

Identity of Muslim Women in Hindi Movies

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Abstract:

Hindi movies are made with male gaze in view, the images of women are discussed sociologically or semiotically or as subservience. In such circumstances when Muslim women are projected, she is doubly marginalized. First as a woman, second as a representative of minority community. But this stereotype images were broken by Hindi movies like Nikaah (marriage) in 1982, Bazaar (market) in 1982, Bombay in 1994 and Fiza (atmosphere) in 2003. In these movies female protagonists enjoy key positions and try to break out of social environmental forces which are controlled by men. It also poses question to the audience of gender issues especially belonging to middle classes and the process of questioning is carried out at multiple levels through characterization and narrative modes. Here, the characters of Muslim women are not treated in abstract manner; in fact the basic projection centers around the need to be accepted and respected individually with Muslim woman's journey towards self-definition. The paper is an enquiry of the representation of Muslim women in Hindi movies where a woman has to face social prejudices, orthodoxies and beliefs which are articulated and challenged, formulating a counter – hegemonic feminist discourse.

Key words: Identity of Muslim women, Hindi movies, Socio-economic perspective, female emancipation.

The issue of identity is central to female emancipation. When this question is attached to gender relations in a male dominated society especially Muslim community in India, it

acquires multiple dimensions. Identity is an important issue for Muslim women as they are frail in power ratio. But it is not the power ratio only infact it is applicable in every sphere of life whether domestic, social or professional. On viewing Indian Hindi movies or the main stream cinema right from 1980s till today, the audiences observe that Muslim women are projected in stereotype images. They are patented to be mothers, faithful daughters, dedicated or obedient wives who do not question the authority of their male counterparts. The most important aspect of Muslim women in general is taken as cultural and moral carriers of their community but not as guardians in such circumstances. When we watch Muslim women in Hindi movies, they stand doubly marginalized: both as a woman and as a representative of a minority community. The present paper is an attempt to study this very perspective through Hindi movies which is the most powerful and influential medium of expression in India. No one can turn away from this medium as it appropriate much larger space in the lives of Indians than it did in past.

My study is based on the analysis of four Hindi movies, *Nikaah* (Marriage) released in 1982, *Bazaar* (Market) also released in 1982, *Bombay* released in 1995 and *Fiza* (Atmosphere) released in 2000. All these movies are Muslim centered films but I have tried to examine the difficulties faced by Muslim women who are from marginalized community. In all these movies the central character or the protagonist is in the key position as far as their portrayal is concerned but what is to be looked at is their identity as a woman. We find that a secondary position is imposed on them by strong social and environmental forces controlled by men. This has left them on the margins as they are forced to live in destitution. They are placed in slots defined by men for their own convenience without women's approval and are left with no choice. These movies received attention from audience as the question of identity is not only restricted to narration and characterization only. The problem is addressed on multiple levels – camera eye,

lights, use of space, silence, facial and body language. In all these movies the female protagonists belong either from lower middle class or from middle class families. Injustice, exploitation and sufferings are manifested to ensure audience identification.

The first movie *Nikaah* (marriage) directed by B.R.Chopra who is known to make movies with strong social undercurrent, depicts the character of a Muslim protagonist called Nilofer, (acted by Salma Agha, a Pakistani actress). In the movie she belongs to an average middle class family who gets married to a Nawab (a Feudal Lord) Waseem. Nilofer is portrayed as a helpless wife getting bored and yearn for understanding from her husband. Instead of treating her with respect and recognizing her as an equal partner in a relationship, Waseem treats her as if she is a commodity to fulfill his physical needs and when she voices her dissent, Waseem in a fit of anger shouts Talaq (divorce) thrice. Nilofer has no choice but to leave her husband's house. She is even discarded by her family, a common scene that we find in Indian middle class families. She is left with no choice but to live in a working women's hostel. But the stigma of divorce remains with her wherever she goes. When she appears for a job interview to become a lecturer in a girl's college, her application is turned down only because she is a divorcee. Later she marries an old college friend Haider (acted by Raj Babbar). They were enjoying their life when her first husband Waseem bumps back into her life realizing his mistake and wanted to get her back. Her second husband Haider is ready to divorce her thinking that Nilofer is still in love with her first husband Waseem but Nilofer speaks out and is ready to leave both of them. She wanted to be identified as a woman who has right to decide about her own fate and future in a male dominated society. She clearly states that she is not ready to be tossed between two men and says, "she is not ready to become a gift". Waseem distanced himself from Nilofer's life.

