

The valley of desire : A study of Kashmir as portrayed through popular Indian cinema

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Abstract

Indian-administered Kashmir has been a conflicted territory since 1947. This paper studies the representation of Kashmir and its civilian population in popular Hindi films. As Bollywood has an immensely dedicated audience, both in India as well as globally, the sensitive issues surrounding Kashmir make for extremely sought-after and therefore potentially influential content in films. I argue that these films reflect a sharp bias and a myopic approach towards showcasing the area and its civilian population. This paper employs the use of film analysis and critical discourse analysis to examine seven films — *Mission Kashmir (2000)*, *Yahaan (2005)*, *Fanaa (2006)*, *I am (2010)*, *Lamhaa (2010)*, *Haider (2014)* and *Hamid (2018)* — to support the argument. The results show that all the films except *Haider* and *Hamid* misrepresent or underrepresent the realities of Kashmir. The content is highly Islamophobic and hyper-nationalistic, undermining the role of the local population in the whole conflict scenario.

Keywords: Kashmir, Conflict cinema, Bollywood, Representation, Nationalism, Islamophobia

Dedication

This paper is dedicated to my beautiful homeland —Kashmir, the place that has taught me to be strong and resilient even when faced with hard circumstances. I wish for you to prosper and be loved and respected .This paper is also dedicated to my loving family, My Parents— Mummy and Baba, thank you for being a pillar of support in the worst of times. Abu and Roohi Mamma, No one has ever made me feel so loved and respected. My sisters — Talha, Uzma, Qudsiyah and Bazilah, for their unending faith and encouragement. My lovely nieces and nephews— Liba, Parizay, Areen, Ali, Hassan, Alya and precious babies Eman and Aisha.

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Introduction

As a native Kashmiri who was born in Indian-occupied Kashmir, my life has been nothing short of an identity crisis. The dislike for the Indian occupation that I experienced on a daily basis was haunting, and so was the constant reminder that I carried an Indian passport. The struggle arose of out watching the Indian regime maim and kill my fellow Kashmiris that slowly shaped the confusion towards a conflicted identity. I was born in the 1990s, after which followed the most volatile period of violence in Kashmir. Schools and offices were often shut due to curfews and strikes that had become the defining feature of the resistance movement. My parents narrated nostalgic tales of watching movies in cinema halls while I never saw one operating in the valley. What can be counted as one of the many fatalities of the dispute is the closure of these spaces that could be used to exchange ideas through films. Most of these halls have been converted into army camps and see no hope of revival, the reasons for this being quite ambiguous. While one party claims cinema screenings as un-Islamic, the other sees a gathering place as a potential target for bomb blasts and violence. Whatever the reason may be, the dearth of cinema halls in the state is a very important issue. The irony is that all the while cinemas were closed in the Kashmiri state, the exotic Kashmiri theme thrived in Bollywood films. As the biggest film industry in the world with dedicated national and global audiences who generate tremendous economic activity, Bollywood representations have an enormous reach. My aim is to study how the Kashmiri conflict and the role of Kashmiris have been represented in these films.

Kashmir is a textbook example of a territory wherein the constant yet tumultuous state of the dispute and the related violence that always accompanies it is inevitable and professes serious ramifications on the population living there. Located at the northernmost region of the Indian subcontinent and spread out over an area of 222,236 km² (Hussain, 1985, p. 20), Jammu and Kashmir is divided into 3 divisions—Jammu, Kashmir and Ladakh—that in totality represent multi-ethnic, multi-lingual and multi-religious populations. The unique topological position of the area has had a specific geopolitical effect on the course of happenings that has led to its present state of affairs.

In August 1947, the British left the Indian subcontinent that had been partitioned into India and Pakistan along common communal and religious lines, the former being a

Hindu majority and the latter Muslim. As the previously existing princely states merged into one or other of the new nations, Maharaja Hari Singh, ruler of the princely state of Jammu and Kashmir, yearned for independence. Hence Jammu and Kashmir was uniquely placed as a buffer territory between India and Pakistan, as well as having shared borders within Afghanistan and China. Neither Pakistan nor India was ready to accept an independent Jammu and Kashmir. They kept on pressing the maharaja to accede to either of the new states (Samaddar, 2004, p. 323). In May 1946, Sheikh Abdullah, leader of the National Conference, fuelled by the patriotic enthusiasm that was sweeping the subcontinent, launched a "Quit Kashmir" campaign against the maharaja and was sentenced to nine years in prison. Meanwhile, a national movement in Kashmir developed the program of doing away with the maharaja, turning Kashmir instead into a democratic republic with the right of self-determination. Facing the tribal invasion in October 1947, the maharaja acceded in haste to India and from exile nominated Sheikh Abdullah, his fiercest enemy, as the Prime Minister of the State of Jammu and Kashmir (Korbel, 1954, pp. 482-490). Subsequently, the Indian administration initiated to include Kashmir into its own territory.

To counter-act the insurgency, scores of armed military forces were sent to Kashmir in order to maintain law and order which resulted in creating a huge trust deficit between mainland India and the local Kashmiris. The consequence of these deployments were a series of atrocities wreaked upon the local Kashmiri population. After the 1987 elections were rigged in the favour of the Indian occupation despite being promised as fair, around 1990, an armed resistance movement started in Kashmir that was launched to attain self-determination and consequently to get rid of the armed oppression and tyranny that was slowly suffocating Kashmiris. Presently, armed conflict is concentrated in the Kashmir Valley. The root of conflict between the Kashmiri insurgents and the Indian government is tied to a dispute over local autonomy and based on the demand for self-determination.

Ever since 1958, the Indian Security forces have enjoyed immunity from prosecution for any crime that they have conducted in the valley. Laws such as AFSPA (Armed Forces Special Powers Act) grant them special access to arrest, kill or even torture civilians if the forces deem them to be a part of or complacent to insurgency outfits. Various armed forces battalions have since been engaging in major counter-insurgency operations

against armed fundamentalist groups which led to increasing reports of torture and death in custody (Amnesty International Report, 1993, p. 20). Half a million Indian troops patrol the Kashmir Valley, making it the most militarized zone in the world. The armed forces have killed, maimed, raped and debilitated local civilians of the Kashmir valley committing extremely heinous human rights violations which continues until today.

The significance of this rather small territory is disproportionately large. The state shares its boundaries with some of the developing world's most powerful economies, including India, Pakistan, and China. Each of these countries has occupied a significant part of Kashmir, rendering it a highly conflicted territory.

As Homi Bhabha (1990) points out, nations are in a constant process of creating themselves through narratives, and there is a continuing dialectical interchange between the nation, which creates a master narrative for its cultural texts on the one hand, and the cultural texts, which provide a narrative for the nation. On a related note, Oren mentions the importance of conflict in shaping national identity which in turn changes the course of the conflict (Oren, 2010 p. 194). National identity, violence and historical narrative are all thus highly entangled.

Drawing upon this statement, it is instrumental to study how patterns emerge in the films that represent Kashmiri history and whether these appeal to the intensely censorious and tyrannical regimes that constantly control the narratives that are tailored to their propagandist agendas. As communities across the globe cannot physically access Kashmir, communication takes a shift towards shared cultural texts. Along with other cultural texts, films have a potential impact in shaping the perceptions, discourse, and thoughts of society's members. They help society understand itself and contribute to forming and changing society's collective narratives (Benziman, 2014). Turmoil and misery have been long been very desirable field for storytellers and media practitioners, and this is no different for filmmakers. Conflicts are not only gaining prominence in "traditional" news media; side by side with journalists, film directors are increasingly entering the media battlefield, "the surface upon which war is imagined and executed" (Thussu & Freedman, 2003, pp. 4-5). In cinema as well, there has been a growing attention to conflicts, and the voices of filmmakers from conflict areas are increasingly being heard (Smets, 2015).

My intention here is not just to analyse the films I have chosen in detail but also to consider the role they have played as representations of the Kashmiri turmoil and portraying the valley in its entirety in terms of explicit and implicit narratives of its themes. The investigation of what has been shown in the films will be accomplished based on “close reading” of the films and in-depth analyses while comparing these to relevant themes such as enforced disappearances, killings, rapes and other elements of violent military occupation.

In what follows, I argue that despite having covered decades from when the conflict originated, the handful of films that exist on this topic still present a small number of recurring stories and carry the same stereotypical portrayal of the Kashmiri civilian who is very visibly a target of the foreign Jihadi and wishes for an Islamic constitution. No attention is paid to their suffering and how they are very important stakeholders in the conflict.

