



Research article

Savage Desires: Afghanistan as a Site for Othering in *Dharmatma* and *Khuda Gawah*

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Abstract

This paper aims to explore how Afghanistan is represented in two mainstream Bollywood films from the pre-9/11 period using Orientalism as a theoretical framework. While much literature exists on Afghanistan being Orientalized in Hollywood films, Bollywood representations of Afghanistan have not been studied from similar critical lenses. With the recent takeover of Afghanistan by the Taliban after a twenty-year-long war, it is more urgent than ever today to examine Bollywood representations of Afghanistan given the crucial importance of India as a key geopolitical entity in the region. The paper shall study two films from the pre-9/11 period in order to understand if Bollywood has Orientalized the region like mainstream Hollywood films. Bollywood films well known for taking their influences from Hollywood productions, make it likely to be the case.

Keywords: Afghanistan, Noble Savage, Orientalism, Othering, Bollywood, Hollywood, *Dharmatma*, *Khuda Gawah*, 9/11, US Media.



Peace, Justice and Strong Institutions

Introduction

For over a century, Hollywood films have often been a vehicle of propaganda against many marginalized peoples across the world such as Arabs and Muslims, this phenomenon can be attributed to what we call Orientalism, an idea that posits in simple terms that the Occident has been involved in misrepresenting the Orient for its interests. With the eighteenth century as a rough starting point, the dominance of the Christian Occident over the rest of the world excepting the Islamic Orient has led Europe to antagonize Islam (Said, 1979). From the pre-9/11 period Hollywood has released over a thousand films with Arab images in them, the vast majority of which dehumanizes them while also maligning Islam. Such evidence demonstrates the existence of an Orientalist gaze long before 9/11 (Shaheen, 2009, 2), and serves to justify the invasion and

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oppression of the Muslim Orient. The Rambo films—*First Blood* (1982), *Rambo: First Blood Part II* (1984), *Rambo III* (1988)—and the Indiana Jones films—*The Raiders of the Lost Ark* (1981), *Indiana Jones and the Temple of Doom* (1984), *Indiana Jones and the Last Crusade* (1989) are among the many popular examples. These movies exoticize and antagonize the Arab/oriental other. Afghanistan, having been a site of war, has often been subjected to the same Orientalist gaze. Bollywood films have been no exception to this. The depiction of Afghanistan in these films shows us that Afghans have been subjected to the same stereotypes of barbarians and turban-wearing terrorists. Like many Hollywood films where the humanity of the Westerner is elevated while denigrating Arabs and Muslims (p.2), some Bollywood films seem to offer the same formula in presenting Afghanistan where the Westerner is replaced by the Indian.

This recurrent pattern is captured in the films *Dharmatma* (1975) and *Khuda Gawah* (1991), which depict Afghan people through Orientalist tropes. While the motivations for Hollywood's Oriental gaze toward Muslims are well understood, Bollywood's Orientalist gaze towards Afghanistan raises a crucial question: In what way are Bollywood representations of Afghanistan similar or different to that of Hollywood films? Building on previous studies, this paper shall carry out a close reading of *Dharmatma* and briefly discuss *Khuda Gawah* to trace this hegemonizing tendency. The films have been selected based on their reference to Afghanistan as a setting or to the Afghan persona and the consideration that the films are created by major directors and have big budgets or well-known actors as a way to define what we may understand as mainstream Bollywood productions.

The pre-9/11 films on Afghanistan present the romantic conception of Orientalism where the Afghan character is portrayed as a noble savage. The exponent of the idea of noble savage, Jean Jacques Rousseau contends that "science, letters and the arts are the worst enemies of morals" since they have created wants and have led to the slavery of other populations. Science and virtue are held to be incompatible due to their ignoble origins. Hence the conclusion "everything that distinguished the civilized man from the untutored barbarian is evil". The definition denigrates colonized populations by imputing them as savages who may have some wisdom to teach the civilized Europeans but are nonetheless inferior (Russell, 1945, p. 687). Though these films do not seem to demonize the Afghans deliberately, they provided a model for later films. *Dharmatma* (1975) presents Afghan characters in the mould of the noble savage, through the Afghan national sport *buzkashi* where they are presented as individuals who are honourable yet lawless and barbaric as well as pitching a romantic vision of a natural, uncorrupted Afghanistan as a foil to the modernized, corrupt India. These early films are similar to mainstream Hollywood films in their themes and are perhaps significantly influenced by them. One such film is *The Horseman* (1971) which features the story of an Afghan man named Uraz whose ambition is to become a *buzkashi* player of great prowess. Although the film is shot in Afghanistan, and the narrative is told from the perspective of the main character, it suffers the pitfalls of an Orientalist gaze (Graham, 2010). The sport of *buzkashi* is one where hundreds of men on horses race towards a goatskin—whip and jostle each other to acquire it and carry it back to the goalpost on horseback at the risk of injuring themselves and getting trampled to death by falling from their horses. The nature of this game not only makes for an exotic spectacle but also conflates the Afghans with savagery. In his work, Graham suggests how the sport came to represent a need for uninhibited use of force or what he describes as an "ability to win without conscience or remorse" or the "Machiavellian drive

