

A NEW IMAGE: MUSLIM IDENTITY IN SAMAR KHAN'S SHAURYA

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ABSTRACT

Muslim identity worldwide is associated with fundamentalism and violence. This has led to generalizations about Muslim culture. Shaurya – a film directed by Samar Khan- center of the Indian Muslim identity and the stereotype image resulting in pre-conceived notions about Muslims in the post Babri Masjid scenario. It is the story of an army officer Javed Khan who is charged with murder of a fellow officer at point blank range. It is a courtroom drama with Kashmir as the backdrop. Although the film is about army yet it is not a war film. Rather, the battle is of the conscience and the enemy is not an unknown soldier on the other side of the border. The film questions the very concept of valour (literal meaning of the word Shaurya). The paper explores the concept of honour which makes Javed silent and he refuses to speak in his defense. The problem of fundamentalism is the main issue and the paper also outlines the trial of Javed Khan in the course of which Siddhant (the defence lawyer) discovers the humane side of his own self. On the periphery is Kavya Shastri (a journalist). The dynamic character of Brigadier Pratap moves from the periphery to the center as the film moves to its climax. The movie presents a strong sense of anti-fundamentalism without any sermonizing and its intense moments awaken us to some serious issues.

KEYWORDS: *Identity, Stereotype, Fundamentalism, Periphery & Center*

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INTRODUCTION

From the earliest times, in Hindi films the culture of Muslims has been presented in a very stereotypical way focusing on a lot of finesse in language, dress and manners. Through films like Mrere Huzoor, Mere Mehboob, Mehboob ki Mehndi and of course, Pakeezaa, Muslim identity became synonymous with sophistication. These films categorized as Muslim socials created an almost fantastical world of what can be called an elite Muslim culture with burqua clad females and highly cultured males (very poetic also) using very fine Urdu and living in grand havelis. The female protagonists of this time became the epitome of sophistication, like Meena Kumari in *Pakeeza* who created a persona on the screen to be remembered by all.

Then in the seventies the aristocratic Muslim figure became the indolent, beetle-nut chewing, Nawab, squandering money on courtesans. At this time Muslim representation on screen meant either a gazal, or a Qwwali, or a Mujra on screen. Social realism was overlooked and there was a dearth of subtle and sensitive cinematic representation of Muslim culture. In later films, Muslim characters were on the margin as caricatured supporting characters and then in films like Company they became associated with the mafia network. Recently, the Muslim characterization has been more varied and we have more sensitive films like Zakhm which not only presents Muslim culture in a realistic way but also raises some serious questions. Thus, in the past few years Hindi cinema has shown a broader and more intellectual approach in the representation of Muslims and their culture.

One such film is Samar Khan directed Shaurya (2008). Set in present day Kashmir, Shaurya is a military

courtroom drama where the battle is of conscience, a battle for truth. The movie explores the very concept of bravery or valor and the concept of honour and it mainly focuses on the isolation of Indian Muslims. Javed Khan, a captain in Indian army is accused of murdering his senior fellow officer Major Virender Rathore during a search operation ordered by their commanding officer, Brigadier Rudra Pratap, in the Punj village of Kashmir, at point black range. The crisp court masshall which is refreshing and different from the usual courtroom drama of Hindi films initially makes us believe that it is an “open and shut case”. The prosecutor lawyer Aakash Kapoor asks his fun-loving friend Siddhant Choudhary who is the defense lawyer to just “square the deal” and ask for a plea bargain. The disloyalty of the Muslim protagonist is not hinted at but we are instantly reminded of the films like Sarfarosh and Khakhee where the Muslim characters were accused of terrorist activities. Shaurya explores the very identity of an Indian Muslim suggesting that he is marginalized and at a disadvantage because in a situation of crises he is the center of suspicion.

The dark and rainy opening is suggestive of the gravity of crime, but the very next frame takes us into the fun-loving and carefree world of bungee jumping by Siddant Choudhary. The director usually does no manipulation of chronology, no flashbacks (except one), but in this direct narration there is an element of withholding in the form of the chilling silence of Javed Khan who does not say anything in his defense.