My aim is to establish the presence of a normalised set of conventions in films that involve Kashmir that strays far away from the actual reality. Furthermore, what is highly disturbing is the blatant idolisation of the armed forces which strive to protect the sacred Kashmiri lands that are apparently controlled by Pakistani elements. As it is unpalatable for the mainstream Indian viewership to accept this victimiser as a tyrant, most films choose to stay away from controversies that question the legitimacy of the armed forces’ brutalities. A strong element of blind patriotism connects the feature length productions considered in this paper. I will be analysing a one-dimensional narrative which is used to tell the story of Kashmir. From the year 2000 onwards, barring a few exceptions, the same old themes have essentially reproduced in contemporary renditions a decades-long justification for Kashmiri occupation.

In order to add a comparative dimension to my research, I draw upon the history of Palestinian cinema, a state with a very similar trajectory to Kashmir. The Indian occupation has drawn inspiration from its Israeli counterparts to enforce brutality and debilitate the rightful citizens of the respective lands. However, the cinematic discourses follow an altogether different discourse.

The Palestinians do not currently live together as a whole group, most of them have settled in the rest of the Arab world, North America and Europe. But they do represent a

collective identity, an identity that is primarily based upon the longing for home which represents the ongoing conflict of the region (Alawadhi, 2013). Baer traces the crucial activity phase in Palestinian cinema from 1968 to 1982. This period saw some of the finest masterpieces in cinema even though the small scale industry had been struggling with inadequate resources and a regulated environment. These films documented war crimes in appalling fashion. This was the cornerstone of a new genre of alternate Arab cinema and Third cinema, which attracted viewership from both Arab and global audiences. In his study, Baer suggests the importance of the cinematic representation of the land for the formation of Palestinian identity:

Overlaid with collective memories and symbolic meanings, the landscape has borne witness to war and imperial conquest, shifting regimes and borders, perpetual occupation and injustice, and overlapping yet seemingly irreconcilable narratives of past experience. (Baer, 2018)

In her book *Palestinian Cinema in the Days of Revolution* (2018), Nadia Yaqub maps the development of transnational networks created through these films and compliments the resilience of these filmmakers as they continue to support resistance through these productions even when left with hostile and despairing prospects. Especially in the 1970's the trauma theme has been commonly utilised in the films' narratives. Traumatic memory is not easily mutated, it remains unchanged in memories and does not remain restricted to the past (Gertz and Khleifi, 2006). One very stark difference that can be drawn between the Kashmiri and Palestinian narratives is that the latter chooses to ignore the fragmentations in the society as a result of war crimes while focusing mainly on national unity.

Given the highly strict restrictions that have been imposed on knowledge production and archive accessibility by both the Israeli and Indian regimes, the Palestinians are surprisingly very prolific when it comes to music, art and cinematic creation. This uplifting trend in cultural and political scenarios looks promising (Baer, 2018). Another analogy that exists between the two colonised states is the dearth of funding that stems from a lack of autonomy, this factor has inherently conditioned Palestinian cinema to be of hybrid character (Ball, 2008). Palestinian filmmakers have fought against dangerous odds to preserve memories through film productions. From extreme temperature that could potentially destroy film stock to debilitating bomb blasts, films were actively

defended in order to preserve national heritage (Alawadhi, 2013). What seems to be the only commonality that exists between Kashmiri and Palestinian films is the recreation of a memory that exhibits a utopian model of a peaceful and nostalgic nation. A desire to return to a non-violent time drives both the cinemas' purpose, with the Palestinian counterpart also stressing upon reviving the imagery of its population. While Bollywood films actively show Kashmiris as crazed shalwar-wearing men who throw stones and raise slogans desiring an Islamic caliphate, Palestinian filmmakers aim for the opposite, a non-stereotypical counter-national identity for its citizens. Palestinian cinema is working towards a strategic goal which strives to see an independent nation one day (Jankovic and Awad, 2012).

The trends that were presented in the study of Palestinian cinema are very dissimilar from that of Kashmir and its cinema. Palestinian filmmakers—especially diasporic ones—have produced an independent cinema which the Kashmiri has failed to do so. As Palestine is a rather well known state globally as compared to Kashmir, it enjoys the freedom of having a larger spectatorship and better funding opportunities. Also, the Kashmiri population is much lower and has a very scarce and scattered diaspora around the world. Hence the majority are still residing in Kashmir, where they are heavily surveilled by authorities. These factors have hindered the prospects of independent Kashmiri cinema therefore having the narrative greatly limited to films produced by the oppressor nation. Nevertheless, as more and more native Kashmiris migrate to different parts of the world, a new era of diasporic cinema may be a ray of hope in the future.

Starting from this analysis of the importance of Kashmir's filmic representation, I have chosen to conduct an in-depth analysis of a sample of seven mainstream Bollywood films that portray Kashmir or the regional conflict as case studies. These films will be examined chronologically, each one being released in relation to a specific era of violence and conflict in the state. I have concentrated my research on fiction and not documentary due to the very high reach that Bollywood films enjoy in mainstream India as well as on a global level. Documentary viewing in India is considered more a niche sector of filmmaking while Bollywood is considered as a more national cinema. Bollywood films receive much more attention than documentary which still stands at a nascent stage, they fetch far less money at the box-office and only find praise in scholarly research.

Documentary filmmaking in India has evolved as a self-evidently politically oriented genre.

There is no doubt that filmmakers have tailored the genre to draw attention to social and political issues but only a handful of films produced independently find their place in the mainstream cinema spheres.

On one hand, the Indian state closely regulates communicative channels, on the other hand, new possibilities of circulation have emerged within these highly policed digital spheres. The possibility created by a new media landscape to instantly share images, thoughts, poems, and photographs have a particular impact on militarized regions like Kashmir where information has historically been so regulated. (Nath, 2019, p. 272)

Documentary in Kashmir is subject to high surveillance both in production and post-production stages, Filmmakers are actively discouraged to produce by some authoritarian barriers, including harsh censorship, harassment or even imprisonment under treason and sedition laws. Documentaries such as Sanjay Kak's *Jashn-e-Azadi* (2007), Ashvin Kumar's *Inshallah, Kashmir* (2012), and Shawn Sebastain and Fazil N.C.'s short *In the Shade of Fallen Chinar* (2016), have all been met with controversy and antagonism as they've travelled and been screened across the world. After filming near an army encampment, Kashmiri documentarian Iffat Fatima was imprisoned for a day while shooting *Khoon Diy Baarav* (2015), a film on Kashmiri women's resistance (Kramer, 2018). These factors highly reduce the reach of these documentaries, limiting the available economic resources and thus hindering the production of more of such pieces.

Looking at the discourse of films that represented Kashmir between in the 1950s and the 1990s, there was a pre-prepared structure that most films adhered to while portraying Kashmir. It was no coincidence that the emphasis was on scenes of the Dal lakes interspersed with the heroic presence of the Indian army and the average Kashmiri Muslim being seduced by the idea of jihad only to be diffused by an Indian state-authorized messiah. This was instrumental in driving the local Kashmiris towards being suspicious of and reluctant towards the idea of a project collaboration with "Indian" filmmakers.

The local Kashmiri population started to distrust non-Kashmiri filmmakers who endeavoured to produce conflict pieces. This led to more and more filmmakers of

Kashmiri origin venturing into the professional filmmaking sector. These could look at the Kashmir issue through an ethnographic lens thus produced interesting and necessary additions to the more insider perspectives of conflict cinema and victim cinema.

As conflict cinema and victim cinema originated in the world after media got particularly interested in exploring these genres, these films delivered the painful stories of war related crimes and displacement to a much larger global audience. Examples of this genre maybe Palestinian, Kurdish and Turkish conflict cinema. Kashmir as of now may not even be comparable to these because of many factors. The conflict there is much less known therefore weakly funded. This has given path to independent documentary filmmaking rather than mainstream fiction because it requires lesser resources, which doesn't make it any less of an effective medium. Filmmakers who belong to this genre enjoy more freedom to execute their ideas on screen in production stages but experience a lot more censorship in the release stages of the film.

In conclusion, pertaining to documentaries one can contemplate that there has been a very noticeable shift when it comes to the portrayal of the Kashmiri valley and its conflict from the 1990's to the present time. The very controlled and sellable pornography of violence has been certainly contained to a necessary minimum when it comes to niche documentary filmmaking although the status of cinema is still questionable in many domains. Cinema may fulfil similar roles, yet these may be more difficult to pin down in comparison to mainstream media because of the complexity that the element of *fiction* adds to them (Smets, 2015). Therefore it makes for an interesting study to analyse fiction feature films rather than documentary due to their higher reach and complex narratives.

