

MISFITTING: AN ISLAMOPHOBIC (FILM) INDUSTRY IN A SECULAR STATE

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ABSTRACT

This article seeks to highlight the prevalence of Islamophobia in the daily fundamental operations of Indian society – by making use of existing examples of media, i. e., Padmavaat and Panipat. Apart from revealing the same, this article looks in the causes and effects of such contempt that Indians harbor.

Islamophobia is the contempt for the Islamic culture which has gained prominence in contemporary Indian society owing to the communal violence it has been leading to. While this contempt has become a part of the way Indians have come to operate, reflecting in all things they do – it has been further fueled by those in power, owing to the large influence they exert on the people. 72 years ago, the constitution of India was drafted which put in place a perennial call for equality, a call for respecting those whose religious ideals may not be the same as ours. For Islamophobia to prevail in a country like ours, is particularly dangerous for it chips away at these ideas on which our country has progressed. This Islamophobia may not always be visible to the ‘naked eye’, moreover a ‘biased’ eye which has come to believe that Islamophobia is acceptable. It is time we pick apart the way we operate, to look within our ‘normal’ ideologies to ensure that we do not alienate a section of society, an ‘egalitarian’ society. While it may be a slow, arduous process to analyze and change the way we have come to operate - it is one deserving of the effort.

INTRODUCTION

On 3rd June 1947, a group of eight men including Jawaharlal Nehru and Muhammad Ali Jinnah sat around a table and decided to partition the south Asian subcontinent (Khan, 2017). Their decision was executed six weeks later, and a new 'secular' India was born, separate from the Islamic Republic of Pakistan. In the years following the partition, the two were able to maintain diplomatic relations, but not for long. The long-standing resentment harbored by Indians owing to the gruesome partition compounded by the 2008 attacks on Mumbai, the 2019 attack in Kashmir's Pulwama along with longstanding territorial conflict in relation to Kashmir, has sowed the seeds of contempt for Pakistan deep within a large number of Indians. Notwithstanding the exclusivity of the two parties, the majority held by Muslims in Pakistan has given way for several Indians to conflate them, leading to the former ostracizing Muslims in the name of 'nationalism'. They feel it necessary to protect their country from these 'foreigners'; this insecurity permeating so deep into their fundamental operations, that today, it reflects in the film industry of the country or 'Bollywood'. It makes itself visible through a dehumanization of Muslims in its creations, an analysis of which reveals that this phenomenon has recently gained significant momentum.

Further, Bollywood exerts an overbearing influence on Indians, visible in the dance styles, sartorial and linguistic trends featuring in cinemas that they often adopt. Owing to this influence, it has become a cultural space for Hindu favoring politicians to mold the products of this imaginary world to suit their own agenda. They weave a nationalistic sentiment through the fine vacant spaces of cinemas linking the filmic world to socio-political issues. They have exploited the opportunity to politicize cinema, by filling these vacant spaces between the lines of a film's story with their ideologies. The release of *Uri*, a movie which triggered a nationalistic fervor among Indians, at the time of elections can be construed as an example of such politicization of cinema. Put together, these forces can be deemed responsible for the fire of Islamophobia that today ravages the industry.

HAS BOLLYWOOD ALWAYS BEEN SO?

Today, Bollywood has chosen to employ Islamophobia in its works, however, this was not always the scenario. Referring to past portrayals of Muslims by Bollywood allows the contextualization of their place in the industry. In the 1960s or rather the post-independence period, movies such as *Amar, Akbar & Anthony* and *Mughal-e-Azam* were masterfully crafted to depict the secular and national ethos of the country as well as the post-Partition socio-political understanding of communal harmony. It then progressed to films depicting the communal riots and bomb blasts like *Phantom*, *Anwar* and *Firaaq*. Recently, it has taken up rewriting famous historical happenings, rewritten to involve the portrayal of the virtuous protagonist as a Hindu while the villain is carved out of a Muslim (*Is Bollywood Selling Islamophobia by Objectifying Muslim Characters?* 2020). An example of such rewriting is the 2018 film, *Padmaavat*.

