

***Bollywood Representations of Kashmir and Kashmiris: between Orientalist
Melodrama and Post-Colonial Representation***

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The Asian Conference on Media, Communication & Film 2020
Official Conference Proceedings

Abstract

This paper starts from the ideas that Indian cinema seeks to describe Indian culture and that filmmakers' use of intertextuality makes them the discernible conscience of the Indian nation in order to explore the depiction of Kashmir and Kashmiris in Bollywood films. It argues that these films portray a kind of "Indianization," not only in their plots and how characters' emotions, singing, dancing, and fighting are made essential parts of the film, but in how they are structured according to the rules of melodrama, which require a moral dichotomy that must comply with the state's agenda of fomenting Hindu nationalism. This paper deploys post-colonial theory to describe and analyze the depiction of Kashmir and Kashmiris in major Bollywood films since 1989.

Keywords: Indian cinema; Hindu nationalism; Indian Muslim; Kashmir; Orientalism; post-colonialism

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Introduction: A linear understanding

The contested province of Kashmir lies on the border between Pakistan and India. Kashmir has experienced considerable unrest and political violence ever since India achieved independence from Britain, and Pakistan was created by the 1947 Indian Independence Act, and especially since the militant demonstrations of anti-Indian sentiment and Kashmiri freedom movements of 1989. Much of this conflict stretches beyond a mere territorial dispute; India and Pakistan have clashed repeatedly over Kashmir because it lies largely in India, a Hindu-majority country that relies on Hinduism as a binding agent to cultivate a sense of Indian nationalism. On the other hand, Pakistan is a Muslim-majority country and Kashmir is a Muslim-majority province. Thus, Kashmir tests the supposedly secular Indian state's ability to accommodate Muslims (Behera, 2006).

In the first decades of independence, from the 1950s through the 1980s, Kashmir was a prime shooting destination for Indian filmmakers of so-called Bollywood films. Bollywood cinema has a long history and a deep influence in Indian culture (Bhatia, 2013) and among the vast Indian diaspora. Although people go to the movies to get away from the real world, "when they leave the theater, they leave with a permanent impression of images of people and circumstances" in the real world that movie-goers lack the proper context to understand (Kaul, 2010).

This is especially true of Bollywood's depictions of Kashmir. These depictions changed after 1989 when the demand for separation of Kashmir from India began; Bollywood's prolonged fixation on Kashmir's natural beauty and visual symbolism ended, and its attention turned to investigating the political connection between Kashmir and the Indian Union. This paper proposes that Bollywood depictions of Kashmir since 1989 have aimed to cultivate identity-based readings of Kashmir and India and offers three lenses through which we can see three different elements of these readings. Cinema and the media hold tremendous power in cultivating people's perceptions of identity, belonging, and the "other," but Bollywood is uniquely powerful in this way (Rajadhyaksha & Willemsen, 1994, p. 10) and thus merits special attention.

Representation of Kashmir and Kashmiris, specifically Muslims, in Bollywood films has long been a hot topic of conversation among scholars, filmmakers, critics, and audiences. According to Nitasha Kaul, Kashmiris were a people who were "bargained" into Indian/Pakistani nationhood when the British left the region (Kaul, 2010). From the mid-nineteenth century, the practice of statecraft and governance came to be tied closely to statistics, record, and classification: in the colonies, the British tried to stabilize and centralize channels of power by classifying their subjects and dealing with them in terms of race, community leaders, and religion. Hindus and Muslims were two important lenses through which people were perceived, categorized as, and then divided by during Partition (Kaul, 2010).

Bakaya and Bhatti write in "Kashmir Conflict: a study of what led to insurgency in Kashmir Valley and proposed future solutions" about major reasons for the insurgency and why it only gained momentum around 40 years after India's partition in 1989 (Bakaya & Bhatti, 2014). Martin-Lucas (2013) writes about this in "The Beauties of Kashmir," based on Nila Gupta's body of work, which explores the situation in Jammu and Kashmir

through short stories. It explicitly examines feminist theory in the context of sexual crimes committed against girls and women at the time of conflict (Martin-Lucas, 2013).

In his analysis of religious and nationalist movements, Spencer (2010) explores the current secessionist movement in Kashmir Valley and the identity politics in terms of religion, ethnicity, nationality, language, and class, among others. The study attempts to bridge the rhetoric and reality and hopes to give a fair evaluation of the role of Islam in contemporary political movements in the valley. Spencer's study uses historical, journalistic, and other literature accounts from common theoretical frameworks of the politics of identity and identity makers of religion and nationalism.

