

The Othering Bollywood: Nobleness and Savagery in *Khuda Gawah* and *Dharmatma*

Marjuque Ul Haque¹
Dhaka, Bangladesh

Abstract

Afghanistan, popularly known as the graveyard of empires, has long been a contested site in geopolitics. With the Taliban coming to power after its victory over the US, it has become more critical than ever to discuss how Afghanistan has been presented in the media. While Hollywood's long history of Orientalist gaze particularly towards Muslim nations is apparent in its vilified representation of Afghans in films like *Iron Man* (2008), *Red Sands* (2009), *12 Strong* (2018), and *The Outpost* (2020), Bollywood's representations of Afghanistan have not been studied with similar critical parameters. With Bollywood exerting significant influence as one of the largest film industries in the world, it has become imperative for us to learn whether Afghanistan has been subject to the same Orientalist gaze. This paper examines two pre-9/11 Bollywood films *Khuda Gawah* (1991) and *Dharmatma* (1975) in order to better understand this issue.

Keywords

Bollywood films, Orientalism, noble savage, South Asian films, anti-Muslim propaganda, Hindu nationalism, metonymic aggressivity

Introduction

Hollywood films have long been known to portray Arabs and Muslims throughout the world in a negative light. This phenomenon has been described by Edward Said as Orientalism. As he puts it:

Taking the late eighteenth century as a very roughly defined starting point Orientalism can be discussed and analyzed as the corporate institution for dealing with the Orient—dealing with it by making statements about it, authorizing views of it, describing it, by teaching it, settling it, ruling over it....” (3)

Frequent dehumanisation of Arab and Muslims characterises Hollywood films, as well as French, Dutch, and Japanese ones produced in both the pre- and post-9/11 periods. They show that an Orientalist gaze has been long in existence (Shaheen 2) and has been used to justify oppression of Muslims and invasion of

¹ **Marjuque Ul Haque** is an independent researcher. He graduated in English Literature and Cultural Studies from University of Liberal Arts Bangladesh. He is chiefly interested in Postcolonial Studies and Film Studies. Email: marjuquehaque@gmail.com; ORCID ID: <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-6419-8189>

their lands. Afghanistan as a site of war has not been spared of this Orientalist gaze. While the Orientalist attitude of Hollywood has been well documented, Bollywood's representations of Afghanistan have gone largely unnoticed and unscrutinised. These films stereotype the people of Afghanistan as turban-wearing barbarians. Following Hollywood's formula of elevating the humanity of the Westerners at the expense of denigrating Arabs and Muslims, we find the Westerner replaced with the Indian in the Bollywood films.

Bollywood's representations of Afghans and Afghanistan in *Dharmatma* (1975) and *Khuda Gawah* (1991) lead to questions of how the films are similar and different to Hollywood ones. Through reference to previous studies, in this paper, I shall trace this Orientalist attitude through a close reading of *Khuda Gawah* and a brief discussion of *Dharmatma*. Aside from the representation of Afghan characters, major directors, big-budget, and popular actors have been taken as the criteria to define what may be considered mainstream Bollywood films. Films portraying Afghanistan from the pre-9/11 period present a romantic Orientalist gaze that has led to the portrayal of Afghan characters in the stereotype of the noble savage. In his work *A History of Western Philosophy* (1946), Bertrand Russell is critical of Jean Jacques Rousseau's characterisation of native populations from around the world as noble savages. Rousseau, who introduced the idea of the noble savage, contended: "Science and virtue... are incompatible, and all sciences have an ignoble origin... [because] everything that distinguishes civilized man from the untutored barbarian is evil" (687). While Rousseau's ideas may seem well-intentioned at first, they nonetheless deprecate colonised populations by suggesting their inferiority as the term "savage" would imply (687).

