

Bollywood and Indian Muslim Women: Representation or Mis-representation?

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Cinema, the world over, is now no more merely a source of entertainment. The change in the century brought in a change in the approach to life. With the rapid transformation of society in the last century, the face of celluloid has also changed. Like other genres, films too have become 'realistic'. The demand now is to watch the blatant reality, howsoever ugly it may be. The filmmakers now hold a mirror in their hands, reflecting the reality to the viewers. Hence, a great onus now lies on films as cinema has a mass appeal, capturing the very nerves of the common people. Reading involves complete participation of readers' personality by keeping their imaginative faculty active. The words printed in black ink on white sheets are to be given proper shape in our mind and appropriate colours are to be filled by us. Films, on the other hand, do half the work for us. What the author says in lengthy paragraphs, a cinematographer does in few seconds. In brief, understanding becomes comparatively easy with visual and sound effects.

Confining the present discussion to Indian cinema, we observe that the Indian filmmakers too have come out of the cocoon of producing stereotyped stories to cater to the needs of the matured audience. The 100-years journey of Indian cinema takes a trajectory from the mute *Raja Harishchandra*, boarding on to *Chennai Express* and sipping coffee at *Madras Cafe*, unabashedly talk at *Table 22*. The characters have developed and the tag of being 'the hero' and 'the heroine' is pulled down, now we have just the 'protagonist'. Shifting our focus to the females in the Hindi cinema, the *Main Chup Rahungi* trend is broken by Reshma in *Dirty Picture*. The melodious music also has the fast beats of the new generation and the 'Majroohs' and 'Hasrats' are replaced by the likes of 'bhag d k bose' etc. The 'hero' is no more a 'superhero' winning over the bad man always and rescuing the damsel in distress; the heroine' is not the 'sati savitri' and 'Ms Perfect' any more. The script writer too has read the nerves of the 'new' audience and thus experimentation has set in. In brief, Indian cinema is moving in sync with the need of the present time.

Discussing the issues such as (i) the changing face of Indian cinema, (ii) the responsibility of the films/ film-makers, (iii) the depiction of Muslim culture, the main focus of my paper is to examine the portrayal of Muslim woman with respect to the two life-turning events: marriage and divorce. Having briefly discussed the first two subjects, the third issue in consideration is the depiction of Muslim culture. The fact that Muslim culture and language have immensely contributed in shaping the Indian cinema cannot be overlooked. Anisur Rahman in "Language, Culture, Bombay Cinema" writes: "The 50s and the 60s could best be described as the golden period of Muslim representation on the celluloid... It would be significant to note that most of the films produced during this golden period were character-plot centric, and that they drew upon history and places..." (Jain 31) – *Chaudvinka Chand, Mughal-e-Azam, Sahib Bibiaur Ghulam, Mere Mehboob, Mere Huzoor, Taj Mahal, Ghazal, Jahan Ara, Bahu Begum* to name a few. If the Hindi films are quickly reviewed, we will find a clear

dominance of Muslim culture and language, primarily because at that time the industry was dominated by script writers and dialogue writers like K.A. Abbas, Manto, Rajinder Singh Bedi, lyricists like Sahir Ludhianavi, Majrooh Sultanpuri, Kaifi Azmi, music directors such as Naushad with singers as Mohammad Rafi, Talat Mehmoood, Suraiyya and directors rooted in Muslim culture like Mehboob, K. Asif, Kamal Amrohi etc. From 1960s onwards, we can observe the depiction of a sophisticated Muslim society with the characters speaking chaste Urdu, men and women clad in typically Muslim attires, *achkan* and *burqa*. The setting too complemented to the entire ethos. There was exchange of *sher-o-shayari* and *mushaiyaras*, the women were shy and coy and the men too were in dignified limits. In brief, the directors completely replicated the Muslim household.

A decline in the representation of Muslim culture is observed in the films off late, especially in the 70s, and if at all the Muslim environment is reproduced, it is done in a very stereotyped manner. However, in the last three decades of the 20th century, again attempts were made to revive the Muslim culture in the films. With the introduction of some newer subjects in films like *Noorie*, *Pakeezah*, *ShatranjkeKhiladi*, *GarmHawa*, *Umrao Jan*, *Nikaah*, *Tawaif*, *Henna*, *Train to Pakistan*, *Sardari Begum*, *Mission Kashmir*, *Refugee* and *Fiza*, the aim was to bring to the fore some pertinent issues related to this community but often misunderstood/misrepresented.