The importance of Bollywood films in India and their censorship

Popular cinema in India consists majorly of Bollywood, South Indian cinema, Bengali cinema Bhojpuri cinema amidst a larger number of other regional cinemas, all of which enjoy immense amount of spectatorship and an almost revered status. These films not only represent an entertainment value but bind communities together based on

common likes and beliefs. Popular actors find a god-like reverence in India and people blindly follows ideals that these films show even if it is pure fiction. Most certainly, films in India cater to mainly elements when it comes to the viewer. The appeal associated with these films is manifold because its spectators takes the medium very seriously and are much more in number as commented upon by Aditya Panda:

A medium exists in a plural sphere, it has more than one purpose, it has more than one element, it has more than one structure, more than one reading. A film as a medium may record a history, may produce a new tradition, may write geography newly, may create awareness, may add to a scientific discovery so on and so forth. As it is one of the most alluring audio-visual media it has the maximum effect on the people. If the effect violates the prescribed norms of an authority, the authority censors the effect-producing films. According to the Supreme Court of India, film censorship becomes necessary because a film motivates thought and action and assures a high degree of attention and retention as compared to the printed word. (Panda, 2017, p. 7)

The Central Board of Film Certification (CBFC), which still operates under India's 1952 Cinematograph Act, is often criticized for its vague regulations and its rather blatant affiliation towards right-wing political bodies. Censorious approaches are taken toward sexual or violent film content, as well as films with cultural and political ambits that go against the official state position (Panda, 2017). Many political parties in India are greatly right-wing and Hindu nationalistic, an important one being BJP—the current ruling party. The BJP is more like a successor of the RSS—the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh whose mandate and ideology is to unite the country under a common Hindu religion and eradicate other religious minorities. The CBFC is presently openly pro-BJP and RSS (Bharatiya Janata Party, Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh) (Gill, 2017) and was instrumental in banning a documentary film directed by Pankaj Bhutalia that showed the armed security forces of Kashmir in “bad light” (Parthasarthy, 2015).

In an article exploring the 2011 *Aarakshan* film ban, Schulz questions all the justifications used by the Indian censorship regime use to justify a state of censorial governmentality. While many films are “censored” heavily under the pretext of “hurting

public sentiment”, it is certainly not an accurate or fixed method for measurement (Schulz, 2016).

As Kashmir is a conflicted territory with a lot of stakeholders , political reasons for censorship often overrule other benchmarks when it comes to the pertaining content. While it might be unrealistic to completely get rid of censorship especially when it comes to content pertaining to such a sensitive topic, it becomes extremely important to set boundaries for that censorship.

“Considering the sociocultural realities in India, it may not be worthwhile to abolish the censorship system altogether but, on the other hand, censorship cannot be justified if it is inconsistent, illogical and encroaches upon the citizens’ right to free expression. Our censorship policies, therefore, need to be given a clear sense of direction so that both filmmakers and censors know where they stand, with hardly any scope for misinterpretation”(Pradhan,2012, p.171)

Cinema and conflict is often referred to rather briefly in studies on national cinemas. Studies that deal with non-Western conflicts tend to focus on textual analyses and national identities. Conflicts are often reverse-engineered by studying tropes such as trauma, belonging, identity, memory, exile, home, and homelessness.

As the representation of Muslims in Indian cinema has been questionable if not entirely Islamophobic, when it comes to the “Kashmiri Muslim figure”, there is an especially distorted paradigm that can be seen in films like *Roja* and *Mission Kashmir*. The Muslim figures here are seen as extremist and fundamentalist with their primary occupations as terrorists who enforce violence fostered for their love of Pakistan (Hirji, 2008) or reinforce the separatist agendas that have been sold to mainstream Indian populations (Kabir, 2010).

Film scholar Ananya Janahara Kabir writes extensively on how the film industry has literally exploited the Kashmir Valley as a “territory of desire”, the beautiful Himalayan mountains serving as the perfect backdrop to entertain a romantic liaison between the mainstream Indian and the exoticized local Kashmiri who is deemed curious and exotic :-

“Several similar “Kashmir films” followed in the first half of the decade. Their

highly patterned nature reminds us today of the pleasures and anxieties they solicited in order to bring forth a national audience through the affective use of the Valley's topography. Close-ups of snow, cascading water, and meadow flowers, and panoramic panned shots of mountain ranges and pine forests, worked with songs ranging from neotraditional ghazal (Urdu love song) to rock-and-roll to evoke an entire gamut of romance moods" (Kabir, 2009, p. 51).

Over the years, Indian cinema started seeing a shift from portraying the valley of Kashmir as a tourist destination, with majestic mountainous locales, to a hotbed of terrorism and militancy in films such as *Roja* and *Lamhaa, dil se* in which Kashmiri locals are portrayed as terrorists feeding off their hatred for India and allegiance to fundamentalist separatist organisations. Research conducted by film scholars belonging to the Ladakh region of Jammu and Kashmir analyses ten feature Bollywood films and the results show at least six that depict the area as backdrop of the theatre of war between India and Pakistan or India and China (Dolma, 2013).

The shift certainly saw a much needed relief from the exotic portrayal of Kashmir but time and again, the realities were overshadowed by melodrama and extravagant sets and music. Even the war and conflict shown in these films was very far away from the realities, they only glorified the armed forces and demeaned the role of the Kashmiri civilian in the conflict. Another factor often overlooked by Bollywood films was the role of the Kashmiri woman as a pivotal character in the resistance movement. We see a toxic male dominance only to objectify the Kashmiri woman as a prop who can dance well or merely mourn the death and torture of her male counterparts.

The filmmakers fail to break the assumption that the conflict in Kashmir is based upon communal disharmony, continuously playing into the rancid factor of religious divide. The terrorist ideologies that according to mainstream Indian filmmakers have consumed Kashmir is far from accurate. Violence and bloodshed somehow form the pivot of the stories but fail to follow a coherence. They seem to be randomly thrown into the narratives just to associate the state with gore and carnage. It is therefore highly interesting to see how popular Bollywood films have presented their take on Kashmir and its conflict while being set in an extremely rigid censorial setup in India given that these agencies are affiliated to mainstream India but choose to represent a sensitive issue like Kashmir.

How popular Bollywood films have represented Kashmir

In this section, I focus on how popular mainstream Hindi cinema has represented the conflict in Kashmir, tracing the discourse of some very popular films from the 2000 to 2018, immediately following the violence of the 1990's. These extremely popular films bring together a plethora of issues that form the cornerstone of the Kashmir conflict like fake encounters, disappearances, killings and torture. As the conflict within the state is essentially a conflict with the Indian state, these films are used as instruments to mitigate the turmoil and work out the anxieties that mainstream India have long associated with the status of Kashmir and its people.

In this section I undertake close reading and analysis of seven films which represent the Kashmiri conflict. This shall draw upon my argument that these films act synchronously with the belief that popular cinema represents the Indian nation's dominant beliefs rather than the truth and reality.

Mission Kashmir (2000)

This film was released in the year 2000 and showcased what was perhaps Kashmir's most tumultuous and volatile political period. It was also the third highest grossing Bollywood film in the year of its release. This action-thriller makes the use of an extremely popular ensemble cast to execute the violent scenes that are present in plenty in the film. Directed by Vidhu Vinod Chopra who personally experienced the traumatic exodus of the Kashmiri Pandits from the political and cultural landscape of Kashmir in the 1990's. The Kashmiri Pandits are a native Hindu minority group residing in Kashmir until the 1990's, As the armed insurgency escalated in Kashmir, an unfavourable communal divide was created by some rogue elements. The communal discord slowly aggravated into a political issue causing to community to undergo a very painful exodus from the state. Thousands of Kashmiri pandits had to relocate in tough circumstances who still hold bitter feelings for the unfortunate event. In what remains an ugly scar on the history of Kashmir, Chopra has been a direct victim. His family was one of the many who migrated from the valley in the unfavourable circumstances that have been wrongly advertised as communal discord in his film. He showcases the Kashmiri culture as rather overpowering and over-accented rather than in its pure subtle essence.

The film opens with gory and graphic images of a shikara blown up while an emotional soundtrack with the lyrics of *dhooan dhooan ... (only smoke is visible)* accents the scene. What follows rather blatantly in the film is a transcendent fetish that appeals to the mainstream Indian audience – an overexaggerated attempt to accentuate religious harmony and denounce communal discord. The young and impressionable Altaf loses his precious family in an unprecedented encounter to weed out terrorist elements leading him to plot a much larger and more dangerous revenge against the Indian occupation. The existence of heroic police officers who pledge to save their territory from the greedy hands of the Pakistani neighbours is used as the backbone of the film. This device has been subconsciously planted in the narrative structure justifying civilian killings by the armed forces as collateral, unavoidable damage.