Methods

This paper combines textual analysis with the application of critical theory to examine how Bollywood cinema constructs a visual text which shapes movie-goers' ideas about the aesthetics and people of Kashmir, various geopolitical conflicts involving India, and the various risks of cross-border infiltration, terrorism, suicide-bombing, extortion, and kidnapping. It uses the term "visual text" in order to apply conventional methods of textual analysis to film, since a "text" can be anything written, visual, or spoken that serves as a medium for communication. (Neuman, 2014).

Textual analysis is the only way to approach the film text, narratives and images of Kashmir propagated by mainstream Indian (i.e., Bollywood) Cinema. Given a large number of films based on Kashmir and Kashmiris and to find out the various aspects of representation the qualitative analysis of the data available on the subject applies in order to get insights into the ideas or hypotheses for potential quantitative research (Wyse, 2011).

Theoretical Framework

In order to understand the concept of representation and how it connects meaning and language to the culture, it is essential to examine different theories on how language is used to represent the world and explore the *reflective*, the *intentional*, and the *constructionist* approaches to representation.



Figure 1: The Representative and Semiotic Framework of Film Text

Bollywood films [Figure:1] should be understood and analyzed through the (reflective) language, which reflects a meaning that already exists in the world of objects, people, and

events; the expression (intentional) of the writer, producer/director, and the cinematographer—that is, his or her personally intended meaning; and (constructionist) meaning constructed through language (Hall, 1997) [Figure:2].

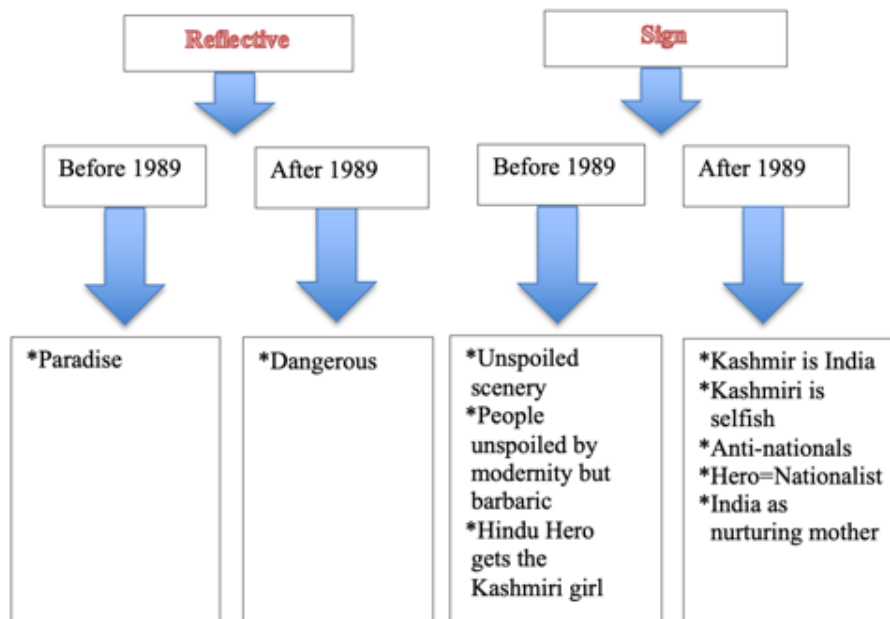


Figure 2: The Reflective Representation and Semiotic Sign of Film Text

Although the reflective, intentional, and constructionist approaches to representation are among the most popular, this paper has chosen to explore the constructionist approach as it has the most significant impact on cultural studies. The variant of semiotics of the constructionist approach (Saussure et al., 1960) and Michael Foucault’s discursive model is applied for analyzing concepts of film and cultural studies in order to understand how the depiction of culture in the selected films contributes toward forming a perception of Kashmir. The face of one person, the dress of another, along with names and voices—this is exactly how the director creates an image [Figure:3]. “Visual signs and images, even when they bear a close resemblance to the things to which they refer, are still signs: they carry meaning and thus have to be interpreted” (Hall, 1997 p.19).