If we deliberate upon the last issue of my paper, i.e the portrayal of Muslim women in Indian cinema, we would find that they have been portrayed in all the possible shades – from the *begums* of rich *nawabs* to the *tawaifs* to the modern age vivacious liberated individuals. However some recurrent issues are too significant to be ignored: Why they were presented as doubly-marginalised character – as a woman and that too of a minority community? Why are they burdened with the responsibility of culture-carriers? Do they have any choice in designing their destiny? In the late 70s primarily, with films like *Pakeezah*, *Umrao Jan*, *Bazar*, *Nikaah*, the attention was shifted to women and we had many women-centric films being made. The image of the coy women changed and the directors made them step out of the threshold. We got strong women who challenged/questioned patriarchy. This was quite new Muslim attitude/culture (as was the belief). Finally the audience got a thinking and self-respecting woman. ‘Identity’ became an important question for them.

The idea behind this paper is to sensitise the common masses (especially the non-Muslims) about the two life-turning customs of the Muslim community. How far cinema is working in this line is a matter of concern – are the filmmakers making money only or do they actually understand the moral responsibility they bear? The partial representation of any custom leads to its misinterpretation. Cinema has become a serious art in contemporary times but unfortunately the sensitivity and creativity of our filmmakers in depicting the Muslim women is under question. No doubt we now have movies like *Fiza* and *Dor* with strong Muslim women as protagonist, still it is felt that this section of our society has faced some kind of negligence by filmmakers. A very stereotyped image of such women is observed in the movies of the previous century – either they belong to the aristocracy or they are put on the *kothas*, either we have the sophisticated, cultured *begum sahiba* in the huge *haveli* or pathetic woman in a cramped house. Where is the true Muslim woman who has been given equal rights with those of men? Why all the *tawaifs* (mostly) in Indian cinema belong to the Muslim

community, standing as “triply disadvantaged as members of the minority community, as women and most of all as poor women” (ZoyaHasan, 64). Why is the pious customs of marriage and the right to divorce not depicted in true light? Why in all the films it is only the husband who divorces his wife and that too at any slightest pretext? Why the filmmakers, if they cannot show the reality, then distort and make fun of the customs of any religion? It is the matter of liability of cinema and the filmmakers, as already it is high time that the responsibility is understood by them and the task is taken with utmost sincerity. The role of cinema is to sensitise the mind-sets of the general public. Islam grants woman an equal status with men. Neither *purdah* is mandatory nor is *talaaq* discriminatory. Women also can seek divorce. Regarding polygamy, it says all the wives should be treated equally. In this context FareedKazmi in her essay “Muslim Social and the Female Protagonist: Seeing a dominant discourse at ‘work’” says:

It is this image which helps in interpellating the audience, especially those women who belong to the subaltern classes and see in them a role model that they would like to emulate but can not, because of their oppressive existential situation. In other words, this rebellious posturing of the female protagonists helps define and articulate the innermost desires of these women. (ZoyaHasan, 233)

Considering the movie *Zubeida*, we clearly see patriarchy curbing the rights given by Islam to women. Whether it be Fayazi, the ‘door-mat’ wife to Suleman Seth or Zubeida the vivacious daughter, upon neither the patriarch fails to puts a cap. Zubeida is forced to marry a boy of her father’s choice and when she refuses to pronounce ‘*qubool hai*’, the father speaks a lie to the *maulvi* about her consent being given. She compares herself with a she-goat readied to be sacrificed for the personal interests of her father: ‘*Main dulhan nahi, qurbani ki bakri hun, jise wo apne dost ko khush karne k liye ziba kar rahe hain*’. (‘I am not the bride but the sacrificial goat that is being sacrificed to appease his friend’). Few months later, once again her destiny is re-written by patriarchy when as a result of the rivalry between her father and father-in-law, she is divorced by her husband with an infant child in her arms. The film-maker deserves applause here. The juxtaposition of two contrary moments, one, Zubeida giving birth to a son and the second, the heated argument between her father and father-in-law leading to a ‘forced’ divorce is noteworthy. Neither the husband nor the wife had any differences between them, still the husband was compelled to divorce Zubeida.