Through the movie the director has taken a socially relevant topic of divorce. Though the movie was made in 1982 the problem of divorce is still a very relevant issue. Muslim male uses the word 'talaq' as a weapon to make their wives submissive. He can divorce his wife unilaterally even without informing her. This problem is acute in middle and lower middle class Muslim families. The movie is more of a social commentary on the difficulty and complexity over divorce faced by Muslim women particularly in India. Any discussion of Hindi cinema is incomplete without the mention of music. It is music which distinguishes Hindi movies from the movies which are made in rest of the world. Apart from the powerful narrative it is music which is an important constituent to the movie. The songs of *Nikaah* complement the narration. The director has used the magic of music composed by Ravi to articulate the subtext of the movie. It is through music that the director communicates his theme and shares his feelings with his audience.

The wider spread of education in 1970 and 1980 resulted in the advent of a new class of audience who were more interested in the movies related with social issues. This class of audience belonged to middle class and higher middle class families who themselves want to identify with the movies which are related to the problems faced by them like riots, dowry problem and prostitution. This audience was not interested to see female dancing around the trees or any imaginative stories which were not socially relevant. This demand gave birth to parallel cinema or the new wave cinema in Hindi language. They wanted Hindi cinema an expression of reality and the directors of parallel cinema seems to subscribe such views. This era may be called a golden era of parallel cinema as most of the cinemas were produced in these years. Actors and Actresses like Naseerudin Shah, Farooq Shiekh, Smita Patil, Shabana Azmi were the superstars of parallel cinema.

Movies like *Salim langde par maat ro* (Do not cry for handicapped Salim), *Dharavi* (name of the largest slum in

Mumbai), Manthan(The Churning) or even Bazaar (Market) are best illustrations made during this period. In all these movies it is the situation which is sinner. Parallel cinema gained momentum in 1980 due to these movies. The directors like Satyajit Ray, Shyam Benegal or Govind Nahlani were those filmmakers who were constantly in search of the images which express the true meaning and reality.

The main objective of these directors is to search for those images that are truly native to Indian soil. The movie Bazaar (Market) directed by Sagar Sarhadi, released in 1982, depicts the plight of Muslim women from subaltern class. It is also the ethnographic description of Muslim community of India. Male masquerade has also been taken into account. Sagar Sarhadi is known to make movies with gender sensitive issues. *Bazaar* is based on realistic incidents of buying of teenage and young Muslim girls by wealthy persons belonging to Gulf countries.

The movie has two main female characters: the character of Najma played by Smita Patil and Shabnam by Supriya Pathak. Najma who wants to settle down with her lover Akhtar Hussain, played by Bharat Kapoor and Shabnam who is in love with Sarju, played by Farooq Sheikh. But the families of both Najma and Shabnam are so poor that they are ready to sell them to the highest bidder. Najma ends up as a mistress and Shabnam has no choice but to marry an old guy who is already married and has three kids. He has returned to India from Gulf. On the strength of his money, he compels Shabnam to marry him.

Everything is done within the framework of religion. Thus we find Najma and Shabnam suffer a great deal both psychologically and emotionally because of the lack of social support from their own community. The movie is deliberately based in the city of Hyderabad as selling and buying of girls happens in this city. Although the female protagonists are from humble origin, yet they are not shown submissive in the movie. They gather courage and strength to raise their voices against

the suppression and oppression though they are unable to continue and succumbed to societal pressures.

