Imagined Communities in Bollywood: A Contrapuntal Reading of *The Kashmir Files* and *Mulk*

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Abstract

Under the Modi regime, Hindu nationalist ideologies have gained prominence, resulting in a growing utilisation of cinema as a political tool in India. This article explores Bollywood's role as a mass cultural medium in shaping communal identities through a contrapuntal analysis of two ideologically opposed films: *Mulk* (2018) and *The Kashmir Files* (2022). Utilising Benedict Anderson's concept of imagined communities and Edward Said's contrapuntal reading technique, the research examines the role of these films in shaping narratives of majoritarian Hindus and minority Muslims. *The Kashmir Files* promotes a one-dimensional communal narrative that portrays Muslims as the aggressors and Hindus as the victims, thus bolstering Hindutva ideologies. Conversely, *Mulk* challenges this narrative by depicting the Muslim community as unjustly demonised and seeking justice in a pluralistic context. This article outlines Bollywood's involvement in the broader political discourse surrounding religious identity in India through a comparative analysis of themes like terrorism, visual stereotyping, and the representation of jihad. The findings are intended to contribute to the critical discussion surrounding nationalism, media representation, and communal politics in present-day South Asia.

Keywords

Bollywood cinema, imagined communities, contrapuntal reading, Hindutva nationalism, Muslim representation in Indian cinema

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Introduction

The cinema serves as a potent cultural mechanism that can mould public perceptions and collective identities. In India, Bollywood—the most significant part of the national film industry—serves a crucial function in mirroring and shaping socio-political ideologies. According to Panna Shah, cinema, while masquerading as entertainment, discreetly influences public opinion and frequently serves as a battleground for competing ideologies (1). As Hindutva-oriented politics has risen under the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP), Bollywood has increasingly been used to promote and validate Hindu nationalist narratives, often depicting religious minorities—especially Muslims—as threatening others. From representing Nehru's socialist dream of an industrialised nation to the contemporary Hindu nation-making project of Hindutva, Bollywood has been a critical tool of cultural diplomacy in India (Zargar).

Films like *Bajirao Mastani*, *Padmaavat*, and *Kesari* have been flagbearers of Hindutva nationalism in contemporary times (B. Roy; K. Roy), and these films convey the message to the world audience that Indian cinema predominantly propagates aggrandised nationalistic ideology to the 'other,' that is, minority communities. It is this scenario that this paper wishes to interject, with the aim of producing a comprehensive discourse of Hindutva nationalism by juxtaposing two films that have opposing treatments of the same subject.

Through an analysis of two opposing films—*Mulk* (2018), which opposes prevailing communal narratives and *The Kashmir Files* (2022), which is in close alignment with Hindutva ideology, this paper examines cinematic constructions. These movies offer a promising basis for investigating the role of cinema in shaping "imagined communities" in India—communities that are formed not by physical closeness but by common symbols, narratives, and media portrayals (Anderson). The article employs Edward Said's contrapuntal reading method, developed in *Orientalism* (1978), to examine the intersecting and conflicting historical narratives embedded in these films, revealing their roles in reproducing or resisting dominant ideologies of religious nationalism. In this study, the contrapuntal reading is applied not only to place the two films in dialogue with each other as point and counterpoint, but also to excavate the silences within each narrative — moments where dissenting voices are muted, resistance is underplayed, or constitutional ideals are overshadowed by ideological aggression. By attending to these absences as well as to the spoken narratives, the analysis aims to expose fractures between professed pluralist values and the exclusionary impulses of Hindutva ideology. According to Anderson, a nation is defined as an "imagined political community—a construct that develops through common narratives, symbols, and institutions" (6). In

societies with multiple cultures, such as India, these stories are frequently conveyed through cultural artefacts like films. These artefacts serve as potent means of shaping group identities.

Anderson's theory focuses mainly on the inclusive mechanisms of nation formation, but it also provides an opportunity to critique the exclusions that underlie such imaginations. Within India, Hindutva ideology reshapes the concept of a national community to align with majoritarian Hindu perspectives, pushing minority groups—Muslims in particular—to the periphery or portraying them as internal foes. With its ability to reach a large audience and evoke strong feelings, cinema plays a key role in either bolstering or contesting these ideological frameworks.

