

## ***Purdein Mein Rehne Do: A Study of Veil in Popular Bollywood Movies***

**Shani.A. Mopila**

*The Veil is an integral part of different religious customs and practices throughout the world and has been conferred with multiple levels of cultural meanings. The Orientalists have always described the veiled women of the East as an exotic and mysterious source of the aesthetic embodiment of the female body. Bollywood films informed by early Oriental fantasies like Ali Baba and Forty Thieves and Aladdin had depicted the fantasy of the veiled women in numerous ways. The veil has functioned as the metaphorical partition between the Male voyeuristic gaze and the female body on the screen. This paper seeks to explore how the veil in Bollywood films has related itself to different meanings like virginity, exoticism, and eroticism on one hand and to oppression and Islamophobia on the other. This study shall focus on how with the utilization of symbols like Veil, Bollywood produces and popularizes certain meanings and discourses surrounding Muslim women and how the spectators interpret and consume them. The paper also examines how the connotative meanings of the veil are constructed in the films under study using the 'Dominant Code' postulated by Stuart Hall. Through analyzing these films, it can be seen how the veil as a cultural symbol and spatial division facilitates a play of several connotative meanings associated with different cultural and political settings and how it defines the female body.*

**Keywords:** Bollywood- Purdah/Veiling system- Spectacle- Orientalism- Colonialism- Muslim women- Cultural metaphor- Visual sign- Voyeurism- Male gaze- Popular Culture- Dominant Code- Islamophobia- Hijab-Ban- Resistance

Film is an art form with a language system of its own. It's language is constructed through the visual symbol which give interpretation to each shot. According to film theoretician Christian Metz, in the filmic articulation, it is the denotation itself that is being constructed, organized, and codified to produce certain meanings (99).

Stuart Hall had observed how the positioning of the visual signs in different fields of meaning and association intersects with the semantic codes and ideologies of culture (123). The visual sign works similarly to a linguistic sign, where there are two levels of interpretation conveyed to the viewers, ie. the denotative and connotative meaning. The denotative meaning conveys its meaning mostly in an objective manner whereas the connotative meanings are achieved through the amalgamation of the visual sign with the existing cultural codes and the understanding of the viewers (122). The fluid nature of visual signs is utilized in films for injecting deeply embedded codes or meanings into the spectator's mind.

According to Hall, any society or culture tries to impose its classifications of the social, cultural and political world which constitute a dominant cultural order even if it is not uncontested (121). The same order can be seen reflected in cultural products like films. The present understanding of the veil as a marker of Islamic identity has been rendered in Bollywood according to this dominant cultural order. The connotative meanings which are produced by it are constructed in the films under study in a manner where the audience will receive the message underlying it as exactly as desired and directed by the dominant powers who constitute it. Hall explains this as the Dominant/ Preferred Code in mass media including advertisements, television or films in his work *Culture, Media, Language* (125). Films utilize hegemonic and dominant definitions, which reappropriate events and situations according to the dominant ideology of the period and are coded into the films which are in turn decoded by the audience. When the message is coded and decoded in a shared plane of cultural

meaning, the audience can be seen as functioning under the Dominant code. The films produced in Bollywood represent the veil on par with the political and cultural demands of the respective period.

The veil is a visual sign when it comes to film language. Being an integral part of women's culture and lifestyle around the world, it carries several meanings and values which translate themselves according to different historical and political contexts of the films. Like any visual sign, the veil can also be employed in reinforcing certain social and cultural meanings associated with it. Examining its representation in Bollywood movies could reveal how certain meanings are reinforced in Indian society through visual media.