The plot moves through a succession of spaces and slowly unfolds some very striking aspects of the army. From the audience point of view we start with a preset notion of Muslim culture as being more pro violent and fundamentalist in its approach but we are indifferent towards Javed Khan initially. It is Carols Catlan’s camera which gives language to Javed’s silence and his searching looks unnerves us. Awareness of a tremendously jammed up spatial scope is metaphorically echoed in the action of Siddhant when he tries to breathe in a limited and congesting area of a polybag on his face and exasperated he voices our opinion about Javed Khan situation “how can be breathe there is no circulation”. There is no room, no room for whom?

Over the years Muslim community is perceived as the “other”, the more violent one, the element inside the country responsible for unrest. As Amartya Sen says that “the pull towards internal separation of communities that has presented the strongest challenge in recent years to the integrity of Indian identity.”(Sen348) Sen states one of the popular views that the Muslims, in India have failed to see themselves first as Indians. From Muslim rulers who were always the other in this country to Jinnah’s “two nation theory” which has resulted in the view that “the Muslims left in India are unintegrated and are basically not “loyal” to India”. And this “include suspicions of Muslim disloyalty in contemporary India”. (Sen 299) However Sen himself does not believe in these arguments as there is no empirical evidence to prove this viewpoint.

The geographical location of the plot – Kashmir is connotative of alienation. It is alienated from the rest of the country in terms of political identity. Kashmir is not introduced with the usual picturesque beauty of mountains and valleys. Rather we are taken into a two by two room of local correspondent Kavya Shastri. It is only the background score that associates the scene with Kashmir. In fact, the valley scenes mainly have men in uniform in the background with references of special permit for driving, or sensitive zone, or terrorist being shot and so on. When Siddhant takes a tour of the scene of crime (punj village) It is a dilapidated village and the smalls camera shots of different villagers scared of the person in uniform, tells a sad and fragmented tale of the place. It is nothing like the paradise of Max Muller. It is now the realm of Brigdier Rudra Pratap Singh the commanding officer of Javed Khan and late Major Virendra Rathore. Dialogues by Aparna Malthotra must be given credit for making the characters interesting as well as highlighting their characteristics.

Brigadier Pratap says "People say that here either it is God or Brigadier Pratap." We expect humility after such a statement but B. Pratap absolutely surprises us and goes on to say "But I say to them that here both B. Pratap and God is me only". One line sums up the sheer arrogance and high handed attitude of this character which till the end not only intimidates but also eludes us. However, there is a sense of duty and discipline in his character which makes us to admire him too.

There is little change in location except for the lighter scenes between Siddhant and Kavya. Javed is in house arrest and most of the scenes are inside the courtroom setting.

The screenplay by Jaydeep Sarkar uses silence as resistance as the truth of Javed Khan is too dangerous for the honour and name of Indian army. His silence is questioned by the prosecution as whether he is trying to protect militants. In fact, his own defense lawyer Siddhant asks him "who are you, Javed Khan the soldier, or Javed Khan the militant" Here the constituent identity of Javed Khan, the Muslim, becomes more focused than his main identity of Javed Khan, the soldier, or rather Javed Khan, an Indian. Javed himself says "My name is Javed Khan and I am paying the price for being who I am." However, this character is attributed with no usual symbols that are associated with the Muslim image. It is believed that Hindi films exaggerate the cultural manifestations of the "other" communities be it Muslims or Christians or any other, and thus creates a stereotype image of these cultures. In this sense, Hindi films have consolidated the Muslims as separate culture.

Perhaps as a protest against a present image of Muslims, Samar Khan does not use any exaggerated or clearly marked features of dress, speech or religious practices to represent the religious identity of Javed. Critics believe that these external symbols segregate the Muslims and even marginalize them in the narration. So when Kavya Shastri goes to meet Javed Khan's mother the backdrop do not have any clearly identifiable association of a Muslim house. Art director Wasim Khan avoids using any of the usual background setting for the scene, the setting is neutral and the walls are entirely covered with Javed and his father's photographs in uniform. The language has no unusual Urdu words and the dress is simple. The camera moves from the walls to the mother, to indicate that the entire family's primary identity is associated with army.