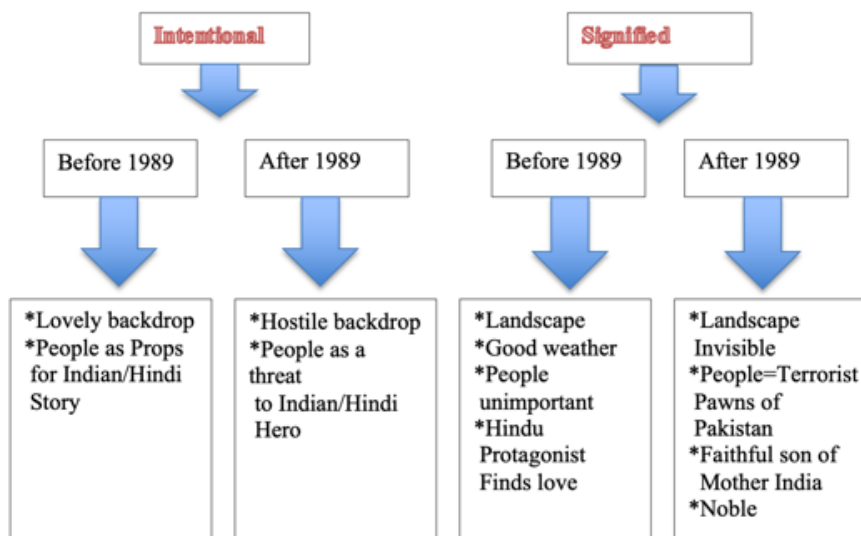


Figure 3: The Intentional Representation and Semiotic Signified Film

The general term used for words, sounds, or images that carry meanings is “signs” (Hall, 1997). Signs are organized into a language which enables us to translate our concepts into words, sounds, or images, to express meanings and communicate thoughts to other people. Language is used comprehensively: the writing system, spoken word, and visual images, whether produced by hand, mechanical, electronic, digital, or other means, are all used to express meaning. Additionally, non-linguistic language, such as facial expressions, gestures, and music, function as signs. Codes fix the relationships between concepts and signs and further tell us which language to use to convey an idea and which concepts are being referred to when we hear or read with a sign. The audience learns about the system and conventions of representation and how language and cultural codes work, thus obtaining cultural “know-how.” Moreover, it enables them to unconsciously internalize these codes and then use them to express certain ideas through their systems of representation—writing, speech, gesture, visualization, and so on—and to interpret ideas that are communicated to them using the same systems [Figure:4].

