
Cultural Corrections of Negative Perceptions Through Bollywood

Diaspora, Cinema, Identity

Dr. Shrimati. C. Das*

**Former Chair/Professor, Indian Studies, Indian Council For Cultural Relations, Universitas Gadjah Mada, Indonesia & Head, Department of English, Nehru College & PG Center, HUBLI- Karnataka.*

Not just a Nation, India represents a distinct civilization and universe of values. It defies definition, containing an incredible diversity of peoples, religions, belief systems, languages, social structures, topographies, weather conditions, and knowledge systems. India is not easy to know and understand. It requires an equal number of perspectives to have a grip on its image. Indian culture has eased their adaptation to foreign modes of life as well. Jawaharlal Nehru wrote in *'Discovery Of India' (1946)* that India's past "with all its cultural variety and greatness, was a common heritage of all the Indian people, Hindu, Muslims, Christians and others and their ancestors had helped to build it. The fact of subsequent conversion to other faiths did not deprive them of their heritage; just as the Greeks, after their ancestors; or the Italians in the great days of Roman Republic and early empire".

A country of 'affectionate pluralism' and this is very effectively projected by the biggest cultural exposition 'Bollywood', which rejoices in singing: *'Tu Hindu banega, na Musalman banega, insaan ki aulad hai, insaan banega' (Dhool Ka Phool)(1959)* ('You should grow up to be neither Hindu nor Muslim, you are a child of a human being, and should remain a human being'). This sentiment has been repeated in film after film made by the iconoclastic Bollywood.

Bollywood produces around 900 films a year- more popular entertainment than any other film center in the world. Bollywood has conquered the hearts and minds of people even in those countries whose governments have not been in harmonious relationship with India. At the time of Lahore Bus Yatra, a Former Prime Minister was reported to have been received by a group of young Pakistanis with the chant: 'Madhuri de do, Kashmir le lo'.

From the beginning of 20th century films have been treated as one of the leading parameters of cultural and sociological expression throughout the world. It is not difficult to imagine and experience the effect of films on various aspects of society – cultural, sociological, psychological, & political. Within such a broad perspective, the Hindi mainstream cinema (Bollywood cinema) in India undoubtedly has a tremendous influence on the everyday life of the Indian Psychology among the rural and urban population. The greatest agent for positive social change in India is Bollywood.

It was as early as in the 1890's long before the partition (1947), that cinema was introduced in India. Today the Indian cinema has become widely popular not only throughout the peninsula and in the neighboring countries but across the world, especially in over 100 countries where live millions of People of Indian Origin (PIO) and the Non-Resident Indians (NRI)- a huge Indian diaspora.

Popular Hindi cinema, '*the dominant cultural*' and '*corrector of stereotypical Images*' is an institution, which is a melting point of cultures and an example of Indian '*secularism*'. This has often provided rich and fascinating accounts of social history and cultural politics within the topography of postcolonial culture. As national cinema that transcends boundaries of language and region, Bollywood has produced new representations of the nation and constructed a '*collective consciousness of nationhood through special cultural referents*' (Verdi, 2007:7)

In the aftermath of the terrorist attacks on September 11, 2001, there have been dangerous incidents of Indian Americans becoming mistaken targets for hate crimes. In this case, these issues are closely related to what happens to immigrants, for e.g.; the story of Asian Indian Muslim immigrants, which is shown in the movie '*My Name is Khan*' (2010). This movie is one of the examples of how the social world reacts towards what happened after the 9/11 & how Bollywood has helped in a strong '*cultural correctional effort*'. Post 9/11 has internationally produced a complete thematic shift in the portrayal of Muslims from around the world.

'*My Name is Khan*' depicts the travails of an autistic Muslim man named Rizwan Khan (played by Shahrukh Khan) in post 9/11 America. His family is shattered by prejudices. The director Karan Johar (KaJo) believes one needs a Bretchian detachment in watching such movies and inner filter that removes all prejudices. So, Rizwan Khan embarks on a quest to tell the President of United States that '*his name is Khan and he is not a terrorist*'. Not only is the Muslim identity '*culturally corrected*' by Karan Johar but also in one of the scenes KaJo describes how a Sikh changed his appearance because he did not want to experience racial attacks.

The scene 549-552(01.53.23- 1.53.42)

'*Did you take this picture before 9/11?*

'*Yes. Why? What's so funny?*

'*No, it's not funny at all actually. They confused a Sikh for a Muslim*'.