The issue of ‘*talaaq*’ is very crucial. It completely changes the life of a woman. Unfortunately, due to our cinema, it is understood that in Muslim community, it is very easy to dissolve a marriage. In the film *Mere Huzoor*, the husband (Akhtar) in a fit of anger divorces his wife (Sultanat): ‘*hum koi kathputli nahi jo tumhare isharo pe nachenge... main jis tarah chahunga tumhe usitarah rehna hoga, agar nahi reh sakti to tumhe hamari taraf se poori azaadi hai, hum tumhe abhi isi waqt talaaq dene ko taiyyar hain*’. (‘I am not a puppet in your hands. You will have to live as per my wishes, if you cannot, then you are free, I divorce you this very moment’.) In an inebriated state he pronounces ‘*talaaq*’ and it is taken to be the end of their married life. The director has presented the wife completely shattered who even tries to take her life but restrains herself for her son. What becomes of a woman? Her identity as a woman, as an individual is extinct; she remains only a wife, a daughter-in-law, a mother. When Sultanat respectfully accepts Akhtar’s

decision of divorce, then too the society does not permit her to live in peace. People start maligning her name with Nawab Salim and assassinating her character.

Nikaah again takes up the two sensitive issues of a Muslim woman's life – marriage and divorce. The dialogues spoken by the husband (Waseem) to his wife (Nilofer) highlight the male dominance leading to the falling apart of their relationship: '*Marzi to hamari hi chalegi, jab bhi humein zarurat hogi tumhe hamari baat maanni hi padegi... main aisi baatein sunne ka aadi nahi... tumhe mere doston se maafi maangni hogi.. main tumhe hukm deta hu... tum apni haisiyat bhool rahi ho... main tumhe ghar se bhi nikaal sakta hu...*'. ('Only my wish will prevail. You will have to obey me. I am not used to such talks. You will have to apologise to my friends. I order you. Do not forget your place. I can even turn you out of the house'.) Once again the cinematographer does a commendable job. The word '*talaaq*' echoes and this emphasizes the gulf created between the two. Like Sultanat, Nilofer too is not treated well by the society. The tag of being a divorcee becomes a blot on her character to the extent that when she applies for job in a school, she was turned out by the selection panel saying '*ek talaqqshudaa urat ka ladkiyon ke school mein rehna munasib nahi*'. ('It is not proper to recruit a divorcee in a girls' school'.)

Is this what Islam says about '*Talaaq*'? Is it so easy to dissolve a pious relation of marriage? Is the right to divorce given only to man? If not, then why the filmmakers present a serious issue with such triviality? In the film *Nikaah*, the *qazi* counsels Waseem '*talaaq kewal majboori mein hi di ja sakti hai, biwi ko ghar se nikaalne k liye nahi*' and this is the truth, divorce should not, by any chance, be made a plaything by patriarchy. The Holy *Quran* mentions in Chapter 4, '*At-Talaaq*': "O Prophet! When you divorce women, divorce them at their Iddah (prescribed period) and count (accurately) their Iddahs (periods). And fear Allah your Lord (O Muslims). And turn them not out of their (husband's) homes nor shall they (themselves) leave, except in case they are guilty of some open illegal sexual intercourse. And those are the set limits of Allah. And whosoever transgresses the set limits of Allah, then indeed he has wronged himself." (*Quran* 4:1) But what do the films show? A husband can, whenever he wants, divorce his wife? Zubeida had an infant baby in her arms when she was divorced and Sulatanat too had a young child, did the director talk about the maintenance of the children in case of divorce? Both the women were immediately shown living separately from their men who had nothing to do with their offspring. Nowhere the audience is told about the *iddat* period before the expiry of which, the divorce cannot take place. (*Quran* 4:4).

Here I would like to quote from *Nikaah* when Nilofer screams in the end asking: '*main puchti hu jo shadi meri marzi k bina ho hi nahi sakti uske tootne mein meri haan ya na ka dakhil kyu nahi zaruri hai?*' ('I ask that when a marriage cannot take place without my consent, should not I be asked at the time of dissolving it?') This is a very pertinent question to all those Muslim patriarchs who have made divorce a plaything and more importantly, it is aimed at the insensitive filmmakers who treat such a grave issue with levity. This is a sheer insult to the woman and to the Faith as a whole.

