

# Representation of Terrorism in Bollywood: the Construction of Muslim Women's Agencies in *Kurbaan*<sup>1</sup>

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This paper sets out to analyse the Bollywood movie *Kurbaan*. The analysed movie breaks out from the mainstream Western media and Bollywood movie narratives by giving 'voices' to the Muslim terrorists: it tries to explain and rationalize the motives behind the terrorists' behavior. Yet what makes *Kurbaan's* narrative even more distinctive, when compared to the conventional cinema, is its efforts to develop the topics related to the Muslim women's agency. This paper aims to analyse *Kurbaan* namely from the construction of women's agency perspective. Although at first glance it seems that *Kurbaan* reinforces the image, dominant in the Western media, of oppressed Muslim women and reproduces simplistic binaries between religious and non or less religious women, at the same time, by introducing various Muslim women characters with different levels of agency, the movie reminds the spectator that not all women are passive victims without any agency. *Kurbaan* develops the questions of plurality and complexity of Muslim women and avoids essentializing them.

**Key words:** Bollywood, Terrorism, Muslim, Women, Agency, *Kurbaan*.

## Introduction

According to Cottle, the media holds a powerful position in conveying, explaining and articulating specific discourses that (mis) represent minority groups<sup>2</sup>. Indeed, popular culture, and especially after 9/11, has played an important role in (mis)informing viewers

about terrorism, Islam and Arab world. A rather substantial body of scholarly research has discussed the negative images and discourses relating to Islam and Muslims in mainstream Western media. Shaheen, who analyzed over 900 Hollywood movies, argues that Muslim "has always been – the cultural "other". [...] In countless films [...] Arabs are brute murderers, sleazy rapists, religious fanatics, oil-rich dimwits, and abusers of women"<sup>3</sup>. In various

1 Many thanks to Tadas Janusauskas for his contributions and comments on the earlier drafts of this paper.

2 Cottle, p. 59.

3 Shaheen, p. 172.

Hollywood movies, as Boggs and Pollard claim, “the demonized Other appears as a monolithic culture of thuggish male warriors who relish violence, directed mostly against innocent civilians, who lack motives beyond hatred and jealousy [...] depicted as a grave threat to the very foundations of civilized society”<sup>4</sup>.

In the late 1990s Lal argued that Bollywood has almost no notion of the outsider or the significant ‘Other’. Furthermore, he stated that “Hindi film, until recently, has had little conception of the villain that we could take seriously”<sup>5</sup>. It seems however, that 2000s was the time when the outsider arrived and s/he is the villain everybody should take seriously. It is noticeable that a substantial number of Muslims are those villains. Mleckai notes that: “Since partition, Hindi film producers have had to tread carefully under the surveillance of the film censorship regime to ignore the subject for most of their work, or used a nuanced approach to broach relations between Hindus and Muslims”<sup>6</sup>. However, as the author observes, by the late 1990s and early 2000s Hindi films started depicting Muslim protagonist and frequently in negative roles. Muslim protagonists were depicted as criminals (*Farz* and *Angaar*), small-time crooks (*Love Ke Liye Kuch Bhi Karega*), power-hungry politicians (*Bas Itna Sa Khwab Hai*), corrupts police officials (*School*), and as Pakistani aggressors fighting valiant Indian military forces in films such as *Border*, *Sarfarosh*, *Indian*, and *LoC Kargil*, that focused on the conflict between

India and Pakistan<sup>7</sup>. Mleckai claims that various reasons, such as communal tensions sparked over the unresolved issue of Kashmir, communal riots, the linkage of Indian Muslim communities to notions of global *jihad*, and a growing consensus amongst the ruling elite of a virulent parochial politics are responsible for such shift<sup>8</sup>. Furthermore, Bollywood’s narratives often overlap with Hollywood’s orientalist views of Muslims and since 9/11 the production of such narratives increased. (Khan, p. 127) However, differently from most Hollywood movies, a handful of Bollywood films, e. g. Rensil D’Silva’s *Kurbaan* (Sacrifice, 2009), Karan Johar’s *My Name is Khan* (2010), Kabir Khan’s *New York* (2009), explore the consequential tensions of 9/11 from the minority perspective of South Asian Muslims and acknowledge the horrors suffered by Muslims in Kashmir, Iraq, Afghanistan and depicts the perspective of terrorists (e. g. Kunal Kohli *Fanaa* (2006), Raj Kumar Gupta’s *Aamir* (2008)). It is very important to note, that all these mentioned movies breaks quite radically from the most of Bollywood movies which usually depict a North Indian hetero-normative Hindu male, upper middle class, and upper caste subject, quite often projecting him as a national citizen<sup>9</sup>. (Khan, p. 128) Khan notes, that in idealizing a Hindu male citizen, Bombay cinema frequently promotes anti-Islamic and anti-woman biases<sup>10</sup>.