As in itself, the veil is nothing but a piece of fabric which has no essential meaning but which achieves its meaning by adapting itself into the context of the film scene and narrative to produce the desired meaning. The incorporation of the veil in different forms and contexts in the film produces different levels of cultural and political meanings. The films examined in this paper belong to various categories of Bollywood like Eastern romances, Historicals, Socials and Contemporary films. These films reflect the cultural assumptions shared by both producers and audiences of the period. The early romances based on fairytales and oriental legends had preferred the element of spectacle from the beginning. The scene from *Gul-e Bakavali* (1924) where the veiled fairy princess emerges from the lotus flower is an example of this. While the historicals had the purpose of exemplifying the royal demeanour and Islamic decorum of Mughals through their veiled queens, the Muslim socials showed the decline of the Purdah system and the advent of modernity into the lives of Indian Muslims. In the films of post-1990, we can discern a wave of transformation which was in contrast to what the earlier films tried to denote with the symbolism of the veil. The appropriation of the veil in films like *Bombay* (1995) gives a clear indication of the same. Before analysing the symbolism and political dimensions of the veil in detail, a basic understanding of the concept of veiling in different cultures is necessary.

‘Veil’ refers to any material which obscures the clear visibility of an object. The female practice of veiling has been located in several

religions and cultures but none had become the locus of so many academic and political discussions as the Islamic veiling. It has been a subject of several cultural debates since the colonial period itself. Now it has become the source of serious national controversies surrounding the minority political rights in India. When some nations like Italy and Germany have imposed restrictions on wearing the full-face veil (niqab) and hijab (headscarf), France and Turkey had introduced laws which ban wearing the same in public spaces. Similarly, in 2022, following the conflict between Muslim girl students and their educational institution over the right to wear hijab inside the campus, the Karnataka High Court upheld the ban on hijab and niqab. The court observed that the hijab is not an essential religious practice under Islam and hence not covered under the fundamental rights of citizens. These state-sponsored responses to the Islamic veiling are seen not only as the enforcement of secular ideology and uniformity among its citizens but also as an act of ‘stigmatizing’ the cultural practice or symbol of a specific community. Thus, the question arises why the Islamic veil occupies such a central position in political or cultural discussions unlike the Hindu Ghunghat or Christian veils.

The origin of the veil and the female practice of veiling has been inherently linked with Islam. But Mohja Khaf in her essay *From Her Royal Body the Robe Was Removed: The Blessings of the Veil and the Trauma of Forced Unveilings in the Middle East* observes that the origin of the veil predated Islam.

Christian women in the Near East veiled long before the advent of Islam and continued to veil in Europe until the twelfth century (they did not unveil because of an increase in gender equality; in fact, medieval scholars regard the Gregorian reforms of that era as a nadir for European women’s rights). Before them, Jewish women veiled, as did Roman, Greek, Zoroastrian, Assyrian, and Indian women, among many of whom veiling was a privilege belonging to women of the upper classes and aspired to by lower-class women. Women veiled in the ancient pagan Near East. Statuettes of veiled priestesses date back to 2500 B.C.E., long before any of the three Abrahamic religions. (27)

The Christian bride often wears an embroidered white veil on the occasion of a wedding. The mourning veils used by women are usually dark-coloured and signify grief. Christian women are also seen covering their heads while attending church ceremonies. The consecration of nuns involves 'receiving the habit' which is the headscarf and attire of the nun.

In the Hindu system of veiling, the piece of cloth is referred to as '*Ghungat*' and is mostly practiced in rural areas of North Indian states like Gujarat, Rajasthan and Maharashtra, where wearing a '*Ghungat*' is part of showing respect to elders or men generally. They only unveil inside their private spheres. *Ghungat* also separates the space shared by men and women in public. *Ghungat* is worn by the women to keep her *laaj*/ modesty.

The Islamic system of veiling consists of different modes of covering the female body. The word '*Purdah*' in Hindi/Urdu language is used to denote the practice of seclusion or covering up. It is defined in Merriam Webster as the 'seclusion of women from public observation among Muslims and some Hindus, especially in India.' In royal courts or households, the area occupied by the womenfolk is usually separated and covered with curtains or transparent fabric so they are not directly visible to unrelated men. As this is not practical outside the household space, women keep their modesty by covering themselves with *Burqa* or *Niqab* which conceals the entire body including the face. The *hijab* or the headscarf which covers the head leaving out the face is also popular among Muslim women. There are Quranic verses which endorse the use of the veil or hijab as a means of modesty for pious women: "And tell the believing women to lower their gaze and to be mindful of their chastity, and not to display their charms [in public] beyond what may [decently] be apparent thereof; hence, let them draw their head-coverings over their bosoms" (Verse 24:30).

