmir insurgency, Indo-Pak wars, 9/11 attacks and communal riots, portrayals of heightened nationalism through vilified stock characters of Muslims who were supposedly involved in anti-national activities became a norm from the 1980s and 1990s. Maidul Islam traces the beginning of this transformation to films such as *Border*(1997) and *Sarfarosh*(1999), which identified Muslims as 'outsiders' and potential threats to the security of the nation (408,409). The plethora of films with vilified images of Muslim men as communal, rapists and terrorists, including *Roja* (1992), *Earth* (1998), *Hey Ram*(2000), *Mission Kashmir* (2000), *Kurbaan* (2009) and *Baby* (2015), to name a few, contributed to this project of vilification. The trend has lately been shifted into re-moulding Muslim historical figures into ruthless barbarians to suit the majoritarian narrative of the Muslim invasion of Hindu India in the form of films like *Patmavat* (2018) and *Tanhaji* (2020). The Muslim men were over-sexualised and portrayed as aggressive, often filled with insatiable sexual desire for Hindu women, as in *Earth*, *Hey Ram* and *Patmavat*. The rape of high-caste Hindu women was fantasised to create a beastly image of Muslim men. With the vilification of

Muslim men, the Hindu heroes pitted against them were hyper-patriotic, masculine and chivalrous (Murty 268). The Hindu heroes were shown as willing to sacrifice their lives for their nation and stand for the chaste Hindu women like Raja Maharawal Ratan Singh in *Patmavat*. The release of *The Kashmir Files* in 2022 marked a turning point in Bollywood, where all the rules regarding censorship and restriction over communal instigation through films were disregarded, and politicians were endorsing sectarian propaganda in the film. The *Kashmir Files* and the films which followed with similar narratives were the extreme versions of the vilification of Muslim men, which perfectly fitted the majoritarian claims to stigmatise Muslims as dangerous.

The following chapter tries to locate and examine a similar transition which reflects in the representation of Muslim female characterisation during and after the period of the 1990s and the discourse formations surrounding these political narratives, leading to the understanding of intersecting dynamics of gender and religion posited in relation to cultural nationalism.

As derived from the genealogy in Chapter 3, it can be observed that till the 1990s, Muslim women characters in Bollywood were mostly detached from the political settings of the time. They were cast into queens, begums or tawaifs. Religion was used as a rough identity marker to show the characters' belonging to each community, but the characters' relationship with religion was mostly positive. The most popular and celebrated role of Muslim women was that of the tawaif/courtesan, which led to several movies reproduced with similar plots, narratives and stock characters. The films from the courtesan genre divorced Muslim

women from society and placed them inside the ‘imaginary’ and ‘elusive’ world of *kotha*, which revolved around the poetics of romantic relationships and their complexities. The tawaifs were generally portrayed as victims of the exploitative system of the period and were often betrayed in love. They dwelled heavily on philosophical ruminations and lived in a world of *gazals*. The change in audience preferences, shifts in filmmaking trends and socio-political transformations slowly led to the vanishing of the Muslim social genre in general and Muslim courtesan films in particular. After B.R. Chopra’s *Tawaif* in 1985, a vacuum in films with Muslim women in central roles can be seen. The film can also be identified as probably the last one from the Muslim courtesan genre, apart from the remake of *Umrao Jaan* in 2006 by J.P. Dutta and *Begum Jaan* by Srijith Mukherji in 2017.

In the 1990s, with the transition in political structures and media images, we also started to witness distinct portrayals of Muslim women characters on screen, especially in unconventional roles which were hitherto not common in Bollywood. The films also moved away from the exclusive Islamic settings and Muslim social milieus into modern spaces and metropolitan cities such as Bombay and Delhi, where the Muslim women engage with the new socio-political settings of the modern nation, unlike the earlier Muslim socials, which situated her in a closed domestic space. The post-1990 films with Muslim women as central characters explored nuanced themes relating to partition, communal conflicts, domestic violence, terrorism and feminism, which were also derived from the evolving political scenario of the nation. Interfaith romances involving Muslim women, which were not so common in the prior films, were formulated in the popular

Bollywood structure, with varying religious and political issues forming the background.

The three major stereotypes, tropes and narrative patterns which may be preferred for an in-depth categorisation and analysis of the selected films are, namely, that of victimisation, heightened nationalism and neo-liberal feminist emancipation. These stereotypes are found to be extensions and projections of the mainstream majoritarian political discourses on Muslim women that were visualised through cinematic narratives in the post-1990 period. The victim trope emerges from the popular image of Muslim women as targets of domestic violence, forced marriage, honour killing and victims of political and religious exploitation by misogynist Muslim men. The existing discourses in Indian public domain like Shabano case and the debates over Muslim women's rights (Agnes, "From Shah Bano", 34), media narratives on Muslim women who are abandoned by Muslim men through triple talaq and polygamy (Avinash Kumar 59), the concept of *Ghar Wapasi* or returning to the Hindu faith (Rajeshwar and Amore 1) were being selectively used and mis-represented in many Bollywood films. The Muslim characters in these films are shown as suffering under their immediate family and the broader community, where a Hindu hero is the only solution, saviour or redemption to the Muslim women. From our detailed analysis of the Shah Bano case and the social contexts of its conclusion, we understood how media discourses and political manipulations had both distorted and complicated the legal standing and rights of Muslim women following the case.

The Nationalist stock characters were part of the secular imaginary of the nation, and often Muslim male characters who were part of the Indian army or police force were portrayed as sacrificial and faithful to the nation, as SSP Inayat Khan in *Mission Kashmir* (2000) or Inspector Salim from *Sarfarosh* (1999). There is a notable absence of Muslim female nationalist characters in the pre-1990s Bollywood narratives and a visible presence of the same in the post-1990s. The female counterpart of these nationalist stock characters who pledge their loyalty to the nation while fighting their men and community must be analysed thoroughly for a closer understanding of the dissemination of the majoritarian ideologies in cinematic space.

The political rhetoric of neo-Liberalist feminism, which emerged in India during the 1990s, privileged “women’s physical and sexual rights” as basically connected to and granted by capitalism (Roychoudhari, qtd in Hemangini Gupta 153). The trope of a Muslim neo-liberal feminist was comparatively a new occurrence in Bollywood, exclusive to the post-1990 films. The narratives should be closely observed to see how these characters were shown as suffering under Islamic patriarchy and how their negotiations with religious identity and sexual constraints were facilitated by the structures of neo-liberal machineries that promised emancipation.

The following sections of the chapter will analyse the selected films to locate these stereotypes and patterns. This will aid in our understanding of the intricate cinematic strategies of constructing, positioning and politicising of Muslim women’s

identity in Bollywood. We may also see how the narratives adhere to and fulfil the majoritarian fantasies.

Saving the Muslim Women: *Bombay* (1995), *Gadar: Ek Prem Katha* (2001) and *Veer Zaara* (2004)

Bombay was released in 1995, directed by Mani Ratnam, who is known for his portrayal of sensitive communal and social issues of national relevance in his films like *Roja* (1992) and *Dil Se* (1998). *Roja* dealt with the Kashmiri insurgency and terrorism, while *Dil Se* focused on the Liberationist conflict in Northeast India. Similar to the heroes of these films, *Bombay* also projected a secular Hindu hero in his run for integrating the warring religious groups into the nation. The film is set in the 1990s, when the communal frenzy was let loose in India in the name of Ayodhya and a time when Right-wing forces were gaining a stronghold over North India. The film underwent many controversies and heavy censorship and edits due to the interference of the Shiv Sena leader Bal Thackeray, who had much political influence in Bombay, Bollywood and the Censor Board during the period. The censor board made Mani Ratnam remove certain scenes, stating the reason as the prevention of communal tension. Certain dialogues spoken by Tinnu Anand, who played Bal Thackeray, scenes directly depicting the demolition of Babri Masjid, the partiality of police towards Muslims and the inefficiency of the state in controlling the violence were removed (Engineer qtd in Khatun, “Imagining Muslims as the ‘Other’” 46-47, Gopalan 26-28). These edits transformed the film into less challenging to the right wing and subtly aligned with the majoritarian take on

communal violence, which refuses to acknowledge RSS forces as aggressors and Muslims as victims (Mallhi 2).

In *Bombay*, the hero named Shekhar, played by Aravind Swami, belongs to a high-caste Hindu family from Tamil Nadu. He falls in love with a Muslim woman, Shaila Bano, and they elope to Bombay when their families disapprove of their relationship due to their religious differences. In Bombay, they try to lead a secular life without any markers of either religion. Shaila Bano witnesses the building tension around the Ramjanmabhoomi issue in the form of a mob resembling *Rathiyatra* led by aggressive Hindu monks and Kar Sevaks for opening the doors of Babri Masjid which was sealed by the government (00:51:15-51:48). Later the people involved in the movement come to the couple's home to collect funds for the Ramjanmabhoomi movement and for building Ramakshetra in place of the Masjid. This scene is followed by the visuals and news reports of the Babri Masjid demolition which took place on December 6, 1993, and the ensuing wrath of Muslims who were recognisable with the white skullcaps (01:14:13-01:25:05). Ravi Vasudevan in his critical study on the film observes that it had a lopsided presentation of the riots where the Muslim aggression was highlighted, their identity 'fetishised' and 'othered' ("The Melodramatic Public", 235). Amidst the riots, their children, Kabir and Kamal, are lost and are caught by rioters, and petrol is poured over them to burn. They are saved only with the timely intervention of Shekhar and the police. With the news of the riots, both Shekhar and Shaila Bano's parents arrive in Bombay to live with them. The religious rivalry between them is thawed with the familial bondings. The short-lived peace is shattered on 5th January 1993, when the

murder of two labourers is assumed to be communal, and the violence is rekindled. The couple's house is set ablaze by the rioters, and Narayan Pillai, Basheer Ahmed and his wife are killed in the fire. The children are missing again, but are saved by a transgender person. In the climax, Shekhar elevates into a dramatic hero, chastising and making peace between the two communities, pleading with them to stop the violence. Shekhar turns into a sacrificial body by pouring petrol over himself and asking the rioters to burn him. The rioters stop the violence, and people from both communities come together in dramatic harmony, holding hands together, while Shekhar's family is also reunited.

Shaila Bano's character in the film is significant yet silent, overshadowed by the ideal Hindu secular journalist Shekhar. The film introduces Shaila Bano through a scene where Shekhar walks through the river banks back in his village, and a burqa-clad Shaila is getting off a boat. The wind shifts her niqab for a split second, and Shekhar catches a glimpse of her face through a mid-shot (00:03:32- 03:57). Shekhar pursues her relentlessly in the song sequence '*Kehna hi kya*' where she is without her burqa. Shaila Bano and Shekhar are involved in a metaphorical hide-and-seek game where she is visible for a moment and then invisible, where the female body is both exposed to and hidden away from the male gaze, invoking eroticism. Shekhar's friend keeps warning him about the dangers of associating with the Muslim community, making Shaila Bano 'forbidden' to Shekhar. And his relentless pursuit indicates the obsession with revealing the hidden and forbidden behind the veil. This play continues throughout the film in different settings, like in the scene where Shekhar follows Shaila Bano when she is returning home with her

friends, in the newlywed scene where Shaila Bano is hiding among the clothes on the terrace and during the song sequence '*Humma*' which portrays the consummation of their marriage.

'*Tu hi Re*' song becomes a transformative moment in the character evolution of Shaila Bano from her religious to secular identity. When Shekhar is waiting desperately for the acknowledgement of her love in the fort, she comes running through the rain. By the time she reaches the gates, her burqa is already halfway open. The burqa is caught in the anchor and torn completely, which she abandons, indicative of her coming out of all the religious shackles forbidding her to the union with Shekhar (00:25:14). The lopsided narrative of the riots where the role of Muslims were portrayed as aggressors, the scenes of the hero lifting the veil of a Muslim woman and Shaila Bano carrying the Holy Quran with her and the verses chanted during her elopement to the Hindu hero had received objections from the Muslim leaders and organisations (Gopalan 31).



Fig 7. "Caught in the Anchor" shot from Bombay (00:25:14)

Shaila Bano's family presents the stereotypical domestic situations of the subaltern Muslim women constructed through the popular understanding of the Muslim community in India, where it is assumed that the women lack agency in matters of choosing their partner. Also, the patriarchal hold over Shaila Bano in the form of her father Basheer Ahmed, who threatens her with a marriage against her choice and physically abuses her, portrays the typical arrogant, illiterate and aggressive Muslim man towering over the voiceless woman. The escape from the darkness of orthodox home transforms into the bright daylight of Bombay, with Shekhar offering her a new life and redemption from her past, which was mundane, superstitious and oppressive. But opposed to her expectations, Shaila Bano is received with surprise and is despised by the landlady when she understands that Shaila Bano is a Muslim indicating the unwelcoming atmosphere towards Muslims and the disagreement with the inter-religious marriage of a Hindu with a Muslim (46:31-47:22). After reaching Bombay we see that Shaila Bano adopts to saree, which is the popular attire of Indian women and discards the burqa and keeps aloof of any markers of Muslimness to amalgamate with the secular lifestyle of Shekhar. In each scene, Shaila Bano becomes the shadow of Shekhar, bewildered and submissive, while Shekhar makes decisions and actions, and leads the narrative forward.

Shekhar becomes the saviour of Shaila Bano in redeeming her from her religious and orthodox family. He challenges the religious differences, which is the reason raised by both Ahmed Basheer and Narayan Pillai for their union by melodramatic performances of placing together the bleeding arms of both his and

Shaila Bano and stating “*Yeh milenge*” (They will unite. my trans) (00:30:55). To every conflict, Shaila Bano’s reactions never exceed her typical helplessness.. Shekhar’s persuasion to escape her fate finds her in the form of the ticket to Bombay, which is the only time she gathers her strength and decides to flee. Notably, Shekhar is keen on converting to Islam, and he asks Shaila Bano if he should; he even retorts to his father to find a Muslim groom for his sister if no one from the Hindu community will marry her. He is also seen wearing a skullcap in the scenes of the song *Hulla Gulla*. Notably, Shaila Bano has no dialogue on the ensuing communal conflicts. She is a mute witness to everything happening around her. The dialogues, actions and responsibilities of a nationalist citizen are carried out by Sekhar. These instances allude to the secular spirit embodied by the ideal hero fighting every vice of communalism, who not only saves Muslim women from the Muslim community but also the Hindu aggressors. Shaila Bano is the object on which every action is imposed or acted upon, leaving her with minimal or no agency in the film.