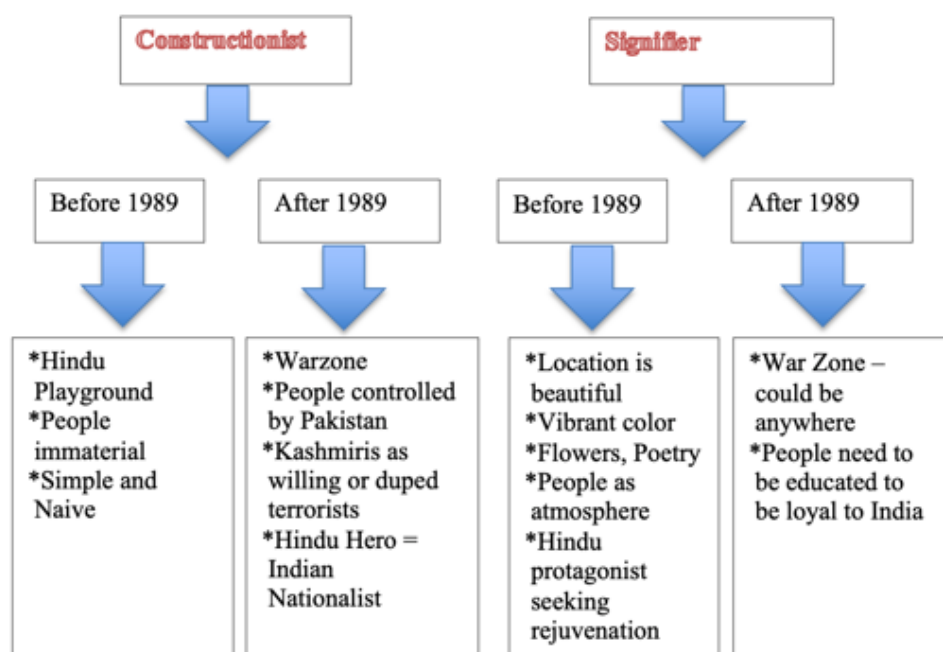


Figure 4: The Constructionist Representation and Semiotic Signifier Film

Saussure: Signifier and Signified, Form and Content

Swiss linguist Ferdinand de Saussure did much of his work on the social constructionist view of language and representation and shaped the semiotic approach to the problem of representation in a wide variety of cultural fields. Saussure divided the concept of a sign into two further elements: the form (the actual word, image, photo) and the idea or concept in your mind with which the form is associated. He named the first element the signifier and the second, the signified. Thus, the sign is the union of a form that signifies (signifier) and an idea signified (signified).

Additionally, Saussure insisted on the arbitrary nature of the sign and the signified: signs do not possess a fixed or essential meaning. What signifies RED or the essence of “redness” is not RED but the difference between RED and GREEN: signs are members of systems and are defined to other members of the system, and the meaning of a concept or word is defined to its direct opposite.

It is interesting to note that the relation between the signifier and signified, which is fixed by our cultural codes, is not permanently fixed (Saussure et al., 1960). The meanings of words shift, and every shift alters the conceptual map of culture, placing different cultures at different historical moments to classify and think about the world differently.

The underlying argument behind the semiotic approach is that, since all cultural objects convey meaning and all cultural practices depend on meaning, they both must work in a similar fashion to language. Not only words and images but also objects themselves can function as signifiers. For example, the Kashmiri dress, *pheran*, has a simple function to cover the body and protect it from cold weather; however, the *pheran* also functions as a sign in that it constructs meaning and carries a message. In pre-conflict films on Kashmir, the *pheran* was a simple, humble, traditional garment worn by both males and females in Kashmir, whereas in post-conflict films, it became the dress of a terrorist who hides arms and ammunition under the garment.

Bollywood and Social Constructionism

Since its inception, Indian cinema has drawn inspiration from the styles, aesthetics, and semiotics from cultural forms that have been adapted in India over the centuries, often mixing them in various ways during the process of evolution into a vast cultural heritage (Dudrah and Desai, 2008). Bollywood films on the subject of Kashmir are synonymous with amusement: Kashmir provides the backdrop, and its beauty signifies peace, tranquility, and love in the 1960s, 1970s, and 1980s through films like *Kashmir Ki Kali* (1964), *Junglee* (1961), and *Jab Jab Phool Khile* (1965). However, a sizable number of films on terrorism in Kashmir emerged after the 1980s. These films have distinctive genres of documentary, drama, thriller, romance, humor, and irony. The narrative themes combine realism and fantasy and mix all the elements of storytelling in a theatrical format.

In *Mission Kashmir* (2000), the fantasy is echoed in each song sequence, by consistently using role-playing, and a representation of reality is constructed. The space between representation and reality becomes extremely narrow, particularly in two Hindi songs that have inserted lines from Kashmiri lyrics into their choruses: *Bhumbro* (O Bumblebee) and *Hrind poshmaal gindne drai lo lo* (O Intoxicated Ones, Poshmaal, Drunk [On Spring], has come out to play).

Looking at Bollywood Through Semiotic Glasses

A typical Bollywood film script is seldom logical or reflective, nor do the audiences anticipate that it will be so: popular Hindi films have been characterized by the famous Indian social scholar, Ashish Nandy, as “anti-psychological” (Nandy, 1981). Augmentation and divergence are essential to the characterization of the hero. There could be no room in this world for calm, quiet, or inconspicuously nuanced characters; thus, heroes in Hindi cinema have extremely articulated, regularly inordinate, identities that fall into very characterized generalizations. The audience promptly perceives the hero, the heroine, the miscreant, and the fool, and this typically results in the performing artists playing similar sorts of characters, to the degree of incarnating the attributes into the collective imaginings.

The movies concerning Kashmir post-1989 test rationale and play with reality in every area of the filming procedure. The content is not composed, remembering the

quintessence of Kashmiriyat: the way of life, social conduct, foundations, and procedures of Kashmir. The story structure demonstrates a kind of fragmentation, as the development of the story does not incorporate a pyramidal example. It instead utilizes a specific method, for example, flashbacks, thematic repetition, and movement back and forth through time. As per the creators and makers of Bollywood (Thomas, 2008), the embodiment of this work of “Indianization” lies in how the plot builds up.