At the outset, this notion may appear as an idea that accommodates comprehending and acknowledging fellow citizens inclusively. However, various socio-political agents work towards challenging the notion of 'oneness' since "inclusion can also mean subordination" (Anthias 839). In the Indian scenario, the majoritarian religion is Hinduism, and minority religions run the risk of unequal inclusion in the socio-political realm. India has been called "the land of religions" (Hopkins 1), where diverse religions co-exist, but a threat to the nation's secular fabric arose with the advent of the current BJP rule that began in 2014.

This article applies Said's contrapuntal reading to place *Mulk,* which counters communal narratives and emphasises the lived experiences of Indian Muslims, alongside *The Kashmir Files*, a film that advocates for a Hindutva-centric interpretation of history. By bringing these two films into dialogic tension, the study aims to uncover the aesthetic and narrative mechanisms through which imagined communities are constructed and polarised in contemporary Bollywood. The analysis focuses on three critical tropes—terrorism, religious appearance, and the notion of jihad—as recurring motifs that shape communal representation in the selected films. These tropes serve as entry points into understanding how popular cinema mediates nationalist ideologies in post-2014 India.

Hindutva vs. Hinduism

In political and popular discourse, an important distinction is often obscured between Hinduism as a faith and Hindutva as a political ideology. Hinduism, known for its pluralistic, philosophical, and diverse traditions, has been historically viewed as a religion marked by inclusivity, flexibility, and tolerance, whereas the term Hindutva—literally translating to "Hinduness"—refers to a contemporary political construct that aims to define Indian national identity

chiefly through the lens of Hindu culture, often marginalising minority groups in the process (Sharma 5-6).

The concept of Hindutva, as expressed by figures like Vinayak Damodar Savarkar and M.S. Golwalkar, sees India as a Hindu Rashtra (Hindu nation). This vision explicitly excludes individuals who do not adhere to the cultural and religious principles established by the Hindu majority. According to Golwalkar, minorities in India must either completely assimilate into the prevailing Hindu culture or accept a position of subordination (70). In a similar vein, Veer Savarkar depicted India as a sacred territory meant solely for Hindus, thereby denying religious minorities any cultural legitimacy. Savarkar asserted that "India was a Hindu land, sacred only to Hindus and not to foreign Muslims and Christians" (Savarkar 110-114).

The ideological divide between Hinduism and Hindutva is not just theoretical; it has practical consequences in today's India, especially within the cultural domain. Researchers like Banaji have observed that the merging of the two—something often intentionally promoted by conservative politicians—contributes to the normalisation of exclusionary nationalism (14). With the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) at the helm, which has ideological connections to the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS), Hindutva has come to exert a growing influence on state institutions, educational curricula, and media narratives—including cinema (Verghese 627).

In this context, Bollywood becomes a site for the production of ideology. Films that align with Hindutva discourse represent Hinduism as the only valid national identity marker through selective historical narratives, stereotypical portrayals, and emotional symbolism. In contrast, representations of Muslim identities frequently depict them as aberrant, menacing, or alien. The movies examined in this research— *Mulk* and *The Kashmir Files*—offer a remarkable example of how this ideological distinction between Hinduism and Hindutva is conveyed, contested, or reinforced through cinematic language.

Hindutva and Bollywood: Trends and trajectories

The trend of vilifying Muslim characters and glorifying Hindu characters has been a characteristic feature of mainstream Bollywood films for a long time. Films like *Barsaat Ki Raat* (1960), *Mere Mehboob* (1963), *Ghazal* (1964), *Mere Huzoor* (1968), and *Mehboob Ki Mehndi* (1971), *Hum Aapke Hein Koun* (1994), *Hey Ram* (2000), and *Pinjar* (2003) essentialise and stereotype Muslims and are, in varying degrees, "sympathetic to the whole idea of the cultural boundaries of nationhood, defined in terms of the *Hindutva* ideologues" (HM 463). These films essentialise Muslims as medieval and, by suggestion, hostile to the current. The definition of

the non-Hindu other has always been clear and explicit, with Muslims being envisaged as the definite 'other' and as traitors of the Indian geo-cultural boundaries. Rather than being based on personal preference, othering stems from the conscious or unconscious idea that a particular group poses a threat to the desired group (Powell).

