

THE INDIA OF THE KASHMIRI OTHER CONCEPTUALIZING INDIA THROUGH THE LENSES OF BOLLYWOOD AND ETHNONATIONALISM

Niloy Mukherjee,
Research Scholar,
Dr. Ram Manohar Lohiya
National Law University
Lucknow

Rhiddhi Saha,
Research Scholar,
The English And Foreign
Languages University,
Lucknow

Abstract

The Muslim Kashmiri is doubly otherised in the Indian nationalist discourse: firstly as a Muslim, and secondly, as a Kashmiri. The issue of Kashmir is not just confined to ethnic differences but to sub-national allegiances and a debated national identity. In this paper, we have attempted to look at the various ways the Indian nation is constructed through ethnonational and sub-national allegiances in the eyes of the Kashmiri population - whose culture and beliefs are marginalized by the dominant Indian majority - in the context of the Bollywood film industry. We have asserted that such deviant discourses, owing to the locations of the individuals indulging in the discourse, are obvious in a postcolonial context and cannot be used to mark a community as anti-national or seditious. We have also pointed out any scope of Hindu-centric Indian nationalistic bias the films lend themselves to, thus trying to eliminate the possibilities of misinterpretation as far as feasible. For a detailed study, we have analysed two Bollywood movies in depth: Haider and Yahaan. While Haider's views about the nation and politics are explicitly voiced in the movie, Ada's concept of the nation surfaces only through nooks and crooks of her conversation with other characters in the movie, the issues of ethnonationalism and national identity smoothed into the romantic focus of the story.

Keywords: *Bollywood, ethnonationalism, nationalism, otherisation, postcolonialism, sub-nationalism.*

THE INDIA OF THE KASHMIRI OTHER CONCEPTUALIZING INDIA THROUGH THE LENSES OF BOLLYWOOD AND ETHNONATIONALISM

- Niloy Mukherjee
- Rhiddhi Saha

The Double Otherisation of Muslim Kashmiris in Bollywood

Bollywood has often promoted the notion of Hindu nationalism. The depiction of Islamic culture and characters is much limited in comparison to the depiction of Hindu culture and characters. Even in Muslim socials, the representation of Muslims is still not naturalized in Indian cinema. In a Hindu majoritarian country like India, Muslims have emerged as a significant Other in the socio-cultural and ethnic context of the country. The Hindu Indian subject, being the absolute, defines the inferior Muslim Other and segregates it to a predestined category of inferiority in a state of affairs created and governed by its own self. This notion of the Self and Other is closely linked to that of identity and difference and involves a relationship of power, inclusion and exclusion.

The Muslim Kashmiri is, therefore, doubly otherised in the Indian nationalist discourse: firstly as a Muslim, and secondly, as a Kashmiri. The issue of Kashmir is not just confined to ethnic differences but to sub-national allegiances and a debated national identity. It is hence not unusual that the Indian nation would be conceptualised differently in the disputed land of Kashmir.

In Bollywood, Kashmiri characters who are absorbed into the dominant Hindu-centric Indian cultural contexts and practices, such as Kashmiris who fall in love with Hindu Indians, or help other characters who are Hindu Indians, are shown to be the prototypes of good Kashmiris. The other stereotype that is portrayed is of a threatening Kashmiri identity: Muslim Kashmiris as terrorists, or as Indians who commit sedition. Such a take may be attributed to the fact that though there is a considerable number of Muslim actors in Bollywood, the industry is majorly run by Hindu Indian directors for a majoritarian Hindu Indian audience.

Attempting to draw a picture of the nation through the eyes of Kashmiri characters in Bollywood becomes a challenging task when we take into account the above-mentioned bias of an Indian Hindu-centric nationalistic representation Bollywood suffers from. However, there have been attempts to break out of this stance of Hindu nationalism, and certain movies have endeavoured to deal with the issues of sub-nationalism, ethnonationalism and national identity in ways that have represented the reality while not offending the Indian censor board and audience. In this paper, we have attempted to look at the various ways the Indian nation is constructed through ethnonational and sub-national allegiances in the eyes of the Kashmiri population - whose culture and beliefs are marginalized by the dominant Indian majority - in the context of the Bollywood film industry. We would further try to make the claim that such deviant discourses, owing to the locations of the individuals indulging in the discourse, are obvious in a postcolonial context and cannot be used to mark a community as anti-national or seditious. In the course of our analysis, we would also point out any scope of Hindu-centric Indian nationalistic bias the films lend themselves to, thus trying to eliminate the possibilities of misinterpretation as far as feasible. For a detailed study, we have analysed two Bollywood movies in depth: *Haider* and *Yahaan*. While *Haider*'s views about the nation and politics are explicitly voiced in the movie, *Ada*'s concept of the nation surfaces only through nooks and crooks of her conversation with other characters in the movie, the issues of ethnonationalism and national identity smoothed into the romantic focus of the story.

