

The Bombay Muslim Social (1940-90):

Law, Desire and Modernity

Synopsis of dissertation submitted for the award of the Degree of Doctor of
Philosophy in Arts at Jadavpur University

by

Asmita Das

Supervisor: Dr Subhajit Chatterjee

Department of Film Studies

Jadavpur University

Kolkata 700032

2019

Content

Introduction

The Muslim Films of Bombay Cinema 1

- Introduction
- Scope of the study
- The Muslim film and the genre question
- Engagement with memory
- The distinction between two proposed categories of cinema
- The three moments of imagination of the Muslim Socials
- Islamic films and the oriental history
- Indian cinema and the legacy of the Islamicate empire
- Building stereotypes through architecture, language, space and memory
- The Islamicate genre
- Looking at the Islamicate through a gendered study of the courtesans
- Conclusion

Chapter 2

Popular Cinema as Archive: at the Crossroads of History and Memory 3

- Introduction
- The public and the private spheres in the Islamic way of life
- Building consensus through iconography and stereotype
- Nation formation and the emergence of the Bombay film industry
 - Economy
 - Politics and religion/communalism
 - Language
- The nation and nationalism/internationalism of Sir Syed Ahmed Khan
- Reform through education and its resistance
- Cinema as archive
- Conclusion

Chapter 3

Approaching Bombay Muslim Cinema through the Prism of Genre 5

- Introduction
- The genre debate
- Position of the Islamicate films within the paradigm of genre
 - Conventions
 - Iconography
 - Setting

Stories and themes
Characters, actors and stars
Viewers and audiences
The generic dilemma: problem of defining genre
Religion to define a genre
Conforming to the established generic concerns and framework
Conclusion

Chapter 4

Muslim Courtesan Films as a Transitional Phenomenon

7

Introduction
Observations on the courtesan films of Bombay cinema
Relation between the courtesans and the Bombay film industry
The courtesan films
 Pakeezah
 Tawaif
 UmraoJaan
 Sardari Begum
Muslim identity of the courtesan
Courtesans: the powerful women of Lucknow
The irony of their fate
Songs, lyrics and the woman question
Conclusion

Conclusion

8

References

9

The Muslim Films of Bombay Cinema:

An Introduction

This thesis looks at Bombay cinema of a specific type produced between the 1940s and the 1990s that specifically represent Muslim society and culture within the purview of law, desire and modernity. This is done by reflecting on some of the prevailing observations and arguments on the notions of memory and history with which this chapter begins. Ashis Nandy's "Memory Work" (Nandy) forms the initial point of reference that helps to move towards the primary arguments that is couched within a ruptured reality of memory and history. Cinema here has been looked upon as a medium of mass propaganda that finds itself positioned quite precariously at a halfway point between conventional history and a quasi-evidence based history (which may be called memory). This phenomenon begins with the classical Muslim Socials of early 1940s and continues till the 1990s that witnessed the emergence of the New Wave films. The study begins with the classical Muslim Socials and goes on to look at the various categories of subsequent films that portray an Islamic way of life or living and its evolution over the years. This Islamic way of life is the constant in all the films that form a part of this study as it defines the focus through which these films are to be read and understood. A brief discussion on this Islamic way of life has been done in Chapter 2.

Drawing from Ashish Nandy's iteration on memory as poised against history, Bombay cinema at large has been split into two broad categories in this study: Cinema A and Cinema B. Cinema A: that which is aligned to what we have previously established as "authentic" history; and Cinema B: that which is constantly rendering Cinema A problematic while remaining within the paradigm that encapsulates Cinema A as well. Thus, Cinema A would include films like *Anari* (dir. Hrishikesh Mukherjee, 1955), *Ab Dilli Duur Nahin* (dir. Amar Kumar, 1957), *Shree 420* (dir. Raj Kapoor, 1959), etc., which has a Nehruvian approach of representing the modern citizen within a heterogeneous space; and Cinema B would include *Najma* (dir. Mehboob Khan, 1943), *Elan* (dir. Mehboob Khan, 1947), *Pakeezah* (dir. Kamal Amrohi, 1972), *Garm Hawa* (dir. MS Sathyu, 1974), *Nikaah* (dir. BR Chopra, 1982), *Salim Langde Pe Mat Ro* (dir. Saeed Mirza,

1989), etc. However, Cinema B does not remain constant; it evolves over the years. This chapter therefore further divides this category into three moments of imagination of the Muslim community, which has been discussed in detail in the next chapter.