Mission Kashmir employs the use of black comedy to rather insensitively tell the story of the Kashmiri conflict. A doctor who is forbidden by separatist elements to treat the police is inexplicably murdered by the leader of the same terrorist outfit that had issued the fatwa. This is to further reiterate the ruthless nature of the terrorists and their cruel operations in the area. The film presents unrealistic and unimaginable standards of foreign interference in the valley which often is used as a justification to over-militarize the region and conduct illegal cordon and search operations on the local youth. The fictionalised plot shows gullible Kashmiri youth being mobilized to destroy the Hazratbal Mosque and Shankaracharya Temple, the two oldest and largest places of worship for Muslims and Hindus respectively. This has no connection to or adaptation from real events whatsoever. The objective of “Mission Kashmir” is for each group to blame the other for the act, thus unleashing the dogs of war between Hindu-majority India and Muslim-majority Pakistan and Kashmir (Sharma, 2008)

Chopra's film sets out to propagate Kashmiriyat, the symbol of religious tolerance and harmony. Somewhere along the way, though, he shifts focus from the plight of Kashmiris in general to a story of personal vendetta which may lead one to conclude about him losing track and also question the validity of the film's title (Hasan, 2000). There is a strong male dominance in the film that overpowers both the resistance as well as the opposing sphere, more than often rape as a means to family dishonour is used as a device to emphasize the objectification of women in the political dynamics. There is no mention of women who have been an extremely important part of the resistance

movement. They are rendered weak and emotionally and physically incapable of Jihad that is shown to require brawn and hypermasculinity. The actress only makes an appearance with the muscled protagonist in songs or recreating a lost romance in the beautifully enticing mountains of Kashmir— a narrative that has been used by popular Indian cinema to reposition the lens only upon on the beauty of Kashmir while carefully avoiding the injustice and bloodshed in the community. Ironically, the narrative that speaks towards the impossible utopian dream of a peaceful Kashmir scaling the whole problem to the simple idea of resolving the larger conflict by giving up agile egos, however the whole conflict in the Kashmir valley is not very simple and requires a much deeper thought in storytelling. *Mission Kashmir* is a plea for peace but omits some very important points. An end to any conflict requires resolution which seems not to have been stressed upon here. There is a symbolic moment in the film show a bright lotus being swallowed by muddy, swampy waters. “Paradise lost? The moment is so brief that it is gone in the blink of an eye. Vidhu Vinod Chopra's film is a plea to regain that paradise – the pre-1989 Kashmir where he grew up and which he still considers home” (Jain, 2000).

In popular films like *Mission Kashmir* and *Roja*, Islam is shown as an ideology pitted against the Indian nation. Drawing the link among religion, masculinity, and the nation in Hindi films, which represent, reinforce, and constitute the political discourse of Hindu nationalism, Murthy comments on the toxic notions of masculinity that Indian popular cinema always links to a desecrated version of Islamic values: "while Hindu masculinity-linked to duty and service to the nation-stands legitimated, Muslim masculinity — linked to Islam seen as ideology not faith—stands delegitimated" (Haider, 2014, p.272). As it puts a face on the Kashmiri separatist insurgency, it also helps us to confront our general error of lumping together all “terrorisms” into one indistinguishable mass. There are too many elements in the film ranging from exile to fake encounters to police heroism, all of which are superficially interwoven. This lack of experimentation and boldness does not do justice to any of them and ends up just like a feel good project to appease the masses of the country remodelling their own comfortable perception of the Kashmiri state of affairs.

Yahaan (2005)

This film, the directorial debut of Shoojit Sircar, speaks extensively of what it is to encounter forbidden love in the conflicted territory of Kashmir. As noted above, Kashmir has long been cinematic fodder for India. Earlier filmmakers framed romance against its natural beauty. Later ones explored the tragic ironies of its violence. In *Yahaan*, Shoojit Sircar attempts to do both (Chopra, 2005).

This war drama has a strong romantic backdrop that binds the narrative together.

The usual heroic messiah who belongs to the Indian armed forces finds himself posted in Kashmir. His demeanour is poised and helpful especially towards the locals who find themselves charmed by his pursuits of protecting Kashmir from intruders. The army major, Aman belongs to Rastriya Rifles (RR), an armed forces outfit that is highly disreputable for innocent civilian killings in Kashmir and whom Kashmiris both fear and despise. The whole narrative is constructed around the notion of promoting congenial relationships between the ruthless armed forces and the local civilian population. The research undertaken while scripting the film can be characterised as bleak and one-dimensional underemphasizing the hostility that exists between the two parties. An unusual forbidden romance ensues between Aman and Adah, a local Kashmiri girl who is visibly seduced by the idea of freedom, an ideal that is shown ceasing to exist in the backward and regressive Kashmir. She longs to wear jeans and shirts which show her clear dislike for the restrictive environment of Kashmir. As the major is warned of the diplomatic and collaborative nature of the Kashmiri locals, informers can be seen in the backdrop as Indian intelligence agents. Their romance fires up unprecedented controversy more because of the atypical relationship between an army man and a local Kashmiri girl rather than the inter-faith dimension. As this torrid affair blossoms into the professional downfall of the army major, Adah, whose brother is a convicted militant, expresses anguish and frustration towards the Indian occupation of Kashmir. Sircar grapples ably with the multiple perspectives that make Kashmir such an arduous and intricate conflict. At one point, the girl's brother, a terrorist, speaks of the angst of the Kashmiris caught among India, Pakistan and geopolitics beyond their control.

Interestingly, Article 370 of the Indian constitution which until August 2019 granted political autonomy to the princely state of Jammu and Kashmir is spoken about in negative light as a liability that has hindered the collective progress of the state as excluded from the rest of mainstream India. The plot serves to reinforce the idea that the greater good of the Kashmiri youth lie in their wholesome integration into India. The sheer audacity of the film suggests is a certificate of exoneration for the armed forces placing the onus of the conflict on the local Kashmiris who are shown as gullible to their neighbour's interference. In a highly emotional exchange between the major and an insurgent, Aman blatantly supports the enormous presence of the military forces as potential shields that would protect Kashmir from intruders. This justification has damaged the Kashmiri cause for independence gravely as it established the state as weak and vulnerable thus not oppressed but protected. As Mubarki (2014) calls *Yahaan* as a love affair of a Kashmiri Muslim girl with a Hindu army officer (Aman) , he calls the relationship as a bridge that paves the way for a wider reconciliation between Adah's alienated Kashmiri Muslim family and the Indian state.

Amid the patriotic conjectures, there are some movies, which have given the insiders' story of the ground realities and the dynamics of the terror market. *Yahaan* does not adhere to the either genre—neither does it demean Pakistan or exoticize peace. *Yahaan* is a clichéd story, just told a bit differently by using Kashmir as a backdrop, which is rendered meaningless in the broader sense.

Fanaa (2006)

Fanaa is a hugely popular and influential film for cinema-goers, including its audiences in India and North America. This romantic thriller has garnered a laudatory critical response as well as being highly successful at the box-office generating a worldwide collection of ₹105 crores (network, 2012).

The opening scene is aimed at an attempt to again show the Kashmir Valley as an integral part of India. Picturesque photographs of the valley are synced with an instrumental rendition of India's national anthem —*saare jaahan se acha Hindustan hamara* (India is the best in the world). Zooni (Kajol), a blind Kashmiri girl, falls in love

with Rehan (Aamir Khan), a tourist guide, while on a trip to New Delhi with a group of friends to perform in a parade on the national Independence Day. Zooni's character continues to draw on dominant nationalist themes when she links the fate of Kashmir to that of India during the 26 January Republic Day celebrations in Delhi (Khan, 2009).

An unlikely romance blossoms between the couple, eventually leading to the consummation of their relationship. Zooni is promptly abandoned by her partner before she returns to Kashmir. Rehan is revealed to be a terrorist highly wanted by the Indian intelligence who had planned an attack on the parliament of India and is quoted by the intelligence agencies to have transformed the terror group from a shalwar kameez (traditionally clothed) group to a highly professional one. This can be construed as a highly Islamophobic slur towards radical groups who are pre-emptively presumed to be of Muslim faith. A heated discussion between two commanding officers of the organization probably presents the only valid and credible moment in the film, wherein the promise of the Kashmiri plebiscite is quoted as the root cause of the conflict and turmoil. Interestingly, the pretext of Pakistani-occupied Kashmir serves as a justification for what the Kashmiris have undergone.