This identical narrative of saving the Muslim women is explicit in Anil Sharma’s *Gadar: Ek Prem Katha* (2001) as well. If *Bombay* establishes a Hindu secular hero for saving the Muslim woman, *Gadar* entrusts the task to Tara Singh, a sikh macho man played by Sunny Deol. He was exceptionally suitable for the role with his physique and aggressive body language. Amisha Patel as Sakina is a flip version of Shaila Bano. The story is set during the partition of 1947 and tells the story of Tara Singh saving Sakina while he was seeking revenge against the Muslims in Lahore with his Sikh companions. Sakina belongs to a wealthy Muslim

family who are rushing to Pakistan amidst the chaos of partition, and she is left behind in the maddening crowd. When Tara Singh identifies Sakina as the anglicised college girl with whom he was in love, he rescues her from his sikh friends by applying *Sindoor* (symbol of Sikh/Hindu married women) on Sakina's forehead with his blood. He saves her from suicide when she tries to jump before the train on hearing that her whole family were dead before reaching Lahore. Later, they marry and live in absolute bliss with their son until Sakina desires to meet her family in Pakistan. Once she is in Pakistan, her chauvinist father, Ashraf Ali, who is now a powerful politician, entraps her there and tries to force her into an alliance that would further his political career. Tara Singh is set to save Sakina from Pakistan, who now sees him and India as her only haven, and he is strong enough to subdue the whole Pakistan army single-handedly. Ashraf Ali and his forces are bloodthirsty for Tara-Singh, where, amidst the exaggerated actions and attacks, he accidentally shoots Sakina from the military chopper. Tara Singh beats Ashraf Ali to the ground and rushes to save Sakina and providing her with medical care. Ashraf Ali is guilty and welcomes the union of Sakina with Tara Singh, as well as Pakistan's alliance with India.

Gadar was notable for its aggressive and explicit jingoist portrayal of the rivalry against Muslims and Pakistan (Sharma, 1158). The Kargil War of 1999 and the escalated tension between the two countries have also been reflected in the monstrous caricature of the 'other nation' and Muslims in the film. The opening scenes show a Sikh father handing over packets of poison to their young daughters, advising them, "Have this if you are faced with any danger, but never let any

Muslim violate your body” (00:03:34-00:03:35 my trans). His daughters are later raped and killed by Muslims. The dialogue is followed by scenes of mass migration of Hindus and Sikhs to India in congested trains and Muslim men attacking them with weapons roaring “*Nara e Takbir Allahu Akbar*” (00:2:59-00:5:59). The scene evokes the stock Islamophobic imagery of Muslim men as rapists of young non-muslim women, bloodthirsty and aggressive in name of religion as the invocation of *takbir* is common in most scenes involving Muslim aggression in Hindi films. The Sikh vengeance is justified as retaliation for the Muslim atrocities throughout the film.

Sakina is introduced as an anglicised and outgoing college student who doesn't wear Islamic dress or follow Islamic conventions. After her marriage to Tara Singh, Sakina converts and adopts the vibrant Sikh way of life, where she is free and happy, but she is oppressed and threatened into submissiveness as soon as she is with her Muslim family in Pakistan. She is manipulated by her father, Ashraf Ali and separated from her husband and child. She is shocked at hearing the Pakistani reporter talking about the atrocities committed against her in India, pointing to Sakina's loyalty towards India. Her resistance is addressed towards Pakistan and the Muslims surrounding her, who are unequivocally trying to oppress and exploit her for political gains. She retorts to the Kazi, who comes to seek her consent to the marriage, that he is committing a crime by forcing a married woman into another marriage while her husband is alive. She also places her love for Tara Singh above the dedication of Kazi to God.



Fig 8. “The Blood Sindoor” shot from *Gadar: Ek Prem Katha* (00:18:09)

The film takes its germ from the many popular partition narratives on horrific stories of rape, kidnapping and rescuing of women from either nations or religions during the partition. Partition caused widespread havoc throughout the nation, displacing and separating thousands of families. Lakhs of people were dead, and the horrors of partition had mostly affected the women and children. About 75000 women were raped or abducted by men of other religions (Butalia 3). As women embody the honour of the family, community and nation, sexual savagery and abduction function as a tool for revenge and imposing authority over the enemy, and recovery becomes the act of redemption and reclaiming of one's lost honour. Thus, the producers of *Gadar* had wisely chosen women and partition as the subject matter of the film, as it also embodies the most sensitive wounds of both nations. Urvashi Butalia narrates a similar story of Zainab and Buta Singh, where Buta Singh rescues her during the partition and settles down as a family in Amritsar. Still, when she is returned to Pakistan by her relatives, she rejects and severs the bond with Buta Singh, which makes him commit suicide (Butalia 127-130). The rescue narrative as

presented in the film manipulates the complex partition scenario into a full-fledged India vs Pakistan and Sikh vs Muslim discourse, where the latter is vilified and portrayed as perpetrators of violence against both Sikh and Muslim women. The Sikh violence against Muslims was justified by selective narratives of Muslim violence that highlight the 'Sikh honour' that was defiled by Muslims. Sikhs are presented as apologetic and are whitewashed in the film, where it is indicated that they have suffered more from the Muslims and still have chosen to forgive them. Tara Singh resembles Shekhar from *Bombay*, willing to convert to Islam and live in Pakistan, but he does not withstand the humiliation of his nation. This instils immense wrath inside him, signifying the power and capacity of India to destroy Pakistan, but the benevolence of Indians, which lets the other nation exist. The Muslim woman who has converted and who is loyal to India is redeemed through the Hindu/Sikh hero, without whom she was destined to perish at the hands of the politically greedy people of Pakistan. Thus, like Shekhar, Tara Singh also rescues the Muslim women from both communities.

Veer Zaara (2004) by Yash Chopra was also a blockbuster of the year and contained a similar narrative of an inter-religious/ cross-national love story. The character of Zaara Hayaat Khan, played by Preity Zinta, closely resembles Sakina. She is from Pakistan and gets entrapped in India when she travels to have her sikh grandmother's ashes scattered in the Sutlej river. When her bus meets with an accident, the Indian army officer Veer Pratap Singh (Shah Rukh Khan) rescues her and realises he has fallen in love with her. He also understands that she is engaged to Raza Sherazi in Pakistan. Zaara returns to Pakistan but feels entrapped in her

engagement with Raza as she also develops feelings for Veer. Veer tries to take her with him, but when her mother pleads to leave Zaara for her father's sake, he complies. But Raza gets him arrested by Pakistani police, and he remains in prison for 22 years so Zaara can live in peace. Saamiya Siddiqui, a young Pakistani lawyer, takes up Veer's case, finds out about Zaara and reunites them after proving Veer's innocence.

The India-Pakistan border depicted in any Indian film evokes national and religious sentiments buried deeply within the psyche of people of both nations. The partition of the "religion-body-territory" not only created divisions between the nations but also deeply wounded and separated the citizens from each other (Sara Smith 64). As Urvashi Butalia observes in her work, "All of this seemed to emphasize that Partition could not so easily be put away, that its deep, personal meanings, its profound sense of rupture, the differences it engendered or strengthened, still lived on in so many people's lives" (Butalia 8). The political discourse of division defining "us" and "them" reproduces the same demarcation between human beings too. Veer, a Sikh man belonging to India and Zaara, a Muslim woman belonging to Pakistan, are no longer two individuals but representatives of two rival nations. Sakina is portrayed as a victim of both Islamic patriarchy and Pakistan's political system. Veer exhibits all the chivalric qualities of an ideal Hindu/Sikh male with his patriotic zeal, and as an officer in the Indian Air Force. Contrary to the Muslim-Pakistani men who try to humiliate, threaten and exploit Zaara for their political gains, Zaara is treated with dignity, hospitality and care by the people in India, including Veer's family. When Veer is treated as an

enemy in Pakistan, Zaara is treated as a guest in India. The characteristics of both nations drastically contrast in their approach to the 'other' in the film. Even though showing Zaara breaking off her marriage with Raza and settling down in India on her own will establishes her transformation from victimhood, it is only possible through a thoroughly whitened image of not only the Indian Hindu man, but also that of the country's social and political realities. This is not only specific to Zaara, but other Pakistani muslim women in the film, like Shabbo and Saamiya, also exhibit their loyalty towards India rather than their homeland, Pakistan. This metamorphosis of Muslim women into Indian/Hindu identity can be read as an ideological imperative employed to show the higher moral position of India.

Like Shaila Bano and Sakina, Zaara is also positioned between the Hindu/Sikh Indian hero at one end and her Muslim family as antagonists at the other end. Veer respects Zaara and her family in every possible way by not taking her away without her father's permission, which is a Bollywood cliché venerating the Indian Hindu/Sikh value system seen in many of Shah Rukh Khan's films like *Dilwale Dulhania Le Jayenge*(1995), *Pardes*(1997) and *Mohabbatein* (2000). But on the contrary, Muslims and especially Pakistanis can be seen as oppressing, silencing and exploiting women to accelerate their political growth, as we see in *Gadar* and *Veer Zaara*.



Fig 9. “The Metamorphosis” shot from Veer Zaara (01:10:54)

The rhetoric of saving the Muslim women was popularised in the colonial period itself when the colonial explorers, missionaries, and administrators were keen on converting, educating and reforming Muslim women by distancing them from the Islamic way of life to Europeanised culture. Removing hijab/burqa/veil was a direct measure for this. Franz Fanon vehemently critiqued the French colonial ventures in Algeria during the 1930s, where the Muslim women were persuaded, coerced and even forced to be unveiled for imposing cultural hegemony over the colonised. He states, “The occupying forces, in applying their maximum psychological attention to the veil worn by Algerian women, were obviously bound to achieve some results. Here and there, it thus happened that a woman was ‘saved’ and symbolically unveiled ” (Fanon 47).

Practices like honour killing, polygamy, and female circumcision were identified as barbaric Islamic practices of which Muslim women were victims and assumed to be reformed by adopting Christian-secular-European culture. They were

also to be saved from their men, who were forcing these practices on them. With the power transfer from imperialists to capitalists and the emergence of feminism and liberalism, it became the moral responsibility of the West to redeem Muslim women. After the 9/11 attacks, recognising terrorism as a potent oppressive force in Islamic countries like Afghanistan, the Europeans and liberal feminists were out together to save the Muslim women again. (Lughod, *Do Muslim Women Need Saving?* 6-8).

This has been heavily reflected in Hollywood, which has vilified Muslim men on a large scale and portrayed Muslim women, especially from the Middle East, as mute victims of Muslim men who are redeemed by the West (Aguayo 52). Bollywood films inspired by Hollywood reproduce this narrative, giving a saviour image and heroic signification to the Hindu hero who saves the Muslim women, which stands in stark opposition to the political realities. The Muslim women in the films under this section are represented as victims of the family, community and the patriarchal codes which bind them into submission. Muslim women are unanimously loyal to and put their trust in the hands of Hindu Indian heroes who are intentionally portrayed as secular and benevolent towards Muslim women. They are also portrayed as epitomes of courage, honesty and sacrifice performed for the Muslim woman and the Nation. Charu Gupta, in her work, notices the popular discourses formed around the inter-religious love stories in India in which the Hindu man who attracts the love of a Muslim woman is valorised and glorified (239)

Stories of love and romance between a Hindu man and a Muslim woman provided titillation and a general sense of elation. For the Hindu male, there was a thrill in seeing the Muslim heroine fall at the feet of the Hindu hero. It

endorsed images of heroism without villainy, bravery without cowardice, and romance without abduction. It signified control, subjugation and victory over Muslim women, made all the more potent because it did not involve force, coercion and suppression (240-241).

The cinematic representation of women in Bollywood demands a certain degree of glamourisation, which is indispensable in commercial films for attracting the audience. The characters of Shaila Bano, Sakina and Zaara all undergo this wild Bollywood fetishising of the female body, especially in the song-dance sequences, which are exclusively inserted for this purpose. The songs *Kuchi Kuchi Rakkamma* in *Bombay*, *Ye Yaad Rakna* in *Gadar* and *Jaanam Dekhlo* in *Veer Zaara* sexualise the Muslim heroines beyond logical expectations. The first song from *Bombay* sexualises the Muslim heroine dressed as a tribal woman with her body largely exposed, therefore cancelling her religious values, and presents her as the object of the Hindu male's sexual desire, where he pleads to consummate with him and to give him offspring. The other two songs visualise the Muslim heroine's unhinged desire and yearning for her Hindu husband/lover, where she is tormented by his memories.

When analysing these films by placing them in the historical context of the period, from the 1990s, India witnessed increased violence against the Muslim community in general and Muslim women were the foremost to suffer the gory violence inflicted upon them by the right-wing fascists which heightened after the Babri Masjid demolition and during the riots instilled afterwards in Bombay during 1992 and 1993 and in Gujarat during 1992 and 2002. The subaltern Muslim

community, who live mostly in ghettos like Dharavi in Mumbai and Juhapura in Gujarat, were most vulnerable to attacks from organised Hindu mobs. During the Godhra riots, Muslim women were raped, murdered and burnt in mass (Kausar 359; Spodek 385). They were attacked by Hindu mobs, and justice was delayed for years. Instead of reflecting the political realities of Muslim women, these films turn the tables on the Muslim community itself as perpetrators of violence.

These films essentialise the Muslim woman into the trope of a helpless victim caught between the rivalry of opposing religions, where she is saved by the Hindu/Sikh man and where she is assimilated into their culture and traditions. These films totally disregard the historical and political complexities of India, where Muslim women exist as members of a minority community, marginalised for decades and exploited for political agendas. The overarching metanarratives of cultural nationalism project the Hindu/Sikh masculinities as saviours of both women and the nation.

The Nationalist Muslim Women: *Fiza* (2000), *Fanaa* (2006) and *Raazi* (2018)

Apart from serving as a source of fictionalised entertainment, Bollywood has played a crucial role in forming various Nationalist narratives and discourse, which popularise conservative patriotism (Kishore Budha 6). These films succeed in influencing the Indian audience, who crave melodramatic nationalism on screen. Whether it be *Border* (1997), *Sarfarosh* (1999) or *Lakshya* (2004), the patriotic National hero figure has always appealed to Indian viewers. The Hero who fights an anti-national figure or offers his own life in the battle for the Nation's cause becomes a saviour icon for the people. This trend has been tried and proven in

Bollywood and many films with similar themes, especially in the post-1990 period, where projections of extreme nationalism were setting trends. Some examples include *Baby* (2015), *Gazi Attack* (2017) and *Uri: The Surgical Strike* (2019). But in most films, the National Hero figure is usually an upper-caste Hindu man; in very few films, we can find a Muslim man, and very rarely, it is a Muslim woman.

Fiza is written and directed by Khalid Mohammad, who is notable for his offbeat portrayal of Muslim women with Syam Benegal through his Muslim Women Trilogy that includes *Mammo* (1994), *Sardari Begum* (1996) and *Zubeida* (2001). *Fiza* can be seen as an extension of Khalid Mohammad's films, which place Muslim women's issues in India at the central focus. Still, the film's narrative becomes problematic once the nationalist philosophies step in by sidelining the individual. *Fiza* introduces the Muslim woman in a nuanced role, indicating a divergence from the stereotypical portrayal of submissive and voiceless figures as in *Bombay*, *Gadar*, and *Veer Zaara*, only to position her as the nationalist heroine who sacrifices her blood ties for the nation.