The study has also taken into consideration the thematic groups like ‘classical Muslim Socials’ (as contextualised within an Islamic setting), ‘Muslim Historical’, ‘Muslim Courtesan’, ‘New Wave Muslim Socials’, etc., as proposed by Ira Bhaskar and Richard Allen. Therefore, the main focus of this study is to chart that transition that eventually results in the New Wave Muslim Socials and the representation of their community. The films have been observed keeping in mind the changes in economy¹ and socio-political developments in India and the subcontinent at large that dictated the logic of representation in films. While doing so, an attempt has also been made to trace back the Muslim Socials to their earlier forms popularly known as the ‘orientals’ which mostly comprised Arabian Nights stories like *Aladdin*, *Hoor-e-Arab*, *Shahi Chor*, *Laila Majnun*, *Shirin Farhad*, *Alibaba and Forty Thieves*, etc. Observations of film historians and scholars like Rosie Thomas, Kaushik Bhaumik and Virchand Dharamsey have been taken into account.

The idea of the Islamicate is quite important in this study, which this chapter has looked into drawing upon the opposing arguments of Mukul Kesavan and Anisur Rehman. This involved a building up of the stereotypes through architecture, language, space, memory, etc. Thus, mise-en-scene formed an important tool. As the thesis title suggests, there are three points of negotiation in this thesis (law, desire and modernity) through which the film texts have been attempted to be studied. These three entry points have been accommodated within the macro movement from the classical Muslim Social to the New Wave Muslim Socials for it is the acceptance and coming to terms with the modernity that envisaged in this transition – from the veiling of the reality through the imagination of a modern that is located in the past, to the complete unveiling of it through an engagement with realism be it the space or through law.

¹ It was an economy which was rocked by liberalization wherein the diaspora, with its power of foreign currency, began to play a more significant role. The typical Muslim Social became redundant as the industry began to feed into the demands of those who brought in a large chunk of the revenue.

Chapter 2

Popular Cinema as Archive: at the Crossroads of History and Memory

This chapter takes a broader look at some of the existing observations and arguments like the growth of nationalism; impact of the world war on colonial economy; socio-political history of the Muslim community within the Indian subcontinent; Bombay industry and its cinema. It has drawn upon Ashis Nandy's views on memory, Urvi Mukhopadhyay's commentary on early cinema and representation; Kingshuk Chatterjee's detailed analysis of the position of Sir Syed Ahmed Khan that charts the course of Muslim history; Ravi Vasudevan's study on film genres, Muslim Socials and discourses on identity along with Ira Bhaskar and Richard Allens's observations on the Islamicate films of Bombay cinema. Based on these, the division of the Bombay films into Cinema A and Cinema B has been taken forward in this chapter. In doing so, it has been found necessary to further sub-categorise Cinema B across three moments to accommodate the metamorphosis of the imagination of modernity of the Muslim community as seen through the representation of the community in early Muslim Socials like *Elan* and *Najma* to the gradual transition to films like *Garm Hawa*, *Pakeeza*, *Sardari Begum* or even *Nikaah* to the complete transformation in films like *Salim Langde Pe Mat Ro* and *Mammo* that comprise the New Wave Muslim Socials.