For instance, in *Roja* (1992), the hero Rishi figures out how to change Liyaqat's mentality from evil to goodness through a dialogue “Islam Ahinsa Nahin Sikhata” (Islam does not teach violence) and looks for a conclusion to the insubordination by utilizing Islam as a weapon.

In *Mission Kashmir* (2000), the doctor who is treating Inayat Khan, the Inspector General of Police, for a wound inflicted by a bomb blast, says, “*Aaj Kal to Kashmir mein Fatwaon ka daur chal raha hai*” (these days Kashmir is governed by religious decree). This clearly imparts that Islam is about radicalism, and Kashmiri Muslims are religious zealots. In *Yahaan* (2005), the lead character, Aman, is travelling a jeep, and while having a conversation with the driver, he tells him, “*Panch Saal Ki Posting Mein Bas Ek Hi Baat Samjhaa Hoon, Kashmir Ki Baasha Hai Bندوق, Phir Wo Unki Ho Yaa Humari*” (in five years of my posting in Kashmir I have understood one thing. The language which Kashmiris understand is the gun, be it theirs or our own). This etymological content passes on a great articulation of Kashmir being an unsafe place, where individuals would only listen to you at gunpoint.

For example, the films *Junglee* (1961), *Kashmir Ki Kali* (1964), and *Jab Jab Phool Khile* (1965) are similar in many ways. In all three films, Kashmir is a place where wealthy Indians go for recreation and, while there, fall in love with a Kashmiri. The location provides a beautiful setting for romance: Kashmir itself is an extended film set with Kashmiri characters and narratives being minimal or limited to the tourist visions of Kashmiris, which is either a houseboat owner or a tourist guide.

Meaning is not in the object or the person or thing, nor is it in the word. In this study Hall's “systems of representation,” Saussure's semiotic approach, and textual analysis research method is applied to Bollywood films to study the images of Kashmir, Kashmiri landscape, people and culture.

Film Plots: Character as Confrontation

The films reviewed in this paper depict the following: conflict between Kashmiri separatist militants and the Indian armed forces in *Roja* (1992, directed by Mani Ratnam) and in *Mission Kashmir* (2000, directed by Vidhu Vinod Chopra); radical debate in *Maa Tujhe Salaam* (2002, directed by Tinnu Verma), *Hero-Love Story of a Spy* (2003, directed by Anil Sharma), *Jaal the Trap* (2003, directed by Guddu Dhanoa), and *Fanaa* (2006, directed by Kunal Kohli); cross-border revolts in *LOC Kargil* (2003, directed by J. P. Dutta); Indo-Pakistani relations in *Zameen* (2003, directed by Rohit Shetty); issues related to the historical partition of India and the presence of the Indian military in Kashmir in *Pukar* (2000, directed by Raj Kumar Santoshi); and elements of Italian neorealism in *Sheen* (2004, directed by Ashok Pandit), *Tahaan* (2008, directed by Santosh Sivan), and *Haider* (2014, directed by Vishal Bhardwaj). The review describes the general setting and plots of these films in order to give some background for this paper's

analysis of the politically motivated depiction of Kashmir and Kashmiris.

Militants in central Kashmir create the central conflict in *Roja*. In the film, cryptologist Rishi Kumar is appointed by the intelligence wing of the Indian Department of Defense to read and decipher “crypto-coded” messages in Kashmir. Upon his arrival in Kashmir, Kumar is abducted by Kashmiri militants who are motivated by Islam to fight for the establishment of a sovereign Kashmir. Kashmiri militants are also the antagonists of *Mission Kashmir*. In this film, Muslim Kashmiri freedom seekers are fighting against the Indian establishment for independent Kashmir. One of the film’s main characters, Altaaf, is a Kashmiri freedom fighter who is portrayed as a terrorist and corrupt fanatic who commits brutal, murderous crimes.

Politics and Empire as Plot and Theme: Orientalism and Representation

All great films have a theme or underlying and unifying idea that gives direction to the plot, defines the critical issues for the characters, and ultimately determines the depth of the film’s meaning (Cowgill, 1999). Indian-ness and Indian national identity have arisen as major themes in Bollywood films.