The Horseman (1971) is a film that has influenced the two Bollywood films we shall discuss. The film features the heroic journey of Uraz, a man who aspires to become a great *buzkashi* player. In his work *Afghanistan in the Cinema* (2010), Mark Graham demonstrates that despite the film being shot in Afghanistan, and the narrative coming from the perspective of an Afghan hero, the film has been subject to an Orientalist gaze. It is chiefly through the sport *buzkashi* that the Orientalist attitude has been presented. In his analysis of *The Horseman*, Graham suggests that the sport represents the "ability to win without conscience or remorse" or the "Machiavellian drive to absolute victory at any cost" as the necessary measure to be taken during the ongoing Vietnam war by the American military (19-20). Being the Afghan national sport, *buzkashi* has been taken as a means to implicate the Afghans as noble savages in the two Bollywood films. As similarities between *The Horseman* and the two films suggest, both the film industries adopt the same formula in that Muslim villains are pitched against their

culturally superior Western or Indian counterparts, portraying Islam as fundamentally barbaric. Graham notes that Afghanistan having resisted invasion by the British and the Russians is conflated with Islam itself and appears as a foil of the West (4). Indian history with its Muslim invasions, lengthy Mughal rule, partition along Hindu-Muslim religious orientation, and communal strife within the country and conflict outside the borders naturally culminate into an Orientalist gaze for a Westernised India in the wake of Hindu nationalism whose adherents view the Muslims as outsiders. In the light of the current aggressive Hindu nationalist movement in India, the two films *Khuda Gawah* and *Dharmatma* capture the moments of Bollywood history that provide a cultural background for such toxic nationalism to thrive today, where the category of Muslims is considered oppositional to the Hindutva ideology. Taking Stuart Hall's idea of identification as an operation in which meanings are derived "from both the discursive and the psychoanalytic repertoire without being limited to the other," (2) this study will trace, how in these two films the noble savage trope has been implicated in the Afghan identity in contrast to the Indian one.

Honour and savagery in *Khuda Gawah*

In *Khuda Gawah*, Afghans are romanticised as honourable people who are nonetheless primitive and barbaric following the stereotype of the noble savage. Its opening scene is narrated by a male voice which describes *buzkashi* as no less than a brutal war in which every rider in an effort to win strikes the foe so horribly that it seems as if it is not a game, but a matter of life and death. Following the narration, we cut to the scene where the thunderous sound of hooves approaches the corpse of a goat lying in the field (0:02:10-0:02:55). Following the expose on *buzkashi* as a brutal war, at the very outset, the film presents a premise where the requital of the hero's love for the heroine hinges on whether he can quench her thirst for vengeance. In this analysis, I show how the noble savage trope is constructed in the romantic conception of Orientalism through the Afghan sport *buzkashi* and how the othering process takes place using the concept of the "other" proposed by Homi K. Bhabha.

Adopting the ideas of Sigmund Freud, Frantz Fanon, and Jacques Lacan, Bhabha posits that the othering process in colonial discourse is "a four-term strategy. There is a tie-up between the metaphoric or masking function of the fetish and the narcissistic object-choice and an opposing alliance between the metonymic figuring of lack and the aggressive phase of the Imaginary" (110). He explains further that "the metaphoric/narcissistic and the metonymic/aggressive positions will function simultaneously, strategically poised in relation to each other" (111). In short, the othering process simultaneously creates the positive

self in relation to the negative other, suggesting the presence of the self within the other and vice versa.

In *Khuda Gawah*, Badshah Khan and Ranveer Singh are presented as the noble savage and the civilised noble, fixated as the self while the villains Pasha, Habibullah, and Aziz Mirza are fixated as the disavowed other. This self-other dichotomy is constructed through the heroine Benazir, the metonymic fetish of the Afghan hero, acting as a locus in the formation of self-other relations. In the film, the protagonist Badshah Khan falls in love with the heroine Benazir while participating in a *buzkashi* tourney. When the protagonists Badshah Khan and a hitherto unknown competitor, have grabbed each end of a goat in a struggle for the win, the face of the competitor comes unmasked to reveal a woman, the heroine Benazir. Flabbergasted and smitten by her, he lets go of the goat and allows her to gain victory in spite of having nearly reached the goal. In the film Badshah Khan thus having proved himself an equal to the winner of the *buzkashi* tourney, Benazir, is hence presented as the quintessential “noble savage” alongside her, as he embodies the savagery and daring to win. Later, when Badshah Khan makes a marriage proposal to Benazir, she accepts it on condition that he seek out and avenge her father’s murderer Habibullah. Her condition is accepted by Badshah Khan, thus setting the tone for the narrative. Badshah Khan’s agreement to Benazir’s condition commences the othering process through fixation on the Afghan self as a just avenger in relation to the anticipated Afghan other, the murderer.

