

# Interrogating Practices of Gender, Religion and Nationalism in the Representation of Muslim Women in Bollywood: Contexts of Change, Sites of Continuity

Nazia Hussein \*, Saba Hussain

Department of Sociology, University of Warwick, Coventry, UK

\*Correspondence: n.hussein@warwick.ac.uk

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**Abstract** *Through a discourse analysis of four commercially successful Bollywood films between 2012-2013, this paper investigates Bollywood's role in creation of hierarchical identities in the Indian society wherein Muslims occupy the position of the inferior 'other' to the superior Hindu 'self'. Focusing on Muslim heroines, the paper demonstrates that the selected narratives attempt to move away from the older binary identity narratives of Muslim women such as nation vs. religion and hyper-sexualised courtesan vs. subservient veiled women, towards identity narratives borne out of Muslim women's choice of education, career and life partner, political participation, and embodied practices. However, in comparison to signs of change the sites of continuity are strongly embedded in the religious-nationalistic meta-narrative that drives the paradigms of Indian femininity/ womanhood. To conclude, the nature of the recent deployment of Muslim heroines in Bollywood reinforce the hierarchy between the genders (male-female), between the communities (Hindu-Muslim) and between nations (India- Pakistan).*

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**Keywords:** Muslim women, India, Gender, Nationalism, Identity, Hindu-Muslim relations, Representations, Religious discourses

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## Introduction

On the 3rd of July 2013, India's top investigation agency, the Central Bureau of Investigation (CBI), told a court that police and intelligence officials from the state of Gujarat killed 19 year old Muslim student, Ishrat Jahan, and three male companions in a 'staged' encounter in 2004. The Gujrat police on its part continues to allege that Ishrat and her companions were in fact 'terrorists' (BBC 2013; Ayub 2013). Commonly

referred to as *Ishrat Jahan fake encounter case*, this has since spiraled into a political slugfest that has exposed fault lines around issues of terrorism, nationalism, Muslim identity and gender in India. A spokesperson of the then key opposition party in India, Minakshi Lekhi, asserted on Times Now TV channel that 'here was a girl travelling with men unrelated to her'. She further added, since Ishrat came from a deprived background, she was a 'fit case' for being a terrorist (**Viz 2013**). These statements come *vis-a-vis* the CBI's report ascertaining the staged character of encounters and the alleged 'terror links' of those killed are yet to be established. Even though Lekhi's deeply sexist and communally presumptuous statement was widely criticised, she found ample political support demonstrating some of the techniques deployed in creating a Muslim 'other' particularly through the body of the Muslim woman in India (**Viz 2013**). Since then with the triumph of the Hindu supremacist Bharatiya Janta Party (BJP) in May 2014, the voices *othering* Muslims and other minorities through the body of the Muslim women have not only become louder, but have also become more mainstream. For instance, the 'Bahu lao, beti Bachao campaign' being run by Rashtriya Swamsevak Sangh, Bajrang Dal, Viswa Hindu Parishad – affiliates of the ruling party (**Indian Express, 13 March 2015**) which asks Hindu men to marry Muslim girls and purify them (read: convert to Hinduism) as a measure to deter Muslim men from marrying Hindu women – a phenomenon popularly referred to as *Love Jihad*. These 'real' incidents remind us of the gendered nature of India's communities and the deeply religious nature of Indian nationalism highlighting key issues and identifying areas of future reflections under the theme of gender, nationalism and religion in India.

In this article, we use the example of Bollywood's representation of Muslim women given its global recognition and its position as an influential cultural product, which both constructs and disseminates the important paradigm of 'Indian-ness' and 'collective identity' (**Mishra, 2006; Ansari, 2008; Osuri and Ghosh, 2012**). In fact, its widespread local and global reach heightens Bollywood's significance as a potent discursive tool that serves the purpose of legitimizing (and illegitimizing) certain identity claims. Our research findings suggest that, in recent times, there have been several cinematic attempts to somewhat re-cast female Muslim characters as the 'new age girl who does not desist from bending the conservative (Muslim) societal norms' (**Daily Mail, 15 Feb 2013**). However, these 'new' representations of Muslim women in Bollywood neither challenge stereotypes about Muslims subordinate position through their portrayals as anti-nation or as the 'other' (**Hirji, 2008; Khan, 2009; Jain, 2011; Kumar, 2013**) nor do they offer a nuanced picture of the association of Muslim religious practices with women's

experiences of gender injustice (**Agnes, 2012; Sachar, 2006; Kandiyoti, 1994**).

Our overarching aim is to contribute towards discussions on intersection of religion, nationalism and gender, in imagining and representing Muslim women in India. Specifically in this article, we argue that such representations create a hierarchy of identities wherein Hindu identities get classed as the 'superior' and Muslims as the inferior 'other'. Following **Das (2006)**, we argue further that Bollywood's strategic deployment of Muslim women becomes a 'discursive apparatus' of maintaining a communalised, Hindu patriarchal social structure at three inter-connected levels: *among the genders* (ordering of women by men); *among communities* (bordering between Hindu and Muslim communal identities) and, *inter-state othering* between Indian and Pakistani identities' (**Das 2006: 373**).

