

Review Article

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Representation of Indian Muslims in Bollywood Cinema: A Scholarly Review

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Abstract: This comprehensive review critically examines the representation of Indian Muslims in mainstream Bollywood cinema, unpacking prevalent stereotypes, misrepresentations, and evolving narratives. Drawing from an extensive corpus of scholarly literature spanning film studies, media analyses, and cultural discourses, it explores historical underpinnings, socio-political influences, and multifaceted implications of such depictions on intercultural understanding, identity formation, and social cohesion within India's pluralistic fabric. The findings underscore the urgency for more nuanced, diverse, and authentic portrayals that challenge entrenched biases and foster transcultural dialogue. The paper concludes by proposing concrete recommendations for filmmakers, scholars, and policymakers to drive inclusive, responsible representations that promote empathy and social harmony.

Keywords: stereotypes; representation; Bollywood; Muslims; narratives

1 Introduction

Bollywood, India's prolific Hindi film industry, has long been recognized as a powerful force in shaping public narratives and perceptions. Its influence extends far beyond entertainment, playing a crucial role in constructing and reinforcing societal norms, cultural identities, and intercommunity relations. Within this context, the representation of minority communities, particularly Indian Muslims, has garnered significant scholarly attention and sparked public discourse (Ahmed and Matthes 2017; Kazmi 1999).

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The portrayal of Indian Muslims in Bollywood cinema offers a unique lens through which to examine the complex interplay of cultural representation, identity politics, and societal dynamics in contemporary India. As Bhaskar and Allen (2009) notes, these cinematic depictions have evolved significantly over the decades, reflecting and sometimes challenging the changing socio-political landscape of the nation.

This review article provides a comprehensive analysis of the existing literature on the representation of Indian Muslims in mainstream Bollywood cinema. By synthesizing diverse scholarly perspectives, we seek to:

1. Trace the historical evolution of Muslim portrayals in Bollywood from the post-Partition era to the present day.
2. Identify and analyze recurring themes, stereotypes, and emerging narratives in the representation of Muslim characters.
3. Examine the socio-cultural impact of these representations on public perception, identity formation, and intercommunal relations.
4. Explore the tensions between stereotypical depictions and efforts to challenge these narratives through more nuanced portrayals.
5. Highlight gaps in current research and suggest future directions for scholarly inquiry in this field.

As we navigate through the complex terrain of representation in popular cinema, it becomes evident that Bollywood's portrayal of Indian Muslims is not merely a matter of entertainment but a reflection of broader societal attitudes, political ideologies, and cultural anxieties. By critically examining these representations, we can gain valuable insights into the evolving dynamics of India's pluralistic society and the ongoing negotiations of identity, belonging, and citizenship.

This review draws upon a wide range of scholarly works, including seminal texts and recent studies, to provide a nuanced understanding of the multifaceted issues surrounding Muslim representation in Bollywood. Through this comprehensive analysis, we aim to contribute to the ongoing academic discourse on media representation, cultural studies, and the intricate relationship between cinema and society in the Indian context.

2 Literature Review Methodology

This literature review focuses on peer-reviewed articles and books published between 2000 and 2023, identified through academic databases such as JSTOR and Google Scholar. Key search terms included "Indian Muslim representation," "Bollywood stereotypes," and "minority portrayal in Indian cinema" (Dwyer 2006;

Kazmi 1999). The goal was to select literature that provides a comprehensive understanding of the evolving portrayal of Muslims in Bollywood. The selected literature includes critical analyses of significant Bollywood films featuring Muslim narratives and characters, chosen for their critical reception and relevance. The works of Bhaskar and Allen (2009) and Khan (2020), and others contribute to understanding the nuances of representation, focusing on both positive and negative portrayals of Muslims.

3 Historical Evolution of Muslim Representation in Bollywood

The representation of Indian Muslims in Bollywood cinema has been a subject of intense academic scrutiny, with scholars offering diverse and at times conflicting perspectives on its evolution, impact, and implications. Scholars generally agree that the portrayal of Muslims in Bollywood has undergone significant transformations, reflecting changing sociopolitical contexts. However, there are divergent views on the nature and extent of this evolution.