As expected from the premise, the supposedly barbaric nature of the Afghans can be seen in many instances throughout the film. They are depicted as turban-wearing horsemen, who carry blades or swords on their waist and have guns slung over their shoulders. It is in this attire that Badshah Khan sets off for India, as his tribesmen raise their guns and fire at the sky to cheer him in their farewell, likewise, they also celebrate his return to Kabul with Habibullah’s corpse after his sojourn from India. The protagonist’s lawless nature is manifest in various instances. As soon as he hears of a man called Habibullah, he rushes towards him and pulls him down from his horse to strike him with his sword. He only stops short of killing him as he realises that he has pursued the wrong person. On learning that the murderer he is looking for is located in a prison, he breaks into the place on horseback and breaches the blockades of police trying to prevent him from entering into the compound. On the next day as Habibullah is about to be executed at the gallows, completely disregarding the law, he again breaches the blockades on horseback and kidnaps Habibullah from police custody, and kills him before returning to Kabul with his corpse.

Badshah Khan’s honourable nature can also be seen in his promise to

Ranveer Singh, that he will return to accept his punishment after a month for his infraction of the law when he is confronted by him for killing Habibullah after taking him from police custody. His return to India, however, is not without resistance. Before leaving Kabul for India to keep his promise, even though Benazir entreats him not to go, he leaves anyway. As Badshah Khan is returning to India on horseback, he is shot in the shoulder by Pasha who has vowed his revenge on him. In spite of this mortal injury, Badshah Khan rides his horse to the police station half dead and turns himself in, red-eyed and bloodied in the mouth, thus fulfilling his promise to Ranveer Singh.

Throughout the film, Badshah Khan's mode of transport is a horse. This is not simply an aesthetic choice as the beginning and ending scenes would suggest. Like *The Horseman*, a Hollywood movie it draws on, where the main character Uraz unites with his horse Jahil in the ending scene, we find the suggestion of a trans-species spiritual connection between Badshah Khan and his horse. When Badshah Khan returns to confront Pasha in Afghanistan on horseback, after his long stay in India, he is shot by a rocket launcher and falls unconscious with his horse. While in this state, his friend Khuda Baksh who is bound by Pasha's men calls out "When wind becomes a shield and protects a flame, who can douse a flame which is lit by the Lord?" (3:04:40-3:04:47). His horse is roused to consciousness by the speech and walks over to nuzzle him. At this point, the adhan (the Islamic call to prayers) starts with "Allahu akbar" and Badshah Khan regains consciousness and gets up to confront Pasha once more. Coupled with the suggestion that Badshah Khan has the Lord's protection as per the speech of Khuda Baksh, the feature serves to demonstrate the spiritual relationship between the rider, his horse, and Islam bound together as a vitalising force that allows Badshah Khan to overcome unfavourable odds, free his captive allies, and enact justice on Pasha. The final scene of the film neatly ties up Afghan characters with horse riding through a re-enactment of the *buzkashi* tourney at the beginning of the film where the two lovers – Badshah Khan and Benazir – each get hold of the *buz*. Having finally gotten a hold of the villain Pasha, both of them riding side by side on separate horses, each grab a side of his arm and drags him along (see Figure 1) before throwing him headlong on a stone to his death and get their vengeance.