Within the time frame of 2012-2013, we found four commercially successful, mainstream Bollywood movies released which portrayed Muslim women as the primary heroine of the movie. In two of these movies, ***Ek Tha Tiger (2012)*** and ***Agent Vinod (2012)***, the Muslim women characters are represented as Pakistani Inter-Service Intelligence (ISI) spies in love with Indian Research and Analysis (RAW) agents. In the other two movies, ***Ishaqzaade (2012)*** and ***Raanjhanaa (2013)***, the Muslim women characters are represented as small town Muslim girls from north India with an active interest in politics.

In our study, we adopted the methodological approach of critical discourse analysis: 'looking at narratives of movies as active in constructing social reality offering definitions and categorisations which are linked to wide social and cultural structures, relations and processes' (**Aapola 1997: 50**). Our focus in this article is the discourse (*discours*) instead of the story (*histoire*) of the plots of the movies- a conceptual distinction popularised by film theorist Christian Metz in his seminal essay entitled 'Story/Discourse (a Note on Two Kinds of Voyeurism)' published in 1975. For **Metz (1975)**, discourse is the rhetorical dimension of the story, i.e. the way it is made to persuade and manipulate the audience, in contrast to the story itself that seems to exist in its own world. Using the narratives of female Muslim characters in the selected movies, we demonstrate that certain hegemonic discourses around the nation, religion and gender are legitimised for the audience of these movies. By exploring this intersection of narratives on gender, nations and religion, within the narrative plots of the movies and the characterisation of the central characters, we attempt to contribute to the existing literature on the construction of national identity through women's representation in popular culture.

Our analysis is divided under three broad types of narratives drawn from the characters of the Muslim women in the selected movies: the first concerns *Narratives of Choice*, which includes various aspects of Muslim women's lives such as cross-cultural love, career, education, etc. The second considers *Narratives of Political Participation*, which explores the representation of Pakistani Muslim women in a non-traditional role of spies. This section critically examines the dynamic between the tendency of representing Muslim women as sexualised damsel(s) or as agents of political change. The final theme of the *Narratives of sartorial display* delves into the stereotypical embodied representation (through clothing practices) of Muslim women in contrast to the Hindu women, which depicts the non-nationalist/anti-nationalist vs. nationalist dichotomy of the two sets of women. Our analysis frequently sets the Muslim characters in opposition to the Hindu characters of the selected movies to identify the depiction of generalised differences among them with respect to their relation to the Indian nation, their religion and their role in intercultural relationships. For example, how the Hindu women choose the nation as their primary identity while the Muslim women often choose their religion, and how such binary associations of these women make intercultural alliances impossible.

### **Muslims in India: the real and the imagined**

The 2006 Sachar Committee report, prepared by the Prime Minister's High Level Committee, concluded that a large proportion of the Muslim population of India suffer from severe deprivation in many social, economic and educational areas, as well as suspicion of their patriotism. The report also says that Muslims carry the twin burden of being labeled as anti-national yet being appeased at the same time. This, according to the report, has caused strong resentment among Muslims towards their stereotypical representations perpetuated by the media (**Sachar, 2006: 11-12**).

In her article, which discusses the relationship between women and nation, **Deniz Kandiyoti (1994)** argues that multi-religious nation-states like India form state policies under the name of a secular state, that are substantially influenced by the norms, values, and lifestyles of the dominant religious group (Hindu), irrespective of the features of the other religions of the state. According to research done by Maidul Islam the identity of a 'Muslim Other' in the Indian public discourse is also influenced by decade-long resurgence of Hindutva<sup>1</sup> (**Islam, 2007**). The

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<sup>1</sup> *Hindutva* ('Hinduness', a word coined by Vinayak Damodar Savarkar in his 1923 pamphlet entitled *Hindutva: Who is a Hindu?*) is the set of movements

Hindutva discourse views Islam as the sole locus of Muslim women's poor socio-economic status, ignoring the persistent and institutionalised deprivation of Muslims in India. The Sachar Report further confirms that:

'The obsessive focus on select cases of Muslim women passionately discussed in the media results in identifying the Muslim religion as the sole locus of gender injustice in the Community. Consequently, the civil society and the State locate Muslim women's deprivation not in terms of the 'objective' reality of societal discrimination and faulty development policies, but in the religious-community space. This allows the State to shift the blame to the Community and to absolve itself of neglect.' (Sachar, 2006: 12-13)