Islamic veiling is essentially aimed at mainly three functions: 1) to create spatial separation between the public male gaze and female privacy 2) to differentiate the social positioning of a female 3) as a symbol of adherence to pious and modest behaviour (*Haya*). In India, with a significant population of Muslims, the non-representation of

Islamic culture in films would seldom have been possible and the representation of Islam could not be ever possible without the veil.

Faegheh Shirazi in his work *The Veil Unveiled: The Hijab in Modern Culture* shows how the Indian filmmakers appropriate the veil in films:

They (Indian filmmakers) use the veil to draw the spectator's gaze. Sneaking a peek under the veil of a beautiful woman becomes a tantalizing game not only for the male protagonist but also for the spectator. The huge success of the Indian film—the Indian movie industry is the largest in the world—inside India as well as outside, especially in the Middle East, shows that the Indian filmmakers' use of the veil appeals to large audiences (63).

Bollywood, which was well informed by Persian and Arab legends had tried to reproduce it on the screen from its very beginning itself (Bhaskar and Allen 4). In the early years of the Hindi film industry there existed films based on oriental romances and fantasies like *Gul-e Bakavali* (1924) by Kanjibhai Rathod, Mehboob Khan's *Alibaba* (1940) and *Aladdin and the Wonderful Lamp* (1952) by Homi Wadia which visualized fantasies of the East. Along with deserts, date palms, camels and treasures, the veiled Oriental women also became an essential part of the spectacle. These women represented the exotic charm of the East which was to be re-created for the Indian viewers. They were sensual and mostly erotic, their veils covering half of their face and part of their garments often transparent with glittering ornaments. The representations of Muslim women in these films were far removed from reality.

In these films, the veil stood for oriental fantasies. The veiled women symbolized the hidden treasures in the desert. It symbolized the sensual Arabian fantasies and formed part of the magic land of the east. The veiled figures were either queens or dancers. They represented authority or servitude. The dancers were veiled to arouse the male voyeuristic desires by revealing and hiding the female body at the same time. The Indian spectators were fed what the western orientalist had already cooked for their audience. The western fantasies and biases were reproduced on the Indian screen without much scrutiny.

When the colonizers encountered the Islamic world, they found the veil not only as a hindrance to their gaze but also as a challenge to their imperialist desires. The veil created an obstacle which obstructed their desire to look, the desire to possess and the desire to invade the female body. This obstructed desire was reproduced in European art forms and films where the veiled Muslim women were either fetishized, eroticized or oppressed. The dancers whom they witnessed in East served well for the purpose. Malek Alloula in his work *The Colonial Harem* observed how the obstructed voyeuristic desire of French photographers who accompanied the colonizers made them portray Algerian women as erotic and nude in their postcards by falsification and treachery (7).

The famed Hindi song *Pardhein Mein Rehne Do* from the film *Shikar* (1968) directed by Atma Ram exhibits the western fetish of the seductive belly dancer which is one of the most popular stereotypes of Arab woman standing in contrast to the generally submissive roles of the burqa-clad women.

Mere parde me lakh jalve hai  
 Kaise mujhse nazar milaoge?  
 Jab zara bhi naqab uthaungi  
 Yaad rakhna ki jal hi jaoge!  
 There are numerous magics in my veil  
 How will your gaze meet mine?  
 When I will raise my mask for a while  
 Remember you will burn for sure! (00:24:30-52)

The song and dance sequence here is an oriental spectacle recreated in Bollywood where the women are portrayed according to the popular representation of Arab, Persian or Egyptian female dancers known as ‘Odalisque’ in popular European literature and films during the 19<sup>th</sup> century. Assunção and Paschoal in their article *Orientalism in Motion: Representations of “Belly Dance” in Paintings and Travel Literature* observes that the choreographic stereotype of oriental belly dancers is largely derived from the Orientalist productions (12). The lead dancer (Kiran) is hidden behind multiple layers of colourful veils and the characters dressed up as Arab men unveil and exhibit her. Here the veil is not used to convey piety or modesty but it

is utilized to present an exotic and erotic spectacle of the female body which engages with the audience. There is a flirtatious invitation to look at the sexualized body of the dancer and simultaneous resistance to the direct penetration of the male gaze with the aid of the veil, which altogether stages a 'peekaboo game' on screen.