Seven years later, a highly dangerous mission involving nuclear weapons is intercepted by the Indian intelligence agencies. Rehan finds himself at the helm of affairs, transporting an electronic device that controls the trigger. A thrilling fight ensues between the Indian army patrolling the area and Rehan, who has impersonated an Indian army major. This event surprisingly lands an injured Rehan at Zooni's home. Zooni now has a six year-old son who had been conceived during their affair in New Delhi – a very unlikely happening in a Muslim majority state which does not allow children to be born out of wedlock (considered to be the sin of *Zinnah* or fornication). Zooni's family is co-opted by the Indian state and willingly supports the Indian army, an irony since a large number of people of the disputed region vociferously express their fury at the excesses of both the Indian army and the Islamic militants from Pakistan (Haider, 2014).

Another anomaly that exists in the film is the consumption of alcohol which again is very unlikely in a state like Kashmir where drinking is socially frowned upon. The story rapidly progresses into Zooni falling in love with Rehan after miraculously having regained her

eyesight and her son finding a fatherly figure in him. Rehan's identity is revealed before Zooni and her father leading Zooni to shoot him as she chooses the greater love for her nation over her personal prospects. This film is a classical rendition of patriotic love, where characters hold higher moral power by choosing the greater good and welfare of the nation over their personal needs.

Nishat Haider extensively studies the Muslim image as portrayed by Indian cinema and criticises the stereotype that they endorse while quoting Murthy:

“As Murthy's classification of Muslims as the good and bad kind stands true, the film utilises an interesting realm within the binary. Rehan is transformed away from the radicalistic views through the love for Zooni who sacrifices her husband for the love of India” (Haider, 2014,p.107).

Fanaa continuously attempts to instil an essence of patriotism for India with the window dressing of the Kashmiri aesthetic. The lyricisms take advantage of the colourful and melodramatic Bollywood song with *Desh Rangila* (India is colourful), wherein a Kashmiri girl dances in praise of the Indian diversity and culture, an attempt to unify the conflicted into the mainstream with the promise of equal inclusion, the song's title a phrase from the National song of India.

yahaan har qadam qadam pe dharti badale rang

yahaan ki boli me rangoli saat rang

dhaanii pagari pahane mausam hai

niili chaadar taane ambar hai

nadii sunaharii hara samandar hai yeh sajiila

des rangiila rangila des mera rangila...

vande maataaram...

(Here in every step, the earth changes its colour

Here in every language there is a rainbow coloured design

The weather is wearing a turban of green colour

The sky seems as if it is a sheet of pure blue

The rivers are golden, the oceans are green, it is decorative

My country is full of vibrant colours)

Vande maataram vande maataram

(I bow down to you, my motherland)

Fanaa shows a proclivity towards understanding the Kashmiri state and its desire for Azadi (freedom), it shows Rehan's character as ultimately being a misled Kashmiri. His instincts are ruled by his vengeance for India and his radical grandfather is a bad influence on him. According to Haider,

In the film *Fanaa*, Kunal Kohli shows a willingness to initiate an openness to, and a desire for, understanding the Kashmiri Other, but it does not convincingly frame the agonistic argument in the filmic text for the need to re-visit, re-witness, re-think, radicalize and dialecticise the capacities and potentialities of the militant image. (Haider, 2014, p.108)

What Kumar (2016) calls a Manichean divide between the Muslim and the resolution of all their problems caused by their faith contains a message delivered by Zooni who successfully creates a divide between the good and the bad Muslim. Her son is trained to be the "good" contrary to his freedom-loving father who is a "bad" Muslim. This lightly concealed narrative has been used to hegemonically deliver the Hindu majoritarian propaganda. The bad Muslim challenges the Indian nation while the good one defends it and, by association, the Hindutva project.

Khan juxtaposes the two religions of Hinduism and Islam and how differently Bollywood represents their followers in the films whilst taking *Fanaa* as a case study:

Fanaa is a nationalist film that depicts the upper caste Hindu male as the norm. Muslim males are presented as dangerous outsiders who must be neutralized in the service of nationalism. To facilitate this process, the Muslim woman is recruited to deploy the Sufi concept of *fanaa*. Yet instead of annihilation in the love of Allah (God) or the earthly beloved, we get the annihilation of the physical body of the Muslim man in the service of Hindu nationalism. The dangerous Muslim man becomes vulnerable through his love for the Muslim woman. It is her nationalism that eventually services the greater cause of nation building and she ultimately destroys the man she loves. (Khan, 2009, p.135)

I am "Megha"(2010)

This film is directed by Onir, a critically acclaimed director, who narrates this story as part of an anthology of four short stories on various sensitive subjects existing in India. Megha is a Kashmiri Pandit who returns to Kashmir after decades abroad to sell her ancestral house. What ensues further is a bitter encounter with her past, the conflict and turmoil that drove her family out of the state in the 1990's. Her friend Rubina is torn between her hatred for the Indian oppression and a desire for normalcy and peace in her homeland and the director somehow fails to connect the two in a legitimate manner.

Megha is adverse to even hearing a word of the Kashmiri language, which the director has made no effort to deliver on screen. The dialogue delivery in Kashmiri is forced and extremely inaccurate making it an unpleasant experience for a native Kashmiri speaker to comprehend. The film is an attempt to tackle two very different issues, one the painful bitterness that the Kashmiri Pandit's have of the unfortunate exile and then equally relevant repercussions that the turmoil has had on members of the Kashmiri Muslim population who weren't forced to leave but experienced an equivalent of humiliation and discomfort nevertheless. Megha's uncle is revealed to have been shot by his close Muslim friend which paints the conflict as inhumane and chaotic.

Whenever the case of Kashmiri Pandits arise in the film, it is very subtly conveyed as a communal issue tainting the Muslim population as inhumane murderers who kill in the name of Islam. While Megha revisits her childhood although in bittersweet remembrances, she is introduced to the new face of Kashmir. The Kashmir where the chants of Azaadi or freedom are loudly associated with the merging of the state with an Islamic caliphate. She is distraught and centralises the exodus with the Hindu-Muslim conflict. Recalling the painful memories of having lived in refugee camps and faced exile from home, she corrects an acquaintance with a fierce rebuttal — *chale Gaye ki nikaal diye gaye* (did the Pandits flee or were they forced to leave)?

The narrative struggles to do justice to two very important issues, the Pandit exodus and the present turmoil in the valley and fails to draw the line between how the former cannot be used as a device to justify the chronic violence inflicted upon Muslim civilians. The exile of the native Hindus and the violence that claimed thousands of lives from both religious faiths deserves more extensive research and accurate portrayal and definitely

more screen time. As Megha dumps her father's ashes into the Jhelum river, the film concludes with a longing for home, a utopian dream of a peaceful Kashmir and the crushing realisation that it is indeed the most beautiful prison in the world. The film presents a rather heart-wrenching account of the exile faced by the Pandits but only a one-sided story has been explored, which may tag the film as propagandist in nature. Kashmiri Muslims have been equal or greater sufferers of the turmoil and that remains a very important part of the issue because the two are deeply embedded with each other.

Lamhaa (2010)

Translated to *moment*, this film was released in a very politically tumultuous time in Kashmir and was shot under heavy security in the state. The film opens with a message promoting communal harmony in the conflict-ridden Kashmir struggling with riots, strikes and curfews. Vikram is an Indian army intelligence officer who is sent to Kashmir on a secret mission to thwart what is deemed as an extremely debilitating plot that threatens to hamper the government sponsored elections in the area. A stronghold of Kashmiri separatists, the downtown becomes witness to a gruesome cold-blooded murder of a member of their organisation. In the meanwhile, Aziza who is part of *Khatoon-e-millat*, an all-female separatist organisation accidentally exposes a sex scandal while trying to find out the killers. The *Khatoon-e-Millat* is a poor facsimile of Dukhtarane-Millat (Daughters of the Nation; abbreviated DeM), an all-woman pro-resistance outfit that advocates Islamic Shariah law in Indian occupied Kashmir. Since 2018 the group has been banned as a terrorist organisation in India.

Over the course of the story, Aziza and her partner Atif, an aspiring political leader who makes an unwelcome shift from separatist to mainstream politics struggle to resist the pro-separatist ideologies. He draws himself away from what he calls the futility of the armed struggle. Ultimately, the duo join hands with the mainstream Indian ideology while her own organisation publicly shames her and Atif is jailed just before the elections. A political and social chaos drives the film towards the end with the portrayal of Kashmiri stakeholders as opportunists, insurgents, separatists, and mainstream Indian fundamentalists. The film has been executed rather poorly with loose adaptations of real-life events that have actually happened in Kashmir. The sex scandal that is unveiled by the organisation is congruent to the infamous 2006 sex scandal which shook the

moral fabric of the state and revealed the involvement of some significant political and army figures.