Fiza Ikramullah belongs to a lower-class Muslim family in Mumbai with significant financial issues. Her father is no more, and she is left with her mother and brother to look after. She is educated, has a degree and is seen reading books. But despite her education and good grades, she has to face long queues before employers. Even with the hardships, Fiza, her brother Amaan and her mother Nishatbi led a content life till the communal tensions started to erupt in the form of the Bombay riots of 1993. Amaan, who goes out with his friends to merely know what is happening around, is attacked by Hindu mobs and is severely traumatised,

witnessing the relentless violence. He goes missing after the riots, and Nishatbi still hopes he will return and continues to visit the Missing Persons Bureau even after six years. Fiza wants to put an end to the uncertainty and embarks on the journey to find Amaan, but in the course of her interaction with the police officer who could provide the information leading to Amaan and the politicians who want to exploit her plight, she witnesses the political manipulations which instigate violence in the nation for their benefit. But despite the evident role of right-wing political factions and police inaction and partiality in the riots, the film portrays the riots as a combined project by Hindu and Muslim political parties. Jim Masselos' paper on Bombay riots points toward this cinematic appropriation of communal riots, where a pogrom directed exclusively against Muslims for uprooting their economic base in Mumbai under the Shiv Sena was turned into a narrative of mutual aggression or Hindu defence (80). This strategy is observed by Ravi Vasudevan in the case of the film *Bombay*, where a certain balancing is seen to have been incorporated in the riots scenes, where the narrative emphasises Muslim aggression with visible images of skull caps and distributes the responsibility of the riots to both communities equally for satisfying the liberal-secular audience ("The Melodramatic Public", 235). The following observation by Jim Masselos reveals the abuse of power and discrimination exhibited by the police forces during the Bombay riots, in contrast to the film narrative:

The lower levels, the police, the fire brigades and so on, displayed a distinct support for Hindus and a strong bias against Muslims. Those who ruled the city were either in emotional and actual collusion with the anti-Muslim

attacks or were incapable of taking effective action in maintaining law and order. All together produced a picture vastly different from what had been typical of former riots in Bombay, which had always been limited in scope and area - and involvement. (Masselos 81)

Fiza discovers that her brother was saved by an extremist named Murad Khan, who has made Amaan a member of his terrorist group. Even though she succeeds in bringing back Amaan, his trauma and vengeance leave him unable to assimilate with society, and the injustice he witnesses around him makes him believe that only extremism can save the Muslims. Fiza and Amaan represent the flip sides of a coin, where Fiza opposes him, advocating for secular and non-violent solutions and placing the national identity above the individual's predicaments, injustice and trauma. This positions them in the dichotomy of the Good Muslim vs. Bad Muslim theorised by Mahmood Mamdani, where the 'Good Muslim' has the moral responsibility to chastise, transform or annihilate the 'Bad Muslim' who is the source of terrorism and fundamentalism worldwide (Mamdani 766). In Mamdani's view, rather than differentiating terrorists from civilians, the cultural discourses post 9/11 have created a distinction between good Muslims and bad Muslims, necessitating an internal civil strife within the community, everywhere around the globe. Mamdani introduces terrorism as a modern political ensemble by questioning the tendency to read Islamist politics as an effect of Islamist civilisation, dehistoricizing the construction of political identities through deeply political contexts. The concept of 'good Muslim' and 'bad Muslim', according to Mamdani, is a Western import used to distinguish the Muslims who belong to the bad extremist

political Islam and the good moderate Islam, which is basically modern and adhering to Western values (767). It has been very common in both Hollywood and Bollywood films where the Good Muslim, even when adhering to Islam, devotes his/her loyalty to the fight against the villainous Bad Muslim. Such imposition of essentialism on individuals as possessing good/bad values, detaches them from the historical or political complexities that comprise their existence. Even if Fiza and Amaan are situated in a network of gender, political and religious convergence, the narrative of the film presents them in the good/bad dichotomy by ignoring several other intersecting factors of their struggle to belong to the Indian polity.

Fiza's journey resembles a moral crusade of enlightening Amaan against the evils of fundamentalism and terrorism, which have plagued not only him but the entire community. The absence of traumatised Hindu youngsters turning into terrorists in the film's discursive terrain also accentuates the focus on the binary. Terrorism, after 9/11, has been translated into a global phenomenon and 'terror' in every sociopolitical context gets equated to Islam. Scholars like Christopher Allen correlate the already existing anti-Islamic biases, like Islam being "other" and "inferior" and "problematic" to the orientalist attitude of the West, which deteriorated after the 9/11 attacks and the Muslims in general became more targeted and prone to attacks after 9/11 as a revenge for the terrorist attacks (5). In her paper, Dina Ibrahim argues that the media framing of the terrorist attacks and every minor aggression involving Muslims has contributed to widespread hatred towards the Muslim population in America (Ibrahim 112, Featherstone et. Al 172). Mark Featherstone and others' studies substantiate the media's role in turning terrorism

into a spectacle or theatre where the hatred is drawn towards the Muslims as members of the same religion as the aggressors (13). Even as scholars like Mamdani have studied terrorism as a modern ensemble that might be harnessing some aspects of tradition, popular culture repeatedly uses the trope of the Good/Bad Muslim binary to establish that the burden rests entirely on a community's perception. Thus, as a good Muslim, it becomes Fiza's moral duty towards her nation to annihilate terrorism. But as she is unable to redeem her brother from the vengeance instilled in him, she has to finally shoot him before the police can. Through killing Amaan, Fiza performs the ritual of sacrifice of the Nationalist, which was hitherto reserved for the Hindu secular men to reinstate the security of the motherland, which the Muslim terrorist has threatened.

According to Anthony D Smith, Nationalism is an ideology that places the nation at the centre of its concerns and seeks to promote its well-being (9). Thus, Nationalism involves extreme veneration and emotional attachment to one's nation, which places oneself, family, religion, region and other factors in a subordinate position. Fiza places the nation above individual experiences and predicaments. She takes on the apologetic stand where the Muslims are always compelled to produce 'proof' or testify their loyalty to the nation. The narrative that the good Muslim revokes traditional values like Jihad and re-interprets them, in contrast to the bad Muslim who manipulates and misinterprets Quranic messages for vengeance, is established through Fiza's words while trying to bring Amaan back to the folds of the nation:

Amaan: This is not hatred. It's a voice against hatred. And those who die in a *jihad* (crusade) like this are called *shaheed* (martyrs).

Fiza: The battle for the cause of truth is called *Jihad*. And the truth is that we belong to this nation and always will. (02:12:29-02:13:14)



Fig 10. “Sacrifice for Nation” shot from *Fiza* (02:38:44)

When Amaan’s death is translated as his escape from his wrong deeds, Fiza is exalted into the position of the sacrificial female who is forced to execute her brother when he becomes a threat to the security of the nation (Khatun, “Imagining Muslim as the Other”, 54). Despite empathising with the predicaments of the Indian Muslim community in the riots, the character of Fiza is encumbered with moral responsibility and obligation to fight against her terrorist brother and to cleanse him from the extremist ‘Islamic’ ideology opposed to the ‘secular Islam’ preached and practised by Fiza. Even when the film projects a brave Muslim woman in her quest

to find the ‘truth’, ultimately, she becomes a victim of Islamic terrorism rather than the violence instigated by majoritarian groups.

If *Fiza* functions at the national level, Yash Chopra’s *Fanaa* (2006) is set in a larger geopolitical mapping where the Kashmiri separatist terrorist organisation named IKF (Independent Kashmiri Front) has a wider terrorist network spreading to Thailand and elsewhere, which deals with nuclear arms. The film narrates a tragic love story between Rehaan and Zooni, where the former hides his identity as an IKF (Independent Kashmir Front) militant by disguising himself as a tourist guide in Delhi. He misleads Zooni, who is visually impaired and impregnated by him, promising to marry her, but escapes through a planned bomb blast in the hospital where Zooni is admitted for regaining her vision. He reappears in Bangkok, involved in a mission there and is entrusted with another mission of acquiring the detonation device of a nuclear weapon from the Indian army’s possession. Later, he reappears at Zooni’s house in Kashmir after getting hurt by the Indian army, who are after him. Zooni, without knowing his real identity, takes care of Rehan and eventually marries him after he asks her forgiveness. But soon Zooni realises he is involved in a terrorist mission and has the detonation device with him through the news. She contacts the Indian military and is asked to stop Rehan from reaching other militants by Malini Tyagi, who is from the Anti-Terrorist Special Force.

Malini Tyagi: If he leaves with that trigger and succeeds in joining his companions, they will use it to activate a nuclear bomb in our nation. Lakhs of Indians will lose their lives (...) And only you can stop this destruction, Zooni.

Zooni: But he is my husband.

Malini Tyagi: Tell me you will help us, Zooni.

(02:35:27-36:01)

The conversation marks the juncture where Zooni takes the painful responsibility of rescuing the nation upon her by sacrificing her husband. During the chase, she has to shoot and kill Rehaan while he is trying to escape with the trigger (02:42:35-02:02:42:51). The climax scene is emotionally charged as she is losing her husband for the second time, but she is left with no other choice than rescuing the Nation. In turn, she is saved from the other militants by the Indian army forces, who appear at the exact time. Thus, the Muslim woman who is loyal to the Nation is brought under its protection. She is exalted to the position of a national hero, a role which was hitherto reserved for the Hindu upper-caste men. The loyalty of Muslim women aligns with that of the nation, while the Muslim men's loyalty is dedicated to the outside separatist militant forces, which threaten the nation's security and translate as treachery and anti-national. Zooni's patriotic zeal is expressed from the beginning of the film when she participates in the dance performance '*Desh mera rangeela*' associated with Independence Day in Delhi, and during the scene where she is compelling her son Rehan to memorise the national anthem. From the innocent victimhood, Zooni emerges as a fighter, taking up the agency in her hands to protect her beloved nation. Zooni is conferred with virtues like love, forgiveness and sacrifice and is juxtaposed to the character of Rehan, who is selfish, materialistic and a traitor. Notably, the Muslim and Kashmiri identity of Zooni is

missing from the narrative, placing her in an artificial mould of constructed Indianness.



Fig 11. “Shooting the Terrorist Husband” shot from *Fanaa* (02:42:36)

Raazi (2018), directed by Meghna Gulzar, is a film based on the novel *Calling Sehmat* by Harinder Sikka. It claims the plot was inspired by the true accounts of a twenty-year-old Kashmiri student of Delhi University named Sehmat Syed, who was married off to Pakistan by her father to function as an undercover Research and Analysis Wing (RAW) agent. Her father, Hidayat Khan, who is an Indian intelligence agent masquerading as an informant to the Pakistan army, wants her to take over this responsibility. The film is set during the period of the 1971 Indo-Pakistan War. She is entrusted with obtaining sensitive information from her husband, Iqbal, a high-ranking military officer, and her father-in-law, Parvez Syed, who is a Pakistani Brigadier, later promoted to Major General. While she resides at their place in Rawalpindi, which also functions as the headquarters of the Pakistan

army, she collects and transmits major information to RAW. She figures out that Pakistan is planning a submarine attack on the Indian army's aircraft carrier INS Vikrant. Meanwhile, Sehmat is forced to murder their house servant Abdul when he finds out that Sehmat is an Indian spy. Later, she kills her brother-in-law by injecting poison when he grows suspicious of her involvement in Abdul's death. Eventually, Iqbal identifies that Sehmat is a RAW agent and confronts her. Sehmat plots an escape from there with the help of agent Manav Chaudhary (Khalid Mir), but by the time she reaches the spot, Iqbal arrives there with ISI (Inter-Services Intelligence) agents. The RAW team shoots Sehmat, and Manav Chaudhary throws a grenade, killing both of them to prevent Iqbal from arresting Sehmat and acquiring information from her. But it was another RAW agent disguised as Sehmat who was killed in the blast, and this makes Sehmat realise that there is no value for her life in this mission. She is traumatised by this realisation and Iqbal's death, and mentally breaks down. Later, we can see Lieutenant General Nikhil Bakshi commemorating the contribution and sacrifice made by Sehmat in rescuing INS Vikrant from the Pakistan submarines, thereby securing the Nation's safety.

Raazi establishes an interesting and nuanced portrayal of the Muslim woman who finds a place with RAW, which is the intelligence wing of India. There are no prior films portraying a Muslim woman in such a role. The narrative glorifies the heroic persona of Sehmat, who undergoes rigorous training and hard work for working under RAW. The word *Raazi* connotes her willingness to serve the nation and bear the sacrifices for it. Sehmat is intelligent and smart, and carries out sensitive tasks regarding national security, which is entrusted to her. In agreeing to

marry a Pakistani military officer and working as an undercover intelligence agent, she makes a personal sacrifice for the sake of the nation. Then she commits two murders of innocent people to protect the sensitive secrets which concern India's security. She also loses her husband to the RAW. The film succeeds in subverting the traditional role of victimhood and submissiveness thrust upon Muslim women characters by bestowing masculine attributes to Sehmat, such as courage and sacrifice and also by portraying a Muslim woman as an active agent of extreme nationalism (Khatun, *Postcolonial Bollywood*, 198). But still, the film was able to align the narrative into the nationalist discourse of sacrificial Muslim women whose loyalty should be confirmed to the state, pitching the Muslim man in opposition as representing the enemy nation.



Fig 12. “Do I Have a Choice?” shot from *Raazi* (01:55:06)

The three films exhibit a similar discourse of nationalist zeal, which is exposed through the characters of the Muslim female protagonists. Even when *Fiza* empathises with the communal bigotry faced by the Muslim community in India, it

takes the standpoint of the apologetic Muslim and her moral duty to rectify the ‘misdeeds’ of her community members, to redeem them from fundamentalism and to eliminate the threat which comes in the form of Islamic terrorism. Fiza tries to put forward a balanced perspective on the communal riots in India, as instigated by politicians of both communities, when the statistics point out that Muslims lose more lives and are subjected to more destruction during the riots. *Fanaa* and *Raazi* place the individual existence subordinated to the nation, where Muslim women have to position themselves with the nation and against the Muslim men who are either terrorists or enemies of the nation. Thus, the Bollywood narratives offer desperate remedies towards annihilating the threat and challenges of Islamic fundamentalism, Kashmiri insurgency or Pakistani military attack through the ‘brave-hearted’ Muslim women who serve as loyal civilians or members of the Indian military wing.

Neo-Liberal Feminism, Islamophobia and Emancipation: *Lipstick Under My Burqa* (2016) and *Secret Superstar* (2017)

In their introduction to *Righting Feminism*, Sara Farris and Catherine Rottenberg observe the sudden ‘virtual explosion’ of feminist content in popular and mainstream media, in versatile forms ranging from bestsellers to television shows from 2012. They point out the coming out of public figures like Theresa May, celebrities like Miley Cyrus and Beyoncé and right-wing politicians like Marine Le Pen as feminists and their empowering experiences gaining public approval. They link this global popularisation of feminism with the simultaneous rise of political ‘anti-Islam feminist fronts’ in European countries, which presents patriarchy as the

exclusive feature of Muslims (5,6). The survival memoirs of Muslim women like *I Am Malala: The Story of the Girl Who Stood Up for Education and Was Shot by the Taliban* (2013) by Malala Yousafzai, co-written with Christina Lamb, *The Last Girl: My Story of Captivity, and My Fight Against the Islamic State* by Jenna Krajeski and Nadia Murad (2018) *I am Nujood, Age 10 and Divorced* (2019) by Nujood Ali and Delphine Minoui proved to be testimonies of the misogyny, chauvinism, orthodoxy and sexual atrocities of the Islamic world over the Muslim women. The phenomenon of connecting misogyny with Islam in its most gruesome form was visible through the short film *Submission* (2004), directed by Theo Van Gogh and written by Ayaan Hirsi Ali, who had turned into a public figure with her anti-Islamic survival memoirs. The film manipulated and exaggerated the Quranic messages to their extremity, where those verses were inscribed to the naked body of a woman wearing a transparent Burqa (Lughod 103). The need to fight against ‘Islamic misogyny’ became an international emergency led by European and American feminists, politicians and media. The Muslim women’s issues in the Islamic world, which found their place in the popular Western media, literature and research, included terrorism, domestic violence, sexual slavery, honour killing, child marriage, forced marriage, polygamy, female genital mutilation and restriction of female education, to name a few(7,8). These issues and the resistance of Muslim women against them with Western aid were portrayed vividly in visual media, including films, short films, and documentaries. Sara R. Farris, in her work, questions these newer techniques and strategies of the West in consolidating Islam as the epitome of all vices from prehistoric times to recent issues. She terms the xenophobic insecurities of Western diplomats, combined with the efforts of liberal

feminists and women's organisations, converging into a battle against Islam as “femonationalism” (*In the Name of Women's Rights* 4). This anti-Islamic global discourse endorsing capitalism and neoliberal feminism as the empowering political movement was exported to several Hollywood and Bollywood movies, which portray Muslim women as mute victims and sexual commodities exploited by Muslim men. The widespread portrayal of Arab and Muslim women as passive, shy, subdued 'sexual objects' of Muslim men, backed by the Islamic scriptures, is the explicit product of global Islamophobia. These narratives are interpreted through the Western liberal feminist lens, focusing on Individualism, agency and freedom, which define freedom in terms of subversion or resistance.