Roja (1992), *Dil Se* (1995), *Kohram*, *Hero-Love Story of a Spy* (2003), *Maa Tujhe Salaam*, *Zameen*, *Jaal the Trap* (2003), *Fanaa* (2006) follow the concept of nationalism and Indianness of Hindi films. The early films’ directors like Dadasaheb Phalke, who created the first feature film in India, *Raja Harishchandra* and actors came from the theatre culture. After India gained independence in 1947, it had to create a national consciousness. The popular Hindi cinema played an essential role in building this idea of belonging to a nation and nationalism. The films are examined to understand how Bollywood cinema supports and strengthens the national spirit by placing India and Pakistan as binary opposites of which the former takes a superior position.

Mission Kashmir (2000) and *Pukar* (2000) are the two films that use signification, subject, and the symbolic order to clarify the masking of reality. The semiotic theory demonstrates how the image signifies the signifier. In both films fantasy echoes in each song sequence, which continually uses role-playing and crafted representations of reality. The use of balaclava and the fabric covered faces dehumanize the terrorists and portray them with no positive human qualities. The negative associations are established to justify the killing of the terrorist in the mind of the viewers.

Kashmir and Kashmiris have received special attention in Bollywood films due to the conflict’s potential for exciting narratives and heroic, starkly dichotomous themes, such as the abstract battle between good and evil. Indeed, Bollywood has produced more films based in Kashmir since 1989, and these films have increasingly focused on violence and terrorism (Kabir, 2009). In recent decades Bollywood movies have portrayed Kashmir as a real-life battleground populated by sweethearts, activists, militaries, and *mujahdeen*.

Edward Said’s seminal work *Orientalism* changed the field of literary studies by demonstrating the colonial nature of knowledge of the non-European world. Said was specifically concerned with the relationship between political or colonial power and the production of knowledge:

Knowledge...means surveying a civilization from its origins to its prime to its decline—and, of course, it means *being able to do that*. Knowledge means rising above immediacy, beyond self, into the foreign and distant...To have such knowledge of a thing is to dominate it, to have authority over it. And authority here means for “us” to deny autonomy to “it”—the Oriental country—since we know it and it exists, in a sense, *as* we know it. (Said, 1978, p. 32)

In other words, said argues that nineteenth-century Orientalists both provided information about the Orient for Western colonizers and simultaneously created an imaginary Orient viewed through the lens of white supremacy—an imaginary Orient whose very existence justified European colonization.

These salient features of Orientalism persist today in Western mass media, especially film and television (Kellner Douglas, 1995). The power to represent reality is vitally important in today’s world, according to Jean Baudrillard, who argues that facts exist simply to emulate models (e.g., narrative conventions of cinema, for example), and that this condition defines the postmodern world, which is “a question of signs of the real for real” (Dino, 2002). In addition, although India’s origins are indeed anti-colonial, we can apply Said’s framework to the depiction of Kashmir and Kashmiris in Indian cinema because of the power dynamic between India and Kashmir—i.e., because India has the power to represent Kashmir in the ways described above. This power to represent enables the Indian state and film industry to disregard and mask the failure of Indian democracy and the Indian national project in Kashmir by using inflammatory, nationalist rhetoric that places the blame for the failure of democracy in Kashmir on Kashmiris and Muslims (Kaul, 2018).

Agenda-Setting, Nationalism, and Representation in Bollywood Films

The concept of agenda-setting suggests that audiences comprehend the significance of an issue through the mass media, and that the mass media amplify some messages and effectively manipulate their audience (Maxwell, McCombs, & Shaw, 1972). Agenda-setting theory can help explain the media’s capability to put some issues at the forefront of public discourse. In a pathbreaking work, Edward S. Herman and Noam Chomsky (1988) show that, contrary to the usual image of the news media as cantankerous, obstinate, and ubiquitous in their search for truth and defense of justice, in their actual practice they defend the economic, social, and political agendas of the privileged groups that dominate domestic society, the state, and the global order (Edward & Chomsky, 1988). This paper sees agenda-setting as a subtext running just beneath the plots of Bollywood films that both helps maintain tension in films when the action slows down and functions as the deeper message of the films themselves. This section relates these reflections on agenda-setting to the representation of Kashmir and Kashmiris in Bollywood films.

Representation refers to the use of language, signs, and pictures that stand in for or speak to things that provide information about a particular community or culture (Hall, 1997). For example, the plots, settings, themes, and distinctive style of Bollywood films have made them prime enunciators of Indian-ness since their inception (Rajadhyaksha & Willemen, 1994). Bollywood films constitute a “nation-space” that propagates Indian nationalism. Thus, representation in Indian cinema matters greatly, given Bollywood’s

status as a nation-making and -defining entity that generates a sense of national culture, community, and identity.