Virdi (2009) and Islam (2007) argue that early post-Partition films like *Garam Hawa* (1973) primarily reflected the trauma of communal tensions, often depicting Muslims as the “other.” This perspective is echoed by Khatun (2016), who notes the persistence of an “us versus them” divide in cinematic narratives.

In contrast, Bhaskar and Allen (2009) offers a more nuanced view, suggesting that while stereotypes persisted, films of this era also attempted to promote national integration and secularism. This perspective highlights the complexity of representation even in earlier periods, challenging the notion of a simple linear progression from negative to positive portrayals.

Scholars generally agree that the rise of Hindu nationalism in the 1990s marked a significant shift in Muslim representation. Kauanui (2018) argue that films like *Bombay* (1995) and *Border* (1997) increasingly portrayed Muslims as potential threats or antagonists, reflecting and reinforcing growing communal tensions.

Kazmi (1999) while acknowledging the problematic aspects of these portrayals, offers a more complex analysis. He contends that these films, despite their flaws, also attempted to address complex communal issues, albeit often unsuccessfully. This perspective underscores the tension between authorial intent and audience reception in shaping the impact of Muslim representations.

The post-9/11 era has seen a complex and sometimes contradictory evolution in the portrayal of Muslims in Bollywood. Scholars like Ahmed and Matthes (2017) note the persistence and even intensification of negative stereotypes, particularly in the

genre of “nation-in-peril” films. Movies such as *Fanaa* (2006) and *Baby* (2015) have been criticized for their one-dimensional portrayal of Muslim characters as threats to national security.

Conversely, this period has also seen attempts to challenge these stereotypes and offer more nuanced representations. Khan (2020) and Lyden (2019) point to films like *My Name is Khan* (2010) and *Mulk* (2018) as examples of cinema that critically engages with issues of Islamophobia and seeks to humanize Muslim characters.

Bhaskar and Allen (2009) identifies several trends in contemporary Bollywood’s portrayal of Muslims:

1. The rise of films addressing Islamophobia and challenging stereotypes.
2. An increase in stories centered around Muslim protagonists in diverse roles.
3. The emergence of narratives that explore the complexities of Muslim identity in modern India.
4. A continued tension between progressive portrayals and persistent stereotypes.

Recent films like *Gully Boy* (2019) and *Article 15* (2019) have been praised for their more authentic and diverse representation of Muslim characters, moving beyond the stereotypical portrayals of earlier decades (Khan 2020).

Despite these evolving representations, scholars continue to debate the adequacy and impact of Bollywood’s portrayal of Muslims. Kazmi (1999) argues that even seemingly progressive films often operate within a framework of “acceptable” Muslim identity, reinforcing certain stereotypes while challenging others. Khatun (2016) points out the persistence of the “good Muslim/bad Muslim” binary in many contemporary films, which continues to place the burden of proving loyalty and “Indianness” on Muslim characters.

The historical trajectory of Muslim representation in Bollywood reveals a complex interplay of societal attitudes, political ideologies, and cinematic conventions. While there has been a noticeable shift towards more diverse and nuanced portrayals in recent years, the legacy of stereotypical representations continues to influence contemporary cinema. Understanding this historical context is crucial for analyzing current trends and debates in the field, which will be explored in subsequent sections of this review.

4 Recurring Themes and Stereotypes in Representation

Several recurring themes and stereotypes characterize the representation of Muslims in Bollywood cinema. This section synthesizes the existing literature to identify

and analyze these prevalent tropes, examining their origins, persistence, and implications.

A prominent theme in the literature is the portrayal of Muslims as the “Other” within Indian society. Scholars like Ahmed and Matthes (2017) and Kazmi (1999) argue that Bollywood often depicts Muslim characters as culturally distinct and sometimes at odds with mainstream Indian (often conflated with Hindu) culture.

Key aspects of this othering include:

- Distinct visual markers (e.g., specific clothing, religious symbols)
- Linguistic differentiation (use of Urdu or heavily Persianized Hindi)
- Cultural practices portrayed as alien or exotic

The stereotype of Muslims as associated with terrorism and threats to national security has also been contentious. Bhaskar and Allen (2009) and Kauanui (2018) trace the emergence of this trope to the 1990s, with its intensification in the post-9/11 era.