Lipstick Under My Burqa (2016) by Alankrita Srivastava can be read in this context, where the post-9/11 film spaces become articulations of the neoliberal feminist portrayal of Muslim women's issues, reinforcing the discourses of Islamophobia. Initially, when the Central Board of Film Certification denied the film's release, the director took up the role as the spokesperson for the ongoing debates surrounding feminism and free speech in India (Devasundaram 40). The film presupposes a strong, radical feminist framework, hinting towards neo-liberalism and capitalism as emancipatory models for women in general and Muslim women in particular, which should be steered by fighting against the oppressive Muslim men.

Lipstick Under My Burqa is a bildungsroman where four Indian lower-middle-class women, Usha Parmar, Leela, Shirin Aslam and Rehana Abidi, who are of different ages and from various religious backgrounds, manoeuvre their paths

towards 'sexual' liberation. The film is set in Bhopal, where the dilapidated 'Hawai Manzil' where these women reside contrast with the bright and sophisticated city life where they explore themselves and 'perform' their alternate identity. If the crumbling and bleak Hawai Manzil is a space of tradition, suppression and violence, the cityscape is picturised as a space of liberation and dreams.

The film opens with a voice-over from the erotic fantasy novel '*Lipstickwale Sapne*' (Lipstick Dreams), which Buaji (Usha Parmar) reads secretly, "There comes a moment in every girl's life when her desire to become a woman is awakened." Rosie's wishes were also blossoming like a Rose (my trans; 00:00:43-00:01:15)

A burqa-clad Rehana is shown in an expensive cosmetic showroom in a shopping mall where her eyes wander through several international luxury brands. She shoplifts a lipstick from there and rushes to her college. She removes her burqa in the washroom to expose her t-shirt and skinny jeans, applies the stolen lipstick, and comes out as a modern youth who can merge with her collegemates. Her interests tilt towards Western singers like Miley Cyrus, bands like Led Zeppelin and a carefree life where she can drink, smoke, go to pubs and indulge in sexual explorations. She secretly lives this fantasy life in contrast with the one with her poor parents selling 'burqa' for their livelihood. Her father's burqa shop near Hawai Manzil operates as another metaphor for her oppressed desires and dreams.



Fig 13. “The Thief in the Burqa” shot from *Lipstick Under My Burqa* (00:01:26)

Shireen, the wife of Rahim Aslam, a Gulf returnee, is also living a secret fantasy unknown to her husband as a salesgirl. Rahim is portrayed as a stereotypical Muslim husband who disapproves of his wife’s employment, subjects her to forceful sex without protection and fails to share equal responsibilities in marriage and raising children. Rahim subjects Shireen to humiliating sexual acts as disciplinary action against her. Moreover, he exhibits his double standards in indulging in an extra-marital affair with a Hindu woman while shutting Shireen inside the Burqa and a prison-like home with three children. The words of her supervisor at the office align with the popular right-wing bias against Muslim women as ‘birth-giving machines’ when she asks, “Is giving birth your only purpose in life, or do you have some other plans?” (00:41:21-00:41:35, my trans)

Several pamphlets and leaflets distributed by militant Hindu organizations show a "Hindu" husband and wife with two children "*Ham do, hamare do*" (We Two, Ours Two) by the side of a "Muslim" family-a man with four

wives and numerous children, accompanied by the self-explanatory slogan "*Ham paanch, hamaare pacchis*" (We Five, Our Twenty- Five).²⁹ Thus, a whole new "common sense" develops, relating to the marital and sexual practices of "the Muslims" (here, as elsewhere, referring only to Muslim men), to their perverse character and their violent temperament. (Pandey, "In Defence of Fragment",⁴³)

Both Rehana and Shireen, despite being projected as victimised Muslim women, are treated as 'other' and 'potential threat' to the public, which hints towards the dangers associated with the Islamic dressing of Burqa with Niqab (face-cover). The Burqa enables Rehana to easily shoplift and steal things, hiding her identity. While Shireen can force herself into unknown households, to threaten them and to spy on others through her burqa.

Like Rehana and Shireen, the other two characters, Leela and Buaji, also live their fantasies for escaping the bleak realities in the traditional '*Hawai Manzil*'. The four characters come together in the burqa shop, who are abused and kicked out of their homes by the oppressive patriarchal figures. But their predicaments and resistance converge by assembling the torn pages of Buaji's erotic novel. It becomes the connecting thread of these four women instead of the need for financial independence or dignity, which are cornered in the narrative. The fictional figure of Rosie is the metaphor for all the suppressed sexual and materialistic desires of these women, consisting of motorbikes, attractive men, cityscapes, flowing hair, high heels, and lipstick. There are specifically two scenes: the cross-cutting scene where the four women apply lipstick when getting dressed for the *mela*/fair (01:33:37-

01:33:41) and the climax scene in the burqa shop where the four women share a cigarette which glorifies the western capitalist ideology which constructs the benchmark for feminism where the cosmetic industry and western culture plays an important role rather than challenging the oppressive systems.

All of these women are victims of patriarchal figures who force them to live under the traditional Indian conventions that expect women to be subordinate to men. But the focus is put upon the Muslim women who have 'Lipstick' under their 'burqas' rather than Leela or Buaji. The moment when Rehana and Shireen remove their niqab and apply lipstick translates as the moment of liberation from the clutches of all the Islamic patriarchal restrictions imposed upon her. But the irony of their idea of liberation lies in the fact that they believe in becoming an employee or consumer of a commodity-based capital system that they imagine will set them free. The narrative fails to reflect on the exploitative network of systems which contribute to the social and economic inequalities of which they are a victim. This concept of feminist liberation aligns with what is termed as 'Lipstick Feminism', a strand of third-wave European feminist movement which endorsed individualism, sexual freedom and consumption of cosmetics for achieving a sexually desirable appearance for women to empower themselves in society (Baker 3). Buaji's desperate efforts to look younger by appropriating her looks with cosmetics also reflect this specific feminist perspective behind the film discourse.

Lipstick feminism is clearly in line with a new mode of neoliberal female citizenship, in which the achievement of a 'glamorous individuality' is seen as the key to women's empowerment and success. The focus has shifted to

individuals' projects, which are influenced and supported by consumer culture (Marchetti, "Lipstick Feminism").

Films like this can draw unwarranted attention towards the complex issues linked to the Muslim community. The treatment of Muslim men in the film aligns with the popular Right-wing rhetoric of '*Love-Jihad*', where Rahim and Arshad are involved in sexual and adulterous relationships with their Hindu lovers. Both of them sexually exploit and betray the women, which feeds the demonised image of Muslim men as sexual predators of Hindu women. Even if the director has tried to balance the gender issues with two Muslim women and two Hindu women, the scales of the former weigh down more with domestic violence, marital rape, denying rights to one's own body, restrictions on employment and education. When the oppression faced by these women is addressed, for the Hindu women, it becomes a rebellion against patriarchy, but when it comes to the Muslim women, it is translated as the continuity of the long-existing fight against the Islamic religion itself.

Advait Chandan's *Secret Superstar* (2017) is also a liberation narrative focusing on a Muslim teenager named Insiya and her mother Najma, who are from Baroda in Gujarat. Najma aspires to be a singer, but her abusive father, Farookh, is against her dreams and wants to marry her off. Because of Farookh's violence and his abhorrence of music, Insiya hides her identity under a burqa and launches her YouTube music channel, which attracts much media attention. When Najma realises that Insiya's future is at stake, she divorces Farookh and takes Insiya to the award function, where Insiya removes the burqa and reveals her identity.

The film's director and producing team are well-known for their television series *Satyamev Jayate*, which deals with the social issues in India, domestic violence being one of the key concerns addressed in Season 1, Episode 7 of the same. A domestic violence victim and survivor named Shanno was the focus of the episode, where she takes up the job of an autorickshaw driver with the support of her daughter, which became the inspiration for the film ("Secret Superstar"). But when a film focusing on Muslim women's issues set in Gujarat shifts its focus entirely to a case of domestic violence inside a Muslim household, the discourse on Muslim women's issues takes a different course. Gujarat is a politically sensitive location in India where communal riots are rampant and where hundreds of Muslim women like Bilkis Bano and Kausar Bano were either brutally raped or killed in the most aggressive ways out of communal bigotry (Flavia, "From Shah Bano to Kausar Bano", 48,49). The observations on the communal aggressions point towards how:

The Vishwa Hindu Parishad and Bajrang Dal have been widely accepted to be key perpetrators in the well-planned and systematic attacks on Muslim lives and property in cities, towns and villages. As in Partition, and more recently in Rwanda and Bosnia, in Gujarat too, women's bodies were sites of violence in this masculinist, hegemonic project of subjugation. Unimaginable acts of sexual violence were perpetrated on women, young and old and even pregnant women - in Ahmedabad and villages in Panchmahals. (Srinivasan et al 4,5)

The film constructs a stereotypical representation of a middle-class Muslim household where the husband is abusive, chauvinist, and senseless towards his wife.

When Farookh treats Najma and Insiya poorly, denying even simple happiness like playing guitar or going to a movie to Insiya, her brother Guddu is privileged by him, as he will grow up into a man like him. Najma is abused in front of the family for minor things like putting excess salt in the food, but she refuses to divorce him until she realises that her daughter's future will be destroyed.

The scenes of domestic violence dominate throughout the film, where Najma becomes a mute victim of Farookh's abuses. The opening scene itself shows bruises over Najma's eyes indicating violence from her husband which she is hiding from Insiya (00:05:53-00:06:48). Farookh throws the food plate over Najma as she forgets to pack his cloths for his official trip (16:35-16:51). He destroys Insiya's guitar and attacks Insiya for low grades in school (51:42-52:45). Fight takes place over the gold necklace which Najma had sold for Insiya's laptop without the knowledge and permission of Farookh where he thrashes Najma with a chair (55:25-1:00:05).

Farookh tries to force Insiya, who is a minor, to marry Razzaq, the son of the vice-president of his company in Riyadh, who had offered him the job. Saudi Arabia, to which Insiya's family is moving to is presented with a negative connotation of their bleak future without any freedom. At the airport, Farookh asks Insiya to throw the guitar into the wastebasket. At this point, Najma realises that if they move to Saudi Arabia with Farookh, Insiya's future will be ruined forever, and she will never achieve her dreams (02:10:14-02:14:54). Najma signs the divorce papers at the airport and attends the award function with Insiya.

The role of Chintan, Insiya's boyfriend, Shakthi Kumar, her mentor musician and advocate Sheena Sabawala, who guides Insiya on her mother's divorce, are

noticeable where the non-muslim act as the saviour while the Muslim male becomes the primary oppressor. The cinematic text of *Secret Superstar* can be closely read with the observations made by Shamsad Hussain and Nadira Khatun. Shamsad Hussain, in her studies on the Malayalam film *Vilapangalkkappuram*, which focuses on a Godhra riot survivor named Saheera, notes how all the oppressors around her are uncivilised Muslim men portrayed as sexual perverts who want Saheera as their wife, but her sympathisers are shown as polite Hindus who put their sincere efforts to save her. Hussain notes that the whole characterisation of the film pivots around the dichotomy of orthodox Muslim vs modern Hindu (45). Nadira Khatun argues that films like *Lipstick under My Burqa* and *Secret Superstar* indicate that Muslims are oppressed by their traditions, and they are unable to come out of their religious identity, and only Hindus can become the ‘torch-bearers’ of modernity. She also points out how the Hindu supporting characters help out the oppressed Muslims in buying their freedom or achieving their dreams while their own people are portrayed as oppressors and traitors (*Postcolonial Bollywood* 216). Even when the singer who is the special guest of the award show recollects her childhood, where she grew up with the dream of becoming a great singer, it juxtaposes the oppressed dreams and childhood of Insiya and even the odd nature of two burqa clad women amidst the elite celebrity crowd of Bollywood divas projecting them as the ‘other’ (02:18:08–2:18:22).

Laura Mulvey in her seminal essay *Visual Pleasures and Narrative Cinema* elaborates upon the three important looks to which the female body is subjected to, ie. “that of the camera as it records the pro-filmic event, that of the audience as it

watches the final product, and that of the characters at each other within the screen illusion”(25). In the scene where Insiya is invited to the stage to receive the best singer award, the camera mounted on the crane moves towards her, and she removes her burqa at the point where her gaze converges with that of the camera. The removal of the burqa before the camera is the exposure of the Muslim female body to the look/gaze of the camera, male characters and the audience simultaneously, turning her into an object/spectacle (2:19:46- 2:20:34).



Figure 14. “The Camera Gaze” shot from *Secret Superstar* (02:19:51)

This narrative draws us back to the colonial/western obsessions surrounding the veil, where the image of a veiled Muslim woman is indicative of all the core problems in Islam. Thus, unveiling becomes a mandatory ritual of initiating the Muslim woman from the oppressed state to that of liberation. The identity of Shireen, Rehana and Insiya under the *burqa* becomes threatening and intriguing, where they assume the role of the voyeur, possessing within themselves the capacity to

see without being seen, which is a powerful female gaze resembling the camera itself (Alloula 14). And this same intimidating invisibility has to be given up to enter the domain of modernity, enlightenment and liberation, which "privileged seeing as the primary route to knowledge" (MacDonald "Muslim Women and Veil", 9). *Secret Superstar* comfortably dodges the questions of the ground reality of Muslim women in a riot-stricken place like Gujarat, where they form the most vulnerable group to the Majoritarian violence and its inhumane forms, suppressing their daily lives into a mute existence. But when the film places the Muslim men and Islamic traditions as the core oppressors of the Muslim women, it's notable that Zahira Wasim, a Kashmiri Muslim who played the character of Insiya in the film, announced her retirement from her acting career as it interfered with her relationship to her religious duties. Her early retirement invited much critical remarks, where the reaction from Taslima Nasreen on Twitter was an attack on her personal choice: "Zaira Wasim's decision to quit is sinister: This is not spiritualism but dangerous political Islam" (Nasreen). Where personal choices are seen as political assertions in feminism, the position of liberal feminists like Tasleema Nasreen undermines the socio-religious choices of Muslim women regarding slavery.