In addition to the *Ishrat Jahan fake encounter case*, several feminist authors use the 1985 case of a divorced Muslim Woman, Shah Bano, as an example of how the Hindu supremacist discourse uses the 'plight' of the Muslim woman as a tactical instrument to repress the religious freedom of the minority and to ensure its own dominance (Agnes, 2012; Kirmani, 2009; Kandiyoti, 2004). It is noteworthy that Shah Bano won a case in India's supreme court granting her maintenance rights from her husband after separation. However, the adverse comments in the judgement against the Prophet Muhammad and Islam created a highly disempowering binary choice between 'Islam' and 'gender equity' for Shah Bano and for other Muslim women fighting for their right. Public furor and the possible pressure of being seen as "anti-Muslim" forced Shah Bano to choose her Muslim loyalty over her legal rights by rejecting the judgment in her favor. Similarly, during the 2002 Gujarat Riots, Muslim women's bodies were subject to endless violence, with plural and new forms of torture, as with other ethnic conflicts elsewhere in the world. The Gujarat Riots that killed over 1,000 people, mostly Muslims, destroyed 20,000 Muslim homes and displaced roughly 150,000 people from their homes was unique in its 'state sponsored veracity' of violence against Muslim women (BBC, 2004; *New York Times*, 2014; Varadrajan, 2003). However, the gruesome sexual injustice inflicted on Muslim women during this period was turned into a response to historic and current Hindu grievances, which justified the communal carnage (Agnes, 2012; Anand, 2007). As we now see in the recent *Ishrat Jahan fake encounter case*, Ishrat's identity as a Muslim woman – more so than any

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advocating Hindu nationalism/supremacy in India. In India, an umbrella organisation called the Sangh Parivar champions the concept of Hindutva. The sangh comprises organisations such as the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS), Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP), Bajrang Dal, and the Vishwa Hindu Parishad.

other aspect of her identity – automatically made her a suspect for going against the Hindu moral order of the Indian nation.

Bollywood, as a popular cultural medium, can be seen to disseminate and reinforce this popular ideology of mistrust and suspicion towards the Muslim community of India. Bollywood movies have in essence created stereotypical images of Muslim characters with clichéd forms of cultural and religious symbols like ‘beard’ and ‘caps’ for men and conservative Islamic headscarf or ‘burqa’ for women creating a monolithic portrayal of the community. Simultaneously, these portrayals completely ignore the regional and socio-economic differences within the community. The portrayal of Muslim men as terrorists, villains and gangsters has also been a recurrent theme in Bollywood movies (**Islam, 2007: 405-406**). During the 1990s, the depictions of rogue Muslims were restricted to Kashmiri separatists and their sympathisers along with the underworld/mafia concentrated in Mumbai. Many films during this period told the story of the Indian (predominantly Hindu) family threatened by the Islamic terrorist, thus demonising the Muslim ‘other’ (**Hirji 2008; Jain, 2011; Rajagopal, 2011**). In fact, in most movies Hinduism and its cultural symbols came across as ‘the norm’ through the elimination of the other religions in the country (**Rajagopal, 2011**). This coincided with the coming to power of the Bharatiya Janata Party in India with its strong *Hindutva* identity created in the 1990s through the Ram Janmabhoomi<sup>2</sup> movement, and the subsequent demolition of the Babri Masjid and the associated communal riots. The Muslim as terrorist genre of movie became popular in the 1990s and themes has been elaborated and diversified in recent times with specific references to the trans-national nature of terror since the events of 9/11 in the USA. For example, in ***Faana* (2006)**, one of Bollywood’s biggest stars Amir Khan plays the role of a Kashmiri separatist named Rehan acting violently against the Indian nation. Although the political ideology of Azadi (independence) from India is mentioned in passing in the film, it is framed from the beginning as being in contrast to the patriotism of the Muslim female lead Zooni and her school teacher parents, who are showcased as the co-opted depoliticised ‘Good Muslims’ in **Mamdani’s (2004)** formulation. Needless to say the character of Rehan in narrative plot is the embodiment of Mamadani’s fanatical ‘Bad Muslim’ that frequently challenges “national order of things” (**Malkki 1992: 34**). The plot of the ‘story’ of *Fanna* appears to occur in isolation from the

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<sup>2</sup> Janmabhomi is a movement of various Hindu political and religious organisations to reclaim what is believed to be the Ram Janmabhoomi (or birth place of the Hindu deity Ram) from the Babri Masjid (mosque) constructed by Mughal ruler Babar. It culminated into the demolition of the Babri Masjid in Ayodhya my mobs and subsequent anti Muslim riots in many parts of India.



complex political realities and people's ideological positionings in Kashmir, by labelling all forms of political dissent from Kashmiris as terrorism or anti-nationalism towards India. This theme has frequently been replicated in many plots of movies churned out by Bollywood in the 1990s, 2000s and after, where Kashmiris have been replaced by Indian Muslims, and acts of political dissent and disagreement with the Indian state is labelled as anti-nationalism, constructing a *patriot vs. terrorist*, dichotomy.

In the *patriot-terrorist* binary, as in the *Good Muslim-Bad Muslim* binary, it appears that only trustworthy Muslims are those who place India first. Notably the title character in *Fiza*, *Sarfarosh's* Salim, *Mission Kashmir's* Inayat Khan and *Faana's* Zooni, are all religiously devout and uncritically patriotic. The *good vs. bad* dichotomy also encompasses the *tradition vs. modern* and *religious vs. secular* dichotomies wherein Muslims embodied by the terrorists, the mafia dons, lecherous *Nawab*,<sup>3</sup> and so on get presented as inherently incompatible with values of modernity, democracy and secularism that the post-colonial Indian state espouses for. In contrast, Hinduism comes to be presented as the philosophy that embraces modernity, plurality and secularism, leading to popular views such as '*India is secular because Hindus respect the other views*' stated by BJP spokesperson Ravi Shankar Prasad (**Source: Zee News, 2013**).