This essay sets out to analyse D’Silva’s *Kurbaan* which clearly has an unorthodox

4 Boggs, p. 347.

5 Lal, p. 245.

6 Mecklai, p. 148.

7 Chadha and Kavoori, p. 140–141.

8 Mecklai, p. 148.

9 Khan, p. 128.

10 Ibid.

narrative as most of *Kurbaan's* protagonists are Muslim, not all male, most of them are terrorists, and they have a chance to explain their violent aspirations and thus are not mindless barbarians willing to destroy the Western world in the name of Islam. The “voices” given to the Muslim terrorists makes *Kurbaan's* narrative distinctive from conventional narrative lines of cinema. Yet what catches attention, when watching *Kurbaan*, is that differently from *New York, Mission Istanbul* or *My Name is Khan*, *Kurbaan* develops topics related to women and their agency. Thus, this paper aims to analyze *Kurbaan* namely from the construction of women's agency perspective. It is important to note, that if *New York, Mission Istanbul* and *My Name is Khan* narratives have been discussed in several academic articles<sup>11</sup>, it is rather odd that by and large *Kurbaan's* unorthodox narrative has escaped attention of film and other scholars.

### **Kurbaan and Voices of Terrorists**

*Kurbaan* begins when Avantika (Kareena Kapoor), a Hindu professor meets Ehsan (Saif Ali Khan), a Muslim professor, in Delhi University. The couple falls in love. Avantika has a teaching contract in one of the USA universities and Ehsan decides to follow her. Prior to their departure the couple gets married. Although Avantika's father at the beginning is against their marriage and reminds the couple about their religious differences, he finally agrees and gives the couple his blessings. Happy

newlyweds arrive to New York and moves to the predominantly Asian neighbourhood. Their neighbours come to greet them and invite for the dinner. Avantika soon discovers that these “lovely” neighbours are terrorists who are planning the bomb attacks on the New York metro stations and that her husband Ehsan – apparently a well known terrorist – is a part of the group and that she was used so Ehsan could enter the USA without being spotted by the border control. The rest of the plot is developed around Avantika's and Riyaz's (an American Muslim journalist, played by Vivek Oberoi) efforts to stop the terrorist from completing their plans.

One of the most conspicuous difference of *Kurbaan*, when compared with the conventional cinema of Bollywood or far more so Hollywood and American mass media, is its willingness to enable the terrorists to verbalize their motivation for action. It is indeed different from the Western mass media discourse which covers terrorism in a way that ignores what “we” do and focuses on what “they” do<sup>12</sup>. Boggs and Pollard gave one of the possible reasons of such media foci: “Widespread legitimate public fear of real-life terrorism enables the media to sensationalize one of the greatest symbols of modern barbarism through visual constructions of savage Others bringing death and destruction to innocent populations for no reason beyond their own pathological disorders”<sup>13</sup>. But while “Hollywood's Muslim terrorist” rarely utters more than *Takbir* right before the violent act, several

11 See e. g. Misri, p. 157–67. Mecklai. Balraj, p. 91–95.

12 Balraj, p. 92.

13 Boggs and Pollard, p. 349.

of highly emotional scenes of *Kurbaan* set out to somewhat rationalize, explain and, as some might view it, even justify the violence. Through various scenes the movie touches upon the terrorist feel of revenge for the losses of the loved ones<sup>14</sup>. Furthermore, it tries to bring some rationalization of revenge, i.e. legitimation of violence through arguments about the consequences of the international military interventions of the U.S.<sup>15</sup> Finally, *Kurbaan* in some way questions influence of Islam on terrorist's actions<sup>16</sup>.