Figure 1 Badshah Khan and Benazir dragging Pasha on horseback, *Khuda Gawah*, 1991

As Badshah Khan is the film's main character, he is not othered by the noble savage trope but rather fixated as the self alongside Ranveer Singh. The trope of noble savage can perhaps be better understood through a contrast between the Afghan hero Badshah Khan and the Indian jailer Ranveer Singh, between whom there is a constant conflict of principles based on the self-other dichotomy. In appearance, Badshah Khan represents lawlessness in his exotic Afghan garb. He has a large rifle slung over his shoulder, a sheathed sword in his waist and rides a horse for transport. His attire is likewise matched to his excitable and impatient nature. Ranveer Singh, on the other hand, dressed as a police officer, represents law and order. Commanding respect as a jailer, he is calm and composed, unlike the Afghan. Even though the two characters acknowledge each other's honourable nature through their noble heritage and have a bond of trust between them, the juxtaposition gives away an Indian self-awareness in which there is a need to match the honour of an Afghan. Badshah Khan's savage nature is manifest in his aggressive and violent actions demonstrated through his sudden attempt at the murder of a man he mistakes for Habibullah, his break into a prison facility breaching blockades of police, his act of snatching Habibullah from the hands of the police, and his killing of Pasha by throwing him against a rock with the help of Benazir. In contrast to Badshah Khan, Ranveer Singh appears to be a sober and civilised actor, performing his duties as a jailer to uphold the law and hazarding his life to save Badshah Khan, but also for his judgment in being able to recognise Badshah Khan as a trustworthy individual and putting himself at risk of becoming a criminal for him.

The civilised India contrasted to the barbaric Afghanistan in the othering process can be understood from the exchange that takes place between Badshah Khan and Ranveer Singh when the former breaks into the prison compound:

Ranveer Singh: Who are you?

Badshah Khan: I'm Badshah Khan from Kabul.

Ranveer Singh: What do you want?

Badshah Khan: Habibullah's head.

Ranveer Singh: This is a jail. Not a cage in Kabul to hand over a fowl or goat to you!

Badshah Khan: You son of a gun, why do you talk nonsense? I'm a Pathan, I'm not used to being talked to impudently.

Ranveer Singh: I'm a Rajput too, Khan. I'm also not used to it!

Badshah Khan: Rajputs are courageous men too. Then talk like a Rajput. Bring that useless being out. I want his head.

Ranveer Singh: Habibullah is not a *buzkashi* goat for you to carry him away on the tip of your sword! Every convict is my responsibility who either serves his term fully or dies!

Badshah Khan: Before Habibullah became a wanted man in your country he became a wanted man in mine! My nation and this sword will punish him!

Ranveer Singh: Badshah Khan, Habibullah has already received his punishment. Tomorrow, he'll be hanged before dawn, in public in the village square.

Badshah Khan: Then by God's holy word, O Rajput Khan, either this Pathan will take him back or the sun will not rise! (0:37:26-0:38:48)

In the exchange, Badshah Khan's barbaric nature is obvious in the way he talks to Ranveer Singh. Even though he breaks into a prison and is surrounded by policemen, he states his demands as if they were his rights. Ranveer Singh's reference to "cage in Kabul" and *buzkashi* in his response, is indicative not only of the unreasonable nature of Badshah Khan's demand but also of the difference between Afghanistan and India, one lawless and barbaric and the other operating under an organised legal system. The fact that Habibullah has been taken into custody by the Indian legal system and is due to receive his punishment, suggests the effectiveness of the Indian legal system that has managed to capture an Afghan criminal whom the Afghans themselves have not been able to bring justice. Here the Afghan, Badshah Khan is viewed as the barbaric self in relation to the civilised Indian self, Ranveer Singh, who is professionally doing his duty as a jailer. It is on account of his status as the hero of the film who has to avenge injustice in order to gain the love of Benazir, the metonymic fetish, that Badshah

Khan is constituted as the self. This duality of the barbaric and civilised self, within the self, is evident in the encounters between the two where the two characters have a clash of principles between them.



