

## **Framing the Other: The Representation of Muslims in Post-Colonial Indian Cinema**

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### **Abstract**

Indian cinema, particularly Bollywood, has long been a powerful medium for shaping cultural narratives and public perceptions. This paper explores the portrayal of Muslims in Indian cinema, focusing on the dynamics of “othering” that have emerged in the post-colonial context. Through a critical analysis of select films *Sarfarosh* (Matthan, 1999), *Fanaa* (Kohli, 2006), *Kurbaan* (D’Silva, 2009), and *New York* (Khan, 2009) this study examines how cinematic representations have often marginalized Muslim characters, depicting them through stereotypes that reinforce communal biases and socio-political divides. Drawing on theories of othering and post-colonial critique, this paper argues that these portrayals are not merely reflective of societal prejudices but also actively contribute to constructing and perpetuating these biases. By scrutinizing the narratives, character arcs, and visual cues used in popular films, the study highlights the nuanced ways Muslims are positioned as the “Other” within the national imaginary. Furthermore, this paper situates the discussion within the broader framework of South Asian cinema’s engagement with global cosmopolitanism, interrogating how international market forces and local socio-political contexts intersect to shape these cinematic narratives. The aim is to uncover these representations’ ideological underpinnings and suggest pathways for future inclusive and diverse portrayals. Ultimately, this paper seeks to contribute to the ongoing discourse on the role of cinema in reflecting and shaping societal attitudes, advocating for a more nuanced and empathetic representation of marginalized communities in Indian cinema.

**Keywords:** othering; Indian cinema; Muslim representation; post-colonial; stereotypes.

## Introduction

The depiction of Muslims in Indian cinema, particularly within the context of Hindi cinema, has evolved significantly in response to the shifting sociopolitical landscapes of various eras. During the 1950s and 1960s, often referred to as the Nehruvian era, films mirrored the state's promotion of a "tolerant" secularism. This period frequently showcased an idealized Muslim world, characterized by the portrayal of *nawabs* and the upper-class Muslim elite, whose grandeur and distinct cultural practices were depicted with reverence. However, the 1970s and 1980s marked a notable departure from this idealized representation, as a new politics of minority representation began to emerge. During these decades, the portrayal of aristocratic Muslims dwindled, and a trend emerged that linked Muslim characters with Mumbai's underworld, aligning them with criminality.

The late 1980s and early 1990s witnessed a profound shift with the rise of the Hindu right-wing movement, culminating in the demolition of the Babri Masjid on December 6, 1992. This event, coupled with the ensuing communal violence across India, represented a critical juncture in contemporary Indian history. The Babri Masjid demolition and the subsequent riots became pivotal themes in Indian cinema, leading to the emergence of the "Muslim political" genre—a cinematic space where religion and politics were intricately intertwined. The proliferation and visibility of these films were further amplified following the 2001 attacks on the World Trade Center and the Pentagon by Al-Qaeda members. Bollywood's engagement with these themes often depicted an ideological conflict between the nationalist protagonist and the "jihadi terrorist," contributing significantly to the construction of a monolithic and often antagonistic Muslim identity.

Indian cinema, particularly Bollywood, stands as one of the most influential cultural industries globally, with its narratives deeply embedded in the social and political fabric of the nation. Over the decades, Bollywood has played a crucial role in

shaping public consciousness, often acting as a mirror reflecting societal values, fears, and aspirations. However, this mirror does not always present an unbiased or inclusive reflection. Instead, it has, at times, been a medium that perpetuates stereotypes and reinforces existing power dynamics, particularly in the representation of marginalized communities.

One of the most poignant examples of this phenomenon is the portrayal of Muslims in post-colonial Indian cinema. Despite the community's significant contribution to the nation's cultural and historical tapestry, Muslims have frequently been depicted as the "Other" in Bollywood narratives. This process of othering—a concept rooted in post-colonial theory—serves to marginalize and alienate Muslim characters, often reducing them to mere stereotypes that echo broader socio-political anxieties.

This paper delves into the intricate dynamics of Muslim representation in Indian cinema, examining how popular films such as *Sarfarosh* (Matthan, 1999), *Fanaa* (Kohli, 2006), *Kurbaan* (D'Silva, 2009), and *New York* (Khan, 2009) contribute to constructing and perpetuating communal biases. By analyzing these films, this study seeks to uncover the ideological underpinnings of these portrayals and explore how they resonate within both local and global contexts. Furthermore, the paper will situate these representations within the broader discourse on South Asian cinema's engagement with global cosmopolitanism, highlighting the intersection of international market forces and domestic socio-political realities.

Ultimately, this study aims to contribute to the ongoing discourse on the power of cinema in shaping societal attitudes, advocating for a more nuanced and empathetic representation of marginalized communities, particularly Muslims, in Indian cinema.