In Homi Wadia's *Aladdin Aur Jadui Chirag* (1952) when Aladdin is brought to the King's court, Princess Badar and her maids appear with transparent thin veils over their faces. He makes pleas to Badar to unveil her face to which she complies but, in another scene, where Nazim her fiancé enters her private quarters, she draws the curtain around her and then addresses him only after wearing a veil which covers her face. When Nazim asks her to reveal her face to him, she retorts that he is crossing his limits. Then he vows to marry her and unveils her himself. In this instance, the veil is a symbol of the boundaries set around a woman which Nazim is trying to transgress. Badar unveils herself before Aladdin as she accepts him as her lover but refuses to show her face to Nazim because despite being her fiancé Badar dislikes him and considers him as a man 'unrelated' to her.

Muslim Historical films which are based on the Mughal empire show women in veil or purdah (seclusion) where the queens/begums are often depicted as seated beside the emperor or separately. Even in court gatherings, they are independently seated by the men using a transparent or opaque cloth veil. The conversations/ ghazals/ songs are addressed to both sides, but the veil does not permit direct viewing of each other. We can see this in films like *Taj Mahal* (1963) where Arjuman Banu (Mumtaz Mahal) is seated behind Shah Jahan inside a transparent veil. The veil in these contexts prevents the unrelated men from seeing the Queen but it permits her to partake in court hearings or political affairs.

In *Mughal-e-azam* (1960) by K. Asif, Anarkali is presented as a veiled statue before Prince Salim on the occasion of his victorious return from the battlefield. Veiled under a white curtain, she becomes an object to be looked and appreciated for its craftsmanship. Salim, in a display of his archery skills, unveils her with an arrow which points to his power as well as the authority to penetrate the forbidden female



space. The veil here serves the function of exciting curiosity of the beholders. The veil which cloaks the ‘*kaneez*’ (servant girl) transforms her into an auspicious and valuable ‘gift’. On their wedding night, Salim unveils Anarkali before the consummation of their love. The act of unveiling is symbolic of the intense love and longing the couple share and also a marker of the lady’s purity or ‘virginity’, that is about to be rightfully claimed by her husband. It also carries the connotation of Salim trying to uncover what is forbidden to him and how unveiling the forbidden has its tragic consequences.

In *Mere Mehboob* (1963) directed by H. S. Rawail, the protagonist Anwar falls in love with a burqa-clad woman named Husna but as she is veiled, her identity is unknown to him. The desire to view her unveiled face is explicit in the song “*Mehboob Mere*” in which he addresses his desperate love.

In the space of the college, Anwar and Husna have met as social equals, their backgrounds irrelevant to the blossoming of their love. But when they travel (back) to Lucknow, the representative home of the Muslim Social, and in the larger cultural imagination, the symbolic embodiment of traditional Muslim social life as the epitome of cultured, civilized interaction, modern romance, or love at first sight, is threatened by the institution of purdah, an atavistic code of family honour, and the social distinctions and hierarchies it is designed to preserve (Souliotis 272).

*Saamne aake zaraa pardaa uthaa de rukh se*

*Ek yahin mera ilaaj-e-gham-e-tanhaayii hai*

Please come in front of me and lift the veil hiding your face,

This is the only solution to the sorrow of my solitude

(00:07:07-25)

In the song sequence, Anwar refers to the veil as the obstacle which keeps him from getting united with his lover and which restricts his entry into the hidden realm of beauty that she possesses. The veil is the symbolic curtain which prevents Anwar to consummate his love, both emotionally and physically. It allows Husna to witness Anwar’s public display of love to her through the song, but at the same time, she can hide her identity which also protects her modesty. Veil here stands for the metaphorical blindness which prevents him

from seeing his beloved's face, which can only be cured by the removal of it. The film which projects the growing Nehruvian secularism symbolizes the veil as a social barrier to modernity which segregates the male and female spaces in public spheres as in a college where the two sexes intermingle. The only purpose of the veil in the film is to serve as a prop in the dramatical structuring of the story and to add to the mystery surrounding the veiled figure. In other scenes, Husna rarely wears the veil.