The contrasting representation of Muslim women under Islamic patriarchy and secular modernity has been mentioned in Sarah Farris' study on the images used by Western politicians for their campaigns advocating neo-liberal policies that can liberate the Muslim woman. She argues that the convergence of right-wing nationalism and neo-liberal feminism in the name of Muslim women's rights is basically an economic and political agenda where gender equality is projected under

the shadow of the “fear of the other”, ie, the non-Western migrants and Muslims (*In the Name of Women's Rights*, 5). To emphasise the liberation of Muslim women under the femonationalist schema, the contrasting images of a veiled Muslim woman captivated behind bars and a modern woman in western attire at the office were used in election posters (38).

These films clearly filter the transcendental journey of the ‘oppressed Muslim woman’ under the neo-liberal feminist perspectives, which presupposes a Muslim male opponent whom she has to escape by transcending all the conventions and boundaries attached to the patriarchal religion. Throughout the narrative, liberation or freedom is characterised by the image of discarding the burqa and embracing commodities and behaviours associated with Western capitalist industry, where it is the red lipstick, Western music, smoking, exposing dresses or sexual encounters projected in these films. This explicitly signals the neo-liberal feminist approach to the concept of freedom, especially offered to Muslim women. It's notable that in the films under this category, the urban spaces, like the shopping mall, office space and pubs in *Lipstick Under My Burqa*, the airport and recording studio in *Secret Superstar*, appear as liberating and offering possibilities of employment, movement and independence to Muslim women and link her to the capitalist material world. Consequently, the domestic space/ household becomes dark dens of dictatorship, violence and fear, paired with discipline and punishment. The domestic space is utilised as a performative stage where the Muslim husband's sadistic/sexual pursuits are unfolded upon the mute/disempowered wife. The similarity between the poor, dark, dilapidated households in both films tries to

condense the urban subaltern Muslim households as prison-houses where women are subjected to perpetual torture.

Theorising Muslim Women's Representation

The representation of marginalised groups like Muslims, Dalits, Tribals and sexual minorities in India has always been problematic, especially in cinema. Bollywood has often functioned as a medium for projecting the prejudices surrounding these groups, often reducing them to stereotypes or commonly accepted tropes that satisfy the dominant narratives of the majoritarian groups. Stuart Hall, in his study on the politics of representation, explains the importance of these tropes within the 'shared cultural meanings' and 'shared maps of meaning', which are systems of ideas or meanings that are socially constructed and shared within a culture. These shared meanings established through repetition and convention influence the way marginalised groups are represented and perceived (Hall, "The Work of Representation", 29). As he notes, "The ways we have been positioned and subjected in the dominant regimes of representation were a critical exercise of cultural power and normalisation, precisely because they were not superficial. They had the power to make us see and experience ourselves as 'Other'" (Hall, "Cultural Identity" 71). When considering the theoretical perspectives of Hall, the Muslim women in the films under study are situated inside a system of shared meanings gradually constructed by the Majoritarian discourse, where they become a 'spectacle' of 'other', which is a fascinating object of representation, subjected to stereotyping ("The Spectacle of the Other", 231). According to Hall,

Stereotypes get hold of the few 'simple, vivid, memorable, easily grasped and widely recognised' characteristics about a person, reduce everything about the person to those traits, exaggerate and simplify them, and fix them without change or development to eternity. (...) So the first point is - stereotyping reduces, essentializes, naturalises and fixes 'difference' (258).

When Muslim women characters are stereotyped into victims, nationalists and feminists, it becomes easier to classify them, marking the difference from the normative Hindu and to erase the complex experiences and politics which shape their reality. When analysing the patterns emerging from the films under each category, we can see how the narratives and characteristics of Muslim women share more or less similar features. This similarity is a dangerous weapon which tries to establish that the Indian Muslim women can only exist in these forms. The reiteration of these stereotypes establishes the acceptability of these types of characters and narratives in Bollywood, where the spectator deciphers the symbolisms as common codes. For example, the domestic violence in these films associates itself with Islamic patriarchy and misogyny, which becomes a 'common code'. Thus, for Bollywood, which is a commercial film industry, any other kind of representation of Muslim women which is not adhere to the popular stereotypes is either not acceptable or not profitable.

Films like *Gadar*, *Veer Zaara* and *Raazi* can be studied under the theoretical framework of Intimacy geopolitics developed by Rachel Pain and Lynn Staeheli, which argues that even intimate practices and personal relationships are interconnected with, and shaped by, the complex power dynamics of geographical

locations, as well as national and global political structures (Pain and Staeheli 3). In nations like India and Pakistan, the wounds of partition and the complexities of demarcated boundaries do not only exist on the geographical level, but they are deeply ingrained in the minds of their people, too. Thus, the films discussing heterosexual relationships which are cross-religious and cross-national mostly end up in tragedies, “revealing how the state and communal politics constitute the individual relationships and how individual affect gets addressed as an act of political control, terror, transgression or resistance” (Mopila and Sreepriya 90). The storyline of *Veer Zaara* and *Gadar* emphasises the impossibility of conjugality between the members of two opposing communities and two rival nations because of the historical contestation separating them infinitely. The only possibility of their union is by integrating the Muslim Pakistani women into the folds of India, as in *Veer Zaara* and *Gadar*. Whilst the impossibility of integration of a Pakistani man into India is symbolised by the tragic death of Iqbal Syed in *Raazi*. The intimate relationships are thus not contained inside a private domain of bonding in these cases, but governed, controlled and negotiated by the political power exertion of the state and community. They act not according to individual choices or agency, but as citizens of respective nations and members of the opposing communities. As Sara Smith notes, “...globally taut and tight threads connect the bordering of land into oppositional territories and the bounding of bodies into collectives of family, community, national identity, ethnicity, race, and religion”(5).

The discourse of nationalism, islamophobia, neo-liberal feminism and intimate geopolitics are integrated into these cinematic texts with progressive plots,

where the Muslim woman is not devoid of agency, but she is imagined as an agent of either the secular nation or majoritarian values. The victimised status of the Muslim women becomes an innate subjectivity imposed upon her through the oppressive religion and patriarchal structures inside it.

The need for a systematic and objective analysis of the stereotyped and stigmatised role of Muslim characters in Hollywood films was brought out after British Actor Riz Ahmed's 2017 speech in the House of Commons on diversity on screen (Riz Ahmed, Chambers and Hussain 289). The Riz test is one of the early tools developed for analysing the representation of Muslims in films by the scholars Shaf Choudry and Dr Sadia Habib (Mixon 10). The test evaluates films based on a set of specific questions:

If the film/show stars at least one character who is identifiably Muslim (by ethnicity, language or clothing), is the character...

1. Talking about the victim of, or the perpetrator of, terrorism?
2. Presented as irrationally angry?
3. Presented as superstitious, culturally backwards or anti-modern?
4. Presented as a threat to a Western way of life?
5. If the character is male, is he presented as misogynistic? Or if female, is she presented as oppressed by her male counterparts?

If the answer to any of the above is Yes, then the Film/ TV Show fails the test (What is the Riz Test?).

Riz Test can be applied to any films for analysing whether these films contain Islamophobic content by checking if the representation of Muslims in the film conveys negative, biased or vilified images. For example, *Bombay* can be subjected to the test by scanning the film for locating the explicit Islamophobic instances given in the questionnaire. According to the test, we can derive that the Muslim characters in the films, especially Basheer, father of Shaila Bano, are shown as aggressive and communal. They are portrayed as culturally backward and anti-modern, as they oppose inter-religious marriage and don't respect their daughter's choice. They are projected as threatening to the secular plural values of the nation. The character of Basheer and other male members of the village oppose Shaila Bano's right to choose her partner and curtail her freedom, so she has to flee them. Shaila Bano becomes the victimised and oppressed female. Thus, these instances provide an affirmative answer to four questions out of the five in the Riz Test, causing the film to fail, denoting a biased and stereotyped portrayal of Muslims.

In case of applying the Riz Test to the films under study, all of them stand the chance to potentially fail the test because of the explicit Islamophobic portrayals and narratives where Muslims are mostly stereotyped as victims, terrorists, misogynists, culturally backward or violent. Riz Test has been a crucial turning point in studying islamophobia in films. But the limitation of the test lies in its oversimplified and surface-level categories of analysing the films. The test categories, like if the film 'threatens the Western ways of life', limit the scope of analysis to the Hollywood or European films, and it becomes problematic in applying the test to non-Western films like Indian ones, because the Western ways

of life need not be the dominant ideology or culture here. Another problem in the test is that even positive films can fail the test, even if a single YES appears as an answer to any of the questions. A crucial film like *A Separation* (2011), Asghar Farhadi can run the risk of failing the test if the anger expressed by the Muslim character Nader in the film is considered irrational (Mixon 15). While the movie *RRR* (2022) by S.S. Rajamouli can pass the Riz test as it doesn't mention terrorism, violent Muslim men or oppressed Muslim women, while carrying subtle majoritarian narratives which marginalise the Muslim culture and their contributions. But, even if the Riz test had drawbacks and limitations, it was one of the first instances of a tool developed for scientifically evaluating films with Islamophobic instances, stereotypes and recognising its patterns.

Following the Riz Test, Muslim Casting developed the Muslim Women Onscreen Test, backed by Geena Davis Institute on Gender in Media and Pillars Fund. Similar to the Riz Test, the Muslim Women Onscreen Test also analyses the films based on a specific set of questions ("Surviving to Thriving"). After analysing the films, the total harmful portrayals are subtracted from the total nuanced portrayals of female Muslim characters. The score obtained is evaluated against the assessment scale given below:

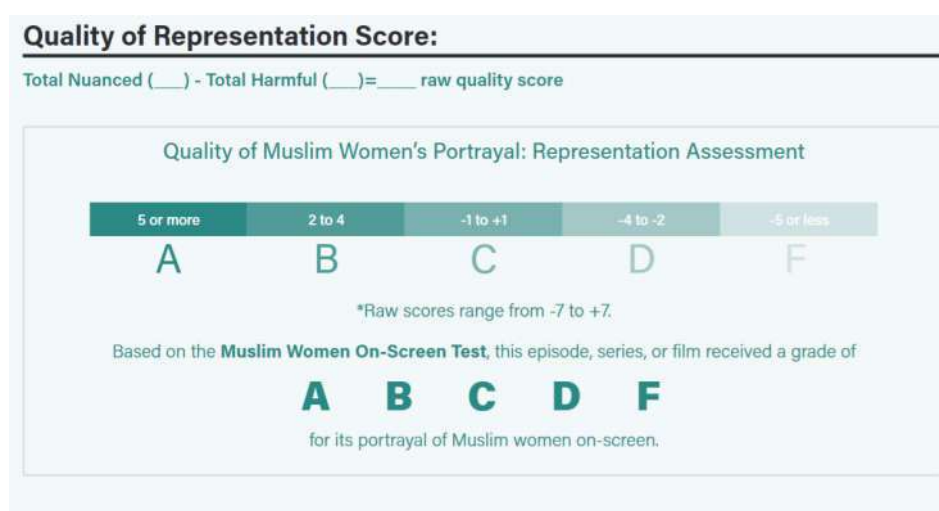


Fig 15. Quality of Representation Score

Table 1 Criteria for Evaluating Harmful Portrayals

Film Title and Year of Release	Criteria for Evaluating Harmful Portrayals							Total value of harmful portrayals
	Oppressed	Rejects Identity	Monolithic	Othered	Objectified	Primitive	Connected to Terrorism	
Bombay	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓		6
Gadar Ek Premkadha	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓			5
Veer Zaara	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓			5
Fiza	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓		✓	6
Fanaa	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓		✓	6
Raazi	✓		✓	✓				3
Lipstick Under My Burqa	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓		6
Secret Superstar	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓			5

Table 2 Criteria for Evaluating Nuanced Portrayals

Film Title	Criteria for Evaluating Nuanced Portrayals							Total value of nuanced portrayals
	Lead Role	Varying Approaches	Intersectionality	Integral to community	Leader	Joy	In motion	
<i>Bombay</i>	✓		✓			✓	✓	4
<i>Gadar</i>	✓		✓			✓	✓	4
<i>Veer Zaara</i>	✓		✓	✓		✓	✓	5
<i>Fiza</i>	✓		✓			✓	✓	4
<i>Fanaa</i>	✓		✓			✓	✓	4
<i>Raazi</i>	✓		✓			✓	✓	4
<i>Lipstick Under My Burqa</i>	✓		✓			✓	✓	4
Secret Superstar	✓		✓			✓	✓	4

Table 3 Grade of Assessment

Title	Total harmful portrayal - Total nuanced portrayal Raw Quality Score	Grade of Assessment
<i>Bombay</i>	6-4 = 2	B
<i>Gadar Ek Premkadha</i>	5-4 = 1	C
<i>Veer Zaara</i>	5-5 = 0	C
<i>Fiza</i>	6-4 = 2	B
<i>Fanaa</i>	6-4 = 2	B
<i>Raazi</i>	3-4 = -1	C
<i>Lipstick Under My Burqa</i>	6-4 = 2	B
Secret Superstar	5-4 = 1	C

The Muslim Women Onscreen Test analyses the films mainly under two broad categories: Total harmful portrayals and total nuanced portrayals. The results obtained from the evaluation categorise films *Bombay*, *Fiza*, *Fanaa* and *Lipstick Under My Burqa* under Grade B. *Gadar: Ek Prem Katha*, *Veer Zaara*, *Raazi*, and *Secret Superstar* fall under Grade C as the total harmful portrayals exceed total nuanced portrayals or cancel out each other with equal numbers. Grade B is indicative of a lesser stereotypical representation compared to the Grade C films. But the ambiguity lies in the fact that the films identified under both Grade B and C show subtler Islamophobic discourse, stereotypes, and oppressed Muslim women under the garb of progressive themes, which are unidentifiable using this specific test. Even though the Muslim women characters in these films are portrayed as educated, modern and intelligent, making their own choices and fighting against the system, the underlying narrative posits these women in the same reductive stereotypes of victims of Islamic patriarchy without bringing into discussion the minority status or socio-economic circumstances which shape the choices of Muslim women. The simplified categories used for evaluation make it difficult to trace the underlying majoritarian ideology, islamophobia and propaganda. These characters are projected as rebellious Muslim women trying to liberate themselves from the oppressive control of orthodox and misogynistic Muslim men. The film narrative positions these Muslim women detached from the core issues of communalism and economic challenges, which force them towards the fringes of society. Films like *Fiza*, even when addressing communalism, riots and bigotry against Muslims, end up placing the Muslim woman as a nationalist who has to prove her patriotism by executing her own brother. There are several instances where Fiza tries to fit into

the feminist, secular mould that is sexualised and objectified to suit the neo-liberal female identity. These films, unlike the earlier Socials, do not limit the Muslim women characters as housewives oppressed by *talaq* or polygamy, but they can be seen exercising their agency and choice in pledging their devotion to the Hindu secular nationalist male, as in *Bombay*, *Gadar: Ek Prem Katha* and *Veer Zaara*. The progressive Muslim women in these films function as the testimonies of women's suffering inside Islam, and most films neglect the actual situation of Muslim women in India. When analysing these characters in connection with the ground reality of Muslim women as detailed in Chapter 2, we can see that beneath these narratives, Muslim women are not really in collusion with the economic or social challenges, but are rather engaged in a warfare against their own community. The characters are disconnected from the real experiences of Muslim women and also appropriated to suit the typical Bollywood formula and spectacle, where over-sexualised and glamourised images in song sequences become an inevitable component. The song sequences like 'Kuchi kuchi Rakkamma' in *Bombay*, 'Hum Juda Ho Gaye' *Gadar*, 'Mein Yahaa Hoon' *Veer Zaara*, 'Dhekho Na' in *Fanaa* and 'Ankh Milaungi' in *Fiza* are a few examples of the glamourised representation of Muslim women.