Based on the larger focus of this study which is the Muslim Socials, the chapter has highlighted the various trajectories through which the microcosmic world as portrayed in the Muslim Socials has transitioned into New Wave Muslim Socials. One would wonder what contributed to this continued fascination for such films, especially at a time when the new Indian nation was trying to build the first foundations for the world's largest democracy and even much after that. While at one hand there were films being produced that played up the need to build a socialist state, here are these one off Islamicate films that managed to fair pretty well at the box office. While social reality was the protagonist around which the actors played their roles in Socials, in the Muslim Socials a world was woven that was completely detached from that social reality. It was a world of courtesans, of men and women living in separate quarters, of women observing *purdah*, a glorified world of nawabs. It was a costume drama with song and dance, of

probing into a world whose doors were still not thrown open and these films were providing that chanced view of it. In other words, Cinema A and Cinema B can be said to constitute films as a means of writing and archiving contemporary history. Cinema is a peculiar kind of institution that has strategically placed itself in a position to arbitrate the two types of history. It helps the audience imagine a certain space and the people that constitute that space. In this regard, it is necessary to address the genre question given that the Muslim Socials function through various iconographic stereotypes that keep recurring across the narrative of these films. This has been done in the next chapter which looks into the question of genre and tries to posit the Muslim Socials within the paradigm of genre.

Chapter 3

Approaching Bombay Muslim Cinema through the Prism of Genre

This chapter does a close study of Cinema B, and looks at the kind of films that comprised it and how they can be divided into three broad moments. Genre forms the entry point in this chapter as it is necessary to address the genre question as the Muslim Socials work through various kinds of iconography, which keep recurring across their narratives. Thus a detailed study of genre and its features has been done initially to align Cinema B with the three moments of imagination of the Muslim community and the modernity that they inhabit.

This chapter takes forwards the idea of the phrase proposed in the last chapter – ‘recuperative difference’ – that describes the process of how these films are asserting a difference (of projecting a modernity that is couched in a glorified past), then recuperating from it while staying within the hegemonic power structure. This can be explained through the first moment of Cinema B which involved the depiction of a homogenous Muslim society, where modernity is claimed by the minority community basis the difference – an assertion of modernity through the difference. Thus what is seen is a comparative dimension at work, which enables the segregation of the community by harking back on a glorious past that provides a veil of imagination. However, that veil does not stay long and we soon witness the unveiling of that imagination. Hence, the Kingshuk Chatterjee’s becomes relevant to a postcolonial identification or visualisation of the Islamic culture, which is in line with Nehruvian modernism.

The visualization of specific imagination has been undertaken through a representation of a macrocosm of public heterogeneous space and a microcosm of private homogeneous space. In fact, imagination is a memory work which involves the excavation of possibilities and arguments which has been left out by the contemporary historical regime. While social reality was the protagonist around which the actors played their roles, in the Muslim socials a world was woven that was completely detached from that social reality.

This chapter raises some questions as to why these films were being distinctly made. Whether there was a specific audience for these films, thus creating an economic motive for the

industry. One possible explanation could be that if these films were mapped to the corresponding socio-political history of the time when they were getting produced, it can be seen that there is a resonance of some of the larger concerns for the community. However, one cannot deny the fact that these films were largely popular and were enjoyed by audiences both within and outside the Muslim community. Their cast and crew involved popular figures like Ashok Kumar, Sadat Hasan Manto, Kamal Amrohi, Meena Kumari, etc., which appealed across the demography.

Chapter 4

Muslim Courtesan Films as a Transitional Phenomenon

This chapter is a study of the Muslim Courtesan films and the interesting position that they occupy as a transitional phenomenon within the three moments of imagination. The generic division of the Islamicate films and the categorization of these set of films under the common heading of courtesan film is not so easy. If the two *Umrao Jaans* (Muzzafar Ali and JP Dutta) are to be considered as classical courtesan films, then *Pakeezah*, *Tawaif* and *Sardari Begum* cannot fall strictly within the same category. The idioms that define these films are not as similar to be grouped within the same category. This throws the very categorization of these films into question as the water tight compartments seem to not be able to hold itself together, which was but bound to happen. These films only bring to the fore every society's fascination to look at the past. However, it is the lens with which they look that colours their understanding of that society, which, in the case of these films and their filmmakers, influence the way they portray that past and negotiate with the present.