## Literature Review

The representation of Muslims in Indian cinema has been a subject of considerable scholarly attention, particularly in the context of post-colonial discourse and cultural

studies. The cinematic portrayal of Muslims as the “Other” has been critically analyzed through various lenses, including those of stereotyping, communalism, and the socio-political dynamics of the Indian nation-state.

One of the foundational frameworks for understanding these representations is the concept of “othering,” which has its roots in post-colonial theory. Scholars such as Edward Said, in his seminal work *Orientalism* (1978), laid the groundwork for examining how the West constructs the East as the “Other,” a notion that has been adapted to analyze intra-national dynamics within post-colonial societies like India. Said’s framework has been instrumental in understanding how Indian cinema, particularly Bollywood, has often positioned Muslims as a marginalized and exoticized community, reinforcing the dichotomy between the dominant Hindu “self” and the Muslim “other.”

Further building on Said’s ideas, scholars like Rachel Dwyer and Jyotika Viridi have examined the evolution of Muslim representation in Indian cinema. Dwyer, in her analysis of Bollywood, highlights how the portrayal of Muslims has shifted over time, reflecting broader socio-political changes. During the Nehruvian era, for instance, Muslims were often depicted as noble and aristocratic, embodying the secular ideals of the new Indian state. However, as Viridi notes in *The Cinematic ImagiNation* (2003), these representations began to shift in the 1970s and 1980s, with Muslim characters increasingly portrayed as criminals or members of the underworld, mirroring the growing communal tensions in the country.

The demolition of the Babri Masjid in 1992 and the subsequent rise of Hindu nationalism marked a significant turning point in the portrayal of Muslims in Indian cinema. Scholars such as Anupama Chopra and Shubhra Gupta have documented how this period saw the emergence of a new genre of films that intertwined religion and politics, often depicting Muslims as antagonistic figures involved in terrorism or extremist activities. This trend was further exacerbated in the post-9/11 era, as global discourses on terrorism began to influence Bollywood narratives. Films like *Sarfarosh*

(1999) and *Fanaa* (2006) are often cited in this context for their portrayal of Muslim characters as threats to national security, reinforcing the stereotype of the Muslim “terrorist.”

Critical to this discourse is the work of Tejaswini Ganti, who explores how Bollywood’s global reach has influenced the representation of marginalized communities, including Muslims. Ganti argues that the intersection of global market forces and local socio-political realities has led to the production of films that cater to both domestic and international audiences, often at the expense of nuanced and empathetic portrayals of minority groups. This commodification of Muslim identity in cinema has been criticized for perpetuating harmful stereotypes and contributing to the marginalization of the community both within and outside India.

Additionally, scholars like Priya Jaikumar and Shohini Ghosh have engaged with the implications of these cinematic representations for communal harmony and social cohesion in India. Jaikumar, in her work on post-colonial Indian cinema, emphasizes the need for a more inclusive cinematic discourse that recognizes the diversity and complexity of Muslim identities in India. Ghosh, on the other hand, critiques the simplistic binary of “us versus them” that is often perpetuated in Bollywood narratives, calling for a more critical engagement with the socio-political contexts that shape these representations.

In sum, the existing body of literature underscores the complex and often problematic nature of Muslim representation in Indian cinema. The prevailing trend of portraying Muslims as the “Other” not only reflects but also reinforces societal prejudices, contributing to the broader discourse on communalism and identity politics in India. This literature review sets the stage for a deeper analysis of specific films like *Sarfarosh*, *Fanaa*, *Kurbaan*, and *New York*, which are examined in this paper to illustrate how these cinematic narratives continue to shape and influence public perceptions of the Muslim community.

## Analysis and Discussion

The primary research problem addressed in this paper is the persistent “othering” of Muslims in Bollywood films, which reflects and perpetuates societal biases and communal divides. This issue is rooted in the historical and socio-political dynamics of post-colonial India, where cinema has often served as a tool for constructing national identity. The problem is exacerbated by the global reach of Bollywood, which allows these representations to influence not only domestic audiences but also international perceptions of Muslims.

Another significant research problem is the lack of nuanced and empathetic portrayals of Muslims in mainstream Indian cinema. Instead of reflecting the diversity and complexity of Muslim identities, these films often resort to reductive stereotypes, particularly in the portrayal of Muslims as terrorists or extremists. This trend raises concerns about the role of cinema in shaping public consciousness and its impact on communal harmony in India.

The portrayal of Muslims in the selected films – *Sarfarosh*, *Fanaa*, *Kurbaan*, and *New York* – serves as a critical lens through which to examine the broader issue of Muslim representation in Indian cinema. These films, produced in the post-liberalization era of the 1990s and 2000s, are particularly illustrative of how Bollywood narratives have evolved in response to the changing socio-political landscape.

### The Dynamics of ‘Othering’:

In *Sarfarosh* (1999), the Muslim character is depicted as an antagonist linked to cross-border terrorism, reflecting the post-Kargil War anxieties and the rising anti-Pakistan sentiment in India. This portrayal aligns with the broader trend of associating Muslims with violence and disloyalty to the nation, a theme that is further explored in *Fanaa* (2006). In *Fanaa*, the male Muslim protagonist is a terrorist who exploits his

love interest, a blind Hindu woman, symbolizing the betrayal of trust and the dangers posed by “the enemy within.”