The cinematic representation of the Muslim women in these films tries to project a subject who is victimised by the Muslim patriarchy but still agential and 'free to choose' to act against the 'oppressive forces' with the aid of Hindu masculine heroes. They are to be redeemed by the Hindu heroes and re-integrated into the folds of the Hindu nation resonating with Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak's observation of "White men saving brown women from brown men" (Spivak 48) in

colonial India where rare practices like *Sati* were exaggerated for creating a saviour image for colonizers and their benevolence towards the Indian women whom they consider as inferior. Likewise, the Muslim women characters in these films are ‘saved’ from the Muslim men by the Hindu men to show the Muslim culture and practices as inferior and misogynistic.

The political shift after the 1990s, which reinforced the Majoritarian ideology over Bollywood, can be seen as a crucial and determining factor in the rendition of Muslim women characters who are positioned in a chaotic situation, often torn between the community and nation, where their loyalty is pledged to the latter. The neo-liberal feminist characters in these films also pose as a rebellious reaction against Islamic practices and culture, which is deemed to be misogynistic, where instances of polygamy, triple talaq, child marriage and resistance against family planning are projected as common practices among Muslims arbitrarily. Sexual liberation is put forward as a benchmark for emancipation for Muslim women in these films. When examined collectively and subjected to critical scrutiny, these films serve as clear indicators of the subtle dissemination of propaganda and Islamophobic narratives that are strategically embedded within progressive discourses that claim to align with secularism and feminism. The analysis draws attention to the complicated and subtle ways in which religion, gender and culture are used to construct certain biased and layered ideologies which reinforce the dominant and hegemonic discourses (Nichols 5). Films can be understood as one of the Ideological State Apparatus (ISA) mentioned in Louis Althusser’s study on ideology. According to him, “(...) Ideological State

Apparatuses function massively and predominantly by ideology, but they also function secondarily by repression, even if ultimately, but only ultimately, this is very attenuated and concealed, even symbolic” (Althusser 244). Thus, the films under study do not overly articulate Islamophobia or majoritarianism in a direct manner that is characteristic of proper propaganda films. Instead, they embed majoritarian fundamentalism and cultural nationalism within subtle and diluted narrative frameworks that remain largely imperceptible to an audience that is conditioned to Bollywood. These hidden narratives become legible only through critical analysis and dismantling of their narrative strategies. This ideological encoding is fulfilled effectively with the deployment of progressive narratives, especially those centred on agential muslim women who break away from Islam or combat ‘fundamentalism’, symbolically if not directly. Notable instances like Shaira Bano’s renunciation of purdah and her appearance in Hindu attire in *Bombay*, Tara Singh’s act of applying blood on Sakina’s forehead as symbolic of Hindu marriage in *Gadar*, or Zooni’s killing of her “terrorist” husband in *Fanaa*. Such scenes operate as subtle representations of Muslim women’s submission to the majoritarian discourses which label Muslim men as misogynists/terrorists and Islam as a dangerous and aggressive religion.

Bollywood is understood as a national soft power and promoter of Indian culture, which also has the potential to “cloak, naturalise and entrench endogenous systems of cultural dominance and hegemony” (Devasundaram 52). Bollywood’s soft power, which is legitimised by the state, corporations and media, is exerted through the complicity or willingness of civic society to submit to this power (52).

The subtle propaganda concealed in these films is disseminated among the mass audience and consequently shapes the common understanding of Muslim women's identity and their position inside the community and the nation.

Muslim Women in Bollywood Propaganda Films

The year 2019 marks the general election in India, which brought the right-wing political leadership into power again. Ajay Gehlawat, in his book *Bollypolitics: Popular Hindi Cinema and Hindutva*, objectively traces the influences of majoritarian politics over Bollywood. The period after 2019 becomes a fertile ground for propaganda films which rewrite history according to the dominant discourses and which disseminates islamophobia without any barriers (1,2). *The Accidental Prime Minister* (2019) by Vijay Ratnakar Gutte, *The Kashmir Files* (2021) by Vivek Agnihotri, *Sabarmati Report* (2024) by Ranjan Chandel, *The Kerala Story* (2023) by Sudipto Sen, *Article 370* (2024) by Adiare Suhas Jambhale, *Hamare Baarah* (2034) by Kamal Chandra, *72 Hoorain* (2019) by Sanjay Puran Singh Chauhan are some of the notable propaganda films which were recently released.

The stereotyped Muslim woman characters which emerged from the films under study in this research were mostly victims, nationalists and feminists. Continuing the subtle pattern of ideology dissemination of the films that were analysed, the outrightly propagandist films introduce Muslim women who are two extreme versions of villainy and heroism. The recent academic studies on propaganda films like *The Kerala Story* point towards a strategic framing of Muslims as recruiters to fundamentalist Islamic organisations, where the Muslim

woman is portrayed as equally participating in such activities. Sahin Reja Mondal & Shubham Bhattacharjee, in their work, examine how the Hindu and Christian women are shown as victims of Muslim men and women who conspire, persuade, sexually exploit and threaten them for joining the extremists who operate in Middle Eastern countries like Syria (167). They observe that the film had misrepresented and exaggerated an isolated incident into large numbers to inflame communal hatred towards Muslims (168). The film had exploited the majoritarian anxieties of *Love jihad*, a term used by majoritarian parties to denote Muslim men coercing Hindu women into conversion (Khatun, “Love-Jihad’ and Bollywood”, 16-17, Kunnummal).

Similarly, *Article 370* is a flip coin where Zooni Haskar is a field agent of the National Investigation Agency and is dedicatedly involved with the government in fighting terrorism and the abrogation of Article 370 in Kashmir. Zooni is a die-hard nationalist, a military personnel and ruthless in her operations against the terrorists in Kashmir. These films clearly demarcate the Muslim women into new tropes and character moulds, which justifies the majoritarian discourses using clear propaganda, using partial truths, manipulation of history and exaggeration of current events to heighten the already existing communal drift and bigotry between Hindus and Muslims.

A comparative examination of these films and their earlier counterparts reveals a discernible shift in the nature of propaganda, evolving from implicit to increasingly explicit forms. Harold Lasswell, in his in-depth study on propaganda, opines that “it refers solely to the control of opinion by significant symbols, or, to

speak more concretely and less accurately, by stories, rumours, reports, pictures and other forms of social communication. Propaganda is concerned with the management of opinions and attitudes by the direct manipulation of social suggestion rather than by altering other conditions in the environment or in the organism” (9). And he also emphasises that propaganda is administered through “repetition of ideas rather than movements” (11). Bollywood had hidden subtle majoritarian and nationalist ideologies inside the typical formula entrenched in chivalric romance and exaggerated melodrama for a long period, yielding significant success. An examination of the aforementioned films reveals a deliberate omission of conventional cinematic elements such as song, dance, romance, and other fantasy tropes, opting instead for a stripped-down, event-based mode of storytelling designed to construct a realistic and serious narrative foregrounded by overt political content. This aesthetic shift aligns with the current political climate in India, where state representatives themselves endorse such propaganda films, thereby facilitating the dissemination of hate-driven narratives even in their most explicit forms.

Alternative Portrayal of Muslim Women in Bollywood

Muslim Women in Alternative Films

To counter the mainstream commercial ‘formula’ movies, the emergence of the ‘New Wave’ or ‘New Cinema’ movement in the Indian film industry has been a decisive factor. Ira Bhaskar defines this movement as ‘connected to a concern with aesthetics, to a seriousness of intent, and to a representation of social issues with a drive towards an understanding of reality in all its complexities, contradictions and ambiguities, necessary, it was believed, for the transformation of society’ (19). The

Muslim New Wave Socials, which developed as part of this movement, also bifurcated from the commercial films which fantasised about the Muslim community in India as a closed life of aesthetics and romance. The Muslim new wave socials tried to penetrate the unexplored lives of marginalised Muslim women caught between the intricate matrix of partition, minority status, economic depravity and communal conflicts.

Salim Akhtar Mirza's *Naseem* (1995) focused on the Muslim experience from the fringes of society, emphasising the apprehension of violence which can erupt anytime in the name of religious bigotry. The film brings out the turbulent events of the Babri Masjid Demolition in 1992, which is rarely discussed or portrayed in mainstream Bollywood. The film is set between the period of June and December 1992 in Mumbai, when the Ram Janmabhoomi Movement and Rathayatra converged into a frantic mob under the banner of Karsevaks, demolishing the ancient Babri Masjid in Ayodhya, Uttar Pradesh. The Majoritarian groups claimed Babri Masjid to be the birthplace of Rama and the site of a Hindu temple, which Babur destroyed to build the mosque (Varma and Menon 83). The incidents are narrated through Naseem, a 15-year-old girl who witnesses the growing tension between Hindus and Muslims in her surroundings. While her grandfather narrates the stories of religious harmony which existed between him and his friends, the family watch the terrifying violence unfolding in Ayodhya on their television. Apart from the television news and a few exchanges on communal tension, the direct images of demolition and violence are absent in the film. Rather, the polarisation is visualised through the everyday events of Naseem's life, her Grandfather's stories

and her neighbourhood, which was not going to be the same after the demolition, which was to leave a permanent scar in the heart of secular India. The news broadcasted in the television set gives important hints on the deteriorating situation in Ayodhya like L.K Adwani's speech on Hindu claims on Kasi and Madhura and Karsevaks collecting bricks for Ram temple and Muslim families leaving their homes (00:58:44-00:59:08). We also witness an announcement in Naseem's school asking students to leave because of communal tension in the city and a rally of Karsevaks in lorries passing by. The demise of Naseem's grandfather, which coincides with the day of the demolition of Babri Masjid, is symbolic of the demise of communal harmony in India. Naseem is portrayed as a girl with insights, exploring the world around her with curiosity and, at the same time, bewildered at the changing dynamics between the people around her, which contradicts the world of harmony narrated by her grandfather. Opposing the narratives of victimhood inside the community, Naseem is vibrant in her classroom and among her friends. The Muslim girls were situated in a progressive world of classrooms amidst history, science and literature. The looming fear of communal bigotry around them is the real challenge to their future, turning it into a state of uncertainty.

The most important films from the New Wave Muslim Social genre, which directly and exclusively focus on Muslim women, are the Muslim Women trilogy by Shyam Benegal, consisting of *Mammo* (1994), *Sardari Begum* (1996) and *Zubeidaa* (2001). The films were a direct response of Syam Benegal to the demolition of Babri Masjid and witnessing the disenfranchised position of Muslims in India (Samaddar 185). All these three films traverse through the diverse identities and lived

experiences of Muslim women from different locales of India. The films also strive to present the possible alternative stories of Muslim women under different subject positions, which are not incorporated into the popular narratives of national histories. Anuradha Dingwaney Needham's work provides a crucial perspective on the politics of Syam Bengal's films which questions the pre-requisite of Indian nationalism which places women as the central point of the state's relationship with modernity (Needham, *New Indian Cinema* 13). He argues that Benegal attempts to centre these film narratives on Muslim women's lives and domestic spaces by adopting a minority perspective which would be otherwise seen and understood through a dominant-masculine lens (85). The female characters in his films are often situated outside the definition of the ideal Indian woman. These women continuously trespass the boundaries of religion, nation and morality. Khaled Mohammad, the scriptwriter of the trilogy, has drawn the stories of these films from his own experiences with the Muslim women around him, especially the ones from his own family. *Mammo* was an autobiographical film based on his great-aunt, who was deported to Pakistan. *Sardari Begum* was based on another sister of his grandmother, and Zubeida was his own mother's story (Priya Kumar 103-104,108).

Mammo is a film which talks about the unacknowledged micronarratives of women's experience of Partition. The film dares to question the basic conception of ideas like Nation, boundaries and partition, which do not recognise the intimate bonds between human beings severed by geopolitical divisions. The terrible memories of partition and Mammo's quest for her motherland and the desire to belong marred by the state bureaucracy and divisive politics recall the short story by

Saadat Hassan Manto, Toba Tek Singh, where the writer questions the madness caused by partition, the decision makers as more insane than the lunatic inmates of the asylum (Jalal 3). The meaninglessness of partition was personified through Bishan Singh who has been searching for his homeland for fifteen years: “Beyond a wired fence on one side of him was Hindustan, and beyond a wired fence on the other side was Pakistan. In the middle, on a stretch of land that had no name, lay Toba Tek Singh” (Manto 19). Mammo also carries a reference to the film *Garam Hawa*, where Salim Mirza’s mother takes her last breath in her ancestral home, refusing to accept the reality of partition. All these characters connect to Mammo in their resistance to the violence of partition and separation from their roots.

Mammo is narrated through the memories of Riyaz about Mammo, aka Mehmuda Begum Ali, who is the sister of his maternal grandmother, Fayyuzi. As Mammo had migrated to Pakistan following the partition with her husband, she had lost Indian citizenship even though she was born in Panipat. After the death of her husband and being abandoned by her in-laws, having no one to rely upon, Mammo returns to Bombay to Fayyuzi on a temporary visa. Even though Rizwan dislikes Mammo at the beginning, they soon form a bond where she understands his teenage anguish, secrets and desires. Through Mammo’s stories, Rizwan learns of partition and its innumerable horrors experienced by millions of people like her. After many failed attempts to procure permanent Indian citizenship and consequent deportation to Pakistan, Mammo finally returned to India after twenty years by forging papers of her death.

Mammo emerges as a remarkable character when she takes her repatriation into her own hands, rejecting the whole of the ‘two-nation theory’ and partition. For Mammo, her homeland is where she was born, and her natal memories tie her to Mumbai. Instead of the direct depiction of violence unleashed by partition, *Mammo* focuses on the emotional traumas lingering beneath the divided families, persisting even after years, like an open wound. She is constantly evicted from India as she is a Muslim and a Pakistani citizen who can have no claim on this land. Thus, she becomes twice marginalised despite the fact of being born in India. The helplessness of individuals before the collective power of the State bureaucracy is underlined through the film. But Mammo, through declaring herself dead and forging the documents, disrupts the state machinery through the exertion of subaltern agency (Needham, *New Indian Cinema*, 101).

The film *Sardari Begum* (1996) is based on the life of a Thumri artist from Agra, and the character was played by Kirron Kher. Thumri belongs to the light music tradition in Indian classical music, which uses specific poetic themes, musical embellishments, ragas and talas. The musical form is related to the female voice, which was usually performed by the *bais* and *tawaifs* of the 19th and early 20th centuries (Rao 31). Bhaskar and Allen categorise *Sardari Begum* as a New-Wave Muslim Courtesan film, as the central character Sardari, even though not a courtesan, was forced to bear the stigma associated with the profession of the courtesan (xiii).