Nationalism and Ethnonationalism

Benedict Anderson visualized the nation as "an imagined political community - and imagined as both inherently limited and sovereign" (Anderson 1991). He emphasized that there is a deep inherent sense of fraternity among the members of a nation based on their imagined inclusion into a community. Such an inclusion is possible based on shared symbols, thereby making nation more of a 'cultural artifact' rather than a concrete physical reality.

Partha Chatterjee counteracts this view of nationalism because it is already constructed by the West and simply handed over to the East, leaving the East no scope to imagine anything. Chatterjee believes that in the postcolonial setting, the newly-independent nations with their own agenda and

ethnic variations need to imagine their nation in their own ways and cannot be guided by the outline set by the West. The concepts of sub-nationalism and ethnonationalism, therefore, become relevant to conceptualise a postcolonial nation.

According to Erikson, the first fact of ethnicity is the application of systematic distinctions between insiders and outsiders; between 'Us' and 'Them'." (Eriksen2002, 12-19). While nationalism is defined as allegiance to a nation-state, ethnonationalism or ethnic nationalism refers to the allegiance to an ethnic group or community. Connor pointed out that classical theories of nationalism have often ignored the issue of ethnic diversity or treated ethnic identity superficially as a minor impediment in the process of nation building. In postcolonial India, Kashmir, with its mixed population and a history of suspicions, atrocities and wars, emerges as a land torn by issues of ethnonationalism and a problematic national identity.

In the light of this discussion on nationalism and ethnonationalism, this article would endeavour to construct India in the eyes of the Kashmiri Other through the lens of the Bollywood film industry.

Haider

Directed by Vishal Bhardwaj and produced by Vishal Bhardwaj and Siddharth Roy Kapoor, Haider (2014) is an adaptation of Shakespeare's *Hamlet* and *Curfewed Night* of Basharat Peer. Set on the backdrop of the Kashmir conflicts of 1995 and civilian disappearances, the movie narrates the story of a young student and poet Haider who returns to Kashmir to find out the cause of his father's sudden disappearance and, in turn, gets entangled in the political issues of the land. Haider struggles to gain independence for Kashmir and its fate from the clutches of both India and Pakistan and thereby set up an independent Kashmir ruled by Kashmiris.

Nation is conceptualized as a safe retreat for its citizens. However, in the context of Kashmir, this obvious connotation of the word 'nation' appears false. Carfew is almost a naturalized state of being, although a much dreaded one. The movie begins with the caption 'Srinagar, India 1995' rather than 'Srinagar, Kashmir 1995'. The opening scene shows a doctor trying to save the life of a patient who happens to be a separatist leader, and this is crime enough in

Kashmir for his house to be bombed and the doctor to be made to disappear, brutally tortured by the Indian army and finally killed because he had committed 'sedition'. The AFSPA of Kashmir is mocked at as *Chutzpah*¹ by Haider and other Kashmiris, because to them, such a system of law can only make the white appear black and the black appear white. The situation in Kashmir stands at sharp contrast to Anderson's concept of a nation because the people of Kashmir have a strong disregard for the nation and its judicial system, making any feeling of an imagined inclusion into the same Indian community a near impossibility. To them, their nation is their land- Kashmir- and they are bound by regional and ethnic allegiances, as is prevalent in ethnonationalism. Thus their sentiments are often referred to as seditious in the Indian nationalist discourse. The national, ethnic and political views of the Kashmiri people are governed by the 'systematic distinctions between insiders and outsiders; between 'Us' and 'Them'.' Rather than being under a rule meant for their cause, the movie depicts the Kashmiris subjected to a government dedicated to the cause of the classical Indian nationalism. Democracy in Kashmir is mocked as '*Dhamacracy*'² which again is a mockery of the classical concept of nation and nationalism. The sentiments of the people and the army meant to protect them are widely different: while the Kashmiri separatists demand a separate Kashmir governed by her own rules and laws, the Indian army views their efforts as efforts to join the Pakistan side leaving India. Such a difference in perspective makes law and order an aspect of exploitation and torture in the valley. It appears as if the Kashmiris live in a different Hindustan haunted by tension and terror. In their very own country, the Kashmiris are treated with the suspicion of treating foreigners (a repeated reference to the distinction between the Kashmiris and Indians). The movie is also explicit in its portrayal of the third degree torture by the army in prison, as is evident in Ruhdaar's statement "Jahannam ka dusra naam hai *Mama-2*"³ (The other name of hell is *Mama-2*). It is interesting to observe that Ruhdaar who is by birth a Kashmiri Pandit, is also part of the separatist movement in Kashmir. Haider mocks at the struggle for power between India and Pakistan that compels Kashmir to be a mere pawn in their 'border-border' game. The Kashmiris are expected to be true Indian citizens; at the same time, they are not treated with the same