Padmaavat

Padmaavat is an Indian epic period drama directed by Sanjay Leela Bhansali. In this movie, Sultan Alaudin Khilji, the 'Muslim Other' is juxtaposed against Maharawal Ratan Singh- the 'Good Hindu' (Dhawan & Kohli, 2020). The only thing the two have in common is their desire for Rani Padmini, the strikingly beautiful wife of Ratan Singh. However, the way the two express their desire for her are vastly different from each other. The contrast between them is visible from the very first scene: where Khilji is shown to be cheating on his wife on the very night of their wedding. His introduction establishes his character for the remainder of the film, a barbaric, misogynistic dipsomaniac, leader of an army of cloaked marauders, who indulged in sexual relations with multiple women- many of which were non-consensual. Khilji's, a Muslim, occupation of the mainstage as such is problematic as it gives way for the audience to generalize Muslims using his character. His 'jungle-ness' is put forth through his multiple dance numbers and the way he ravenously attacks pieces of meat, eating them straight off the bone (Thompson & Itaoui, 2019, pp 44-45). To further this alienation, it is insinuated that he has a homosexual relationship with his eunuch slave general- Malik Kafur, considered a deviation from the norm at the time of release. The manner in which Khilji is portrayed: matted

hair, kohled, hungry eyes and ratty clothes is an attempt on the filmmakers to generalize Muslims as unkempt and uncouth. In contrast, Raja Ratan Singh is portrayed as a gentle, righteous man whose valor knows no bounds. His love for Rani Padmini, unlike Khilji's sexed up desire, is pure. Additionally, there is a complete disregard of the fact that Ratansen's marriage to Padmini is a polygamous one and it is considered to be a picture of love itself. This quiet acceptance of Ratan Singh's polygamy represents an Islamophobic double standard, which was significant as it was put forth at a time when there was a heightened political hysteria about the alleged demographic threat that Muslims posed to Hindus through their polygamy and 'Love Jihad'. In Padmaavat, we see a departure from the text of Malik Muhammad Jayasi- the original poem on which this movie is based. This departure is seen in the form of a complete erasure of the familial conflict between the Rajput Kings. A Hindu 'oneness' is created by depicting these Hindu kings as a family, as a tribe unlike the text, which claimed the Rajputs were at loggerheads with each other. The film allows this departure by rewriting one vital piece of the original story: in the original text, it is the neighboring Rajput ruler of Kumbhalner, Raja Devpal who kills Raja Ratan Singh on the battlefield. Devpal, other than being envious of Ratan Singh's riches and land, was enamored by Padmini's beauty. It was when he asked Raja Ratan Singh to combat with him for her love on the battlefield that he struck him with the fatal blow that killed him. However, instead of Devpal, Khilji was the one painted as the murderer of this righteous king in the movie. As Ratan Singh moves towards the afterlife, his wife moves towards a pit of fire to commit 'jauhar' along with thousands of Rajputani women. Jauhar is employed to portray the 'honor' of these Rajputani women who chose to die instead of submitting to the enemy, putting their values before their lives. It is celebrated instead of criticizing the 'honor-shame martyrdom' complex that compels them to suicide. This extolling of 'jauhar'- an archaic ritual of the Hindus and while furthering the notion that Muslims are blood-thirsty, lustful and devoid of virtues allows the further marginalization of a community that already occupies a minority status in the country and puts Hindus on a pedestal.

Panipat

A similar reconstruction of history- of the Third Battle of Panipat is seen in *Panipat*, the 2019 epic war film, directed by Ashutosh Gowariker. In this film, Sanjay Dutt takes on the role of Ahmad Shah Abdali, the founder of modern Afghanistan who is fondly known as ‘Baba’ in the country. He is cast opposite Arjun Kapoor who is several years younger. This is a departure from reality, as Abdali was only eight years older than Sadashiv Rao Bhau. Such a portrayal of the (Hindu) Marathas as ‘uber-macho’ can be interpreted as an attempt on the part of the cinematographers to give them an edge over the dull, old (Muslim) Afghans.