Figure 2 Ranveer Singh offering handcuffs to arrest Badshah Khan, *Khuda Gawah*, 1991

In another encounter when Badshah Khan asks Ranveer Singh why he is arresting him after saving his life (see Figure 2), Ranveer Singh responds that saving his life has been a matter of *insaniyat* (humanity) but arresting him is his *Farz* (duty/obligation), and explains further, to Badshah Khan's query about the nature of his crime, that, according to the law, he has committed an injustice by kidnapping and killing Habibullah after taking him from police custody. When Badshah Khan insists that he will take the corpse with him to Kabul and nobody can stop him, Ranveer Singh tells him "Pathan, a Rajput stands before you. He too knows how to bid. I'm afraid I can't permit you to go." Though Badshah Khan remains adamant and tells him he did not ask for permission but merely stated his decision, Ranveer Singh warns him that he too has stated his decision based on his *Farz* and that it would be better if their principles did not clash (0:47:15 -0:48:16). Though Badshah Khan explains the enmity between the two tribes that will disappear and the possibility of his marriage to Benazir if he returns to Kabul with Habibullah, Ranveer Singh remains adamant. The clash of principles is solved by a compromise on both sides: Ranveer Singh gives Badshah Khan leave to take Habibullah's corpse to Kabul in exchange for his return to India in a month's time to receive his punishment after Badshah Khan gives him his word as a Pathan. Ranveer Singh agrees to this arrangement referring to their respective honour, saying "Ok, you may go, Badshah. Go for now. But

remember... A Rajput has trusted a Pathan. Thirty days from now we'll meet again" (0:49:53-0:50:10). The clash of principles between the two and the subsequent agreement on terms serves to suggest an acknowledgement of honour on both sides and the requirement to have the Indian law acknowledged which the Afghan has breached with his lawlessness.

The noble savage trope and the duality of the self are perhaps best depicted in the irreconcilable collision of principles between the two characters when Ranveer Singh is blackmailed by Pasha to hand over Badshah Khan as a ransom for his abducted daughter's life. When Badshah Khan confronts Ranveer Singh on why he does not go to rescue his kidnapped daughter and offers to go and save her himself, Ranveer Singh tells him that he can get his daughter himself but is held back by his duty towards his convict and friend. On learning about the circumstances of the situation, Badshah Khan offers to go himself. However, he is stopped by Ranveer Singh who tells him he will not exchange "a life for a life." In the altercation that follows, Badshah Khan makes reference to his honour thus: "What do you take this Pathan for? What do you think? That I'll be able to live with such a huge burden? My life will end, my life" (1:23:20-1:23:28). After Badshah Khan is pushed to the table in the scuffle that follows his attempt to leave the prison, Ranveer Singh tells him, "Forgive me, friend. Don't get me wrong. It is my duty to keep you within these walls. And I forget all other relations where my duties are concerned, forgive me." Badshah Khan responds, "This Pathan too can forget anything before duty. Rajput Khan... forgive me" (1:24:00-1:24:08). He leaves the prison to rescue the abducted girl despite Ranveer Singh's effort to prevent him. The scene presents Badshah Khan as both barbaric and honourable since he attacks Ranveer Singh on the one hand and breaks out of prison in order to save a child he loves like his own daughter on the other. Though the two have their differences, it is in their desire to uphold honour and rescue the child they love where the two selves – Afghan and Indian – converge.

The exchange between Badshah Khan and Ranveer Singh demonstrates a great deal of awareness about each other's respective heritage and noble bearing. Even though their principles come to clash with each other, their respect for each other does not diminish. Badshah Khan frequently refers to his own identity as a Pathan, addresses Ranveer Singh as "Rajput Khan" in acknowledgment of his noble heritage, and demands respect and speaks of the duty that his honour demands. Likewise, Ranveer Singh calls him a Pathan and accords him honour, as well as identifying himself as a Rajput and demands the same for himself. Both characters make references to duty in relation to their identity prioritising it over their personal relationships. Badshah Khan turns down Benazir's pleas to stay in Kabul and instead goes to India to keep his word

while Ranveer Singh opts not to trade Badshah Khan for his daughter's life on account of his duty as a jailer. The similarities between the two, however, also make apparent the differences between them. The juxtaposition of the two characters demonstrates the need to assert Indian honour in relation to the honour of the Afghan hero. The Rajputs being identified with the warrior caste are well-known in South Asian history for being honourable. The film fixates the Afghan as the noble savage self through a romanticised identification with *buzkashi*, contrasted to the Indian as the civilised noble.