Similarly, a supporting character, Parveena, is loosely based upon Parveena Ahangar, the chief of APDP, the association of the parents of the disappeared people. She is shown to be aggressive and persistent in her fight to enquire about the whereabouts of the disappeared yet has been given an insignificant cameo with negligible screen time. Probably what can be construed as the only accurate adaption in the film is the nonchalant attitude that the authorities display towards the half-widows and how they are told that their loved ones can never come back and how they have received monetary compensation. Half-widow is a term given to Kashmiri women whose husbands have disappeared and were still missing during the ongoing conflict in Kashmir. These women are called "half-widows" because they have no idea whether their husbands are dead or alive.

The despair of the Kashmiris is shown bluntly and vividly, their desperation to at least have the procession of the dead bodies correlates well to the chronic trauma that they have incurred. Police and army brutality is also shown very explicitly in some scenes.

However, the director, Rahul Dholakia, who is known to produce thrillers inspired by real stories, presents a very poorly scripted narrative which does not follow a coherent timeline. The adaptations have been executed in a chaotic manner and follow no ordered structure. While the centrality of the film plays around avoidance of a communal discord, very little is shown to actually support that notion. The sheer amount of the issues that are taken into consideration confuses the plot than being able to isolate the important elements like draconian laws, collaboration and childhood trauma. Painting local Kashmiris as collaborative opportunists is used as a device that weakens the already irredeemable plot. *Lamhaa* attempts to address a lot of issues and as a result is not able to provide much-needed screen time to any of them. The result is a poorly constructed action thriller that only shows an abundance and violence and graphic scenes without any coherence to them. Film critics have also pointed out this anomaly in *Lamhaa*, as seen in the following quote from Kabra's film reviews on *Lamhaa*:

“It is arguably an insurmountable task for a film to address the nexus of one fascist faction, another faction, Indian government, Pakistani Government, idealists, military, and the common man - each of them with their aspirations, filled with back-stabbers and double-crossers. I'd assume it is only understandable for the film to rush through this all without much attention to details - characterization, plot and pace. But this is accompanied with a notion of typical, shrill music in the background and dramatization techniques that should be reserved for infant-amateurs. And that is like drawing one more straw, if not the last one” (Kabra, 2010).

Lamhaa is a classical example of an outsider film maker who has attempted to venture into the storytelling arena of Kashmir but has completely failed to understand the nuances of the culture and the conflict that is an extremely essential part of the state's identity.

Haider (2014)

The film opens in Srinagar 1995, with Dr Hilal Meer (Narendra Jha), a politically neutral surgeon who agrees to perform an appendectomy to a critical patient, Ikhlaq, who happens to be the leader of an armed pro-separatist group operating in Kashmir in the unrestrained 1990's. The doctor agrees to operate at his own home to avoid exposing his patient's identity when the Indian armed forces undergo an unprecedented cordon and search in the area having received an anonymous tip about the presence of militants in the house, followed by a fatal gunfight which results in Dr Hilal being taken away by the armed forces after his house is blown up to debris.

A few years later, Dr Hilal's son Haider (Shahid Kapoor) returns as a doctoral student from Aligarh Muslim university having learnt of his father's disappearance only to find his mother, Ghazala (Tabu), has become involved with his sinister uncle Khurram (KK Menon). While things go well with his girlfriend Arshiya (Shraddha Kapoor), he struggles with finding the whereabouts of his father which leads him into a state of denial and frustration. While Khurram wins the local elections, a man by the name of Roohdaar contacts Haider and tells him that his father had been held in the same detention center as him where the Indian armed forces wreaked havoc in terms of atrocities on them

resulting in the death of Dr Hilal but revealing important information that the mole who ratted out the whereabouts of the militant to the armed forces was his own brother who in turn had been helped by his wife. Roohdaar urges Haider to avenge his father's death by shooting his uncle in his both eyes, which he characterizes as "the eyes that lusted on his mother and made him an orphan".

Meanwhile, Dr Hilal Meer gets an Islamic funeral following which Khuram lawfully marries his own sister-in-law. This chain of occurrences pushes Haider to a state of insanity in which he turns violent and agitated pushing his girlfriend to commit suicide. Haider finally escapes to a safe location where he is intercepted by Khurram's men causing a fierce gunfight. Ghazala encourages her son to surrender telling him that revenge only results a vicious cycle but Haider, who is bent on vengeance, does not understand. She finally says goodbye to her son, and detonates a suicide vest killing herself and gravely injuring Khurram whose legs are severed from his body. Haider finally gets a chance to kill him but decides to let him live. Khurram begs Haider to kill him to free him from the burden of guilt and to avenge his father's death, but Haider does not oblige leaving him in pain and misery.

The director Vishal Bhardwaj is known for his innovative adaptations of Shakespearean works, including *Maqbool* based on *Macbeth*, and *Omkara* his 2006 adaptation of *Othello*. Bhardwaj uses these historic English plays to set a viewing lens towards the viewer to experience dark stories based in contemporary India. The movie is set in Indian-administered Kashmir in one of the most politically and socially unstable times in the valley, the 1990's. Shahid Kapoor plays Hamlet, Shraddha Kapoor is Ophelia, and Tabu plays the mesmerising Gertrude with Kay Kay Menon as Claudius. The idea of vengeance is raw yet powerfully executed, while the film highly borrows from Hamlet, it also offers an unflinching look into the restive political scenario of Kashmir. The extensively used war tactic of enforced disappearance or extrajudicial killings is unmistakably amalgamated with the uncomfortable plot of Shakespeare's *Hamlet* and how it has and is used as threats and as a premise to falsely accuse men and extort their families. The film also talks about the unmarked graves which have been a huge blot on the history of Kashmir. As Kashmir is a very sensitive and controversial topic, especially with regard to the role of armed forces, Bhardwaj fictionalises two dark plots into one defending an unambiguous position when it comes to the scripting and

execution of the plot. A very under-discussed yet important aspect of the armed insurgency in Kashmir remains the introduction of the *Ikhwan-ul-Mukhbireen* or the army of the collaborators who were basically internal people acting against their own to weaken the pro-freedom struggle.

Tabu presents a unnerving portrayal of Gertrude. Her beauty is raw and captivating as that of a typical Kashmiri woman. Her eyes do not give away any emotion and she plays the character with such depth and nuance that it at times side lines every other character. She is complex and does not give away her motives. A classic example of a Kashmiri half-widow, the iconised woman figure in the Kashmiri conflict. However, this character waivers from the classical sketch of the tormented and wailing widow instead embracing a rare comedic notion of merrymaking and remarriage. Her loyalties are abysmal and dynamic while on the other hand Hamlet, portrayed as Haider, is a uniform character whose motivation is purely vengeance. His character arc is fairly uneventful, the point of no return being learning of the news about his father's death and the scandalous involvement of his uncle and mother. The romantic in him is subtle and persistent. "As is often the case in Hindi cinema, the mother-son relationship here is all-important. Its eroticism is heightened (the actors aren't even 10 years apart), and its power axis has shifted, with Ghazala having the upper hand" (Saltz, 2014). There is a hint of a subtextual Oedipus complex in the background of how their relationship persists throughout the film.

"There is no escape from the prison that is Kashmir," Haider says, which is re-established by the nauseating torture scenes involving inmates at interrogation camps. In one such bone-chilling and emotional scene, *Haider* captures the humiliation that the armed forces inflict upon the civilians. A man, his face covered in a balaclava is sitting in an army jeep while the civilians of a village are paraded in front of him humiliated to their very core. With a swift movement of his head, he dismisses most of them who are assumed to be innocent. While his eyes linger excruciating on the doctor, Dr Meer is taken away by the army. The identity of this man is never revealed, whether he is a collaborating agent or just a pawn in the disgusting display of authority remains a mystery. In a matter of seconds, the doctor's house is blown up into bits in front of their bewildered eyes, again a very disturbing war tactic employed in Kashmir, enforcing the fear of homelessness and insecurity upon their subjects. "Vishal Bhardwaj crafts this

nervous tension in pale white Kashmir, lets it simmer all through the first half, soaking you in the environment slowly and indulgently” (Kamath, 2014).

The cinematography of the film does the utmost justice in capturing the unmatched beauty of Kashmir, called paradise on earth by as the Mughal emperor Jehangir. *Haider's* shots are captivating and awe-inspiring. The long shots of Dal Lake are used as abstract fillers around the dark moments that engulf this tragedy. The lighting is noir-ish with subtle overtones and sultry undertones especially in the graphic scenes that show the Indian armed forces executing unimaginable torture and human rights violations in detention centres.

One important aspect of the film is the stark accuracy with which it makes its characters deliver a typical Kashmiri accent which adds a delightful air of credibility and believability.