dignity as that of an ordinary Indian citizen. The Indian identity emerges as the Self from which the distinct Kashmiri identity, crisscrossed by sub-national and ethnic allegiances, is distinguished as the Other in their own land in a state of affairs controlled by the Indian military and government.

In a land like Kashmir, ideas of nation and nationalism are skewed and modified by issues of ethnicity and nationalism, and Haider, like other Kashmiris, fails to reconcile to the dominant discourse of a nation. India is viewed as an intruding powerful nation and met with slogans of "GO INDIA GO BACK". Haider's country is his motherland- his Kashmir- and his loyalty is to his land. The movie emerges as one of the better attempts at sketching a truer to life portrayal of the sentiments of the minorities, the Other in a framework of the dominant discourse of the Self, and raises a question on the validity of the classical concept of nationalism and sedition. Being true to Kashmir makes Haider appear seditious in the Indian nationalist discourse that views national allegiances as patriotic or seditious in terms of one's allegiances to India. However, from a postcolonial perspective, his vision is only a divergent discourse of nationalism that takes into consideration issues of sub-national and ethnic allegiances. The Kashmiris become the Other as opposed to the Indian self in the Indian nationalist discourse, while the Indians become 'them' as opposed to the Kashmiri 'us' in the sub-national and ethnonational discourse of Kashmir.

Yahaan

Yahaan is a 2005 romantic movie based on the backdrop of Kashmir. Directed by Shoojit Sircar and produced by Robby Grewal, it narrates the story of a Kashmiri girl Ada, the sister of a *jihadi* (insurgent) Shakeel, who falls in love with an Indian soldier Aman. The relationship is obviously not accepted and welcome owing to the political conditions in Kashmir and even results in the suspension of Aman who is tried for his accused links to Shakeel. Ada fights bravely for her love and succeeds in saving Aman from being court-martialed. Shakeel is torn between his loyalty to the *jihadi* cause and the happiness and well-being of his family.

Unlike Haider, *Yahaan* does not explicitly deal with issues of ethnonationalism. Instead, the discourse about the nation is formulated in this

case by drawing from subtle dialogues, actions and representations. Set in Kashmir, it portrays how contemporary political situations have made the sound of gunshots the principle language in the valley of Kashmir: “Kashmir ki bhaasha hai bandook, phir wo unki ho ya humari” (The language of Kashmir is that of gunshots, be it theirs(‘*jihadis*’) or ours(‘Indian army’s)). The distinction between ‘ours’ and ‘theirs’ points to the distinction between the Indian army and Kashmiri *jihadis*, Indians and Kashmiris, the Self and the Other. Ada says that if a Kashmiri girl is found associating with an Indian soldier, she is either raped or killed or her house is burnt. Such an act stems from a militant ethnic and sub-national allegiance, again emphasizing the distinction between ‘us’ and ‘them’. In such a state of affairs where Kashmiris feel like outsiders in their own land, conceptualising a nation in Anderson’s terms through the shared allegiance of its citizens becomes problematic, thereby making it difficult for the sentiments of Kashmiris to merge into the dominant discourse of Indian nationalism. The *jihadis* represent an explicit form of ethnonationalism. It is, as if, the India they live in is a different one from the India of Delhi and Mumbai, a concept explicitly voiced in Haider. They are the Other in the dominant Indian nationalistic discourse. They want a Kashmir that is strictly their own: “Kashmir tumhara watan ka hissa nhi,... unka bhi nahi, kisika nhi. Kashmir humara hai, hum logo ka”(Kashmir is neither a part of your country, nor theirs; Kashmir is none’s apart from ours). Despite the subtle tone of the movie in comparison to Haider, there is a repeated reference to ethnonationalism and sub-national allegiance. In her letter to the Prime Minister of India, she writes as a girl of Kashmir, a territory India *calls* her own and says she *wants to believe* what India is saying. Ada’s voice is not that of an ordinary Indian: in her ways of putting herself through, her identity surfaces as the Othered identity in the Indian nationalistic discourse. Her feeling of inclusion in the Indian community is, to a great extent, forced and imagined, as opposed to Aman’s spontaneous feeling of patriotism and loyalty to India.