Hindu-Muslim romances are also another common theme through which Muslims are represented in Bollywood. Whether it is cross border (India-Pakistan) or within India, the fear of intermarriage caused the success of many Indian movies like *Henna* (1991), *Bombay* (1995), *Gadar* (2001), *Veer Zaara* (2004), *Fanaa* (2006), etc. Movies such as these serve as a reminder of the impossibility of cross-border or cross-cultural love between Hindu-Muslim lovers (Hirji, 2008).

The nationalist ideology of Bollywood positions *Qaum* (community) against *Mulk* (nation), which is declared as a synonym to *Ghar* (home) (Fazila-Yacoobali, 2002: 184). According to Fazila-Yacoobali (2002), the *Mulk* is the Hindu, middle-class, territorially distinct, efficient, benevolent, reasonable, forward-looking and militarily-vigilant modern nation-state that India aspires to be. On the other hand, *Qaum* is constructed as the antithesis of this Indian modernity. It is constructed as feudal and decadent, unable to keep the sufferings of the past in the past, unable to move forward, calcified, irrational, sentimental,

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<sup>3</sup> A *Nawab*, is an honorific title ratified and bestowed by the reigning Mughal Emperor to semi-autonomous Muslim rulers of princely states in South Asia. "Nawab" usually refers to males; the female equivalent is "Begum" or "Nawab Begum". The primary duties of a Nawab was to uphold the sovereignty of the Mughal Emperor alongside with the administration of a certain province.

somewhat deranged, criminal and ultimately dangerous. Thus the Muslim *Qaum* is viewed as threatening towards the Indian modernity because of its association with the partition and setting up a Muslim *Mulk*-Pakistan as opposed to the imagined secular Indian *Mulk*.

Much like the demonised Muslim man, the Muslim woman has often been incorporated into the imagination of Bollywood as the inferior 'other' to the 'ideal' upper caste Hindu woman. This may be best illustrated by more substantive filmic examples of the nationalist classic, *Mother India* (1957), and the romantic classic *Mughal-e-Azam* (1960). The de-sexualised character of Radha in *Mother India* is the archetypical noble Gandhian mother-submissive, chaste, patriotic and selfless. This sharply contrasts with the character of Anarkali in *Mughal-e-Azam*, who is a *tawaif*<sup>4</sup> (courtesan) and the ultimate demure seductress and dancer with whom Mughal Prince Jahangir falls in love and rebels against his father, Emperor Akbar. Radha is represented in a nationalistic sari, symbolically binding or protecting her body from vulnerability and permeability of access by men. While for Anarkali, despite her fully covered body, her breasts are often accentuated by the cut of her dress, her swirling dances reveal her full leg even though they are covered, and the only exposed parts of her body, her palms and feet are fetishised through long nails painted red, jewellery and elaborate dancing gestures using her hands and feet (Dwyer, 2000: 148). If Radha represents the ideal of the coherent but gendered nation, Anarkali represents the selfish, disruptive, rebellious and erotic presence that disrupts *status quo* of power (Ansari, 2008).

The image of the veiled Muslim woman has gained iconic status, both in India and globally. It has become a trope in support of clash of civilisations argument between the civilised Hindus and the barbaric Muslims in India. Women's dress in India is produced, performed and read through an opposition of putatively 'Hindu', thus Indian sari, and 'Muslim' thus un-Indian 'veil'<sup>5</sup> (Osella and Osella, 2007). Controversies around the Kashmiri militant group Lashkar-e- Jabbar announcing that all Muslim women in Kashmir must wear a burqa<sup>6</sup> became a project of marking and drawing inside/outside boundaries of Indian Muslims nationalism (Menon, 2005). Muslim women's choice of clothes became a

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<sup>4</sup> A *tawaif* was a courtesan who catered to the nobility of South Asia, particularly during the era of the Mughal Empire. The *tawaifs* excelled and contributed to music, dance (*mujra*), theatre, film, and the Urdu literary tradition, were considered an authority on etiquette.

<sup>5</sup> The veil is a generalised term used to refer to the practice of Muslim women covering the head and chest, beyond the age of puberty

<sup>6</sup> An enveloping outer garment worn by women in some Islamic traditions. Often black in colour, it covers a woman's whole body and has a separate headscarf.



symbol of their rejection of nation. Such understandings, discounted a similar ideology of Muslims, whereby threats to Muslim communities identity or existence, resulted in the proud assertion of their communities' identity on the bodies of their women (**Menon, 2005**). For example, in the state of Kerala the practice of hijab was rare, but post the demolition of the Babri Mosque, it became a more widespread practice among Muslims to establish their greater attachment to Islamic identity, and a response to Hindu chauvinistic nationalism displayed through the events of the demolition of the mosque (**Menon, 2005; Osella and Osella, 2007**).