In her essay *Visual Pleasures and Narrative Cinema*, Laura Mulvey explains how the woman on the screen facilitates the pleasure of looking. She supports her argument with the help of Freud's theory which is based upon scopophilia that regards other people as objects, subjecting them to a controlling gaze and deriving erotic pleasure out of it (16).

In a world ordered by sexual imbalance, pleasure in looking has been split between active/male and passive/female. The determining male gaze projects its fantasy onto the female figure, which is styled accordingly. In their traditional exhibitionist role, women are simultaneously looked at and displayed, with their appearance coded for strong visual and erotic impact so that they can be said *to-be-looked-at-ness* (19).

In a visual narrative depicting a veiled female figure, the male gaze, symbolized by the camera lens, the male actor or the audience fails to penetrate beyond the veil and invade the female body. The veil poses a challenge to the absolute functioning of the camera, the third person omniscient God-like view is blocked away by the veil. Now the camera must appropriate the veil discreetly in a manner that arouses the desire of the spectator instead of satisfying it. There is erotic arousal of male desire which is postponed instead of immediate exposure to the female body, leaving ample scope for 'yearning' which is the most prominent emotion in Bollywood romances. When the veil takes up the intermediate space between the male gaze and the female object, it disrupts the pleasure which arises from the scopophilic looking. The female is no more available as the visual object or the scrutiny of the erotic male gaze of the camera, audience, or the characters on the screen. She is placed in a separate realm of the

unknown and hidden which resists the penetration of the gaze. She is no longer even the subject of looking because the identity of the female under the veil is incomprehensible.

The only thing left is the imaginary ruminations which take place mostly as song sequences or dialogues which describe the imagined beauty of her physical form and the desire to see her face or body. The hindrance that the veil offers is often characterized as an agony inflicted upon the lover by his beloved, her family or her culture.

In Manmohan Desai's *Amar Akbar Antony* (1977) the famous song sequence *Parda he Parda* uses the Veil as an oppressive instrument which creates a hindrance to the secular temperament of the Indian audience of the Nehruvian era.

Parda he parda  
 Parde ke peeche pardanasheen hai  
 Pardanasheen ko beparda na kar doon toh  
 Akbar mera naam nahi hai  
 There's a veil  
 There's a woman behind the veil.  
 If I don't unveil the woman behind the veil  
 Then my name is not Akbar (00:35:15-35)

Here the lover is a trespasser, eve teaser and upholder of secular values who does not believe in the seclusion of Muslim women inside the veil. The entry of Salma Ali, his lover with her female relatives all veiled and in the guardianship of her father evokes a caricature of the Islamic community casting them as slaves under the patriarchal 'monsters' who imprison their women inside veils, hidden and separated from their beloved's gaze. Through the song, he inspires Salma to lift her veil which she is eager to do and which gives a further connotative meaning that the veiled women are curious to reveal themselves.

"*Parda Hai Parda*" proves to be both a by-product of and contributor to the Indian discourse on the veil. The sequence depicts a multitude of direct responses to societal norms. It makes an attempt to challenge the status quo of female veiling, which serves to negotiate identity and social spaces in multiple forms. Multiple allusions to Indian Islamic life within the context of Hindu India

have a number of implications for interpreting the sequence's meaning (44).

With the influence of the English culture and the advent of modern education, discarding the purdah system came to be regarded as the mark of progress in many elite Muslim families of India and many prominent Muslim women were against purdah. Qudsiya Begum, the first of Bhopal Begums who ruled from 1819 to 1837 had discarded purdah for herself and her daughters (221). Ismat Chughtai, the famed Urdu writer of the 1950s had also written about how the abolishment of the veil had demystified the superficial romances which flourished based on imagination and which caused psychological complications (435).