The film unfolds between communal tension in Delhi, where Sardari Begum is hit by a stone thrown by the violent mob while she goes out to the balcony to see

what is happening. Through Tehzeeb's investigation of Sardari's life by collecting her memories from several people associated with her, we can see a multi-faceted character sketch of Sardari emerging gradually. Tehzeeb understands that Sardari was a well-known personality, but at the same time, a woman who bore the burden of shame which came with the tradition of thumri, which was a music form practised by the courtesans/tawaifs. The term *nachnewali-gaanewali* or nauch-girl was a slang word derived from the colonial period, where Englishmen used it to connote any native performing women (Neville 45). After independence, the nationalist reformers and English-educated elites took efforts for a cleansed and reformed version of what counts as Indian culture. Thus, *Thumri* was detached from the courtesan's domain and transformed to fit the middle-class men and women (Needham, *New Indian Cinema*, 68, 69).

The film traverses through the experiences of Sardari from her teenage years to adulthood and middle age, showing the rise and fall of her music career. She doesn't fit into the stereotyped and victimised images of Muslim women, as she can be seen negotiating with every adversity and opportunity alike throughout her life. In her relationship with men, including her patron Hemraj or Manik Sen, who offers to marry her after separation from Sadiq Moosvi, she makes it clear that she cannot be an ideal wife as expected by society. To Jabbar, she was not an ideal sister. To Sakina, she was not an ideal mother. She defied every role conferred to a woman. But to everyone, she was an ideal artist who dedicated her life to music. Sardari Begum was one of the rare Hindi films which focused on a Muslim woman as a singer.

The third film from Benegal's trilogy, *Zubeida* (2001), was inspired by the real life of Zubeida Begum, who was a Bollywood actress during the 1950s. In the film, Zubeida grows up as a modern lady, not confined to the Muslim traditions but rather influenced by the Western lifestyles of her father, Suleman Seth, who is a wealthy filmmaker. After her first marriage, childbirth and divorce, she fell in love with Vijayendra Singh, who was already married to Mandira Devi. Even if Zubeida is formally wedded to the Maharaja, she is treated like a concubine who lives in a separate mansion, only receiving occasional visits from him. She grows jealous when she realises that she doesn't have an equal standing with his first wife and competes with her. Zubeida, who insists on travelling with Vijayendra Singh to Delhi, is killed in the flight crash with him. Zubeida's character remains aloof in the rendition of the identity crisis of a Muslim female who lives a Hindu/Sikh life. Her character navigates through different subject positions: as the daughter of a filmmaker, wife of a powerless Muslim husband, wife of a Sikh Maharaja and politician, and as a mother who is separated from her son (Samaddar 190). The film explores the multifaceted existence of a Muslim woman in a most nuanced and layered manner, where her story is told through different people associated with her, each of them drawing a different portrait of Zubeida. This points towards the complex and multifarious nature of overlapping identities, unlike the stereotyped portrayals of Muslim women in mainstream commercial Bollywood films.

Zaqrn (1998) by Mahesh Bhatt tells an unconventional story about the life of a Muslim woman, Noor Hussain Khan, during the period of the Mumbai riots, which happened in 1992 after the demolition of Babri Masjid. She had lived as a Hindu

before her children, as she had married a Hindu man named Ramen Desai. She was never accepted by his family as his legitimate wife because of her religious identity. During the riots, she is burnt by a Muslim mob, misunderstanding her as a Hindu. After her death, her son Ajay, who knows his mother is a Muslim, wants to fulfil her last wish, which is to be buried according to Muslim rites, but his brother Anand, with other Hindu fundamentalists, stands against this. But when Anand realises the truth, he stands with Ajay and buries his mother according to her wish.

The film takes the complicated identity crisis faced by a Muslim woman who chooses a Hindu spouse in India. The Hindu household never accepts a Muslim daughter-in-law, nor the children born out of her. Thus, Noor and her children are doomed to live a life of disgrace and shame, without the protection of her husband and with no claims on him. She is burnt by her own people amidst the raging riots, which spread over India in 1992 and 1993, showing the extent of communal rivalry during the time. Even her death becomes a matter of legitimacy for either community, rather than being treated with kindness.

Syed Asif Haider's study on another new wave film, *Firaaq* (2008), directed by Nandita Das, underlines the fact that when there are abundant films based on terrorism in Bollywood which frame Muslims as villains, films on communal riots are comparatively less because they require acknowledgement of Muslims as victims of the Hindu nationalist political regime (Haider 95). *Firaaq* is one of those rare films in the Hindi language which talk about the harrowing violence which took place during the Gujarat riots in 2002. The narrative moves forward through the perspective of different Hindu and Muslim characters, who are traumatised after the

riots. It shows an undramatic and direct portrayal of the communal bigotry and polarisation which plagued Gujarat during the time. It moves through different vantage points, like that of Muslims who lost everything, inter-religious couples who live in fear and also from the perpetrators who carry the poisonous hatred inside their minds. The dead bodies of Muslim victims killed in riots are piled inside a mass grave for burial, and another truck unloading corpses at the opening scene of the film shows the gravity of the riots (00:01:22-00:02:33). The character of Muneera shows a unfiltered representation of thousands of Muslim women from the lower strata of society who lost their homes and families to riots. Muneera is heartbroken seeing her house being burnt to ashes by the rioters (00:06:25-00:09:19). Another scene shows how Muneera has to go to put henna at a rich Hindu household with her friend by putting a bindi so they don't recognise her as a Muslim. From there, she overhears how Hindus are boycotting Muslim services. With this, Muneera's suspicion grows towards her that her husband Mehul has burnt their house (1:00:28-01:02:23). But she rescues Muneera from the police and brings her to her home, where she realises that her suspicion was out of place. The moment where she consoles Muneera becomes a moment of cementing the human connection beyond religion (1:18:48-1:22:00).

The films analysed under the category of alternative narratives read the complexities of Muslim women's existence under multiple subject positions, unlike the post-1990s mainstream Bollywood narratives, which simplify or erase the intersections of gender and religious identities. These films situate the Muslim women inside the matrix of historical and political events and their relationship with

Hindu/Sikh men without claims of saving or redemption. They resist the claims of majoritarianism, which positions the Hindu culture at a higher moral plane where it acts as a place of refuge and instead foregrounds the perplexing knots of human relationships and fluid identities.

Chapter 5

Conclusion

This thesis undertakes a close examination of the discursive patterns through which dominant ideologies operate, often in subtle and unacknowledged ways, in the representation of Muslim female characters in Bollywood cinema. By foregrounding the changing socio-political contexts of post-1990 India, the study situates cinematic narratives not merely as entertainment but as complex cultural texts in which power, identity, and ideology are sedimented and reproduced. The analysis focuses on selected films produced after 1990, with the deliberate choice of this temporal threshold owing to the profound political paradigm shifts that have marked the Indian polity and society since then. Processes of economic liberalisation shaped the period, the intensification of right-wing politics, the remapping of caste and communal relations, and the emergence of new forms of cultural nationalism, all of which created fertile ground for cinema to mirror, mediate, and at times contest hegemonic discourses.

Within this framework, the Muslim female subject in Bollywood cinema becomes a privileged site of inquiry, functioning as a lens through which broader socio-cultural transformations and escalating communal anxieties can be traced. The figure of the Muslim woman, simultaneously hyper-visible and marginalised, oscillates between being rendered as an exoticised other, a bearer of cultural difference, and a vehicle for negotiating modernity, secularism, and national belonging. In mapping these shifting figural and ideological inscriptions, the study

contributes to ongoing scholarly debates on Islamophobia, majoritarianism, and gender politics, while also bridging a critical gap between feminist theory, post-colonial discourse, and film studies. The analysis reveals that Bollywood's representational strategies are not merely reflective of social realities but are constitutive of them, producing a contested terrain where questions of identity, community, and citizenship are continually reconfigured.

The study is organised around a set of interlinked questions that probe the relationship between political transformation and cultural production. How did the 1990s mark a significant political and cultural reorientation in India, and in what ways do cinematic texts absorb, refract, and re-stage this shift? What narrative templates and ideological strategies inform the representation of Muslim women in Bollywood, and how do these strategies reproduce or contest prevailing cultural anxieties? The inquiry also asks what patterns of repetition and variation emerge across these depictions, and how such repetitions function as discursive technologies of power. Further, it interrogates how cinematic portrayals efface the lived experiences of Muslim women while simultaneously projecting idealised or demonised images that sustain dominant imaginaries. By situating these representations within the wider landscape of Islamophobic tendencies and majoritarian discourses in contemporary India, the study reads cinema as a key site where cultural politics is both staged and naturalised.

The thesis is anchored in the core argument that Bollywood's representation of Muslim women tends to reduce, oversimplify, or altogether erase the complex, layered, and intersecting forms of oppression that Muslim women experience as

members of a minority community in India. Rather than attending to the heterogeneous lived realities of class, caste, region, and history, Bollywood foregrounds overarching religious meta-narratives that re-script Muslim women into emblematic figures of cultural difference. In doing so, cinema participates in what may be described as the strategic stereotyping of Muslim women—a discursive process that gained unprecedented intensity in the altered political landscape of the 1990s, when liberalisation, communal polarisation, and new forms of cultural nationalism transformed the contours of the nation’s imagination.

This stereotyping operates through identifiable tropes that recur across films, acquiring a kind of narrative fixity. The first is the trope of victimisation, which frames Muslim women as subjects in need of saving, either from a patriarchal community or from the violence of history. The second is the trope of nationalist embodiment, where the Muslim female figure becomes a symbolic terrain upon which anxieties of belonging, loyalty, and secular citizenship are staged. The third is the trope of neoliberal feminist emancipation, which presents Muslim women as liberated subjects when they assimilate into dominant cultural norms, often by disavowing traditional and religious practices.

When read together, these tropes crystallise into recurring patterns within post-1990 Bollywood cinema. They reveal not merely a continuity of orientalist and communal imaginaries but also a pronounced reconfiguration of the cinematic imagination of Muslim women, who are positioned less as historical subjects and more as allegorical figures through which the politics of nation, gender, and

modernity are negotiated. The thesis thus situates Muslim women on screen as a critical lens for understanding the cultural logic of post-1990 India.

The first chapter briefly introduced the central idea of the thesis, the context and relevance of this study, which explores the complex representative narratives of Muslim women as members of a minority group within a Nation challenged with communal politics and cultural nationalism. The chapter identified the Muslim woman as an entity enmeshed between the intricate matrix of gender politics, religion, cultural biases and historical invisibilities. It defines the objective of the study as locating the occurrence of a significant cultural and political shift in the rendition of Muslim women in Bollywood cinematic space and analysing what strategic configurations are internalised within the selected films for framing the subject as aligning with the dominant ideology. The chapter also explains the mixed nature of the methodology followed, which incorporates qualitative analysis, tools like the Muslim Women Onscreen Test, critical insights from cultural studies, anthropology and sociology and several related theories to present a comprehensive study on the topic.

It also emphasised the existing research gap in academia, where it was found that, despite significant works on Bollywood and Muslim representation, serious and elaborate studies on Muslim women's representation in cultural spaces like Indian cinema in general and in Bollywood specifically were nearly absent, pointing towards a need for crucial academic interventions.

The second chapter presented a comprehensive enquiry into the historical and contemporary status of Muslim women in India, serving as the detailed social

context for situating the Muslim female characters as presented in Bollywood. The chapter investigated the systematic erasure, strategic omissions and marginalisation of the histories and experiences of Muslim women. It involved the critical analysis of the discrimination in documentation and acknowledgement of the Muslim women's contributions to the freedom struggle, nation-building, political movements and cultural formations. Through the works of A.K. Gandhi, Mahua Sarkar, Gail Minault, Siobhan Lambert-Hurley and others, the cultural linkage between the absence of Muslim women in mainstream national and cultural narratives and the popular imagination of Mother India as a Hindu goddess endorsed by majoritarianism was established. Pushing the national and cultural contributions of Muslim women to the fringes of Indian history was a deliberate and evasive process for their systematic exclusion from the nation's past and present. This strategic omission also aided in re-imagining the Muslim women as a subaltern subject without any legitimate record of existence or claims to the nation's history, culture or citizenship. This substantiates the prevailing absence of films based on Muslim female legendary figures, freedom fighters or reformers in Bollywood films. The examination of post-independence socio-economic conditions of Muslim women pointed towards their vulnerable existence at the margins, deprived of basic infrastructure, security and human rights. They were subjected to continuous communal aggression, including mass rape and murder, like in the case of Bilkis Bano and Kausar Bano, where these harrowing problems were obscured by the majoritarian political discourses, media narratives and state policies. The state, when prioritising Muslim women's legal rights, ostensibly to protect them against domestic abuse and religious inequalities, remained in deliberate oblivion in matters

of their grievances related to communal riots or social discrimination. The chapter also delved into the resistive voices of Muslim women through Islamic feminism as an academic discourse and activism, and its role in countering the popular discourses on Muslim women.

The core findings of this chapter are:

- a) The invisibility of Muslim women in freedom struggles, reformation and nation-building reinforces the nationalist narrative of cultural nationalism, which projects India as a Hindu nation.
- b) The significant role of tawaifs in the socio-cultural development of literature, art, music and dance forms in India was foreshadowed by nationalists by stigmatising them as immoral women.
- c) Economic and educational inadequacy, with vulnerability to communal violence, had tied down Muslim women to the lower strata of society.
- d) The media narratives, majoritarian discourse and state policies jointly function in reproducing the victim trope of Muslim women and appropriating them to frame Muslim men as misogynists.
- e) The resisting voices, achievements and agency of Muslim women are brought into mainstream discussions through activism and academic interventions emerging out of Islamic feminist and post-structural feminist studies.

The third chapter incorporates an elaborate diachronical study on the evolution of Muslim women's characters in the Bombay film Industry/Bollywood, focusing on the trajectory of representation according to the changing historical, cultural and political context in India up to the 1990s. The chapter builds a concrete background against which the politics of cinematic representations of Muslim women in post-1990 films would be compared. The films from the 1930s to 70s situated the Muslim female characters as an extension of the aestheticised and romanticised fictional world of Islamicate culture constructed upon the *mise-en-scène* derived from Mughal court culture. Whereas from the 1950s, the Muslim Socials began to explore the domestic and social issues encountered by Muslim women inside the community, but often limited their roles to *begums* or *tawaifs*. Both Muslim men and women functioned as an inevitable component of the Nehruvian secular-plural constructs of the nation. But the Muslim new wave socials discarded the nostalgic and aesthetic elements of these films to expose the bare realities of the subaltern Muslim women. The chapter aided in studying the traditional tropes of Muslim women, which were already part of the popular imagination.

The key findings of the chapter are:

- a. Commercial films of the period were mostly focused on aestheticised romances, fixating on Muslim women as a spectacle or a tragic beauty, especially in films under the courtesan genre.

- b. But with the emergence of Muslim New Wave Socials, the conflicts were visible through the narratives on the economic instability, lack of education, and communal issues faced by the Muslim women.
- c. The chapter reveals that the politicisation of religion, islamophobia, extreme nationalism and emancipatory models of feminism were nearly absent in films till the 1990s.