In a land torn by atrocities, her idea of India, of her nation and her sense of loyalty differs from Aman’s sense of loyalty to the same country. In her interview with the media, Ada asks frantically how she should complain to a government she had never met, thus indicating a sense of distance and alienation from the nation of India, the Othered Kashmiri identity outlined in the Indian context. Ada’s nation is one that cannot shield her from bullets and

blasts, that does not allow her to live freely the way one is supposed to in one's own country, that makes sure associating with her(the Other) becomes a stigma for another Indian. Her location is different from Aman's and so is her concept of nationality. In her pride at loving the captain who is a loyal soldier of the Indian army, it is the 'Indian army' she talks about, not 'our army'. Ada's nation does not fit into the dominant Indian nationalistic discourse, but that does not make her a seditionist. In the movie made for consumption in India by an Indian director, the Indian bias is prominent because the people are only seen to suffer from the atrocities of terrorism while army atrocities on common people are deliberately not depicted. However, the movie attempts a subtle treatment of the issues of nationalism and ethnonationalism in the garb of a romantic drama. In the eyes of this subordinated Other, the Indian identity again emerges as the 'them' in contrast to the Kashmiri 'us'. The loyalties in the Kashmir valley are divided along the lines of ethnicity and sub-nationalism and the concept of nationalism thereby skewed by views of ethnonationalism.

Nations, Not Nation

The analysis of the concept of the nation through the eyes of the Kashmiri Other in the two movies reflects that the nation cannot be conceptualized as one, but one's concept of the nation is determined by his location. While Haider attempts to set up azadi in Kashmir, Ada seems unconcerned with issues of nationalism and strives more for peace and security of her land, an issue she can relate to better. The ones in a torn land are torn in their loyalties, their ideas of the nation diverge from the rest and from each other as well. But their views need to be looked at taking into consideration issues of ethnonationalism and sub-national allegiances. Their views constitute divergent discourses of the nation, not discourses of sedition and anti-national propaganda. India is constitutionally secular and plural, and it is not unusual that conceptions of India would also be pluralistic. Every person situated in India would have his own view of the nation, and there would be as many nations as the number of people inhabiting the country. This reflects how, in the postcolonial world, trying to succumb to one classical definition is problematic and results in misrepresentation of the reality. Imaginations cannot be compelled to converge: we can, at best, talk of nations, not nation; Indias, and not India.

Works Cited:-

- Anderson, Benedict R. O. G. *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism*. London: Verso, 1991. Print.
- Baruah, Sanjib. *Ethnonationalism in India: A Reader*. New Delhi, Oxford University Press, 2010. Print.
- Chatterjee, Partha. "Whose Imagined Community?" *The Nation and Its Fragments*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1993. Pp. 3- 13. Print.
- Connor, Walker. "Nation-Building or Nation-Destroying?". *World Politics*. 24 (03): 319-355. Print.
- Erikson, Thomas H. *Ethnicity and Nationalism*. 2nd ed. London: Pluto Press, 2002. Pp.12-19. Print.
- H.M., Sanjeev K. "Metonymies of fear: Islamophobia and the Making of Muslim Identity in Hindi Cinema." *Society and Culture in South Asia*. 2(2):233-255. Print.

Filmography

- Haider*. Dir. Vishal Bhardwaj. Perf. Shahid Kapoor and Shraddha Kapoor. UTV Motion Pictures, 2007. DVD.
- Yahaan*. Dir. Shoojit Sircar. Perf. Jimmy Shergill and MinisshaLamba. Red Ice Films, 2005. DVD.

Higher Education &
Research Society