Besides its attempts to counter the dominant Western view of what is known as 'Islamic terror', the film challenges the stereotypical depiction of Muslim women. The rest of the paper will be looking at how *Kurbaan* represents the Muslim women which typically in the Western media are portrayed as passive victims of the despotic Muslim men.

14 E.g. the scene, where Avantika's neighbour Appa explains her the reasons why she and Ehsan decided to become terrorists.

15 E.g. the scene, when Riyaz comes to Ehsan class and starts the heated discussion about Islam and terrorism. When Ehsan is holding a gun to the traitor's Riyaz's head, the latter says: "killing someone gives you sadistic pleasure. You enjoy it, don't you? Taking a life? Allah's will. *Jihaad*. Just excuses. [...] pull the trigger! But even for a second don't think this is Allah's will, because Allah's will does not justify taking a life. And whenever a bomb explodes, only innocents die."

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## (non)Agency of Women

The spectator is first brought to (re-) consider the position of Muslim women when Avantika with Ehsan accepts their neighbours' invitation and comes to visit them. In the scene we face a tremendous contrast between her and Anjum – a Muslim neighbour. Avantika's bare arms, non-covered head shows the modernity of a Hindu women which is contrasted with Muslim Anjum, who is encouraged by her husband's eyes to tighten her *hejab*. The role of dress, as a bodily marker, plays a significant role in the construction and contestation of group identities and group boundaries<sup>17</sup>. The contrast between two women brings the idea of subordinated and secluded Muslim women, predominant in western representations. The seclusion of women is furthered by following scenes. When Avantika is introduced to Bhaijaan he looks at her and without greeting requests Anjum to bring her to other women. Here Avantika's modernity is again being contrasted to the women gathered in the kitchen. We can hear the admiration in women's voices when they discuss the fact that Avantika is a University professor. When Avantika asks women what do they do, Salma explains: "We are not allowed to work. Our men don't like it." This reflects the common belief that: "Woman's expression of her desires and the pursuit of her interests contradicts the interests of man and challenges man's God-given rights over woman"<sup>18</sup>. However, Aapa, the

17 Dwyer, p. 5.

18 Mernissi, p. 20.

matriarchal figure, is in a rush to explain that: “What Salma means is that our men earn enough with the blessings of Lord, so we don’t need to be employed. Besides, what sense does it make for our women to work in places where there is no *pardah*? It is wrong, isn’t it?” Thus even though she defends their men, Aapa brings up the idea of *pardah*, the need to control women and their sexuality. United States does not offer segregation in public life and makes conservative Islam adherent women confined in domestic sphere<sup>19</sup>. Women are seen as sexually forceful and irresistibly seductive, weak in moral judgement and deficient in cognitive capacity. As Mernissi notes, it is Muslim men’s explicit and implicit fear of female sexuality and women’s seductive power which explains the seclusion and surveillance of women in Islamic cultures<sup>20</sup>.

It seems, that the imagery of Muslim women oppression has been predominant in Western world and has been misused for legitimating of their own actions: “The domesticated, subjugated, unenlightened Other as opposed to the liberated, independent and enlightened Western self was used as a moral prop to legitimize colonial power relations”<sup>21</sup>. Since colonialism the idea of “liberating women” has been used

to justify the imperialist actions.<sup>22</sup> Indeed such ideological structures as practice of *pardah* support patriarchy and might be associated with particular fundamentalist interpretation of religion, however, this is not necessarily a function of Islam itself. Obermeyer reminds us that: “Rather, the political context defines the role played by religion and determines whether historically defined tensions concerning the status women persist and are reflected in particular demographic outcomes.”<sup>23</sup> Though it seems that through the Muslim women characters film director chooses the orientalist depiction of domesticated and subjugated women, however three characters – Salma’s, Rehana’s and Aapa’s – are denying such a haste conclusion.