The Marathas, led by Peshwa Chief Sadashiv Rao Bhau, are introduced in a properly choreographed battle sequence in a sanitized background, while Abdali’s first scene includes a gory knife fight in his own court (Sood, 2019). This introduction hints at what is to come, the portrayal of the Marathas as men of valor while that of Abdali, as a blood thirsty murderer, leading a troop of ravenous black robed Afghans and whose eyes literally ooze blood in the trailer of the movie. The idea perpetuated throughout the script is that Abdali intended to seize and rule India, a notion furthered by the Marathas labelling him as a ‘ghuspaithia’ (intruder). In reality, Abdali had no such desire, his multiple trips to India were only in the search of wealth which the country was then surplus in (Tewari, 2019). The female presence in this movie is of great significance. One of the roles it plays is to soften the image of the Marathas and thus, further the notion of ‘Good Hindu’. In contrast, there is a visible lack of such feminine presence on the opposite side, advancing their ‘hostile’ image to the audience by portraying them as incapable of a familial life. An interesting juxtaposition is that of Najib Au Dula’s, a serviceman in the army of the Afghans, conception that Muslims should stick together in times of distress against that of Sadashiv Rao Bhau’s: that no ‘qaum’ is better than the other and an interfaith army is better than a homogeneous one. This acts as a catalyst in rooting an image of Muslims in the mind of the viewers as radical fundamentalists, who are willing to sacrifice their all in the name of Islam. Lastly, notwithstanding it being a well-known fact that the Afghans won the Third Battle of Panipat, the Marathas occupy the main stage in the film as the ‘real’ victors and are described as the saviors of our nation even though the battle was not about saving India at any point. It is imperative to note the heavy-handed use of semiotics in both these works, ranging from a low camera angle for the Muslims, giving them a menacing look

to the use of a dark color palette for their appearances. Contrastingly, the Hindus are shot at eye level, in a bright, chirpy setting for further augmenting their appeal to the audience. Similarly, the menacing background score in comparison to the victory music for the Hindus, put together with the aforementioned factors makes it hard to miss the underlying saffronizing agenda of the cinematographers.

WHY IS BOLLYWOOD'S ISLAMOPHOBIA PROBLEMATIC?