Chapter 4 delved into the core issues of the representation of Muslim women through Bollywood narratives of the post-1990s, and the concealed political messages internalised in them, which are disseminated as entertainment. The selected films were categorised according to the recurring patterns and character tropes of victim, nationalist and neo-liberal feminist and subjected to extensive analysis, which revealed the correlation between the intrinsic film ideologies and dominant power structures. A close reading of the film texts with the shifting political climate of India during and after the 1990s illustrates the strategic integration of selective issues relating to the Muslim women, such as cross-religious/cross-border conjugality, terrorism, forced marriages, domestic violence, and communal violence, which are stripped of their context and complexities. The issues are diluted into simplistic narratives which transform the Muslim women into victims of religious patriarchy who are redeemed by Hindu men, sacrificial nationalists who annihilate terrorists and subjects who attain feminist emancipation overnight by coming out of burqas. This is achieved through the careful injection of politicised religion into the Bollywood formula, where the Muslim woman is posited as the loyal agent of the State, aligning with the majoritarian discourse and rejecting

Islamic religion as a repressive force. The analysis of the selected films revealed the complexities involved in locating the subtle propaganda in films which claim to be progressive, like *Lipstick Under My Burqa* or *Secret Superstar*, which typecast Muslim women as sexual slaves, baby-factories and abused housewives. The emancipatory models offered to them mandatorily include the guidance of a Hindu male who embodies modernity, patriotism and chivalry. These films try to formulate simplistic solutions to complex issues of terrorism, identity, border-crossing, communal violence, discrimination, marital crisis and deliver them in Bollywood packages with enough melodramatic dialogues, dance and song sequences.

These films conveniently choose to nullify the systemic discriminations and violence of the right-wing political groups inflicted upon the Muslim women during the recurring communal riots or during the demonstration of protest against fascist laws. Stereotyping serves as a political strategy for defining and labelling the subject, thereby erasing all the heterogeneous cultures, identities and experiences of Muslim women. Her politics, negotiations and struggles within a communally polarised nation which refuses to assimilate her but demands a sacrifice of her identity are seldom discussed in these films. The portrayal of the practising Muslim woman is always framed within the structure of neo-liberal feminism, which over-emphasises capitalist consumption and sexual liberation as the validating criteria of an empowered woman. The selected films fall short in adequately representing the Indian muslim women, but ensure commercial success by catering to the majoritarian interests in the most subtle ways.

The major findings of the chapter are:

- a. The films under study exhibit striking similarity in recurring characters, narrative structures and themes.
- b. The abuses faced by the Muslim women place the Muslim community as antagonists, creating a crude, sexually aggressive, misogynic image of Muslim men while projecting Hindu men as safe and sophisticated.
- c. Films like *Bombay*, *Gadar* and *Veer-Zaara* indirectly suggest the Hindu nation as a redemptive space, reminding the majoritarian concept of *Ghar-wapasi*.
- d. The tools, like the Riz test and the Muslim Women Onscreen Test, are inadequate for analysing subtle forms of islamophobia, ideological interpellation and propaganda in films with progressive narratives.
- e. The projection of religion as an oppressive force tries to hide the violence inflicted by the hegemonic power structures of majoritarianism on the Muslim community.

The Muslim identity in India, evolving out of the historical contestations, political complexities and cultural negotiations, reflects the intricate process of evolution, adaptation and resistance that have shaped its contemporary forms. The influence of ancient Islamic empires on contemporary global politics has affected the discourse formed around Indian Muslims. The gradual erosion of Nehruvian secularism, which considered Muslims as an essential part of the secular national identity, gave way to extreme communal politics, which forced them into a

submissive and marginalised position. In any nation, the narratives surrounding the minority are always determined through the cultural hegemony of the majoritarian power structures. This research has tried to analyse this basic premise of cultural formation, grounding it on Bollywood narratives on Muslim women in the post-1990 films.

As Partha Chatterjee argues in his work, India's past was essentially imagined as Hindu by the elite intelligentsia, and Islam was seen as a foreign element which abridged the true Indian heritage. And for incorporating Islam into the Indian past, Islam had to be reduced into a weakened form, which didn't challenge the Hindu dominance ("The Nation and Its Fragments", 73,74). The Bollywood films, similarly, from their very beginning, have privileged Hindu mythology, legends and experiences as their central narrative, placing Islam/muslim cultures on their periphery. As Vijay Mishra notes, Muslim culture and history have only been offered a marginal position in Indian popular cinema mainly because a) they are not considered as the legitimate objects in the domain of the popular, b) the popular stereotyping implies the denial of the complex emotional spectrum of human conditions to the Muslim, allowing only "limited emotional range" like aggressive, lustful or mysterious and c) the because the muslim life has been a mystery to the popular domain (217,218). But still, due to the exotic and aesthetic appeal of the Islamicate culture, films based on Muslims had enjoyed a golden period in Bollywood, producing several hits like *Pakeezah*, *Umrao Jaan* and *Mughal-e Azam*, which primarily focused on melodrama. Muslim socials like *Mere Mehboob* and *Nikah* were also quite celebrated among the Indian

audience. According to Bhaskar and Allen, these socials presented the ‘life behind the purdah’ and “offered a pleasure of recognition to those who were familiar with this world, and a pleasure of entering unfamiliar spaces to those who were not, which developed as a double address of the genre directed both towards the Muslim community and outwards to non-Muslims”(65).

With the downfall of Nehruvian secularism, changing cinematic culture and the gradual rise of majoritarianism, Hindu nationalist supremacy and cultural nationalism, the nature of portrayal of Muslims in Bollywood witnessed a significant change. The post-independence political rivalry with Pakistan and the aggravated situations in Kashmir, leading to militancy and occupation, reflected in the metamorphosis of the friendly Muslim neighbours in films into armed fundamentalists. With the consolidation of majoritarian communal forces in the 1990s, the 9/11 attacks and the spread of global islamophobia, Bollywood magnified Muslims as sophisticated terrorists with international networks. At the same time, the Hindu legendary figures like Chattrapathi Sivaji, Bajirao Peshwa, Prithviraj Chauhan and major Hindu historical figures were privileged as national heroes in films, creating a major duality which polarised the popular understanding of both religions.

Simultaneously, biopics were made on notable females like Jhansi Rani, Sankuntala Devi, Gunjan Saxena and Neerja, but there are no notable biopics or films on Muslim women from any field who have achieved success or who have made a remarkable contribution to society like Fatma Begum, M.Fathima Beevi or Shah Bano. The films which portrayed Muslim women were either victims of

Islamic patriarchy suffering domestic violence, forced marriage, forced to have many children, or barred from education or employment. Another category of films portrayed her as an extreme nationalist who was sacrificial, intelligent and had a secular perspective who fought for the nation exclusively against the 'Muslim fundamentalist'. The third category foregrounded the emancipatory model offered to the Muslim women, where they desired independence, fame or sexual liberation by defying their religion, either explicitly or symbolically. The most crucial impediment in analysing films which belong to these categories is their carefully crafted plots, which give the delusion of an agential Muslim woman fighting for her choice and freedom against the patriarchal forces. But with only close examination, one can discern that the adversaries exclusively consist of Muslim men, whether it be her husband, lover, terrorist, the *mullah* or her father. The films subtly hint that Muslim women are offered a safe space or support by virtuous Hindu men with secular and nationalist qualities. But these films fail in bringing the real, complex lives and experiences of the Indian Muslim women and the uniqueness of each of them. The social, political and cultural diversity of Muslim women, their negotiations with the state, religion, and family, are oversimplified by projecting the religion as the sole oppressor. Recalling the scenes from the documentary *Submission* (2004) by Theo Van Gogh and Ayaan Hirsi Ali, all other adversities evaporate from the screen when the Muslim woman is laid bare, with her skin tattooed by Islamic scriptures (00:01:58-00:02:14), where the spectators get the impression that she is nothing but a victim, and she has to fight against Muslim men and God.

The thesis concludes that the long history of invisibility, exclusion, marginalisation, and re-appropriation of Muslim women in Bombay cinema has generated a distorted and bleak image of the Muslim social milieu. Within this framework, Muslim women are consistently depicted as being trapped under the dual oppression of Muslim men and religious orthodoxy, while their complex lived realities are erased or silenced to sustain the dominant narratives of majoritarian power structures. By repeatedly reproducing reductive and overused tropes, Bollywood constructs Muslim women as a monolithic category devoid of distinctive politics, agency, or identity. This homogenisation not only erases diversity within Muslim women's experiences but also strengthens stereotypes that serve broader ideological ends. In this sense, the soft power of Bollywood aligns itself with and reinforces majoritarian politics and cultural nationalism, ensuring that cinematic representations function as instruments of political consolidation rather than spaces for pluralistic or emancipatory narratives.

Chapter 6

Recommendations

Bollywood cinema can be understood as a “collective fantasy” which projects the common denominators of the spectators’ understanding of the imaginary world projected on the screen (Bhaskar, “The New Indian Wave”, 44). The Indian public gets a first-hand picture of history, culture, fashion and politics through these imaginary narratives. In-depth analysis of the truth-claims presented by the films is seldom brought under critical enquiry unless it creates a major controversy. Even with the knowledge of films as works of imagination and fiction, they can deeply penetrate the psyche of the spectators. For instance, the propagandist films like *The Kashmiri Files* (2022) and *The Kerala Story* (2023) have tried to manipulate and re-appropriate history and political allegations into truth-claims with falsified statistics and fabricated stories, which are intended to instigate violence and hatred among the Hindu and Muslim communities in India. The Kashmir issue and *Love-Jihad* are both considered sensitive subjects with respect to the Indian audience, especially the North Indian Hindi-speaking belt, where communal violence is a common occurrence. These films, which were being endorsed by political leaders, gave unwarranted attention and authenticity to the false narratives which make the public believe in their claims. The films that followed, *Article 370* (2024) and *Sabarmati Report* (2024), were intended to glorify the right-wing government policies and to re-ignite the communal conflict related to the Godhra riots of 2002. But unlike these explicit propagandist films, films discussed in the study involve hidden and subtle

formulas which merge the aesthetics and politics to create a natural storytelling in the Bollywood tradition. Understanding these subtleties and ideological implications is important in analysing the Muslim women in Bollywood. Borrowing from fields like that of feminism, history, journalism, anthropology and minority studies, the present research tries to incorporate observations derived from these disciplines into the cinematic space of representation. It analyses how Muslim women are represented in Bollywood films and what strategies and ideologies are incorporated in the narratives for endorsing the majoritarian discourses in subtle ways. It also traces the invisibilities of Muslim women's authentic lives, their stories and experiences and how this absence shapes the overall discourse on Muslim women in India.

The study has mainly focused on the evolution of Muslim women characters and the narratives surrounding them in the films according to the changing social, cultural and political transitions, which places the 1990s as a crucial point of deviation from the earlier films. But many of the observations discussed in the thesis can be elaborated into detailed studies, which can certainly add to the understanding of Indian Muslim women's marginality in the Indian cinema.

As mentioned in Chapter 2, the Muslim women's role in the anti-colonial struggle is largely absent from mainstream Indian history. A detailed study on this exclusion can be carried out using feminist historiography, which could look into how this vacuum is reflected in Indian cinema, educational textbooks or historical accounts. The study can enrich itself by filling this omission by excavating the details on Muslim women who contributed to the cause. The contribution of the

tawaifs in both the freedom struggle and their cultural legacy can be another important topic of examination. The recent drama series *Heeramandi* (2024) by Sanjay Leela Bhansali had initiated such a debate over the significance of tawaifs and the power yielded by them in the past. The film imagines the tawaifs in a nuanced light where they are willingly sacrificing their lives for the nation's freedom from the colonisers. Another notable feature of the film is that it doesn't foreground religion or Muslim men as oppressors of the Muslim women. Even though set in perfect Bollywood aesthetics, *Heeramandi* still holds space for alternative discourses on Muslim women. The possibilities of representing Muslim women's lost history through different forms like biopics, web series, independent films, etc., can be explored.

The thesis limits its study to the analysis of Muslim women characters in Bollywood, but a historical research on the Muslim female actresses, screenwriters, directors and musicians who have made important contributions in Bollywood can be relevant. An in-depth study on the first female filmmaker, Fatma Begum, who directed films such as *Bulbul-e-Paristan* (1926), *The Goddess of Love* (1927), *Heer Ranjha* (1928), *Kanaktara* (1929) and *Shakuntala* (1929) can contribute to the re-reading of Indian film history itself, bringing out the neglect to which talented Muslim women were subjected.

Another area which is untouched in the thesis is documentary films, which can open doors to an entirely different reality on Muslim women's lives as they contain the raw representation of their lived experiences. A close study on the role of Muslim women and their diverse cultures and challenges as represented through documentaries like *The Other Song* by Saba Dewan and Rahul Roy on the

marginalised lives of *tawaifs* can give fresh insight into the Indian Muslim women and can also function as counter-narratives to the popular majoritarian conceptions.

Local religious practices of Muslim women in India based on specific locations can be an interesting area of study, which can be pursued with the aid of combining fields of cultural studies, sociology and anthropology. These distinct religious rituals or practices can dismantle the popular understanding of Islam as a monolithic and orthodox belief system, and gain insight into the influence of localities and other cultural practices on Islam and how the Muslim women negotiate and refashion religion in remote settings of India and how it is interwoven with their identity and existence.

The thesis has strictly limited its parameters to Hindi-language films, even though it traverses through some of the early Hindustani films for understanding the cultural ethos during the beginning of the Bombay film industry. But a similar research on Muslim women's representation in Malayalam language films would be a crucial addition to the gender and minority studies in Kerala. Films such as *Biriyaani* (2019) by Sajin Babu had created uproar among Malayali viewers with its misogynistic and extreme Islamophobic content, which made claims of the deplorable conditions of Muslim women in Kerala seeking freedom from despicable Muslim men who sexually exploit them and discard them by triple talaq. The problematics of the narrative lie in the central character of Khadeeja, who seeks liberation through sex work. Such films, which carry unchecked propaganda wrapped in realistic storytelling, require critical academic enquiry to dissect them. And another stream of progressive filmmaking exploring alternative narratives on Muslim women is also taking place in Kerala with films such as *Varthamaanam*, *C/*

O Saira Bano and *KL 10*, where strong muslim female characters are portrayed. *Varthamaanam* becomes a remarkable film with its narrative exposing the majoritarian atrocities on Muslim women and how they are framed as anti-nationals for speaking against injustice. *Saira Bano* also contains a similar theme where the Muslim woman has to seek justice for her adopted son, who is framed in a fabricated case. *KL 10* portrays the Muslims in Malappuram as any other community with their natural culture, life and experiences, where the central Muslim female character is a college student, academically prudent and politically aware individual. But apart from Shamshad Hussain K.T.'s work *Muslimum Sthreeyum Allathaval* (2015), no significant academic works have been carried out which explore the transformations in Muslim women's representation in Malayalam films. When comparing the evolution of Muslim female subjects as rendered in Bollywood and Malayalam films, it indicates a parallel existence of heterogeneous and diversified representations which re-imagine them out of the dominant narratives.

It can be observed from the present study that the historical and cultural research and documentations on the Muslim women suffer significant absences and distortions as a result of continued systemic exclusions, which are to be addressed by a more informed academic enquiry. Further studies into the recommended areas can fill in these crevices and rectify the internalised misconceptions about Muslim women and their community. This can direct our attention towards the real issues demanding critical actions from the state machinery, and can aid in formulating democratic policies and laws for the inclusion of Muslim women.

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