Such dichotomised representation of Hindu-Muslim women appears in the imagery of the subservient veiled women evoked in the image of Muslim Pakistani woman Zara in the movie *Veer Zara* who always covers her head and wears a salwar kameez. She is indebted to the Hindu hero for saving her life and falls in love with him, only to suffer further by her countrymen's conspiracy to separate her from her lover for many years. She is shown to be passive and subservient, in need of protection from the brutish Muslim man. Unlike the dangerous Muslim man, the Muslim women in Bollywood, particularly post 9/11, are shown to have some possibility of redemption through an allegiance to the nationalistic agenda. For instance, Zooni (in *Faana*) sacrifices an earthly love for her lover who is a terrorist/separatist for a larger transcendental love of the nation, much like *Mother India* described earlier. In doing so, she creates a space for herself and her son as depoliticised 'good Muslims' within the nationalist space of India (**Khan 2009**).

By assigning an intense image of the 'dangerous other' or the 'inferior other' **Kumar (2013)** suggests that the image of a Muslim in Indian films have sociologically broadened the definition of Islamic terrorism. Reducing the discursive space accorded to Muslims in India and elsewhere making them more vulnerable to social ostracism, state violence and mob fury. '*The vileness of the present discourse is such that it has Muslims forever on the defensive, which is precisely the agenda of Hindutva and all such forms of authoritarian ideology*' (**Kumar, 2013: 464**). In the following sections we illustrate the changes seen in the recent portrayals in of Muslim women in Bollywood under the heading of the three dominant narratives of change. We also scrutinise the nature of these changes in then in larger narratives of gender and religion within the paradigms of Indian identity.

## Creating the lived 'other' through representations in celluloid

### Narratives of Choice: Cross-cultural love, education and public mobility

All the Muslim women characters from the selected movies, Iram in *Agent Vinod*, *Ek Tha Tiger's Zoya*, *Ranjhanaa's Zoya* and *Ishaqzade's Zoya* are represented as educated and mobile in the public sphere either for education, jobs or political campaigning. It is interesting to note, though outside the scope of the current article that the culturally and geographically specific name 'Zoya' has assumed such popularity in Bollywood's characterisation of Muslim women. These recent portrayals of the Muslim heroines as cosmopolitan women is a leap forward from the movies of previous generations, where Muslim women were either depicted as the seductress (courtesan) or the subservient veiled victim of religion. For example, Zoya in *Ranjhanaa* explicitly seeks to attend a University in Delhi outside her home town of Benaras/Aligarh to escape her conservative Muslim family. Her character in fact attributes her metamorphosis into a confident politically aware woman to her association with the secular educational system and a supportive non-Muslim lover. *Ishaqzade's Zoya*, is also shown to be campaigning for her father's political party, wearing a waistcoat just like her brothers' who join her in the campaign, and is represented as bold, vocal and aggressive in her political pursuit. In fact, she is shown to be fearless in front of the hero's gun in the movie, challenging him to shoot her. Such depiction of Muslim heroines are certainly a change from what **Hirji (2008)** called the 'mysterious figures who veer between innocent damsel in distress or exotic seductress'.

With the exception of Iram in *Agent Vinod*, all the other three characters, *Ek Tha Tiger's Zoya*, *Ranjhanaa's Zoya* and *Ishaqzade's Zoya* appear to actively choose life partners from 'forbidden' or 'enemy groups', namely a Hindu Tiger, a Sikh Jasjeet and again a Hindu and a political opponent Perma. While *Ranjhanaa's Zoya* and *Ishaqzade's Zoya* have tragic love stories ending in the death of the two partners, *Ek Tha Tiger's Zoya* the Pakistani spy and her Indian lover are shown to end up being together, in an unnamed foreign/western country. The happy ending in *Ek Tha Tiger's* plot can be interpreted as Zoya having greater choice and agency in selecting her life partner and creating a space for themselves to be together, although in hiding. However, this choice can also be interpreted as her weakness towards earthly romantic love over the transcendental love for her country, thus pitting her choice of a Hindu/Indian lover against her choice of a Muslim nation (Pakistan). Additionally, the Nationalist and/or patriarchal narratives of Hindu Indian men protecting 'good Muslim' women from the 'bad Muslim' men is visible in varying degrees in all the four plots. In particular, Pakistani

woman assisting an Indian man in discharging his duties towards his nation also firmly makes a case for the redemption of Pakistani (Muslim) women through her association with a Hindu man and her encounter with a Hindu nation.

A closer look at the three choices of partners in the selected sample reveal that the characteristics of each of these partners are associated with an ideal 'Indian Hindu male'. As opposed to the Hindu men, Muslim masculinity in the selected movies are embodied by the brutish colleagues of Zoya in *Ek tha Tiger*, deeply conservative fathers and male relatives of the two Zoyas in *Ranjhanaa* and *Ishaqzade*.