In this context, Bollywood takes on the appearance of a political spectacle (Nandy, 1995). Although films are works of imagination, they are not expressions of reality but rather representations of reality aimed not at accuracy but at narrativity (Ferro & Greene, 1988). This is where ideology comes into play: Narratives reinforce ideologies through semiotic language and stereotypes regarding the people, place, and history of Kashmir. Although “the interests of ideology may remain the same, its immediate content does not” (Philo, 2007, p. 108); in other words, although the settings and characters and conflicts of Bollywood films may change, their core ideas and underlying themes—the representation of Indians, Pakistanis, and Kashmiris in ways that stoke and validate Indian nationalism—remains unchanged.

Maa Tujhe Salaam contains more explicit anti-Pakistani sentiment. The film starts with an iconic dialogue, in which the following words are superimposed on the screen in gold: “*Dood maango ge toh kheer denge, Kashmir maango ge toh cheer denge*” (“If you ask for milk, we shall give you milk pudding, but if you ask for Kashmir, we shall crush you”). This dialogue is crude and derogatory, and it commodifies Kashmir as an object under the authority and ownership of India. This not only creates the perception that Kashmir is India’s property, but it dehumanizes Kashmiris by framing their existence as a mere commodity.

Conclusion: Ways forward between Cinematic and Real Kashmir

There exists a bifurcated trajectory of peace and conflict in cinematic Kashmir. Bollywood films provide a representation of Kashmir and its political situation that serves the interests of the Indian state by demonizing and dehumanizing Muslim Kashmiris by portraying Indians as superior and associating terrorism with Islam. The pre-eminent cultural role of Bollywood films in India makes these portrayals a serious issue worth extensive consideration. Why then does this happen and what are some ways through which we can counteract the damaging effects of these representations?

The film-maker Kuman Shahani has remarked “The biggest problem seems to be that we are working within a capitalist framework and we do not have a capitalist infrastructure” (Prasad, 1998, p.29). This heavy reliance on state funding and organization to get their films made hinders filmmakers’ ability to experiment with the content and themes of their work. As a result, Bollywood is a largely ideological production that seeks to establish political unity among Indians by subordinating all internal conflicts under its primary concern, namely the survival and thriving of the Indian state.

This study has demonstrated how negative and damaging portrayals of Kashmiris in Indian cinema both create and justify the conditions for violent repression of Kashmiri political movements. If we always run the risk of Orientalizing subjects, as per Said, is there any way forward—i.e., a way in which Kashmiris might be represented in film in ways which both overcome the biases of previous and current representations and acknowledge and disentangle the potentially harmful effects of Indian domination over the nation-space of film? We might, for example, recognize domination itself as an experience alongside oppression and lean on both to break free of the tendency to see and depict the world through colonizing binaries (Mattingly, 2011).

The central claim of this study is that the Bollywood (Hindi) film industry has not portrayed the real Kashmir in pre- and post-1989 films. The textual analysis of each film and its narrative plot reveals the perspectives that promote and serve the bearers of particular ideologies. To this end, textual analysis is the primary vehicle of investigation, with the use of New Orientalism to understand the discourses around the ideas of “terrorism” and “terrorist.” Orientalism was first described in the pioneering work by Edward Said in 1978. Since then, the world has changed in many ways and come a long way in representing the other. Accordingly, New Orientalism expresses and serves, part culturally and part ideologically, as a mode of discourse in understanding and representing Kashmir. Orientalism is a thought based upon an ontological and epistemological distinction made between the Orient and Occident: based on this theory, this research indicates Indian cinema to be a western-style Occident, dominating, restructuring, representing, and having authority over the Orient (Kashmiri) and what Kashmir is known to or made to do as New-Orient.

Observations on the art of film and controversial conventions like the politics of representation, stereotyping, and agenda-setting provide insights into how filmmakers construct “Kashmir,” “the Kashmiri,” and “terrorist.” This thesis argued the case of Bollywood cinema and that, based on the evidence generated by reference to numerous productions from the pre-conflict era (1960-1980) to the post-conflict period (1990 to the present), there exists a bifurcated trajectory of peace and conflict in cinematic Kashmir.

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