By exploring questions of race and identity, '*My Name is Khan*' seeks to represent a '*corrected notion*' of Muslims the world over. (The movie has done an overseas business of US\$29 million making it the highest grossing Bollywood film overseas and being released in 120 theatres in USA alone).

There are some genuine efforts to improve understanding and awareness amongst the people as conveyed in the film. The decision to make the protagonist of the film autistic renders him pre-political in a way, since he is completely impervious to indoctrination by social pressures. This trope, combined with Khan's tendency to inflict suffering on him throughout the film suggests a Gandhian interpretation of character. This Gandhian method of winning over the ostensibly hard hearted and mis-conceptualized idea through silence and uncomplaining suffering results in a harmonious and voluntary change of perception. However Rizwan achieves this result only by undergoing a whole series of self-imposed trials to demonstrate that few men are at fault, not his religion.

The decision of Karan Johar to make Khan autistic reminds us of a certain phenomenon in Hollywood films about African-Americans before 1950s. Such films generously portrayed African-Americans as stammering and emotionally inept individuals. In the same way, *'My Name is Khan'* portrays the Muslim protagonists with a childlike innocence. The film also talks about one's need for a deep knowledge about any religion in order to give better understanding and clarification about the same. In this film Islam is shown as a tolerant religion. In an interview with the director of the film, Karan Johar said as follows:

"It is not about a disabled man's fight against disability. It's a disabled man's fight against the disability which exists in the world- terrorism, hatred, fighting. 'My Name is Khan' is also about Islam and the way the world looks at Islam. But we are not taking any sides. We are only trying to say that there are only good people and bad people. There are no good Hindus, bad Hindus, good Christians, bad Christians. Either you are a good person or a bad person. Religion is not the criterion, human is".

Actually half of the film is a true story based on a couple's life in LA. Karan bought the rights of the story from them. This film set mainly in America, is an affecting fairy tale, about the perils of goodness. Rizwana kind holy, innocent male, played mostly with restraints by Mr. Sharukh Khan has Asperger syndrome. He has problems in his social interactions. After his mother's death, his US based younger brother takes him to San Francisco where Rizwan starts working as a salesman. His condition makes him a single-minded worker but it also gets him and his family into trouble: he cannot tell a lie, or keep his faith hidden. After 9/11 that's dangerous for a man named Khan (NY Times: 93)

Karan Johar has constructed to give a glimpse of Asian American Muslim life and how it changes with the after effects of 9/11 event for example. The film is about the relationship between two people, between an individual and the state, an individual and the country, between western world and Islam, and how that has changed over the past few years. Johar describes the film as about *"the journey of one family and how it changes because of 9/11"*. In another interview KaJo reveals that *'My Name is Khan starts at a time when Hindus and Muslims in India have united like never before'*. In response Johar goes on to state, *"I think it is an exceptionally relevant time, as the unity of our nation is of paramount importance, and I am very happy to witness such a movement in front of my eyes. We have all come together to fight for a common cause – called humanity. Everyone knows that anti social activities have no religion and it will never have a religion. As a film maker, I believe that I have a social responsibility and I promise to fulfill that"*. (Mnik.htm: 2)

Literary/Cinematic works are cultural nomenclatures, which are products of inner searching towards real life around and through imagination as well as the expression for a deep thought and feeling of the author/director. Bollywood is a very apt avenue for the depiction and projection of culture, art and life. The psychological tension of the Indian Muslim minority who were being targeted in the US after 9/11 events as well as their relationship with America has been projected. Karan Johar through this *'Once in a Promised Land'* also reveals the role of media in shaping the perception of world communities towards immigrants. Taking this film as a study point one can also research the historical developments of the ethnics in America from the early slavery era until the recent developments after 9/11.

This discussion if taken further could cover the arrival of Asian immigrants in particular in America, the obstacles faced by them and America's perception of its ethnic minorities. Hence, KaJo does a yeoman service to the socio-cultural world by '*cultural correction of negative perception*' through this film, so much so that this Bollywood film has become a landmark in American Popular Culture and Literature Studies in many Ivy League Universities in the US. This trend of popular formula established by visual media, has explained so much in his book '*Adventure, Mystery and Romance*'. (1976) '*My Name is Khan*' is categorized as romance in which the moral fantasy of the romance is that of love triumphant and permanent, overcoming all obstacles and difficulties (p-42)

Mandira is a single mother, falls in love with Rizwan in improbable yet utterly romantic manner. Rizwan & Mandira are torn apart after they face a monumental tragedy of 9/11 events as victims of racism. To win Mandira back, Rizwan is faced with the most daunting task of all. And thus begins his journey – across states, cultures, people, racial profiling & Hatred. In his quest to rediscover his lost home, his lost identity, his true religion of Islamic humanity, Rizwan emerges as the most unlikely hero and these sharpened corners form the crux of this film.