Contrastingly, a chivalrous Tiger gives up an opportunity to kill his opponent Zoya – the female Pakistani spy in *Ek Tha Tiger*, even though the male Pakistanis are not bestowed with the same kindness. This establishes firmly the possibility of redemption for Muslim/Pakistani women through encounters with the Hindu men and the Hindu nation as discussed earlier in the context of the "*Bahu lao, beti Bachao campaign*" in some parts of India. On the other hand in *Ranjhanaa*, Zoya's childhood sweetheart Kundan is depicted as passionate lover waiting for years to be with his beloved, so much so that he even endears himself to her family by doing odd jobs for them. He is shown to be gregarious and big hearted even in the face of Zoya's refusal to reciprocate his feelings. Similarly, *Ishaqzade's* Zoya falls for the misogynistic Parma when he expresses his desire to protect her family's honour equated with her honour (*izzat*) by withholding from the public information that can potentially be construed as dishonourable in the wider society. In the plots discussed above, overall narratives are that of Muslim women being sheltered and protected by Hindu male characters embodying the chivalrous, strong, and virile Indian and/or Hindu masculinity as opposed to the brash, uncivilised and uneducated Muslim masculinity.

These narratives about Muslim women's choice of relationships, public mobility and education indirectly help solidify the age old Hindu supremacist narrative of disruptive Muslim masculinity. Therefore, even when the female Muslim characters are empowered to make 'choices' these choices are restricted within the category of benevolent and virile Hindu men capable of protecting the Muslim women's and the Muslim community's honour. It is also a fact that, while the celluloid depictions of Hindu hero rescuing Muslim heroine are very common, the reverse scenario involving Hindu heroine and a Muslim hero is still unimaginable. Thus continuing two problematic traditions: firstly, that of emphasis on family and community honour embodied by Muslim women who are finally saved by Hindu men and secondly, that of demonisation of Muslim men, from whom these characters need protection.

Narratives of Political Participation: sexualised damsel(s) in distress or agents of political change?

The most intriguing portrayals of Muslim women in the public sphere in the selected movies are Iram in *Agent Vinod* and in *Ek tha Tiger* representing Muslim heroines as strong and independent women in the service of their nation through espionage. Both of these characters demonstrate a seemingly effortless ability to fit across a range of western and non-western (Pakistan) social contexts by altering their clothing practices and demeanor, a representation rarely found in Bollywood before. In addition, the Indian Muslim heroines, *Ranjhanaa's* Zoya is a student activist with a very well defined political agenda for social change and towards the end of the movie she becomes the leader of a radical political group. *Ishaqzade's* Zoya is also portrayed as having strong political ambitions including an aspiration to become the Chief Minister of the state in future, making her the subject of ridicule from the male family members. The political ambitions *Ishaqzade's* Zoya's are demonstrated clearly in her actively campaigning for her father's election and frequently leveraging the family's political clout. The character of Iram stands out among the four in being forced into a career in espionage by the Pakistani secret service agency in lieu of protection from persecution in a false case. The other three characters seem choose their political or spy careers actively. However, a closer examination of these portrayals shows more signs of continuity in stereotypical representations as those needing protection of Indian (Hindu) men and the question of women's position in politics is still represented to be embedded in a male-centered structure.

For instance, *Ishaqzade's* Zoya chooses a career in politics where she can leverage her family's political clout and *Ranjhanaa's* Zoya is portrayed as carrying forward the ideological/political vision of her dead lover. Irum and *Ek Tha Tiger's* Zoya are used by Pakistani intelligence agency to forward their country's geo-political agendas, often using their sexuality to distract the opposition. For instance, Iram in *Agent Vinod* performs a highly sexual courtesan inspired dance sequence to distract the enemy, while the hero, an Indian agent, tries to revoke a terrorist attack. Thus, while Muslim women's recent portrayals in several movies depict elements of political participation in most cases, their feminine dispositions are deployed towards personal, political and nationalist agendas that are not always controlled by them.

Representation of Muslim women as political agents, remain embedded in a patriarchal structures whereby their political agency is converted into sexualised narratives of damsels in distress, which ultimately helps maintain hierarchical power relations. Firstly, the very fact that the two

strongest political agents of change, recognised formally by their government through appointment as spies, are Pakistani and not Indian Muslim women. Their Pakistani identity frees them from the inevitable comparison with the ideal Hindu upper caste women as the benchmark against which Indian Muslim women are measured. Thus they are represented with greater agency, especially with regards to the diverse dressing practices and practices of espionage at home and in foreign lands. Whereas, the Indian Muslim heroines are able to practice their political agency mostly within the restricted frameworks of family honour and shame. Secondly, pairing of Pakistani female character with Indian male characters in the lead allows these films to successfully maintain the communalised, militarised and a Hindu patriarchal social structure among the genders, and between nation states (Das, 2006). This is captured first in both portrayals by *Agent Vinod's* Iram & *Ek Tha Tiger's* Zoya as damsels in distress who are then the recipients of Hindu male magnanimity and benevolence. In both cases, the notion that perhaps the female spies are as well trained as their male counterparts is ignored largely in a way that focuses somehow on their gender disposition which requires 'protection'.