Metonymic aggressivity in *Dharmatma*

As in *Khuda Gawah*, we also find the Afghan character firmly embedded in the noble savage trope in *Dharmatma*. The film tells the story of the wealthy, influential Dharamdas who has acquired his stature through illicit means. His son, however, does not appear too enthusiastic about his father's character, and self-righteously denounces him as a criminal. After a heated altercation between the two, Ranveer leaves the civilised yet corrupt India for what appears to be a primitive uncorrupted Afghanistan. It is here that we find the divide between the self and the other as it applies to the Indian self and the Afghan other. The othering process of the Afghans can best be understood through a contrast between Ranveer and his Afghan counterpart and romantic rival, Jangura. The film introduces Jangura as pursuing the heroine, Reshma, with Ranveer observing as a bystander. Even though Reshma tells Jangura that he can only have her with her permission, he lunges at her and wrestles her down.

At this point, Ranveer intervenes by making his presence known and saves Reshma. The scene positions Ranveer as the self, the righteous saviour of the metonymic fetish, the heroine Reshma, from the Afghan other, Jangura. Ranveer's interest in Reshma also leads him to conflict with Jangura. When Ranveer attempts to court Reshma, Jangura makes a surprise attack on Ranveer mounted on a horse with a spear (see Figure 3). A fight ensues which ends with a wounded Ranveer wrestling with Jangura until the tribal chief leading a group of Afghan tribesmen arrive and stop the fight. When inquired about the cause of their fight, although Jangura blames Ranveer with the accusation of ogling Reshma with evil intent, Reshma comes to Ranveer's defence by disagreeing with him. The treatment of women by the Afghans, as the film attempts to project, is also apparent in Jangura's conduct with Reshma. Even though Jangura is not in a relationship with Reshma, he assumes his claims over her and confronts her for being interested in Ranveer.



Figure 3 Jangura attacking Ranveer, *Dharmatma*, 1975

Like in *Khuda Gawah*, *buzkashi* has been used to implicate Afghans into the trope of the noble savage or the other. The valorisation of *buzkashi* in the Afghan culture is evident in the tribal chief's announcement where he declares the reward for the champion. The brave man who risks his life to bring the *buz* to him will get whatever he desires. Jangura participates in the sport and emerges victorious as the quintessential Afghan and asks for Reshma's hand in marriage from the chief at a climactic moment in the film. His right to marriage is, however, foiled by Ranveer who appears at the scene with his acting guardian Roshanlal demanding that he has rights over Reshma, as she has herself allowed him rights over her. Neither Jangura nor the chief finds the intervention acceptable. Jangura, in a fit of rage, attacks Ranveer with his whip and the chief, after stopping Jangura in his act, threatens Roshanlal to take Ranveer away from the place. Although the chief appears disagreeable about the matter, he agrees to a private talk with Roshanlal. His discussion is intervened by Reshma who at first with pleas and imploration and finally with the threat to kill herself persuades him to allow her marriage to Ranveer.

The othering process of Afghans takes place through the viewer's perception of *buzkashi* as an Afghan sport in which Afghans manifest themselves in the trope of the noble savage as opposed to the Indian civilized noble. These self-other identifications of the Indian and Afghan take place through the heroine as the metonymic fetish whose approval of the Indian and disapproval of the Afghan distribute the characters into the categories of self and other. The name *Dharmatma* meaning "righteous man" has a double reference to both Seth Dharamdas and Ranveer. Though Ranveer's father is the eponymous *Dharmatma* (literally, a righteous man), his name belies his corrupt nature.