Other Bollywoodfilm, which ventured into the domain of sports and feminism, which are appropriate contours of culture with pious intensions of '*cultural correction*' are Nagesh Kukunsoor's '*Iqbal*' (2005) and '*Dor*' (2006). These films portray many features contrary to popular beliefs. These are again two great efforts towards '*cultural corrections of negative impressions*'.

Iqbal (2005) essayed by Shreyas Talpade is a character that is infected with the desire for Indian National Cricket Team and finally accomplishes his dream. In the pursuit of his dream his sister Khadija played by Shweta Prasad supports him. It's a success story of a rural, poverty stricken, physically challenged Muslim boy winning his battle against all odds. He has to fight all kinds of challenges and battle a number of factors- first and foremost his minority status, fighting dirty politics in sports revolving around the selection for the Indian Cricket Team. But the protagonist's religion never plays a vital role in the development of the narrative of this film, which can be considered as a vital breakaway from any previous film entailing a Muslim character. Another good factor about the film is that never once is the character of Iqbal shown to be helpless and dependent on others for his wellbeing. Writer/director Kukunoor holds the audience's interest till the 'last ball'. He has taken special care to have the audience sympathize with the situation the character is in, rather than the character himself.

'*Iqbal*' is '*not only about cricket*' like Lance Armstrong's first autobiography, one of the most inspiring books and the biggest sport best seller, simply read: '*It's not about Bike*'. Thereby Iqbal bridges a gap between so called Bollywood off beat film and commercial film.

The film '*Dor*' (2006) portrays the story of two women- Meera and Zeenat. This film juxtaposes the two characters, wherein Zeenat is shown in a very positive light, an independent and brave woman who has lived her life in her own terms, married for love and is willing to go to any extent to save her husband's life. This film breaks the stereotype image of the 'purdah' system as an inherent part of Islam. It also shows Meera equally an effective tool for patriarchy in a Hindu Rajput family.

Bollywood enacts new cultural narrative relentlessly with a view to bring about ‘*cultural cohesion*’ be it in religion, social dialogue, and political statement or even in mundane existence of life. All these three Bollywood films help in enhancing and propagating this positive faith. Those true believers in Islam are invariably depicted as pious human beings whose faith teaches them to treat all human beings as equals and who are steadfast in their loyalties and commitments, including their loyalty to the land of their birth. Muslims rejoice in the liberal Islam that took roots in the Indic civilization. Bollywood shows an instinctive wisdom to generate feelings of mutual respect and tolerance, celebration of diversity, a land of song and dance and foremost a ‘*responsible medium for the dissemination of Indian values and culture*’.

REFERENCES:

- i Viridi, Jyotika: “ the Cinematic Imagination: Indian Popular films as social history”, Rutgers university press, 2003
- ii Aldo, Geneive; “ Mecca and Main Street: Muslim life in America After 9/11”, oxford University Press, 2006
- iii Cowelthy, John G; “ adventure, Mystery, and Romance; Formula stories as Art as Popular Culture”, University of Chicago Press, 1976
- iv Miles, Margaret R; “Seeing & Believing: Religion & Values in the Movies”, Beacon Press, 1996
- v Veer, Peter Van Der & Shoma Munshi; “Media, War & Terrorism: Responses from The Middle East & Asia”, Rutledge, 2004
- vi Hurst & Co; “ Critical Muslim”, London
- vii Ghazali, AbdusSattar; “ Islam & Muslims in the Post 9/11 America”; Eagle Enterprises, Modesto, CA, April 2008
- viii Manushi,; Issue- 139; June, 2004
- ix <http://planetbollywood.com/displayreview.php>, accessed January 18, 2015
- x http://movies.nytimes.com/2010/02/13/movies/13_name.html, accessed January 18, 2015

(This invited paper was presented at the International Conference on ‘Diaspora & Culture’ hosted by The Indian Council For Cultural Relations, ICCR, Govt of India, New Delhi-11th Feb-13th Feb, 2015 at India International Center, IIC, Lodhi Road, New Delhi)