The idea of covering/ revealing has its connection with the European understanding of the 'Self'. The Humanists tried to portray the truest and most natural forms of human beings. The enlightenment philosophies and influence of Greek/Latin art forms made nudity appealing in European renaissance art. The European man had the privilege of scrutinizing nudity as the ultimate reality of human existence. John Berger observes in his work *The Ways of Seeing* (1972):

In the average European oil painting of the nude, the principal protagonist is never painted. He is the spectator in front of the picture and he is presumed to be a man. Everything is addressed to him. Everything must appear to be the result of his being there; it is for him that the figures have assumed their nudity. But he, by definition, is a stranger - with his clothes still on. (54)

The Islamic veil takes away this particular privilege to 'see' by covering the female body. Not only the veil negates the erotic pleasure of consuming the nudity, but it also refuses to reveal the female body in any desirable forms endorsed by the capitalist culture.

Culturally empathetic understanding of Islamic traditions is rarely found in the popular discourses, especially in Bollywood which always uses the symbols of green flags, crescent-star, skullcaps and veils as visible markers of 'Muslim otherness'. They are mostly understood from the dominant secular perspectives which assume themselves in a 'civilized' position which can undermine other cultures.

The political turn after the 1990s accelerated a cultural climate which had welcomed the portrayal of Muslim characters in Bollywood as a threat to the nation's peace. For this, the characters of Muslim terrorists, smugglers and misogynists were widely incorporated into mainstream films. With the increased visibility of aggressive Muslim men, the characters of Muslim women caught in the struggle for freedom from these men also gain popularity. The easiest method to mark the Muslim woman in the secular settings of the Bollywood film was to portray them in a hijab or burqa. When the veiled women in Muslim historicals or socials indicated Islamic traditions and the flux with modernity, in later films it carried the connotation of the captivated Muslim woman who is awaiting her 'saviour' to bring her out of the veil.

As Sarah Farris critically examines in her work *In the Name of Women's Rights: The Rise of Femonationalism*, women's organizations and the western nations single out Islamic religious practices as patriarchal and as a threat in public spaces. They all endorse legal proposals banning veil/hijab and portray Muslim women as submissive and needing protection (2). Indian Right Wing with its orthodox Hindu religious dogmas had tactfully imported the same for marginalising the Muslim community. The negative portrayal of the veil/hijab in post-1990 Bollywood is a reflection of this. The veil or burqa in films like *Bombay* (1995), *Lipstick under my Burqa* (2016) and *Secret Superstar* (2017) functions as a signifier which encodes different allusions into the already established popular discourses formed around it.

*Bombay* was set during the time of communal unrest in India, i.e., post-1990, and the film carried a clear reference to the controversial Rathyathra and demolition of Babri Masjid which led to widespread violence in and around Bombay. But for constructing a secular hero from a Hindu uppercase community, where the communal markers are invisible in his body and ideology, the heroine has to be constructed in a way where the burqa translates to the orthodox Muslim religion. Shaila is shown in burqa only until she is united with Shekhar, her transformation is completed by taking off the burqa. Shekhar is desperate to unveil Shaila, to rescue her from her 'oppressed state' and to consummate with her. The Muslim woman, to be elevated into

the secular realm of the hero must shed off her burqa, the second skin of religion that envelopes, hides, and binds her. The burqa must be torn off to embark on the journey to freedom.

The song ‘*Tu hi re*’ from the film can be translated as a Muslim woman’s conflict with her religious identity where the burqa becomes the core signifier of it. Shaila is desperate to be united with Shekhar but the burqa becomes the obstacle in her way, it stands for all the adverse forces of her family, society and religion which divide them. The burqa translates to a prison house from which she must flee.