Communal violence has been an unfortunate reality in post-colonial and post-partition India. However, its most significant magnitude hit India during the Modi era. The minority Muslims are forced to "occupy the position of a constitutive outside…to be either excluded or assimilated to a Hindu national culture" (Shani 264). There came a gravely disturbing video of a teacher from Uttar Pradesh telling her students to slap a seven-year-old boy inside the classroom. The boy "had gotten his multiplication tables wrong, but his real crime was being an Indian Muslim" (Truschke). Human rights groups' concerns regarding the rising violence against minorities and instances of "terrorising Indian Muslims have become depressingly common in Modi's India" (Truschke).

Muslims are also killed in India for consuming and carrying beef. The reason stated by the Hindutva mobs for these acts is their claim that "Hindu texts often praise vegetarianism and Hindus may also avoid eating beef because cows are traditionally viewed as sacred" (Corichi). However, what is strange is that all these atrocities take place against minority Muslims in a country which is one of the largest exporters of beef (Dhingra; Bharati). Reports state that violence against Muslims related to bovine issues has risen at an alarming rate since the rise of the Modi era.

This political zeitgeist of religious intolerance and violence is not only reflected in but also propagated through many contemporary Bollywood films. A particularly noted characteristic that is common in these films is the element of Hindutva nationalism. Ideally, nationalism can be a positive force if it promotes the uniting of diverse communities, but it can also be a negative force if it emphasises the exclusive rights of one community based on a particular identifying characteristic (Thapar 19).

The Kashmir Files fits snugly into the category of right-wing propagandist films with its vicious attack on Muslims through a narrative that distorts a controversial and sensitive episode in Indian history: the exodus of Kashmiri Pandits from Kashmir. Even though rarely, there have been deviations from this tradition, through films like *Parzania* (2005) and *Firaaq* (2008), which present a frank and brutal account of the incidents that happened during the infamous Gujarat riots of 2002. In contrast to mainstream Indian national films, *Parzania* and *Firaaq* bravely capture the anti-Muslim fury of Hindutva and show the miserable state of Muslims as a marginalised and oppressed minority.

Firaaq, a debut by Nandita Das, is a significant film which "bears testimony to the horrors of the 2002 Gujarat riots" (Bhattacharjee). The film tells the tale of a few characters' days in the wake of the riots in Gujarat and how they deal with the pain they have experienced on an emotional and psychological level. The backdrop of the film is established with an opening scene showing two men excavating mass graves for the constant stream of Muslim victims of the riot and the crippling anguish and rage they experience (Bhattacharjee). As Gita Viswanath observes, "*Parzania* is a searing real-life tale of a family whose young son goes missing during the communal riots of 2002 in Gujarat" (Viswanath 3293). Both films were a "cry of anguish for those who had been robbed of everything but life in the Gujarat genocide" (Salam). *Mulk* is such a film that has relevance, as it unveils the wrongdoings of the proponents of Hindutva through the story of a Muslim family that the supporters of Hindutva persecuted.

Existing literature on Hindutva politics in Bollywood talks about the intersections of nationalism, gender and religion (Hussein and Hussain; Murty). It shows how Muslims are pictured as the 'other' and the nation's enemy (HM; Khatun). Shoba Sharad Rajgopal talks about the imagined communities that Bollywood presents and the role of Hindutva in them. While Rajgopal's article mentions 'imagined communities,' it fails to explain the implications of the concept and finds its place in the article only as a definition. The article, seemingly falling short of doing justice to its objective, does not delve into the notion of imagined communities and, more importantly, how exactly it is created in Bollywood and what its implications are.

This shortcoming could be in part because Rajgopal focused on the pre-Modi era films that did not exhibit the brazenness of Hindutva ideologues. This article addresses this lacuna and situates the notion of imagined communities in the Modi-era Bollywood films to delineate the mechanisms and modalities of representing Hindus and Muslims as constructed as separate imagined communities. The following section identifies three distinct modalities through which Hindutva nationalism creates imagined communities of Muslims and pits them against the Hindus in India, namely terrorism, visual appearance and Jihad. Juxtaposing *Mulk* with *The Kashmir Files* is a deliberate attempt to analyse the workings of Hindutva nationalism through Bollywood because the two films form a point and counterpoint to the larger narrative of Hindutva nationalism.