The film strives to juxtapose the simmering Kashmir with *Hamlet* on every human level possible. There is surprising sense in staging the mousetrap and gravedigger scenes as musical numbers, and something compelling in how this backdrop forces the characters to adopt explicitly political positions (McCahill, 2014). The most astonishing part of the film is Haider's monologue set in uptown Srinagar's Lal chowk where he is visibly unruly and unkempt to an extent that his own mother takes a moment to recognise him. He spins a rough and unadulterated narrative around the AFSPA (armed forces special powers act) highlighting the shameless audacity of the law wherein the cinematography unmistakably captures his insanity. The scene spins around the unacknowledged truth of the enforced disappearance (more than 10,000 in number that has affected thousands of families) and asks a question – do we exist or not? If yes, then where are we? The film represents the conflict very well in terms of the suffering and turmoil shown very beautifully through such sequences.

Another peculiar scene just after the entry sequence of Roohdar or the ghost shows a Kashmiri man refusing to enter his own house and entering only when he is checked properly showing the struggle and fears of a common man who just barely survives in utmost humiliation caused by incessant and unforgiving surveillance and police checks

The music of the film forms its backbone in terms of execution and their emotion-evoking power. The lyrics are written by the legendary Gulzar except for two songs *gulon me rang bhare* and *aaj ke naam*, which are written by Faiz Ahmad Faiz, a Muslim Marxist poet.

The songs are instrumental to the storytelling technique of the film. For example *Jhelum* plays at a very emotional turn in the story as a background score of Haider's pursuit in search for his disappeared father around the shores of Kashmir's famous river Jhelum:

Jhelum, jhelum dhoondhe kinara

(Jhelum, Jhelum looks for the shore,)

Kis se poochhein kitni der se dard ko sehte jaana hai

Andhi raat ka haath pakad kar kab tak chalte jaana hai

(To whom should I ask for how long do I have to bear with this pain, and have to keep walking holding the hand of the blind night.)

Dooba sooraj, kin aankhon mein

Sooraj dooba, kin aankhon mein

Jhelum hua khaara

(The sun [did] set, in which eyes,

In which eyes did the sun set,

The Jhelum has become salty [as if with someone's tears].)

What is probably the most beautifully and overwhelmingly scary song in the film is *so jao na* (go to sleep), a climax that re-enacts the grave digger's scene of *Hamlet*. The score is haunting and the scene is set in deep snow with three old men digging their own graves and singing about the impermanence of life and the ultimate resolution of all conflict being death, the only entity not discriminating between the old and the young, the light and the dark. It is a dark tragic take on Kashmir, the most tormented and conflicted souls living in the most beautiful place on earth finding the ultimate salvation in 'a long peaceful sleep that leads to death'.

Haider retrieves a skull from the graves, 'Why are these skulls always smiling?' asks a small boy. 'Because, it is only after death that they realize there was no point in living the way they did' replies Haider after a couple of comic frames. The beauty of this scene lies right there in the words of Haider; death is a great leveller.

Chhota Na Bada, Koi Lamba Hai Na Bauna Hai

(There's no one big or small, no one is tall or a dwarf)

Kabaron Ke Tadabon Mein, Lambi Neend Sona Hai

(In the midst of all these graves, one has to take a long sleep)

As a native Kashmiri, the song is oddly settling, it draws upon the futility of all pursuits which will all be equalised by the idea of annihilation. This nihilistic approach often appeals to people who live in conflicted lands and see no hope for the foreseeable future. Their only reassurance is the idea of nature's justice or simply death which kills everyone equally — be it the oppressor or the oppressed.

The film boldly and fearlessly criticizes the Armed Forces Special Powers Act in a bold adaptation of a classic especially set for a release in India, a country that venerates the Indian armed forces. While there are too many stories for a non-Kashmiri to comprehend at once, it is a very bold attempt to dissect some very sensitive issues. Bhardwaj not only delivers a strong denotative message to the viewers but also leaves the climax open-ended and the whole plot brimming with metaphors and tropes that suggest a huge potential towards a diverse connotative response from the viewers. Probably the first refreshing film in ages, *Haider* doesn't portray the Kashmiri as the enemy that needs to be punished for their wrongdoings but an equal stakeholder in the conflict who deserve the right to their native land. *Haider* has stepped out of the closet refreshingly after year of cliched cinema that suffocated the representation of Kashmir. A major factor that supports the authenticity and success of this film is that it employs a large number of local Kashmiris both as actors as well as production crew. The accents are passable, if not entirely satisfactory, while the art direction is impeccable as each as every frame has been shot in the locations of the valley. There is no doubt that *Haider* is an improvement on typical representations of Kashmir in Indian cinema, it is still a very small drop in the ocean of wrongful representations that have marred the image of the conflict and its sufferers.

Hamid (2018)

Adapted from Mohammed Amin Bhat's play *Hamid* the film opens with a middle-aged Kashmiri man, Rehmat, humming a song while painting a wooden boat. He chooses to paint the boat in red, the colour which symbolises the blood of thousands of Kashmiris

as witnessed by the mighty river. A witness to the brutalities that the Kashmiris have incurred, the river is metaphorically always a shade of red. On his way to his modest home, the carpenter is stopped by the Indian armed forces who humiliate and demean him because his poetry speaks about conflict and turmoil. This particular scene is haunting and real, very accurate in terms of representation. Rehmat has a loving home with a 7 year-old son, Hamid, a curious and lively boy. Hamid's TV remote runs out of batteries while watching a cricket match which causes his father to venture out at night to fetch new ones. The film quickly progresses to a few months later showing Rehmat to have inexplicably disappeared that night and a bitterly devastating state of affairs between the son and his mother. A classic half-widow, Ishrat lives in constant hope of her husband's arrival, an improbable situation that haunts her very existence. New to this unfortunate phase of her life, she is financially distressed and struggles to adapt to her life as a single parent. Slowly, this experience begins to illuminate to her the nuances of the administrative failures in Kashmir. As part of the half-widow community, she is seen meticulously maintaining a file of her husband's particulars. Emphasising the redundancy of the whole process, a fellow half-widow who accidentally switches her disappearance file with Ishrat comments: "What is the purpose of maintaining this file, how does it matter if we get each others? Ultimately both of them will rot away to be eaten by termites."

There is a helpless and emotional backdrop supporting the narrative of the constant trauma that these women endure on a daily basis from decades ago. Somehow, Hamid learns that 786 is God's number (which means In the name of Allah, the most Merciful, the most Beneficent in Arabic). He randomly makes up a combination and dials a phone number which ironically belongs to an Indian armed forced officer. That particular officer is highly aggressive and violent and is shown to experience bouts of rage triggered by his past experiences in Kashmir. He is brimming with anger and hostility for the locals who yearn for azadi (freedom) and holds a crippling guilt for having killed a kid in his military career. His heart is melted by Hamid's innocence and demands, a strangely ironic connection develops between them which even leads to the officer looking for his missing father.

Rather courageously, the plot brings forth some very powerful scenes. For example, a Kashmiri local fearlessly spray-painting the slogan "Go India, go back" on the road, a

very popular slogan chanted by pro-freedom Kashmiri protestors in rallies. The man is clearly shown to be undeterred by the incessant honking of an army bus which later drives over the rather inconspicuous graffiti. The unlikely phone connection strays the film away from a serious tone and introduces a humanised touch to the armed forces, a feared and tyrannical force in the Kashmir conflict. Although some very bold and fearless themes exist in the film, the cute pheran- (cloak) clad Hamid is a stark reminder of those many children who have lost their fathers to the ruthless phenomenon of enforced disappearances ultimately bearing the financial burdens of their families. In the midst of the happenings, a very random character is introduced to the film, a radical Muslim man who trains to indoctrinate young minds towards a fundamentalist school of thought. He strives to train Hamid as an across-the-border militant, though the child is visibly indifferent if not repulsed by the advances. This character lends no importance or necessity to the story and uncomfortably sits as an eyesore in the story. It can be seen as an attempt to breed an air of doubt around the identity and intentions of the local Kashmiri population. Despite these troughs in the narrative, the film fearlessly speaks about the atrocities that the armed forces have inflicted upon the locals in Kashmir. A very sensitive topic of enforced disappearance is explored, one which definitely is controversial and usually avoided.