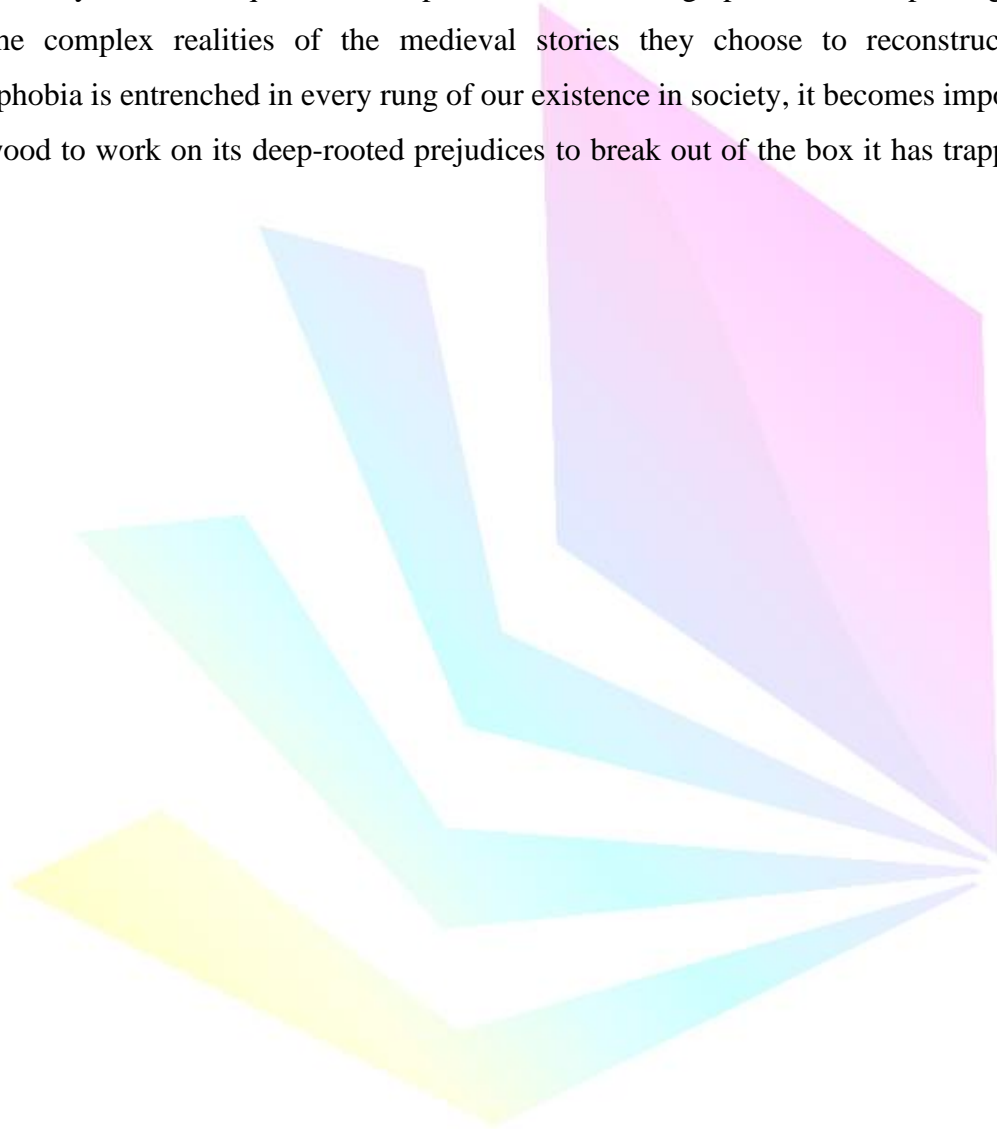
This repackaging of stereotypes under the garb of shiny costumes and elaborate dance numbers by Bollywood has acted to further widen the gap between Muslims and the rest of the country. It aggravates the degree of discrimination already faced by them which ranges from derogatory slurs to hate crimes. An example of such discrimination is seen in the unnecessary communalization of the Tablighi Jamaat meet of prominent Muslim preachers, which worsened the Covid-19 situation in the country. Instead of their irresponsibility, the focus was placed on their religion and was used as an instrument by the media to propagate their 'nefariousness', eventually leading to violence against Muslims.

Further, the ideas of 'love jihad' and 'ghar vapasi' have taken birth due to this contempt for Muslims while anti-conversion laws are being enforced to stop 'Good Hindus' from becoming 'Muslim Others'. These instances have resulted in a cultural identity crisis of the Muslims with them struggling to find a place in a nation with a prominent majority like the Hindus. This crisis is compounded when they are demonized by the majoritarian order, rendering them 'ghettoized' (Kumar H. M., 2016, p. 235, pp. 252-253). In a country which provides the freedom to practice and propagate any religion, the suppression of any becomes problematic.

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, Bollywood's turn towards the objectification of Islam is evident when we observe the recent works it has produced. Notwithstanding their often failures at the box office, these films have achieved much success in molding the thinking of their audience. Their

success has taken the form of Indians viewing Muslims with a degree of contempt, blaming them for the wrongs that they had no part in. This reconstruction of history in the favor of Hindus is undesirable because it fuels a modern-day political discourse leading to communal violence and disharmony and social environment of this sort threatens the very secular identity of the country. What is required on the part of the cinematographers, is a deeper engagement with the complex realities of the medieval stories they choose to reconstruct. When Islamophobia is entrenched in every rung of our existence in society, it becomes important for Bollywood to work on its deep-rooted prejudices to break out of the box it has trapped itself in.



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