Constructing terrorism in communal narratives

Terrorism has become a key motif in the filmic portrayal of religious identity, especially in the global context after 9/11 and the Indian context after 2014. In Bollywood, the portrayal of terrorism often overlaps with Islamophobic

stereotypes, creating a dichotomy between the righteous Hindu patriot and the purportedly violent Muslim adversary (Hirji; HM). The trope is especially prominent in *The Kashmir Files*, which depicts Muslims as violent extremists in a homogenised manner, while *Mulk* critiques this reductionist narrative.

The Kashmir Files portrays terrorism as fundamentally Islamic, blurring the line between extremist individuals and the larger Muslim community. The movie tells the story of the Kashmiri Pandits' exodus in the early 1990s, depicting it as a direct result of Muslim aggression. Almost all characters of the Muslim faith are portrayed as terrorists or as being involved in terrorism. For example, the protagonist's neighbour becomes a militant, thereby betraying the family and reinforcing the film's portrayal of widespread communal complicity (Agnihotri 00:12:21). The visual language itself, depicting groups of armed Muslim men approaching, is crafted to instil fear and distrust. Such portrayals contribute to the "securitisation" of Muslim identity, where the inclusion of Muslims in a narrative transforms it into a security issue (Raj and Suresh 364).

Moreover, the main character, Krishna Pandit, who is first depicted as a secular and sceptical student, slowly adopts the Hindutva interpretation of history. His climactic speech reveals a striking change: from objective inquirer to ideological mouthpiece. The film connects the hero's revelation with a national awakening through this arc, transforming subjective trauma into communal truth. This instance can be read in connection with how Benedict Anderson outlines the formation of an imagined community. Anderson maintains that José Joaquín Fernández de Lizardi's novel *El Periquillo Sarniento* (The Itching Parrot) is a 'nationalistic' novel wherein the actions of the protagonist Periquillo reveal a "national imagination at work in the movements of a solitary hero through the sociological landscape of a fixity that fuses the world inside the novel with the world outside" (Anderson 30). If the sociological landscape presented in the novel is colonial Mexico, it is contemporary India in *The Kashmir Files*.

The hero, Krishna, disturbed by the various and contradictory accounts concerning the exodus of Kashmiri Pandits as portrayed by the media, his friends and family, and college academia, sets out alone to discover the 'truth'. In a moment of touching revelation, he provides a narrative that depicts the entire Muslim community as instigators of violence. The secular intellectual abruptly transforms into a spokesperson for Hindutva nationalism, leaving an entire community of scholars and intellectuals astonished by this disclosure and accepting his 'objective' portrayal of 'true' history.

This instance of the crowds relating to the hero is illustrated by students exclaiming, "Let him speak!" This moment in the movie acts to connect the filmic world with the real world, trying to highlight the hero's 'truth' as the nation's

'truth.' In this way, the film is evidently producing a readily consumable portrayal of Muslims as dangerous 'others' who are deserving of hatred and violent retribution for their unforgivable deeds against the Hindu community. Essentially, the film depicts Muslims as an imagined community in a manner that is acceptable to the Hindutva majority of the country. However, history tells a different story. There are clear historical records – which various political actors later destroyed – that document a harmony between the Muslims and Kashmiri Pandits in Kashmir.

Nishita Kaul discusses how some Kashmiri Pandits remained, partly due to support from Muslim neighbours and co-workers (Kaul). There are similar articles and research papers which give impetus to the previous statement, which explains the religious harmony the Muslims and the Kashmiri Pandits had in Kashmir (Hassan 7-9; Aswani). In contrast, *Mulk* (2018) questions the association of terrorism with communal identities by depicting a Muslim family that is falsely accused of harbouring terrorist sympathies. The story revolves around Murad Ali, a Muslim lawyer who is held in high regard. After the discovery that his nephew has become involved with a terrorist organisation, his family is shunned.

The courtroom scenes in the film directly contest the notion that terrorism is inherently linked to Islam. During a crucial scene, Aarti (Taapsee Pannu) declares: "Terrorism is a criminal act, not a communal one" (Sinha 02:02:38). This differentiation highlights the film's dedication to secular values and legal rationality. *Mulk* challenges visual stereotypes by depicting both terrorists and non-terrorists in ways that contradict audience expectations. While the militant nephew Shahid is clean-shaven, his innocent uncle Murad sports a traditional look with a beard and skullcap. As a critique of the visual shorthand that often equates visual appearance with guilt in Hindutva cinema, this reversal serves its purpose. In addition, the film connects past occurrences of communal violence—like the anti-Sikh riots of 1984 and the Gujarat pogrom in 2002—with a wider discussion on the selective application of definitions of terrorism. Murad mentions during the trial, "Trying to scare someone is also an act of terrorism" (Sinha 01:15:33), reframing the definition to encompass majoritarian violence.