Though the discussed portrayals of Pakistani women in Bollywood denote some stereotypical representation of Muslim women, they also assume a futuristic political agenda wherein unlike the older India-Pakistan related movies the emphasis on partition and Kashmir dispute are much more muted. In fact there is a lot of emphasis in the narrative plots of these movies to show that India has moved on from Partition of India and Pakistan, but Pakistan has not. Therefore, Bollywood portrayals carry forward singular and simple construction of Hindu nation and Indians as peace loving, responsible and often taking a paternal attitude to the actions of an irresponsible, fundamentalist and tactless Muslim nation Pakistan.

#### Narratives of sartorial display: Nationalist vs. Anti-Nationalist Clothing

The Hindu Indian women in the selected films always wear a sari, while none of the Muslim characters are ever represented in a sari. Muslim characters only wear salwar kameez,<sup>7</sup> headscarf<sup>8</sup> or western attires in the four films. Absence of representation of Muslim women in a sari marks them as the inferior 'other', and the headscarf, often generalised as the Muslim women's 'veil', is the emblem of those who are 'totally' the other

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<sup>7</sup> *Salwar Kameez* is a long tunic like top, with loose trousers and a scarf.

<sup>8</sup> Headscarves or head scarves are scarves covering most or all of the top of a Muslim woman's hair and her head, leaving face uncovered.

to the nationalist Hindu women in a sari (**Dwyer, 2000**). *Ranjhanaa's Zoya* and *Ishaqzade's Zoya*, both from small towns in India, are most often shown in salwar kameez in contrast to the western attire adorned by the two Pakistani spies Iram and *Ek Tha Tiger's Zoya*. *Ishaqzade's Zoya* wearing a waistcoat over her kameez, can be viewed as symbol of Muslim League's politics in colonial India. While *Ranjhanaa's Zoya* wear a long kurta (tunic) and leggings or jeans with a scarf around her neck and sometimes a waistcoat, coat or a sweater mixing eastern and western attire, only when she is away from her family, at her university.

Gender analysis of nationalism demonstrate how communities vest their 'honor' on women's bodies which reproduces the boundaries of ethnic/nationalist groups (**Yuval-Davis, 1989**). Traditional Indian garb, like the sari- communicate positive attributes of 'honesty', 'obedience' and represent the nation. It is a form of banal nationalism of Hindu Indian women through their sartorial practices, in the sense that it is everywhere and unnoticed (**Wilton, 2012**). The Sari is also connected to the religious traditions of images of the Hindu goddesses, reinforcing the identification of the sari with ideals of Hindu womanhood (**Wilton, 2012; Tarlo 2007**). However, **Dwyer (2000)** argues that many Muslim women historically wore the sari and still do, but remain outside nationalist discourses presented through women's sartorial practices in Bollywood films. Thus Muslim women's choice of rejecting the sari becomes representative of rejecting the nation. Western clothing also represent a challenge to Indian sartorial conventions, whereby Hindu nationalists still prefer the sari, while the young 'modern' women prefer Western style clothing (**Wilton, 2012**). Western clothes are still considered more 'revealing' than the sari, and thus only acceptable among unmarried younger women (**Dwyer, 2000**). But, a shift is evident in the young, professional and urban Indian woman's choice of clothing in India, whereby in Indian newspapers and magazines most of the women are pictured in western-style clothing (**Wilton, 2012**). This is also reflected in Bollywood where heroines are now tall, thin Caucasian looking young girls often with blue eyes, fair skin and a western accent dressed in western style clothing conveying a modern and cosmopolitan look, able to shift comfortably between different global contexts and settings (**Bahl, 2005: 106**).

All Muslim heroines represented in the sample movies wear the salwar kameez and are represented, at least once in each of these movies, in a headscarf (either when they are praying, participating in religious ritual of death or in a formal occasion representing the Islamic nation in an international event), and Iram and *Ek Tha Tiger's Zoya* almost always wear western attire, such as miniskirts with knee high boots, short dresses and hot pants. This ensures that the Muslim women in the



selected films do not challenge the *status quo* around the hierarchy between the superior, idealised and nationalist Hindu women and the inferior, conservative and anti-nationalist Muslim women even through sartorial practices.

But for the Muslim heroines of the selected sample, western wear is still not 'the norm', particularly when they are in India. They only represent a form of fusion clothing practice especially when they are in public spheres in cosmopolitan settings, outside their family's scrutiny. Thus although many Bollywood movies represent their Hindu heroines in western style clothing conveying a modern and cosmopolitan look, Indian Muslim heroines such as *Ranjhanaa's Zoya* and *Ishaqzade's Zoya* are never represented in fully western garb. Thus they are depicted as conservative and backward, thus inferior to the modern and cosmopolitan Hindu Indian characters in various other movies of today.

This can be further explained through the representation of the two Pakistani Muslim heroines in predominantly sexually suggestive western wear. Iram and *Ek Tha Tiger's Zoya*, playing Pakistani ISI agents in western countries wear western clothes being represented in a highly sexualised manner. The only time they wear ethnic clothing, is when they are either in the company of their fellow Muslim countrymen. In these movies, they entice the Hindu heroes (and other men) through their beauty and sexuality, are deceitful and dishonest, just like the courtesan characters in old Hindi films. In fact, Iram in *Agent Vinod* performs a courtesan inspired dance sequence to keep the man she is spying on enticed. Thus the western garb of the Pakistani spies are deployed as tools of seduction by their countries and they also use their sexuality through courtesan inspired dance to enter enemy units. Such depiction of the Pakistani ISI agents represent them as inferior to Indian women as they use their western sexualised sartorial practices to seduce the Hindu heroes disrupting the Heroes' duty to the nation. While Indian women wear western garb as a sign of progressiveness and modernity, leading India into globalisation.