Even when the mother meets Siddhant she says that if Javed is guilty he must be given death punishment, exhibiting a strong sense of honor and a deep loyalty for the army and the nation. This scene is in the garden where there are no visual connections of culture. Even Javed's own room is like any other soldier's room with medals and photographs and has no overt symbol associated with his religion. In fact we sometimes feel that in his attempt to dissociate the narration from the overtly Muslim symbols, Samar Khan has rendered the film apathetic in terms of sentiments. There is a dearth of emotional scenes. Even when the mother and son meet there is very little exchange of words. It appears that the script has given them only silences to express their stance.

The first seriously Muslim image is that of a funeral procession carrying a coffin, at the time when missing Captain R.P. Singh comes and tells Siddhant about the truth of Virender's murder. A truth which puts army to shame as the orders of killing innocent people were given by Brigadier Rudra Pratap himself and Javed was just trying to save a six year old girl from being shot. The praying motif so common to Muslim image comes towards the end just after the confession of R. P. Singh, when the audience knows that Javed is innocent. Here for the first time we see Javed with his head covered offering Namaz while in the background the sound of Azaan could be heard. Here for the first time the Muslim identity of Javed is reinforced on the screen, a Muslim who is not a terrorist. A fleeting image of praying by Javed's mother appears just before the final hearing of the court marshal.

In a cleverly manipulated memory game and finely cinematographed scene, Brigadier Pratap accepts Siddant's challenge to tell the truth about Jameel his Muslim servant who killed Brigadier Pratap's mother, wife, and daughter in December 1992 after the demolition of Babri Masjid in Ayodhya. This has led Pratap to generalize his hatred for the entire Muslim community and he says that by killing them he is cleaning the country. The truth leaves everyone including the audience aghast. In stunned silence Siddant rests his case and the high profile Brigadier Rudra Pratap Singh is charged under RPC 304 for culpable homicide. The truth of this enigmatic character who has strong views about everything from single malt whisky to the people around him leaves us speechless. The whole concept of valor is turned inside out. Who is braver? A man who, blinded by hatred, kills innocent people or a man who stands and fights for justice and honor without any fear. In fact, in the beginning itself Siddant questions martyrdom when he says about his dead father "When dad died, army found a hero, but I lost a father." A sense of personal loss forbids him to attend any ceremony held in honor of his father.

Hindi cinema is a powerful and very unique media which moves across the regional sections of the country and acts as a means of entertainment for a very large section of the population and hence its influence too is very extensive. This media have often been criticized on the point that it has a predominant north Indian male identity. However, one must remember that film representations are not without some base in reality. Probal Dasgupta in his article "Popular Cinema, India and Fantasy" says that film representations are for the pursuit of knowledge. He further says:

"Such a perspective raises questions about realism in representation and about the relations between struggles in society and such struggles in films, the problems of presenting conflict-portraying works through an ambiguous market mechanism to a problematic public, the effect of vivid or potent audio-visual imaging of the struggles on the public arena, the social reinforcement of the fetishized vividness and potency of the film image" (pg.4).

Even if the protagonist is a Muslim, how many films are there which shows a cliché free Muslim life. There are very few screen representations that show an ordinary man with everyday work and ordinary dreams of making high in career or to see his sons succeed, or any other such "normal" dream. This middle class ordinary identity is missing from Hindi films for a Muslim protagonist. The differences among Muslims of various regions and classes are also overlooked and they have become a composite other. This leads to a rather monolithic construction of the Muslim identity in which Muslims are viewed as backward, conservative and fundamentalist.

We know that repeated exposure to any visual media have its effect and it influences (perhaps subconsciously) the way we perceive things. The impact of films on people is multitudinous and therefore film as a media has greater responsibility to be careful about what it presents for a particular community.

CONCLUSIONS

Shaurya with its sensitive theme exploits the Muslim identity presenting an "Indian first" approach to the issue. As Shahrukh Khan's voice echoes on the screen that "Killing is not shaurya, rather it is a feeling deep within us to stand against all odds and fight for what is right". The film can be seen as a protest against exclusion and distrust and a cry for inclusion in the national family. It is a plea for a process of reconstruction of the entire Muslim image in the nation's eye and expresses a desire to be incorporated in the national space.

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