In *Secret Superstar* and *Lipstick Under My Burqa*, the veil/burqa functions differently in different stages. In the first stage, both Rehana and Insiya appropriate burqa for anonymity. They feel secure in the anonymity offered by the Burqa which becomes a means for satisfying their desire. Rehana wants to live a life of freedom and luxury and Insiya wants to establish herself as a singer, both are possible only through the anonymity offered by the burqa. But then the same burqa becomes a hindrance to the visibility of Rehana’s beauty and Insiya’s fame. They must come out of their veil to attain public visibility. To take off the burqa or to unveil becomes synonymous with freedom and liberation. But even when the veil is presented in the film as the marker of invisibility and anonymity of Muslim women, critics like Emma Tarlo opine that when in a minority context, the veil gives the women a particular kind of contrasted and heightened visibility which marks them as well as Islamic culture and dressing as different from the others (9). When Rehana enters the secular space of her college, among the fashionably dressed students, her veiled figure stands out of place and in stark contrast to that of others.

The two films *Secret Superstar* and *Lipstick Under My Burqa* equally succeed in symbolizing the veil as the dark oppressive force which confines the Muslim woman and blocks her path to ultimate emancipation. Even if it can be utilized as a means of hiding one’s identity, the idea of ‘success’ and ‘liberation’ is closely tied to revealing one’s identity. Rehana must reveal her modern ‘self’ before her collegemates for social recognition. Insiya must reveal her identity as a singer before her audience to win their appreciation. The character

of Rehana is extended as a threat to public order when in the burqa as in the scene of theft in the mall, but she is portrayed as courageous in jeans where she shouts for her rights. There is visible contrast in perceiving the practising Muslim woman and the modern Muslim woman. The films suggest that the negation of the veil helps the Muslim woman to acquire education and liberation for stepping into the modern society but in reality, a major section of practising Muslim women find it difficult to enter the educational institutions and workplaces without their veil/ hijab. This further aggravates their marginal position in society. In a political context where India's Right-wing politicians and international NGOs are extensively trying to criminalize Islam in the name of women's rights and protecting Muslim women, films like these function as a site of ideological reproduction of the dominant political order.

Thus, the semiotics of the veil in Bollywood has undergone continuous transition, conferring upon it different levels of connotative meanings which further explains the socio-political and cultural settings of India. What began as an eastern charm in early Bollywood romances, the representation of the Islamic veil attains more politically charged meanings in post-1990 films. These films carry a subtle ideology which states that negation of the veil is a compulsory process of secularization for the Muslim woman, only through which she can attain her liberty and 'belong' to the Nation. The right-wing political bloc which had always taken an ambiguous stance towards the Muslim women of India becomes more and more explicit in their visible communal bigotry by vowing their support towards despotic laws like the Karnataka Hijab ban. This dominant ideology which sees the veiled or hijabi woman as a threat, more to the majority community than to the secular configuration of the nation tries to subtly incorporate the message that the veil is an Islamic tradition which is forced upon the Muslim women who by the acceptance of it can be a potential threat to the nation's religious harmony.

The films examined in this paper belonging to the Muslim Historicals and Socials utilize the veil as the artefact of Islamic cultural tradition of modesty where even looking at a veiled woman was considered impolite. The veiled women were aestheticized for

producing a mysterious and romantic aura in these films. But films post-1990s, especially beginning from *Bombay*, appropriate the veil as a marker of the backwardness and orthodoxy of the Muslim community. As an Ideological State Apparatus in Althusser's formulation and as a form of Dominant Coding in Hall's terms, these films try to incorporate the veil's meaning into socio-political scenarios where the veiled woman is always a victim of Islamic patriarchy. The cultural meanings of the veil ranging from the symbol of plurality to means of resistance against the hegemonic regime under which the minority Muslims function are altogether invisible in these narratives. The films which portray Islamic veiling as a hindrance to the freedom of Muslim women do not analyze how they negotiate and utilize it. The rendering of the veil in these films are indicators of the dominant political and cultural readings in India which define the veil/hijab as a 'negative communal marker' rather than a religious or cultural practice.

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**Shani.A.Mopila**

Junior Research Fellow (PhD)

PG & Research Dept. of English

Govt. Victoria College

Palakkad, India

Pin: 678001

Ph: +91 9496217796