

Shifting Identities in *Kali Salwaar*

Research >
South Asia

Indian cinema, now widely recognized in the West, has attained a highly mainstream profile. Popular Hindi cinema, nicknamed Bollywood, is increasingly popular thanks to the many non-resident Indians in the US and UK stimulating the DVD market and organizing film-screenings in mainstream cinemas in major cities. The popularity of Indian films and film stars is growing so rapidly that British film officials recently travelled to Mumbai to discuss working on potential co-productions, fearing that they will soon lose too much ground to popular Hindi cinema. Ironically, popular Hindi cinema was until recently completely ignored by Western film scholars and journalists, who seemed to assume that it could have no relevance for a Western audience. In light of this new interest, we examine one of its main themes, and how its portrayal varies.

By Thomas Voorter & Marijke de Vos

One of Bollywood's main themes, seen and enjoyed by a (still mainly non-white) worldwide audience, is middle-class family life and its preoccupation with marriage, respect for the father, and the ambiguous position of sons and daughters stranded between Eastern and Western standards. The other concentrates on the forces trying to destroy the unity of Mother India. Cinema has had its fair share of battles between Good and Evil, and Evil has come to have many faces. With the perception of the enemy highly depending on the cultural and historical context, the enemy has naturally changed over the decades.

In Hindi popular cinema the image of the enemy has changed from the outsider (the British Empire) in the thirties, to the feudal landlord and the mean moneylender in the fifties, the corrupt big city businessman in the sixties, the equally corrupt police officer or member of the local government in the seventies, to the *bhai* (mafia) in the eighties and nineties. It had long been at the popular and official mainstay of Indian cinema that the enemy could never be one of India's own ethnic groups, i.e. Hindu-Muslim rivalry was never portrayed. Yet after the 1992 Bombay riots, following the demolition of the Babri Masjid mosque, this common agreement seems to have weakened and as underlying awareness of 'difference' has been increasingly brought into the open, the enemy image took on a different shape.

However 'subtly' done, there is a tendency to either romanticize the Muslim (as in *Bombay*, 1993) or to emphasize the cultural differences between Hindu and Muslim (as in *Gadar*, 2001). In a Hindu-dominated film industry, the (implicit) argument is that the Muslim is the other, has another homeland, and therefore has a split or even other loyalty. No longer unquestionably part of the larger Indian family, today's Bollywood Muslim must prove his loyalty towards India (*Sarfarosh*, 1999) and distance him- or herself from Pakistan.

Only a few films allow us a glance of the Muslim perspective, such as *Fiza* (Khalid Mohamed, 2001) and *Naseem* (Sayeed Mirza, 1995), both made by Muslim directors. Some Hindu directors, for example M.S. Satyu (*Garam Hawa*, 1973) and Shyam Benegal (*Mammo*, 1995), have also made Muslim-oriented films. Yet, on the whole, one could say that political correctness has recently been traded for an acceptance of the Muslim as the new Evil. The only mainstream exception to this rule, *Lagaan* (2001), a typical feel-good film, returned to the tried and tested formula of branding the former colonizer as the enemy so as to bring back together again Hindu, Muslim, and all other communities in this vast and tumultuous region.



Sultana (Sadiya Siddiqui) in *Kali Salwaar*

So, it may be argued that there is ample scope for subtlety and criticism in the depiction of class, gender, religion, community, and society at large – the Indian nation, if you will – in (inter)national blockbusters. Yet, it is mostly in less widely distributed and discussed crossover-, offbeat-, or art films in which a genuine attempt to comment on present-day society is made, and in which the mainstream tendency to stereotype the Muslim as evil is successfully countered, be it through social realism or intimate parables. Among them, Fareeda Mehta's debut film *Kali Salwaar* (The Black Garment, 2001) tries to approach major themes in a more philosophical way.