### *Salma*

The first character which catches attention is Salma. Though she is shown as oppressed Muslim woman, her actions reveal her aspiration for agency in her own life. First we see her revealing to Avantika, that they, the group of Muslim women, are not allowed to work (the scene analyzed above). When “corrected” by Aapa she ironically admits that “who knows better, than you Aapa.” Furthermore, she comes to see Avantika, and ask for the help as her life is in danger as she “knows everything.” Somehow she managed, using an internet chat room, to befriend a journalist Rehana, whose contact details she shares with Avantika. Salma believes that only Rehana can save her

19 Moghissi notes, that “it needs to be emphasized that while all Islamic conservatives advocate *hejab* or *pardah* for women, they do not agree, necessarily, on the idea of domesticity for them. Moreover, despite the influence of the rhetoric of domesticity, Islamic movements and states, in practice, draw women to public life, albeit within all-female networks and essentially in the service of the sexual segregation of public life.” Moghissi, p. 27.

20 Mernissi, p. 30–31.

21 Mohsini, p. 15.

22 See e.g. Al-Ali, Nadje, and Nicola Pratt.

23 Obermeyer, p. 51.

life. She says, that she would definitely call herself but she is not allowed to use phone. Thus, though Salma risks to put herself in further danger by coming to talk to her new neighbour Avantika, her character disrupts the negative stereotype of “the veiled Muslim Woman,” who is supposed “to be silently suffering due to her religion”<sup>24</sup>. Salma’s character reveals the existence of “resistance agency” which refers to a woman’s refusal to be a victim and to fight back instead.<sup>25</sup> However, though through her character one stereotype is disrupted the other is being reinforced: when she tries to run away, her husband Hakil catches her and beats her up. Thus Hakil is shown as a despotic man and Salma as a victim suffering from his violence. This brings us back to the orientalist stereotypes and “white men’s” burden to save “brown women”.<sup>26</sup> Later on we learn that due to her “misbehaviour” she is being punished and killed. The despotism of the group is even more developed when Bhaijaan does not allow to burry Salma’s body as she does not deserve it because she betrayed them.

### Rehana

Rehana is a young American Muslim journalist. Her modernity is marked by exclu-

<sup>24</sup> Bullock, p. xvi. It is worth noting, that the fact that Salma comes with a cry for help to a woman she barely knows, Avantika, is telling about Salma’s perception of this modern Hindu woman, a professor, who can help through her independence and unquestioned agency. Furthermore, it is Rehana, a modern American Muslim woman, who Salma is looking for to save her.

<sup>25</sup> Shirazi, p. 9.

<sup>26</sup> Spivak, p. 264.

sively ‘Western’ clothing, she is not afraid to show sexual affection to her boyfriend Riyaz by kissing him publicly. Indeed, her Muslim identity is revealed only by her Muslim name and in the conversation with Riyaz: “I was praying (she used the word *Salam*) for you everyday.” We see her as an equal to men as she is able to mediate between Riyaz and his father by interrupting their conflict. Indeed through Rehana’s character the movie sends the message that Islam varies in restrictions it imposes on women. As Moghissi reminds us: “The level of rigidity implicated by the Islamic *Shari’a* ruling, as interpreted by the local *ulama* (jurists), continue to define women’s legal status and provide a basis for gendered social and cultural practices.”<sup>27</sup> Yet the directors chose to eliminate her by positioning her in the plane which blasts. The sacrifice of Rehana was inevitable in order to give a personal reason for Riyaz to fight the terrorists.

### Aapa

The last character – Aapa – seems to enjoy the most agency in the group. She is shown as a matriarchal figure who moves freely. When Avantika, held in a home arrest (after she learns about the group plans to bomb the metro stations), asks Aapa to take her out, Aapa takes the car and brings her shopping while saying to Bhaijaan that he should not worry as she will not let Avantika out of her sight. In previous scenes as well we saw that none other Muslim women moves freely without men. Thus it is only

<sup>27</sup> Moghissi, p. 7.