It becomes apparent, in the two films, how terrorism is used as a narrative tool to bolster or counteract the ideological objectives of Hindutva. While *The Kashmir Files* uses the trope to create a majoritarian imagined community based on collective Hindu victimhood, *Mulk* emphasises a constitutional and ethical framework that opposes communal stereotyping. By revealing how historical trauma is selectively invoked, this contrapuntal reading encourages a critical examination of cinema's responsibilities in shaping public discourse about national identity.

While both films express certain political views, their handling of dissent and resistance reveals important silences. In *The Kashmir Files*, scenes that could have shown Muslim characters opposing militant violence are missing. This absence erases potential internal community resistance to extremism. This silence ideologically flattens Muslim identity into a single image of complicity. In contrast, *Mulk* features subtle yet powerful moments of resistance. For instance, neighbours defend the accused family, and there are courtroom discussions that reaffirm constitutional protections. However, these counter-voices have limited screen time and are often overshadowed by the main trial narrative. That reflects the challenge of maintaining pluralist values in an atmosphere filled with suspicion. By highlighting what remains unspoken or underplayed in each film, a close reading reveals the gaps between constitutional commitments to equality and the real experiences of community tension.

Visual stereotyping and the semiotics of Muslim identity

In the realm of cinema, visual representation significantly influences how audiences perceive identity. Costumes, facial characteristics, religious icons, and nonverbal communication frequently serve as shorthand for cultural or political messages. The representation of Muslim communities in world cinema in general has been critiqued for propagating a negative stereotype that includes reductive depictions of "beards, scarves, halal meat, terrorists, forced marriage" (Saha 435). Similarly, Bollywood facilitates this phenomenon of "'negative' preoccupation with Islam" (Malik 352). When these markers are paired with certain narrative roles, they turn into instruments of stereotyping—depicting Muslims as culturally foreign or intrinsically menacing (Khatun; HM).

These visual cues are drawn upon extensively in *The Kashmir Files* to mark out religious differences. Muslim characters are portrayed almost exclusively with long beards, Islamic headgear, and dark garments, setting them apart from Hindu characters, who wear more secular or traditionally Indian clothing. This visual division culminates in scenes depicting Muslims not only as cultural outsiders but also as physical threats. A moment rich in symbolism takes place when Pushkar Nath Pandit, garbed as the Hindu god Shiva for the Shivaratri festival, is seized and savagely mistreated by Muslim extremists. The parallel depiction of a Lord Shiva poster being burned intensifies the perceived attack on Hinduism. The visual message leaves no room for doubt: the Muslim is portrayed as not just the 'other' but also as a destroyer of the sacred order of Hinduism. Even in places deemed 'neutral' like schools and universities, the film employs visual stereotyping. A long-bearded schoolteacher in traditional Muslim clothing is shown spitting on a female Hindu character and calling her an "infidel"

(Agnihotri 02:34:43). Such scenes do not just reflect religious differences; they encode hostility and reinforce the Hindutva narrative that a Muslim appearance is a veritable sign of danger, deceit, or treachery. Anderson's observation that Nationalism can have a "near-pathological character with its roots in fear and hatred of the other" (Anderson 141) becomes relevant here. Hindutva propagandist films like *The Kashmir Files* equate nationalism with religion and, in effect, produce a pathological fear and hatred towards the Muslim community in the minds of the Hindu majoritarian public.

In contrast, *Mulk* calls this visual logic into question. It purposefully dismantles the presumption that looks dictate ideology or character. The film's protagonist, Murad Ali, is a devout Muslim who wears traditional clothing and sports a beard. However, he is depicted as an educated, liberal, and deeply patriotic Indian citizen. Shahid, who evolves into a terrorist, is portrayed with a strikingly clean-shaven and modern appearance. That undermines the link between external appearance and internal conviction into question. During a courtroom scene, Murad Ali addresses this bias head-on by stating, "If you cannot distinguish between my beard and Osama bin Laden's, I still have the right to follow my religion" (Sinha 01:52:00).