Centred on a Muslim prostitute coming from Muzzafarpur to Mumbai, *Kali Salwaar* is an almost abstract odyssey into migration, marginalization, and displacement. Fareeda, who was trained by Kumar Sahani, is an admirer of Ghatak and the French cinematographer Bresson, and follows in the footsteps of the famous cinematographer Ritwik Ghatak, who used cinema for social criticism as much as for contemplation and dialogue, like his students Kumar and Mani Kaul. Her film is based on a story by Saadat Hasan Manto, the leftist Urdu short story writer of the nineteenth century.

Almost the entire film was shot in her neighbourhood in Mumbai, focusing on a lively bazaar. Although the

main themes are displacement and the sense of loss in an anonymous metropolis, the setting breathes a striking intimacy. Sultana, the main character, together with her husband and pimp Kudabaksh, soon find out that life in Mumbai is often beyond their control. With nothing left to make ends meet, Kudabaksh is attracted to fakir mysticism, leaving behind his wife, alone with the desperate wish to find a black garment to wear during Moharram, the Islamic month of mourning. Manto himself, as the author of the story, appears in the film, together with some of the characters from his other short stories, such as the local gangster M'ahmmad Bhai, Babu Gopinath, and Sughandi. Some of the characters meet, while others do not. These separate life stories constitute a web of relations and interconnections, in which money and goods, gestures and glances, and desires and fulfilments are exchanged between people in the bustling bazaars of the city. We get a sense of an imagined community, in which the shared sorrowful memories and experiences of Partition still linger under the surface, occasion-

Sultana (Sadiya Siddiqui) and Shankar (Irfan Khan) in *Kali Salwaar*



ally shining through the dialogue.

This film is an intimate study of urban life, focusing on details in the way people are dressed, the decoration of the rooms, the colours, the smells, and takes time to consider the personal thoughts of people on the street. It is rich in symbolism, for example in the way in which Hindu art is placed in Muslim culture, such as the tree (Krishna's tree, the philosophical 'Self', which balances internal nature with the outside world) painted on the wall of Sultana's apartment. In a daring shot Sultana prepares herself for Moharram, slowly pouring warm water over her naked back and touching her face with the soft satin of the black scarf.

Fareeda captures the poetics of life, in which ornate Urdu and street slang alternate, friendship dispels loneliness, hope turns into despair, yet poverty is realistically harsh. Big Art is sold as small art, characterized by the picture of the Taj Mahal on postcards and the classical tune of Beethoven's *Für Elise* playing in a cheap cigarette lighter; the rich courtesan culture is perpetuated in a cheaply dressed prostitute without money or clients, and references to classical *ghazal* songs are sung in glossy films. According to Fareeda, *Kali Salwaar* does not have a message per se, but deals with exchange of energies. In a silent way it creates 'contemplative spaces' in which the audience can pause and let imagination, emotions, and memory roam free.

Fareeda succeeds in weaving genres and symbols into the texture of life in such a way that the film is not only about Indian Muslim culture, but about a community of people living around a Mumbai bazaar, who share to a certain extent their memories, symbols, emotions, and desires. This notion only once gets overt-

ly expressed, in a dialogue between Sultana and Shankar, a petty criminal who lives day by day. When she remarks to him that he, being a Hindu, cannot understand her concerns for the observance of Moharram, he replies: 'At least spare this hallowed place from communal issues. Your bazaar has the magical ability to bleach both saffron and green to pure white. Here all identities are forgotten.' Here, Sultana's body is an explicit metaphor for the market outside. Shankar's riddle, however, seems to contain some kind of message. The ethnic composition of individuals – governed by primordial principles – are not important, but identities, articulated under the pressures of ever-changing socio-economic forces of the market, are. Or as Fareeda poetically puts it: 'Bombay – a city where identities and icons are formed violently and broken graciously.' ◀

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Fareeda Mehta was in Amsterdam to lecture at the three-day masterclass on Hindi Popular Cinema, entitled 'Spicy Spectaculars', held at the Asian Studies department (University of Amsterdam), together with Marijke de Vos, programmer of Indian film-screenings at the Royal Tropical Institute in Amsterdam (KIT).

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