Common tropes include:

- Muslim characters as terrorists or sympathizers
- Plots centered around foiling “Islamic” terror attacks
- Conflation of religious identity with anti-national activities

While some scholars, like Khatun (2016), argue that this representation reflects real-world concerns, others, such as Khan (2020), criticize it for promoting Islamophobia and reinforcing harmful stereotypes.

Bollywood often portrays Muslim communities as adhering to regressive ideologies and practices, particularly in historical or rural settings. Dechamma (2011), Zafar and Amjad (2015) highlight this theme, noting that characters are frequently depicted as bound by outdated traditions and resistant to modernization.

Common tropes include:

- Oppression of women (e.g., forced marriages, restrictions on education)
- Religious orthodoxy and intolerance
- Resistance to social reform and progress

Islam (2007) argues that while these portrayals sometimes aim to critique social issues, they often reinforce stereotypes about the entire Muslim community.

Despite recent films challenging these entrenched stereotypes, debates continue about the effectiveness of these portrayals and their broader impact of these issues.

Ahmed and Matthes (2017), Dechamma (2011) highlight the significant underrepresentation of Muslim characters in Bollywood. The quantitative analysis of Ahmed and Matthes revealing that only 7.6 % of Bollywood films between 2001 and 2015, featured a Muslim lead character, provides empirical support for this

argument. Khan (2020) and Thussu (2013) extend this analysis, arguing that such underrepresentation contributes to the marginalization and misunderstanding of Muslim identities in Indian society.

Kazmi (1999), Zafar and Amjad (2015) critique the tendency to portray Muslims as a monolithic group, disregarding intersectionalities of caste, class, and cultural variations. This perspective is supported by Khatun (2016), who argues that even seemingly positive portrayals often operate within a “good Muslim/bad Muslim” binary, reinforcing problematic notions of acceptable Muslim identity.

However, Khan (2020), Kazmi and Kumar (2016) offer a counterpoint, suggesting that recent films like *Gully Boy* (2019) have begun to challenge these monolithic portrayals by presenting more nuanced and diverse Muslim characters. This debate highlights the ongoing tension between entrenched stereotypes and emerging efforts to diversify representations.

5 Challenging Stereotypes: Emerging Narratives and Their Limitations

Recent studies have identified efforts to challenge entrenched stereotypes, though there is debate about the effectiveness and implications of these attempts.

Khan (2020) and Lyden (2019) argue that films like *Gully Boy* (2019) and *Mulk* (2018) represent a significant shift towards more authentic and nuanced representations of Muslim characters. These scholars suggest that such films successfully address issues of Islamophobia and societal prejudices, providing a counter-narrative to prevalent stereotypes.

Conversely, Khan (2020) critiques even these progressive portrayals, suggesting they often conform to secular, liberal ideals, potentially marginalizing more conservative expressions of Muslim identity. This viewpoint highlights the complexities of representation and the challenges of authentically portraying diverse Muslim experiences within the constraints of mainstream cinema.

6 Sociocultural Impact and Public Discourse

The impact of Bollywood’s Muslim representations extends beyond entertainment, influencing societal perceptions and intercultural relations. However, scholars differ in their assessment of the nature and extent of this impact.

Islam (2007), Zafar and Amjad (2015) argue that stereotypical portrayals contribute to normalizing prejudices, influencing various aspects of daily life. This

view is supported by Shaheen (2015), who link negative cinematic portrayals to the fueling of Islamophobic sentiments, particularly in the aftermath of events like the 2008 Mumbai attacks.

Conversely, Lyden (2019) and Thussu (2013) posit that nuanced, authentic representations can promote empathy and challenge deeply rooted biases. This perspective aligns with Khan's (2020) assertion that positive portrayals can foster greater social cohesion in India's pluralistic society.

The influence of these representations on identity formation, particularly among Muslim youth, is also a point of scholarly debate. While Khan (2020) and Khatun (2016) emphasize the potential for internalized biases and feelings of alienation, Ahmed and Matthes (2017) and Kauanui (2018) argue that positive representations can contribute to a sense of belonging and pride.

Shaheen (2015) extends this discussion to the global impact of Bollywood's portrayals, arguing that these films shape narratives and cultural identities among Indian diaspora communities worldwide. This global perspective adds another layer to the complexities of representation and its far-reaching consequences.