From the perspective of the imagination of Cinema B, it is with the courtesan films that the unravelling of the community begins. Although films like *Pakeezah* and *Umrao Jaan* still portrayed a mise-en-scene that was essentially Islamic in nature, there were element of the reality in the shape of law and representation of the social milieu within that space. The scene in *Pakeezah* when they board the *tonga* and enter the police station is an iconic moment as we see the public breaching the watertight walls of the microcosm of the classical Muslim Socials and closing in. With *Tawaif* and *Sardari Begum*, the complete removal of the veil of imagination takes place. Gone are the homogeneous private spaces, replaced by heterogeneous public spaces as we see in the opening scenes of *Tawaif*. Indeed, *Sardari Begum* is the ultimate example of having dissociated itself away from that veiled representation. As already mentioned, courtesan films come under the second movement of that popular imagination that provides a safe transition of Cinema B from moment two to moment three.

Conclusion

Communities and identities are not products of imagination; the process of imagination simply helps in giving an existing community a definite shape at particular conjunctures. (Chatterjee, 2007: 173)

This thesis is a study on the representation of a community through the cinematic imagination of their modernity. This modernity finds expression through a veiled imagination that does not allow the contemporary to breach into its representation. The study dwells on the Muslim community's attempt at negotiating with their internal dilemma through their resistance towards accepting a representation of the actual discrimination. Hence, they formulate an imagination of the real that is couched in the nostalgia of a glorious past. These arguments are based on a close study of how cinema could be looked upon as a social archive of history as well as memory. One of the main arguments in this thesis is that within this ruptured reality of memory and history, cinema acts as a medium of mass propaganda that finds itself positioned quite precariously at a halfway point between conventional history and a quasi-evidence based history (which may be called memory).

Law has played a significant part in this imagination for it has formed the first ruptures through which the first cracks begin which eventually leads to the disintegration of the imagination. Even in a film like *Pakeezah* that is replete with the Islamicate iconography, the film does capture the intervention of law, and hence, of the realist representation of life as we see the camera capturing the society (comprising non-Muslims) moving into the space of the main characters. In fact, this also brings in the question of purity. The private and homogeneous nature of the representation of a community or culture brings in the notion of a purity of that space. This infiltration of the heterogeneous reality is done through the intervention of law.

The thesis, while trying to comprehend the negotiation of a community with the ideas of modern nation, has thrown in questions with regard to law, especially personal law and how the community is still grappling with the realities of the modern nation. It does open up an interesting area of study where we see how the community has indeed successfully negotiated by embracing the intellectual tradition of Western education and scholarship.