The movie is a realistic portrayal of gloomy conditions prevalent in this area. The narrative is guided by middle class values where female has to follow their male masters. All the characters in the movie have either yearning for love or money. This movie is different from *Nikaah* as Sagar Sarhadi presents the plight of the women through their silence and eloquence of feelings and emotions. In *Nikaah* men are instrumental to decide women's identity and future and the vulnerability of weaker sex is stressed. B.R.Chopra uses Muslim background to discuss the institution of marriage that reduces female to a commodity. But *Bazaar* is little different from *Nikaah* where Sagar Sarhadi stresses that individuality of a woman can be gained by economic independence. The movie follows an unconventional narrative style and has sentimental and emotional moments too. The end is highly melodramatic. Shabnam commits suicide on bridal bed. The director has deliberately shown the death of Shabnam on bridal bed for significant human and contemporary purposes. For Muslim women in India the ultimate goal is to get married which is the beginning of a new life where husbands are their new masters and a woman have to mould herself accordingly as her master wants but Shabnam refuses to become a part of it. After watching the movie one may perceive that the myth of true love, almost in Romeo Juliet tradition, is illustrated within a rotten and degrading social system. Sagar Sarhadi also portrays the conflict between those compulsions that are rooted in tradition and are part of the value system of a decadent society that not only tolerates injustice but often seeks to perpetuate it.

Apart from its narratology *Bazaar* is a beautifully structured movie. There is brevity and concentration of cinematic handling and each movement of the camera try to reveal Muslim ambiance. Sagar Sarhadi also presents his audience a vivid account of Muslim social life which makes the

experience meaningful. The music in the movie is composed by Khayyam, a noted music director of Hindi movies. The songs are based on classical music. In *Bazaar* too the director has largely used the songs for story telling with passionate notes.

Before discussing the next movie *Bombay* it is necessary to consider the background on which it is based. The Hindi movies of 1990s show marked departure from its predecessors. The leftist approach of films of Raj Kapoor in the 1960s paved way to action filled movies of Amitabh Bachchan in the 1970s and 1980s but decade of 1990s have swung to the other side of the spectrum. It was the time when Hindu nationalism enjoyed a hegemonic status till the demolition of Babri Mosque in 1993. A national culture was in constitution by the process of exclusion of minority culture especially Muslim culture. For the spread of rightist ideology militarization acquired a prominent place. Muslim community instead of being asset or an important constituent of the country was not taken into consideration. The way Indian society and thinking of Hindus was heading were reflected in the films. The new issues which Hindi movies started addressing were riots and terrorism.

Many movies were made on these issues but it was *Bombay*, released in 1994, directed by a South Indian director Maniratnam, tried for the first time to interpret the complex relation between Hindus and Muslims by putting focus on female protagonist. The movie is full of multiple meanings. Broadly the movie is based on the communal riots which erupted after the demolition of Babri mosque (a 16th century mosque at Ayodhya in the state of Uttar Pradesh, supposed to be built on the birthplace of Lord Rama) in 1993 which was demolished by Hindu extremists. But the main concern of the movie is to depict religious construction of Muslim women which is the central part of her identity. Unlike movies like *Nikaah* and *Bazaar* where whatever role the female protagonists play, are within the framework of their religion but in *Bombay* the female protagonist Shaila Bano gathers courage and marries a Hindu boy against the wishes of her

father and community. The movie is unique too as for the first time on the silver screen the marriage of a Hindu boy and a Muslim girl is shown. Though the movie has taken up a very serious issue but to make the movie commercially viable, the director has started with the same plot common in commercial cinemas, i.e., the love story. But the only difference is that the hero and the heroine belonged to different religious background. One important thing is to note that the main objection of the people from both community, i.e., Hindus and Muslims, was that they were not ready to accept marriage of a Hindu boy with a Muslim girl or vice-versa. This made the movie more controversial. The director Maniratnam was even attacked after the release of this movie.