Similar is the ritual of *nikaah* which is always shown in our films to be too elaborate with the *qazi* asking the bride and the groom for their respective consent. However in actual practice it is first the woman whose permission is sought. Zubeida is not 'asked' but 'told' by her father about 'his' decision of marrying her to his friend's son. Her

refusal is not paid any heed and her voice is suppressed, her happiness and vivacity are sacrificed to satisfy the ego of her father. The film *Bazaar* raises the issue of selling away the girls to the debauched old men, reducing them to the state of commodity. It foregrounds the plight of young Muslim teenage poor girls who were 'bought' by the rich and affluent business-men to satisfy their lust. *Bazaar* sets a new movement to discuss issues as poverty, lack of education and unemployment. The trend of bride-selling and man-woman relationships being reduced to mere sex became common in the mid-80s. Najma (SmitaPatil), herself being conflict-stricken, ends up in a guilt-ridden and tormented woman. Her journey that began with asserting of the self and going against the illogical social demand/ family demands, leads her nowhere as she becomes instrumental in leading Shabnam (SupriyaPathak) too to a similar dark dungeon. But gradually she realizes what actually she has done. She emerges wiser and from there, the actual journey begins: for her own identity, for the identity of other women like her. The audience is shown another angle of marriage which becomes a 'bazaar' where to protect the 'honour' of the family, the parents either compel their daughters to take up flesh trade or to 'sell' her to the rich old lecherous men. For miserable girls, their life is a perpetual 'bazaar' and they are always a commodity to be bought and sold. The consent of the woman is a far-thought issue. It never exists for these traders: *Bazaar mein sabse sasti cheez hai to wo hai aurat* ("The cheapest item to be sold in market is woman'.) But ironically, the Muslim law gives the woman the right to voice her choice/opinion. What is written as principle and what is projected in films is completely divergent. In Muslim marriage, consent is the basis but what we see in *Bazaar* is entirely different. Shabnam's refusal is ignored. Significant is the scene when her hands are held by her mother and sister while she wails '*nahi amma nahi*' and the two other women bring pearl necklace to take the measure for the ornaments.

Islam always acknowledged women at par with men granting them many rights in almost all the spheres of life. They are held in high esteem and are not supposed to submit to men, rather both men and women are to submit to God. The battle of sexes does not occur in Islam, they both share their rights and duties and work in tandem just as night and day, complementing each other. *Quran* does not blame only Eve for the fall from Paradise; as per *Quran*, both (Adam and Eve) committed a sin and God punished both (7,19, 23), hence it does not differentiate between the two and never mentions woman as deceiver. Islam has given many rights to women; it is only because of some aspects of misuse or misinterpretation of religion by men that a patriarchal set up emerged in which the males dominated the females. There are certain misconceptions prevalent about Islam and Shariyat among the common masses (preferably the non-Muslim) and are propagated by cinema. In Islam, marriage is a 'contract' between the man and the woman. According to the holy *Quran*, "And among His Signs is this, that he created for you mates from among yourselves, and that you may dwell in tranquillity with them, and He has put love and mercy between your [hearts]..." (*Quran* 30:21). Islam, by giving the woman the right to choose her husbands, has actually honoured her and also made her strong and independent. She can be guided but by no means be forced by her parents. Also Islam makes her mature and dependable enough to offer advice to her husband. The best example is that of Khadijah bint Khuwaylid, the first wife of Prophet who embraced Prophet when He was trembling just after the Revelation. She was wise, steadfast and strong of character.

The *Quran* states: "And among His Signs is this, that He created for you wives from among yourselves, that you may find repose in them, and He has put between you affection and mercy" (30:21). Islam has laid down duties and responsibilities for both man and woman and both would be held accountable for any laxity on their part. If the man is made responsible to protect the family and earn the livelihood, woman's duty is to nurture the children and look after the household chores. Marriage is a sanctified bond in Islam too, like any other religion, and it is necessary to maintain its purity. The exit option should be used only when there is no other way out. Thus it should not be taken that Islam encourages divorce. If the husband is given the right to dissolve the marriage in Islam, so is the woman. The husband has no right to take back the gift (*mehr*) given to the wife at the time of marriage whereas the wife, if she leaves her husband, should give back the gift. Islam has made women strong and equal to men then why has the cinema presented her as a miserable creature, depended upon her husband with *nikaah* and *talaaq* becoming the only yardstick to measure her status in the society? No film has been made till date showing wife divorcing her husband. Does it mean that the right to do so given only to the men? Whereas we all know that this is not the case. But with such projections, films are misleading the general public and creating wrong notions about the Muslim community.

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