Mulk examines the cinematic grammar of 'Muslimness' in Bollywood by emphasising the contradictions between visual appearance and moral integrity. It denies that traditional Islamic garb is equivalent to extremism and instead affirms the ability of Muslim citizens to define their identity beyond stereotypes. By doing so, the film reclaims space for secular pluralism, asserting that identity cannot be reduced to visual cues. The two films' greater ideological split is mirrored in these contrasting visual tactics. While *The Kashmir Files* uses costume and visual appearance as tools for cultural segregation and fear, *Mulk* employs these same devices to promote empathy, complexity, and constitutional inclusion. A contrapuntal reading reveals that the visual representation of Muslim identity in Bollywood is not neutral; it is politically charged, reinforcing or resisting the imagined binaries of nationhood and religious belonging.

The visual field of each film has its silences. In *The Kashmir Files*, no Muslim character is shown in a way that suggests liberal, secular, or dissenting views, even though such figures are common in society. This gap creates a one-dimensional image of the Muslim 'other.' *Mulk*, in contrast, shows some diversity within the Muslim community. However, it mainly stays within the narrow view of accused versus exonerated. It does not explore the everyday coexistence of Hindus and Muslims outside of crisis moments. The lack of this ordinary, diverse imagery represents another kind of silence. This silence shows how both films, each in its way, limit the potential for intercommunal solidarity.

Contesting the meaning of Jihad: Between demonisation and redemption

In current global and Indian political discussions, the term jihad is highly debated. Jihad, which originally referred to a spiritual struggle for personal improvement or justice in Islamic theology, has increasingly been used in popular media to denote militant violence or religious warfare. This change in meaning has important consequences, especially in the context of film, where intricate theological ideas are frequently boiled down to symbols laden with ideology. The more significant and accurate meaning of 'jihad' is "taking care, protecting the faith from deviations" (Hasanzadeh and Renani 2502). In particular, since 2014, Bollywood has played a role in distorting the concept of jihad by linking it to stories about communal violence and frequently equating it with terrorism (HM 880).

The Kashmir Files uses jihad as a keyword to depict Muslim characters within a story of religious extremism. At the beginning of the film, a character asserts, "The people who are turning Kashmir into hell are doing jihad to ensure their place in heaven" (Agnihotri 01:06:23). This portrayal depicts jihad not as an ethical or personal struggle but rather as a violent fanaticism. Without context or nuance, the term is presented, turning it into a euphemism for terrorism.

On the other hand, *Mulk* provides a counter-narrative aimed at restoring the original significance of jihad from its politicised distortions. This reclamation is presented in the film via a private dialogue between Murad Ali and his daughter-in-law Aarti, during which he clarifies, "Jihad means to struggle against your bad habits, against injustice" (Sinha 00:25:53). This interpretation is in close agreement with Islamic scholarship, which stresses that jihad is primarily a moral endeavour rather than an act of aggression (Streusand). The film advances the discussion by depicting the consequences of a radical misinterpretation of jihad, as represented by the misguided young character Shahid: personal ruin and collective stigma. *Mulk* complicates the often monolithic portrayal of Muslim identity in mainstream cinema by juxtaposing Shahid's fundamentalism with Murad Ali's moderation. It contests the idea that jihad is equivalent to violence, using the term instead as a space for ethical reflection and cultural debate. *Mulk*, via this reframing, not only upholds the dignity of Muslim identity but also offers a critique of the way language can be easily turned into a weapon for political deception.

It is interesting to note how *Mulk* and *The Kashmir Files* conceptualise the concept of Jihad. While the former attempts to attribute and propagate a violent and communal meaning to it, the latter attempts to create an awareness of the initially conceived meaning of the term as per the Islamic belief system. This

duality points towards Anderson's observation of language being a primary tool of the nation-building process. According to him, a nation is "conceived in language" (Anderson 145), and people can be invited into an imagined community through the use of language. In essence, *The Kashmir Files* showcases a language wherein Islamic vocabulary is demonised, and the manipulation of the word 'Jihad' testifies to that. This becomes a divisive tactic wherein two imagined communities are created: the people who accept this communal language and those who reject it.