Bombay is not purely a commercial movie. It has serious characteristic of parallel cinema too. The movie does not waste time on multiple subplots or comic farce. The focus is on the main characters. In the movie Shekhar (played by Arvind Swami, a South Indian Actor) is a Brahmin by caste and returns to his village after two years of study in Bombay. His relationship with his father is cordial. He promises his father that he is not going to marry a city girl but will marry a girl from his own village. He soon witnesses Shaila Bano (played by Manisha Koirala) a Muslim girl from a typical lower income middle class family by the blown of her veil and falls under her tender spell. Shaila also likes him but her love becomes forbidden as she belongs to a Muslim family and her lover is a Hindu. Shekher is warned by his friends that he may get killed even though he follows Shaila by wearing a veil so that he can talk to her. When Shekhar converses with his father and Shaila's father about his desire to marry Shaila, both the families were appalled by his decision. Shekher went back to Bombay but cannot forget Shaila and writes a letter and sends a train ticket. She gathers courage and against her father's will run off to Bombay. They immediately got married in a civil court. Years passed and their happiness grew, children came and later their families also accepted both of them. But as the

movie progresses the horror begins in Bombay after the demolition of Babri Mosque. The family is caught in the middle of it. The mob tries to burn their children alive but they are saved by the cops.

Though the movie starts with the identity of a Muslim woman who, despite all prejudices of her father and community, dares to marry a Hindu boy but the movie ends up giving a message of national unity. Through the movie the director tries to depict the complexity of religion on femininity and female body. He also discusses the issue of veil in Muslims. Though in the movie it produces certain kind of romance as the hero is desperate to see by lifting the veil of Shaila. The lifting of veil has many other connotations too. It is not only Shaila's tender spell of love but at the same time depicts her courage; profess for freedom and her determination that she has the right to choose her husband. She is not ready to be guided by her father or community. In the movie veil is an important constituent forge linkages and plays an important role in movie's screen play. The music composed by A. R. Rehman is more in hip-hop style. The song and dance are the vital elements to extend pleasure to the audience but is not employed to interpret and articulate the narration.

Fiza (Atmosphere) released in 2000, is another complex Muslim women centric movie directed by critic turned director Khalid Mohammad. Here the modern face of Muslim woman is shown. Khalid Mohammad, himself, in an interview to a newspaper *The Hindu* dated Dec 26, 2003 stated:

“In 'Fiza', I made an attempt to show a normal Muslim family. Nobody noticed it. My heroine in it is a Muslim girl who could go to a disco and behave like everyone else. The message is that Muslim women are not forever wearing a dupatta or clad in a burqa (veil). They are as much mainstream as anybody else. The identity is part of the conscience and an attempt was made to step beyond convenient stereotypes.”

Here the story revolves around a stubborn Muslim girl Fiza Ikramullah (acted by Karishma Kapoor) who goes out in

search of his brother Amman (acted by Hrthik Roshan) who disappeared after riots which erupted due to the demolition of Babri Mosque in 1993. The story is woven around Fiza's search for her brother. Amman who is now a terrorist shocks Fiza. She is successful in getting him back home. But it is his body which is at home not his soul and ideology. After coming back home he could not tolerate the injustices and hardships of daily life and rejoins the terrorist group. The story has a very powerful ending. It is Fiza who shoots her brother though persuaded by Amman to kill him. In the movie the female protagonist is presented in a glamorous way. The director has tried to interpret female Muslim identity in context of postcolonial period in the light of the rise of Hindu nationalism. Space and territory play a more decisive role while defining the identity of Fiza. Here a modern Muslim woman is shown who takes charge to find her own brother not depending on her male counterpart. She is not shown submissive. The narrative of the movie also analyses the disintegration of a family which is an important social component of a society. Any woman's social identity is constituted through her family but when the disintegration of family occurs it is a woman who is the only sufferer in any form she is associated with the family. The music of Fiza also composed by A.R.Rehman is not well connected with the film's screenplay. The songs base is folk music and Indian classical with the blend of modern music. The emphasis on song's picturisation and comedy scenes are inserted to give commercial value to the movie which to a certain extent dilutes the basic theme of the movie.

The characters of female protagonists are sketched as real life Muslim women in Indian society. In the movies too they are not treated in abstract manner. The basic projection of these female protagonists center around the demand for space, identity and recognition.

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