Ranveer, however, in his righteous attitude presents himself as the Dharmatma in substance and shows that the Indian self constitutes within itself both the righteous Indian self and the corrupt Indian other.

Although Jangura has been presented as a barbarian for the greater part of the film, he is eventually depicted in a positive light during Reshma's wedding to Ranveer to bring out the "noble" aspect of his "savage" character. Even though he has been rejected for the marriage in favour of Ranveer, he accepts the rejection honourably and celebrates their wedding by joining them in the traditional dance and playing the flute in anguished tears. His rejection by both the chief and Reshma is a subversion of the Afghan identity and culture through *buzkashi*, a sport central to Afghan culture through the deprivation of Jangura's reward as promised by the chief in favour of Ranveer. Reshma's preference for Ranveer over Jangura is again symbolic of Indian cultural supremacy over the Afghan one, suggesting that Afghan women need saving from Afghan men by Indian men resonating with the fantasy of white men saving brown women from brown men. The romantic vision of Afghanistan presents itself once more as Ranveer avenges Reshma and his family of the culprits involved in their killing and permanently migrates to Afghanistan—a migration from the corrupted India to the natural, uncorrupted Afghanistan (see Figure 4).



Figure 4 Ranveer moving to Afghanistan with his family. *Dharmatma*, 1975

Conclusion: Ideating the frontier

Through the romantic idea of Afghanistan as an uncorrupted natural world and India as a corrupt metropolis, Afghanistan has been used as a foil for India, and the noble savage trope imputed to the Afghan identity has been used as a foil for the modern Indian. As in Hollywood's *The Horseman*, the formula of using *buzkashi* as a spectacle of savagery has been used in both films; the sport has also

been tied to the love interests of both Afghan characters being central to the plot. Within the schema of the othering process, the two films present us the premise where the love interest or the metonymic fetish has been used to further demarcate characters into self and other. While we find in *Dharmatma* an overt presentation of Indian cultural superiority over the Afghans, in the presentation of an Indian hero in *Khuda Gawab*, the corollary to the narrative strategy, as per the hero's prerogative to succeed, allows the viewers to identify better with the Afghans and experience their "noble savagery" more cathartically while presenting an Indian anxiety to be viewed as equals. In many ways, *The Horseman* has more similarities to *Khuda Gawab* than *Dharmatma*. While *Dharmatma* presents us the cut-and-dried narrative of the superior Indian's civilizing mission in Afghanistan, *Khuda Gawab*, much like *The Horseman*, presents us the narrative of the hero's journey from the eyes of the Afghan main character to engage the viewers more deeply with the perceived Afghan cultural value of victory at all cost. *Khuda Gawab* takes this logic a step further. By setting up an Afghan main character and asserting Indian honour as equal to the Afghan one, the film not only projects the imperialist zeal for victory but also claims it as a quality of the modern Indian.

The two Bollywood films need to be considered taking account of the trajectory of Indian cinema in its mirroring of Indian history. In his work "Bombay Films: The Cinema as Metaphor for Indian Society and Politics," Akbar S. Ahmed argues that Bollywood films from the pre-1971 and the post-1971 period has distinct differences in content reflecting the times in which they were made. While pre-1971 period cinema projected themes of love and tolerance reflecting the need for cohesion after Indian independence, the post-1971 cinema projected violence, action, eroticism, and corruption, reflecting an Indian self-regard as a dominant power following its military victory against Muslim Pakistan, the growth of materialism leading to social and moral crisis, religious intolerance, and communalism (291-300).

In India, under the influence of the Hindutva ideology, the identity of the Muslim other is constructed in the media and Bollywood as one that is more loyal to foreign territories and their religion than to "patriotism and nationality," as well as being portrayed as "terrorists, villains and gangsters" aided by cultural symbols like caps and beards. The predicament of Indian Muslims, often glossed over by the media, is that they suffer from socio-economic and academic opportunities due to lack of access to education, healthcare, public services, and employment caused arguably by the discriminatory practices employed by the hegemonic majority, the Hindu nationalists (Islam 404-405). Following the 1990s, as Sanjeev Kumar HM discusses in his work "Constructing the Nation's Enemy: *Hindutva*, Popular Culture and the Muslim 'Other' in Bollywood Cinema," Muslims have been largely vilified in mainstream Hindi cinema

pandering to right-wing Hindu ideologues. These films identify Muslims as perpetrators of violence and present the Hindus as traumatised victims. Aside from being vindictive and barbaric we also find them stereotyped as antimodern.