References

- Arora, P. (1995). Sanctioned and Proscribed Narratives in Postcolonial India: A Bicultural Reading of the Courtesan Film. In K. Myrsiades (Ed.), *Order and Partialities: Theory, Pedagogy and the Postcolonial* (pp. 59–86). Albany: State University Press of New York.
- Bhaskar, I., & Allen, R. (2009). *Islamicate Cultures of Bombay Cinema* (First Edit). New Delhi: Tulika Books.
- Bhaumik, K. (2008). Querying the “Traditional” roots of silent cinema in Asia. *Journal of Moving Image*, 7, 1–11. Retrieved from <http://www.jmionline.org/jmi7.htm>
- Bordwell, D., Staiger, J., & Thompson, K. (1985). *The Classic Hollywood Cinema: Film Style and Mode of Production to 1960*. New York: Columbia University Press.
- Buscombe, E. (1970). The idea of genre in the American cinema. *Screen*, 11(2), 33–45. <https://doi.org/10.1093/screen/11.2.33>
- Chatterjee, K. (2007). The Politics of Reformist Islam in India: The Ambiguous Legacy of Sir Syed Ahmed Khan. In D. Bhattacharya (Ed.), *Of Matters Modern: The Experience of Modernity in Colonial and Postcolonial South Asia* (pp. 173–203). Calcutta: Seagull Books.
- Dharamasey, V. (2010). The Advent of Sound in Indian Cinema : Theatre, Orientalism, Action, Magic. *Journal of the Moving Image*, 22–51.
- Dwyer, R. (2006). Filming the gods: Religion and indian cinema. *Filming the Gods: Religion and Indian Cinema*, 1–198. <https://doi.org/10.4324/9780203088654>
- Grant, B. K. (2007). Film Genre: From Iconography to Ideology. In *Wallflower Press*. London: Wallflower Press.
- Kesavan, M. (1994). Urdu Awadh and the Tawaif: The Islamicate Roots of Hindi Cinema. In *Forging Identities: Gender Communities and the State*. New Delhi: Kali for Women.
- Mukhopadhyay, U. (2013). The “Medieval” in a Time of Communal Polarisation, 1940-46. In *The “Medieval” in Film: Representing a Contested Time on the Indian Screen (1920s-1960s)* (pp. 145–191). Hyderabad: Orient BlackSwan.
- Nandy, A. (2015). Memory work. *Inter-Asia Cultural Studies*, 16(4), 598–606. <https://doi.org/10.1080/14649373.2015.1103018>
- Neale, S. (1980). Brief but important early work of film genre theory. In *Genre*. London: British Film Institute.
- Oldenburg, V. T. (1990). Lifestyle as Resistance: The Case of the Courtesans of Lucknow, India. *Feminist Studies*, 16(2), 259. <https://doi.org/10.2307/3177850>
- Panofsky, E. (1939). *Studies in Iconology: Humanistic Themes In the Art of the Renaissance*. London: Oxford University Press.

- Prasad, M. M. (2010). *Ideology of the Hindi Film: A Historical Construction* (Second). New Delhi: Oxford University Press.
- Rajadhyaksha, A., & Willeman, P. (1994). *Encyclopaedia of Indian Cinema*. New Delhi: Oxford University Press.
- Rao, S. (2019). Tawaifs: The unsung heroes of India's freedom struggle. Retrieved May 28, 2019, from Scroll website: <https://scroll.in/article/print/921715>
- Rehman, A. (2011). Language, Culture, Bombay Cinema: Reflections on Cinematic Representations of Muslims. In J. Jasbir (Ed.), *Muslim Culture in Indian Cinema* (First). New Delhi: Rawat Publications.
- Sharar, A. H. (2000). Lucknow: The Last Phase of an Oriental Culture. In F. Hussain (Ed.), *The Lucknow Omnibus*. New Delhi: Oxford University Press.
- Singh, L. (2007). 1857 Visibilising the "Other" in History: Courtesans and the Revolt. *Economic & Political Weekly*, 42(19), 1677–1680. Retrieved from <http://www.jstor.org/stable/4419567>
- Thomas, R. (2014a). Bombay before Bollywood. In *Bombay Before Bollywood: Film City Fantasies* (pp. 1–30). Hyderabad: Orient BlackSwan.
- Thomas, R. (2014b). Thieves of the Orient: The Arabian Nights in Early Indian Cinema. In *Bombay Before Bollywood: Film City Fantasies* (pp. 31–65). Hyderabad: Orient BlackSwan.
- Vasudevan, R. (2002b). Shifting codes, Dissolving Identities: The Hindi Social Film of the 1950s as Popular Culture. In *Making Meaning in Indian Cinema*. New Delhi: Oxford University Press.
- Vasudevan, R. S. (2015). Film Genres, the Muslim Social, and Discourses of Identity c. 1935–1945. *BioScope: South Asian Screen Studies*, 6(1), 27–43. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0974927615586930>