Similarly, *Kurbaan* (2009) and *New York* (2009) engage with the post-9/11 global narrative of Islamophobia, portraying Muslims as either victims of racial profiling or perpetrators of terrorism. In *Kurbaan*, the film explores the dual identities of Muslims in the diaspora, where characters oscillate between being peace-loving citizens and radical extremists. *New York* delves into the complexities of Muslim identity in the post-9/11 world, yet it ultimately reinforces the notion of Muslims as suspects within the global war on terror framework.

These films employ visual and narrative strategies that emphasize the “otherness” of Muslim characters, often through their attire, language, and actions, which are contrasted with those of the Hindu protagonists. This process of othering not only marginalizes Muslim characters but also reinforces communal divides by presenting Muslims as fundamentally different from and opposed to the national “self.”

### **Socio-Political and Global Contexts:**

The portrayal of Muslims in these films cannot be divorced from the socio-political contexts in which they were produced. The 1990s witnessed the rise of Hindu nationalism and the subsequent hardening of communal identities, which was reflected in the increasingly antagonistic depiction of Muslims in cinema. The Babri Masjid demolition in 1992 and the communal riots that followed marked a turning point in Indian cinema, where Muslim characters began to be depicted more frequently as threats to the secular fabric of the nation.

The post-9/11 global landscape further influenced Bollywood's portrayal of Muslims, as seen in *Kurbaan* and *New York*. These films tapped into the global



discourse on terrorism and security, aligning Bollywood's narratives with international trends in media representation. However, this alignment often came at the cost of reinforcing stereotypes and simplifying the complex realities of Muslim lives, both in India and abroad.

### **Implications for the National Imaginary:**

The persistent portrayal of Muslims as the "Other" in Bollywood films has significant implications for the national imaginary. By framing Muslims as threats to national security and social cohesion, these films contribute to the exclusion of Muslims from the imagined community of the Indian nation. This exclusion is not just symbolic but has real-world consequences, as it fuels communal tensions and justifies discriminatory practices against Muslims in various spheres of life.

Moreover, the global reach of Bollywood means that these representations shape perceptions of Muslims beyond India's borders, contributing to the broader narrative of Islamophobia. The portrayal of Muslims in Indian cinema thus becomes part of a larger discourse that links Muslim identity with terrorism and violence, further entrenching negative stereotypes.

### **Toward Inclusive Representations:**

To address the research problems identified in this paper, it is crucial for Indian cinema to move toward more inclusive and diverse representations of Muslims. This requires filmmakers to move beyond simplistic binaries of good versus evil and to explore the multifaceted identities of Muslims in India. Films like *My Name is Khan* (2010) and *Gully Boy* (2019) offer examples of more nuanced portrayals, where Muslim



characters are depicted with depth and complexity, highlighting their struggles, aspirations, and contributions to society.

By challenging the dominant narratives and offering alternative representations, Indian cinema can play a pivotal role in fostering greater understanding and empathy between communities. This shift is not only necessary for promoting social cohesion within India but also for countering the global narrative of Islamophobia.

## Conclusion

The representation of Muslims in post-colonial Indian cinema, particularly in Bollywood, reveals a complex and often troubling narrative that mirrors broader societal tensions and political shifts. Over the decades, the cinematic portrayal of Muslims has evolved from depictions of a once-celebrated aristocracy to a more insidious association with violence, criminality, and terrorism. This shift not only reflects the changing socio-political landscape in India but also contributes to the reinforcement of communal biases that perpetuate the “othering” of Muslims within the national imaginary.

The analysis of films like *Sarfarosh*, *Fanaa*, *Kurbaan*, and *New York* underscores the powerful role that cinema plays in shaping public perceptions and constructing cultural narratives. These films, while engaging with contemporary issues of nationalism, security, and identity, often resort to reductive stereotypes that simplify the complex realities of Muslim lives. In doing so, they risk perpetuating harmful ideologies that alienate and marginalize a significant portion of the Indian population.

Yet, the discourse on Muslim representation in Indian cinema is not without hope for change. The growing awareness and critique of these portrayals, both within academic circles and among filmmakers, signal a potential shift towards more

inclusive and empathetic representations. Films that challenge the dominant narratives and offer more nuanced depictions of Muslim characters are beginning to emerge, providing a counter-narrative that emphasizes shared humanity over divisive stereotypes.

In conclusion, the task ahead for Indian cinema is to move beyond the simplistic binaries that have long defined its portrayal of Muslims. By embracing the diversity and richness of Muslim identities, filmmakers can contribute to a more inclusive and harmonious vision of Indian society – one that reflects the true plurality of its people. The power of cinema lies not only in its ability to reflect reality but also in its potential to shape a more just and equitable future.

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