Conclusion

As the conflicted area of Kashmir is inaccessible to most people, these films are like portals to the valley and have shaped the collective memory of the conflict. Films are seen as critical observers that use the medium of cinema to negotiate and reflect on the living conditions of the different actors involved in conflict. More specifically, they often deal with human rights issues of people affected by violent conflicts. In contrast with the propagandist or deeply personal films of battle cinema and victim cinema, these films tend to have a more diplomatic and political character (Smets, 2015). These films do not merely bring forth stories of the conflict and war crimes but are also used to appease the general masses by reinforcing their beliefs. As mainstream Indian strongly believes that there is an absence of a conflicted status of the state and the issue revolves around Pakistani involvement, these films gain popularity and money by stating the same incorrect information. They glorify the armed forces and justify their actions by

emphasising the greater good of the nation thus overruling years of atrocities. Therefore, the films are highly political and one-sided.

By analysing this sample of films, I concluded that the majority (five out of seven) of the films justify the existence of the Indian occupation of Kashmir rather than providing a well-researched and accurate account of the conflict. Only *Haider* (2014) and *Hamid* (2018) have attempted to undertake an authentic approach while addressing these concerns. While *Haider* employs a more explicit approach, *Hamid* is slightly timid and implicitly does some damage control in favour of the armed forces.

All these films have originated from Bollywood, hence have been produced in mainstream India. Bollywood freely mixes genres like action-thrillers(*Mission Kashmir*, *Lamhaa*), romantic thrillers(*Fanaa*, *Yahaan*), crime drama (*Haider*) and melodrama (*I am Megha*, *Hamid*). Despite the fact that all of the films under consideration are musical, they otherwise represent a fairly diverse group of films that have been taken into consideration. Also important here is that the directors are not themselves a diverse group—none of them are native Kashmiris, which limits their understanding of the political and social nuances of the place. They have ventured into murky waters to depict the Indian-Kashmiri relationship along with that of its neighbours given the amount of scrutiny such a topic is subject to. This aspect also makes these films liable to high financial viability, which in turn is related to how much the general masses are appeased with the content pushed through these. The Indian armed forces are seen as highly respected demi-gods by the mainstream Indian masses and in no sense a victimiser. If they commit a crime, most certainly it will be for the national good and can be justified by calling it unavoidable collateral damage. While portraying the armed forces, all the films, except *Haider* and *Hamid*, have been very careful to not taint their sacred image in any way. While on one hand the forces are astounded by the beauty of the valley, their brutal actions are unavoidable, bought by the Kashmiris upon themselves. The soldiers grapple with constant post-traumatic experiences and are responsible for morally policing local Kashmiris, reminding them that their greater good lies with India. Another disturbing element in these films is the protection of nationality. No plebiscite is offered to the Kashmiris while their fate is decided by the coloniser. In no way do most of these films present the three decade old conflict accurately, acting synchronous with the ideologies of the regime. Filmmakers here undertake a journalistic stance which is more

direct than exploratory, the scripts feel very report-like observing and checking some tick marks. These checkboxes mainly include the scenic beauty of Kashmir, an abundance of violence, the derided Kashmiri youth and Pakistani influence instead of showing the blatant human rights violations in the area.

Take for instance, the exilic perspective of the Kashmiri Pandits. What position the films like *I am "Megha"* and *Mission Kashmir* occupy vis a vis the conflict is very cursory. The exodus is shown to be motivated by communal discord without any mention of it being an orchestrated attempt to steer the attention away from the real issue which was the common desire for freedom. This desire is to live life free from humiliation and brutality and has nothing to do with religion. If physical displacement is used as a plot device to garner an emotional response from the spectatorship, then the unending turmoil of the left behind Kashmiri Muslims deserves an equal share of attention. The horrors of the unfortunate migration are many but so is the present unrest in the Muslim community. This rather dishonest tendency of filmmakers has bought forth an ugly side of the profession. The Kashmir issue was never based on a communal divide, it was out of the collective want of the two communities for self-determination and independence. In a country so motivated and divided by religion, it becomes very easy to sell propaganda tailored to a template to appease certain religious groups. Religiously motivated discord and politics are so interwoven into each other that no escape is seen from the two. Therefore, clouding the very sensitive Kashmir issue under the communal garb of sectarian politics is not only loathsome but damaging to the cause as well. There is no discernible mention whatsoever of the role of Jagmohan Malhotra, governor of Jammu and Kashmir in the year 1990 who had a huge role to play in organising the divide. Similarly the issue of Pakistani involvement in Kashmir is very overtly explored because it appeals to the general masses. It is deemed futile to even include a significant role of local Kashmiris in the indiscriminate war of egos involving India and Pakistan.

As a visual medium, cinema has had enormous influence on how societies have been shaped and how perceptions about contentious issues, such as the occupation of Kashmir have been made. Therefore, it is not new so as to how political parties and other agencies tailor this medium to cater to their own ulterior motives as studied by Kumar while investigating Islamophobia in popular Hindi cinema:

Due to such an overbearing influence, cinema also acts as capacious cultural space for politicians, reactionary ideologues and the defenders of a particular social belief system to reconstruct and reinterpret the archaeologies of the imaginary world built in the celluloid, in a manner that suits their own agenda. (Kumar, 2016, p.235)

Bollywood has capitalised on war and nationalism considering the demand of a genre of cinema that speaks to conflict in a country like India that fetishizes the status and exoticism of the Kashmiri state. Cine-patriotism is a phenomenon that rules the majority of these narratives suffocating the spaces for the free flow of film content. Bollywood has been long ruled and almost consumed by censorship. The film *Haider* faced 41 cuts by the censor board before it could be released to the public due to its sensitive themes. A U/A (Unrestricted Public Exhibition-But With Parental Guidance) certificate was given to it thereafter (Staff, 2014).

To expect a completely censorship-free environment for content production may be a delusional fantasy but the film community in India definitely needs to protest incessantly against the regimes. To produce content which is half-researched and heavily altered is extremely dangerous when it comes to sensitive issues. Most films present very myopic and narrow overviews of the conflict—context and complexities are largely missing. The struggle that has claimed the lives of millions of people and has seen the maiming of thousands more deserves better researched and heartfelt filmmaking that does some amount of justice to the people of the state and not merely desecrate their memories through misrepresentation or even underrepresentation.

As a self-proclaimed integral part of India, Kashmir is certainly a very common topic both in politics as well as the arts. Its beauty is captured in its pristine form flawlessly by almost all filmmakers who fail to understand the nuances of its struggle for basic human existence. The conflict goes way beyond religion or displacement. It represents protest against uncountable human rights violations inflicted upon Kashmiris over the past 70 years. Bollywood ventures into producing idealistic solutions to the issue, stressing irrevocably on conflict resolution and return to normalcy. While this utopian dream is implanted in the narratives suggesting a feel-good sense for the future, the past and the present stand as silent witnesses of the brutalities experienced by the locals. Prioritising peace over the hatred of India consuming Kashmiri lives remains a very sellable concept

in these films, but no respite is offered in terms of explaining thoroughly how youth are pushed against the wall in order to act the way they do. This is not to imply that violence and gore are justifiable in any way, but a well-rounded approach should be executed instead of mobilizing spectacles of violence motivated by jingoism and Islamophobia.

There is a certain artisanal value when it comes to films about areas of conflict. They serve as a tool for resistance through memory. An audience actively uses the film to perceive, absorb and re-circulate the ideas, which in turn affects the cross-cultural understanding of the situation. The transformative potential shown by cinema is an important part of resistance, it amplifies faith in conflict resolution and mitigation. As a Kashmiri native, it is refreshing to view the issue through an transparent lens without the banal and bucolic over-exoticism of the Kashmiri landscapes and populace. Audio-visual media have a critical role when it comes to the representational stakes that alter the geo-political dynamics of a politically unstable territory especially when it comes to issues such as ethnicity, human rights violations and gendered altercations. Although it might be an isolated brick in building a wall that substantiates the Kashmiri issue through visual art, films need to be promoted as an essential part of protest against dictatorship and oppression. There is a greater need for independent documentary filmmaking as well.

While films such as *Haider* and *Hamid* have boldly stepped out of the comfort zones of storytelling and explored some very controversial themes, they represent only a very small fraction in a larger field of misrepresentation. The future looks more uncertain and bleak rather than promising. Real life incidents such as the Uri attack (2016) have been rendered into motion pictures which, having fed off hatred and hyper-patriotism, have done exceptionally well at the box office. As more and more filmmakers dangerously pursue the idea of adapting incidents such as the infamous 2019 Pulwama attack which claimed the lives of 40 armed forces personnel and even the Indochinese Galwan Valley skirmish (2020), the average Kashmiri remains no less sceptical. Especially with the radical right wing leadership ethnically cleansing out Muslims and challenging the permanent residence status of local Kashmiris, the future of their representation looks bleak and questionable. The broader question remains, will Bollywood finally break free from the judgemental lens that has been cast on it when it comes to Kashmir or will cinema remain a victim of the occupation's propagandist agenda?

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