The two films, when considered together, offer radically different approaches to the concept of jihad. While *The Kashmir Files* employs it to incite fear and justify majoritarian anxiety, *Mulk* utilises it as a means of reconciliation and understanding. This difference in meaning highlights the influence of film on how the public understands religious terms. A contrapuntal reading shows that jihad is not a fixed signifier but rather a contested site where national and communal identities are negotiated, reaffirmed, or subverted.

Here, the politics of absence is revealing. *The Kashmir Files* ignores theological or community-based challenges to militant views of jihad. It shows the term only through the lens of extremist violence. This silence removes the many voices within the Muslim community that oppose these distortions. *Mulk* tries to correct this by restoring the original meaning of jihad, but he restricts this to private talks and courtroom speeches. There is little visual interaction with wider community discussions on the topic. These gaps in representation highlight the ongoing conflict between constitutional ideals of religious freedom and the narrowing of public conversation due to communal politics.

Audio-visual strategies and ideological framing

The Kashmir Files employs a number of cinematic methods in order to bolster its emotional impact and create strong moral viewpoints. High-contrast lighting emphasises hazardous or contentious situations, directing the viewer's attention to moments of threat or moral crisis. Tight close-ups and low angles highlight either threat or bravery. During the slaughter sequence, handheld camera work and rapid edits produce pandemonium and heighten the audience's sense of panic. When the musical score rises during difficult or depressing times, such as the widow's monologue, the audience's sympathy for the Hindu victims increases. With one side signifying innocence and the other guilt, desaturated hues reduce the warmth of the images and direct viewers towards a clear moral decision.

In contrast, *Mulk* uses a more restrained and humanising visual style. Domestic interiors, like the opening kitchen scene, are warmly lit and framed

with steadier, centred shots that create intimacy and normalcy. In the courtroom, shot-reverse-shot sequences provide a balanced visual space for opposing arguments, allowing ideological counterpoints to exist on screen. The pacing is more measured. The extended cross-examination of the protagonist serves as a moment of controlled dramatic tension rather than emotional escalation. The score is subtle, and moments of silence, such as the pause before the judge's verdict, stand on their own, giving space for the viewer's moral reasoning. This visual approach highlights constitutional ideals of justice and civic belonging instead of fear-driven stories.

Conclusion

As a cultural apparatus, cinema is instrumental in the formation of national consciousness. In modern India, Bollywood functions as both a reflection and a shaper of sociopolitical beliefs, especially regarding religious nationalism. This article has shown how *Mulk* and *The Kashmir Files* serve as contrasting cinematic texts that express opposing visions of Indian identity. The study has explored how the tropes of terrorism, religious appearance, and jihad are used to create polarised representations of Hindus and Muslims through a contrapuntal analysis based on Benedict Anderson's theory of imagined communities and Edward Said's method of oppositional reading.

The Kashmir Files serves as an example of the narrative tactics used in Hindutva propaganda, creating a uniform Hindu victimhood that perceives Muslims as menacing others. The movie conflates religious identity with national loyalty, using emotionally charged imagery and simplified binaries to reframe historical trauma in the service of a majoritarian nationalist agenda. On the other hand, *Mulk* provides a counter-discourse that serves to humanise Muslim identity, question communal stereotypes, and reclaim religious notions like jihad from their politicised misinterpretations. By challenging the visual and narrative conventions that define Muslim representation in Indian cinema, *Mulk* restores complexity to characters and communities often flattened by ideological filmmaking.

These two films, placed side by side, demonstrate how the film medium serves as a battleground for rival political imaginaries. While one builds a nationalist mythos based on exclusion and fear, the other champions pluralist, secular values inherent in India's constitutional democracy. This article highlights the pressing necessity of critical media literacy in the era of populist politics by exposing the methods used to create, control, and oppose imagined communities. Ultimately, the stakes of representation in film reach far beyond what is depicted on screen. Films like *The Kashmir Files* and *Mulk* impact public discourse, social

policy, and intercommunal relations by shaping a community's self-perception and its perceptions by others. They require academic examination not just for their representations but also for the ideologies they promote or contest. This research adds to that continuous examination by highlighting the imaginative politics central to Bollywood's treatment of nationalism, religion, and identity in twenty-first-century India.

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