7 Conclusions

The scholarly discourse on Muslim representation in Bollywood reveals a complex interplay of historical, sociopolitical, and cultural factors. While there is a general consensus on the prevalence of stereotypes and underrepresentation, debates persist on the effectiveness of recent efforts to challenge these narratives and the broader sociocultural implications of these representations.

The literature underscores the need for more nuanced, diverse, and authentic portrayals that reflect the complexities of Muslim identities and experiences in contemporary India. However, scholars differ in their assessment of what constitutes "authentic" representation and how it can be achieved within the constraints of commercial cinema not only within India but also in the broader South Asian diaspora and among global audiences. They suggest that Bollywood's reach amplifies its role in shaping international perceptions of Indian Muslims, making the stakes of representation even higher. For instance, films like *My Name is Khan* (2010) have resonated globally, addressing issues of Islamophobia in the post-9/11 world, while *Fanaa* (2006) has drawn criticism for its problematic portrayals of Muslims as anti-national threats.

In a globalized media environment, Bollywood's representations of Indian Muslims influence both local and international understandings of Islam and South Asian identity. Scholars like Kazmi (1999) and Ahmed and Matthes (2017) highlight the dual-edged nature of this influence – while Bollywood has the power to challenge

prejudices and foster empathy, it can also perpetuate harmful stereotypes that echo across borders, feeding into broader Islamophobic narratives.

Future research directions could include more intersectional analyses, exploring how factors such as gender, class, and regional identities intersect with religious representation. Additionally, studies examining the impact of emerging digital platforms and independent cinema on Muslim representation could provide valuable insights into evolving narratives and audience reception.

This review of the scholarly landscape reveals a field rich in critical analysis and diverse perspectives, highlighting the ongoing importance of scrutinizing and challenging media representations in shaping societal attitudes and intercultural understanding.

8 Key Findings and Recommendations

The review highlights the troubling prevalence of historical stereotypes and misrepresentations in Bollywood, where Muslims are often portrayed as the “other,” depicted as terrorists, or shown upholding regressive ideologies. These portrayals not only reinforce existing biases but also contribute to the marginalization of Muslim communities within the broader socio-cultural landscape. Moreover, there is a significant underrepresentation and tokenism of Muslim characters in Bollywood, which limits the visibility of diverse Muslim identities and experiences. This lack of nuanced representation serves to erase the complexities and realities of Muslim lives, fostering a narrow and often distorted view of their role within Indian society. Despite these prevailing trends, there are emerging efforts within the industry to challenge such stereotypes by presenting more inclusive and nuanced narratives, although these narratives are frequently constrained by the oversimplified “good Muslim/bad Muslim” binary. The socio-cultural impact of these representations is profound, shaping intercultural relations, influencing identity formation, and informing public discourse on diversity and inclusion. The manner in which Bollywood portrays Muslims not only affects how Muslims are viewed by others but also impacts how they perceive their own identity within a pluralistic society.

To counter these problematic portrayals and encourage more responsible and inclusive representations, several recommendations are proposed.

For filmmakers, there is an urgent need to move beyond simplistic binaries of “good” and “bad” Muslims. Muslim characters should be depicted with greater complexity and depth to capture the multifaceted experiences of Muslim communities. Involving Muslim voices in the creative process is essential for ensuring authentic and multidimensional portrayals that resonate with real-life experiences. For scholars, more intersectional studies are needed to examine how religion, class,

gender, and regional identity intersect in the portrayal of Indian Muslims. Research focusing on audience reception would also provide valuable insights into how these representations shape public perceptions and contribute to identity formation. Policymakers likewise play a vital role in promoting diversity in media production. Governments and regulatory bodies should encourage responsible filmmaking by supporting initiatives that promote intercultural dialogue through cinema, a powerful tool in combating stereotypes and fostering social cohesion.

The representation of Indian Muslims in Bollywood is not a static phenomenon; this review underscores the continuous need for scholarly vigilance, creative innovation, and policy support to ensure that cinema serves as a positive force within India's diverse society. By addressing entrenched misrepresentations, exploring intersectional dimensions, and cultivating inclusive narratives, the media can significantly contribute to dismantling biases, fostering empathy, and enhancing social harmony within India's cultural fabric. With such concerted efforts, Bollywood has the potential to transcend mere entertainment, positioning itself as a powerful medium for social change that bridges cultural divides and advocates for a more just and equitable society.

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