Through analysing the impossibility of representing the Muslim women in India in either the nationalistic sari or western wear to represent their modernity, in the selected movies, we have demonstrated that Muslim women's sartorial practices is a site through which hierarchies among the communities (Hindu women and Muslim women) and between India and Pakistan (Pakistani Muslim women and Indian women) are maintained.

## Conclusion

This article has identified a number of contexts of change in the representation of Muslim women in recent Bollywood movies. First context of change is that Muslim characters are now being portrayed as occupying central roles in the plots of commercially viable mainstream movies such as the four movies from 2012-13 discussed in this paper. Secondly, there has been a distinct diversification in the portrayals of Muslim women in different roles and contexts. For instance, as this paper has shown, fulfilling roles of spy, political campaigner, etc. and making active choices in terms of education, career and life partners. This represents a change where the intersection of gender, nationalism and religion now form their public identities, as opposed to orientalist depiction of restrictive private lives of veiled women in previous generation of movies. The selected portrayals attempt to break free of the Madonna/Whore complex,<sup>9</sup> enabling Muslim heroines to possess 'respectable' yet sexually transgressive qualities which were historically associated only with the *tawaiif* and had hyper sexualised negative connotations. Thirdly, Muslim women within India are represented in fusion wear, combination of eastern and western, in secular spaces such as the university within India and outside India; Muslim women are represented in western clothing as opposed to the stereotypical backward and conservative salwar kameez or the hijab.

In order to make a realistic assessment of the recent representation of Muslim women in Bollywood, the contexts of change need to be located within the contexts of continuity of traditional discourse on Muslim women. The four selected movies represent hierarchical gender relations through the mediated modernity of Muslim women by the upper caste Hindu man. Iram seeks help from Hindu RAW agent to put an end to her forced espionage role. *Ek Tha Tiger's* Zoya falls in love with a Hindu man and they start a life together where he protects her from her Muslim Pakistani countrymen, who are looking to penalise her for loving a Hindu man and betraying her country. And finally, *Ranjhanaa's* Zoya and *Ishaqzade's* Zoya are both protected by Hindu men from their conservative and aggressive Muslim male family members, for falling in love with a Sikh and Hindu man respectively. Secondly, there are strong elements of continuity around asymmetrical Hindu-Muslim relationship in India. Muslim men are still portrayed as the brash, uncivilised and uneducated 'other', from whom the Muslim women need protection. Muslim women are differentiated from Hindu women through sartorial practices, where they are never shown in a nationalist sari or fully

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<sup>9</sup> Madonna/whore complex refers to the binary representation of women as respectable, subservient and often publicly inaccessible and the contrasting image of women as highly sexualised, publicly visible and accessible *Tawaiifs* and dancing girls (Hirji, 2008).

western garb as representative of modern India. Muslim women's identities are constructed through association of her clothing practices with her religion or sexuality, as opposed to the Hindu women who chooses her nation. Finally, the impossibility of a romantic relationship between a Pakistani woman and Indian man is still upheld, as although one of the inter-religious couples in the four movies end up together, they have to be in hiding in western countries outside both India and Pakistan to give their love story a happy ending. The inter-nation friction is represented through the impossibility of cross-border love, which is still unimaginable if the lovers are either in India or Pakistan.

To summarise, we find that Bollywood tactically adopts 'good Muslim women' as a discursive troupe to reinforce the Hindu supremacist discourse that 'Hindu men' are the protectors of the Muslim women from the 'bad Muslim' men. This conceptualisation then supports and reinforces the opposition between the Hindu men and the Muslim men, laying down the attributes of the ideal Hindu man (through the choice of partners) as the yardstick against which the Muslim men should be measured. Such a discursive practice supports **Das's (2006)** model that representation of Muslim women (and men) in Bollywood helps maintain a communalised, Hindu patriarchal structure among the genders, between Hindu-Muslim communities in India and between India and Pakistan as nations. We argue that 'good Muslim' women do not challenge the status quo of hierarchies between the communities, and through the acceptance of the benevolence of Hindu men align themselves with the Indian nation, simultaneously providing a discursive blueprint for the 'bad Muslims' to be accepted in the imagination of the Indian nation. This potentially helps maintain the Hindutva or Hindu supremacist moral and national order where violence against the Muslims are rationalised, legitimised and normalised as strategies for building and protecting a Hindu nation. Furthermore, the *Ishrat Jahan fake encounter case*, with which we started this article, is also an example of how this ideology is often also realised outside Bollywood in real India. The record of change *vis-a-vis* continuity in Muslim women's representation in Bollywood is at best mixed and its future highly contingent on the political climate of India.

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