Even apparently innocuous portrayals of Muslims are conflated with those that depict them as violent. Another category of representation is the good Muslim-bad Muslim dichotomy within the Hindutva framework. Following the ongoing Kashmir rebellion and the Babri mosque demolition in 1992, Muslims have been overtly represented as terrorists, many of whom wear *salwar-kameez* (traditional attire), Arab scarves, have beards, and carry guns. It is the Muslimness of the character that is brought to attention by *salwar-kameez*, beard, and *namaaz* (regular Muslim prayer). The other variant of Muslim representation is the modernised version of the suave and successful corporate worker supposedly more dangerous than the former. It is against these terrorists that the good Muslim characterisation is pitched—the patriotic Indian who thwarts the terrorists’ machinations. Through such portrayals, Muslims are inscribed into the Hindu nationalist idiom: “All Muslims are terrorists but all terrorists are not Muslims,” suggesting that they themselves must carry the onus of culturing themselves to be good Muslims (463-465).

To reiterate my original position, the Othering in Hollywood and Bollywood adopts the same formula: Muslims and Islam as the perfect go-to villain in its melodramatic movies in the framework of imputed Western or Hindu India’s moral and cultural superiority over perceived Islamic barbarism. As the analysis of the films *Khuda Gawah* and *Dharmatma* suggests, Bollywood cinema is a political tool of cultural dominance in the context of rising Hindu nationalism since the end of the Indo-Pak shooting wars in the ’60s and ’70s as evidenced by Bollywood’s obsession with the Mughal era that established Islam in the Indian sub-continent in the popular imaginary. The films discussed in the paper mirror the Hollywood style of using the cinema as a religious and cultural propaganda instrument – more so in a political ambiance of the resurgence of aggressive Hindu religious nationalism under the current Prime Minister Narendra Modi’s long regime that began in 2014.

References

- Ahmed, Akbar S. “Bombay Films: The Cinema as Metaphor for Indian Society and Politics.” *Modern Asian Studies*, vol. 26, no. 2, 1992, pp. 289–320. JSTOR, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/312677>. Accessed 13 Mar. 2023.
- Anand, Mukul S. director. *Khuda Gawah*. Headliner, 1992.
- Bhabha, Homi K. *The Location of Culture*. Routledge, 1994.

- Graham, Mark. *Afghanistan in the Cinema*. University of Illinois Press, 2010.
JSTOR, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/10.5406/j.ctt1xckvr>. Accessed 13 Mar. 2023.
- Hall, Stuart, and Gay, Paul D. *Questions of Cultural Identity*. Sage Publications, 1996.
- HM, Sanjeev Kumar. "Constructing the Nation's Enemy: *Hindutva*, Popular Culture and the Muslim 'Other' in Bollywood Cinema." *Third World Quarterly*, vol. 34, no. 3, 2013, pp. 458–469.,
<https://doi.org/10.1080/01436597.2013.785340>.
- Islam, Maidul. "Imagining Indian Muslims: Looking through the Lens of Bollywood Cinema." *Indian Journal of Human Development*, vol. 1. no. 2, 2007, pp. 403-422.
- Khan, Feroz. director. *Dharmatma*. Bombino Video Pvt. Ltd., 1975.
- Russel, Bertrand. *A History of Western Philosophy*. Simon and Schuster, 1946.
- Said, Edward. *Orientalism*. Vintage Books. 1979.
- Shaheen, Jack G. *Reel Bad Arabs: How Hollywood Vilifies a People*. Olive Branch Press, 2009.