Aapa who is allowed to do that. One could argue that her empowered position is due to her age – there is no need to suppress her sexuality as she has passed the fertility age.<sup>28</sup> Her position equal to those of Muslim men is strengthened in the scene where entire group gathers for the final talk before the attack and she is included into the gathering. Furthermore, Aapa's character contradicts the notions that women are more likely to choose peaceful ways for conflict resolution than men are – that women are inherently more disposed toward moderation, compromise, and tolerance in their attitudes towards international conflicts.<sup>29</sup> Bloom claims, that most of the time women become involved in suicide bombing “at least initially, for personal, rather than ideological, reasons.”<sup>30</sup> This claim fits perfectly with Aapa's character. She explains to Avantika: “I came to Pakistan from Kabul, after I married Bhaijaan, I left both my younger brothers Iqbal and Fawad, back home. Then three years ago, the American's attacked it and nothing and no one was spared. They razed Afghanistan to the ground. Iqbal and Fawad died. Their families perished too.” Thus we see that Appas rage and determination is the consequence of her personal experience and pain. Her determination remains strong, even after

28 For example, while talking about women in North India, Lamb argues that with age, women become more like men and men more like women – gendering then is not an even and lifelong process but something salient during youth, of hyper-importance during reproductive years, and gently tailing off once one's own children are adults or married. (Lamb, p. 207)

29 Bloom, p. 95.

30 Ibid, p. 96.

Bhaijaan, the leader of the terrorist group, was killed she decides to carry on with the bombing plan: in the end of the movie Aapa again expresses her wish to revenge. Holding a gun to the pregnant Avantika's head, Aapa silences her cry “Aapa, my baby!” by stating that – “Children die every day. In Iraq. In Afghanistan. To quench America's thirst for oil”.

However Brunner, and the analyzed movie itself, criticizes Bloom's claim, that men are likely to conduct suicide missions motivated by religious or nationalist fanaticism, whereas women are motivated by personal reasons.<sup>31</sup> According to her: “This supposedly clear distinction between the personal and the political (and the concomitant association of femininity with the personal and masculinity with the political) permeates scholarly and journalistic explanatory discourse, not only in writing about suicide bombers as men or women, but also in discussions of the primary agents or perpetrators of suicide bombings.”<sup>32</sup>

Thus we see that all three Muslim women who carry some sort of agency and do not completely fit into stereotypical frame. The movie reminds us, that one must not assume that all women are passive victims without any agency. It speaks about the

31 We could remember the scene when Avantika then learns that Ehsaan had been married before and lived in Pakistan. After few years of marriage, Americans dropped bombs on his village, killing his wife and a four-year-old son. During the same scene Appa reveals to Avantika, that they lost everyone and that Bhaijaan had to kill with his one hands the nephew, the only one who survived the American attack in Kabul but was badly injured by shrapnel which lodged in his spine, causing unbearable pains.

32 Brunner, p. 963.

plurality and complexity of Muslim women and avoids essentializing of Muslim women. However, interestingly, all these three women in the film are being silenced in violent deaths. Are they being punished for their agency?

## Conclusions

The importance of Bollywood cinema in Southeast Asia in general and in India in particular, as well for the diaspora communities around the world, is very difficult to overestimate. The messages that Hindi films send can resonate far, wide and deep. *Kurbaan* may not have been successful commercially, but its importance lie in its novelty.

Although *Kurbaan* is far from being an exception in linking terrorism with Islam, it is unusual for Bollywood in that the object of terror is the U.S. If Hindi films do have some examples of giving the voice to the terrorists to explain their actions, Hollywood is basically immune to such characters. On

this aspect *Kurbaan* is light-years ahead as the majority of main protagonists are exactly Muslim terrorists, both male and female, spending qualitatively and quantitatively large parts of the film telling their stories and their views on the U.S. imperial politics and in that way counters the dominant view. It is also far out when compared to other Bollywood movies in depicting Muslim women's agency, or attempts to have it.

Even though *Kurbaan* could be criticized that it provides certain simplistic binaries when talking about the Muslim women, i.e. religious Muslim women's oppression by men is contrasted with the modern Hindu and an American – read modern and less religious – Muslim women. However, by introducing various Muslim women characters with different levels of agency, the movie reminds the spectators that not all women are passive victims without any agency. *Kurbaan* expose the questions of plurality and complexity of Muslim women and avoids essentializing of Muslim women.

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