to absolute victory at all cost" as a prescription for the American military in the backdrop of the Vietnam war (pp. 19-20). Just like in *The Horseman*, the Afghan national sport *buzkashi* presented as a spectacle of savagery is found in both the Bollywood films where they have been used to represent the Afghan characters as noble savages. Informed by Stuart Hall's concept of identification as a process in which meanings are drawn "from both the discursive and the psychoanalytic repertoire without being limited to the other" (Hall, 1996, p. 2) we shall study how the films construct and bring attention to the noble savage trope in Afghan characters through a contrast with Indian ones in view of a romanticized Afghanistan.

Othering in *Dharmatma* through Fixation and Disavowal

In *Dharmatma*, the romantic conception of a primitive, uncorrupted world is pitched against the modernized and corrupt urban space. A romanticized Afghanistan is lent through the feature of mountain ranges, *buzkashi*, horsemen, headbutting rams, gypsies, fortune telling, etcetera. On the other side, we have the story of a corrupt man and his righteous son in the city. The movie conforms to the stereotype of the other as the Afghan "noble savage" and the Indian counterpart as the civilized, noble self. Following Bhabha's thoughts, I shall demonstrate how the Afghan other is constructed within Bollywood's Orientalist vision. Through Bhabha's theory of the colonial other, the paper will attempt to explain how the self-other dichotomy is not a clean opposing division, but that the other is nested within the self as a projection and how it is in relation to the self that the noble savage trope is constructed in the imaginary through the processes of fixation and disavowal

Bhabha's ideas around the colonial other largely draw from the area of psychoanalysis. Using the ideas of Freud, Lacan, and Fanon, he suggests that the construction of the colonial subject takes place through a complex process of disavowal and fixation as demonstrated by Fanon's primal scene which illustrates "looking/hearing/reading as sites of subjectification in colonial discourse" through the Lacanian schema of the imaginary. He explains further that in "stereotypical racial discourse," the identity of the self and other is formed through a fixation on aspects of oneself that are absent in the other as a "positive metaphor" and the disavowal of aspects of the other absent in oneself perceived as a "negative metonymy" or what Bhabha describes as the "play between the metaphoric/narcissistic and metonymic/aggressive moments in colonial discourse from the "imaginary" as points of identity and origin". In other words, the identity of the colonial other is formed in simultaneity to the self, suggesting an existence of the other within the self (Bhabha, 1994, pp. 109-110, 116).

In *Dharmatma* we find the construction of the noble savage trope through the metonymic fetish, the heroine Reshma, the object of desire, as the locus around which the Indian hero and his Afghan rival in love are constituted as the fixated self and disavowed other and through *buzkashi* as a paean to the Afghan culture in the play of metaphoric narcissism and metonymic aggression. The film though inspired by *The Godfather* (1972) in its premise of having a philanthropist crime lord and a son reluctant to take up his position, is actually based on the infamous real-life Indian Matka king, Ratan Khatri and not least of all different in that many of the scenes were shot in Afghanistan and has many musical sequences that are the usual marker of Bollywood films (Kohli, 2016). The film tells the story of the wealthy and influential Seth Dharamdas, who, having acquired his power

through gambling and drug dealing, is above the law's reach. His idealistic and righteous son Ranveer, however, does not like him on account of his criminal activities. Having returned from abroad after completing his education, he confronts his father for his illegal activities and righteously denounces him as a criminal. Though Dharmatma tells him of all the charity he has done with his money, Ranveer repudiates him explaining that the ills he has caused do not amount to the good he has done:

Do you think if you ruin countless homes through gambling and then feed a few poor people it makes you a Dharmatma? After killing thousands, if you balm the wounds of a few do you become a Dharmatma? After making the government lose in millions, does wiping the tears of a few orphans make you a Dharmatma? No, dad! If all this is right according to you then only God only knows what will happen to our country! (*Dharmatma*, 1975, 0:26:03-0:26:27).

In his idealism, Ranveer further warns his father of his inevitable fate in the hands of the law, "you may be able to keep society at your feet but not the law. No one is so powerful that the law can't get to him. There's still time, dad. Stop all your illegal activities before the cruel hands of the law crush you" (*Dharmatma*, 1975, 0:26:44-0:27:00). The altercation ends with Dharmatma slapping him in anger, after which, Ranveer goes to find peace in the primitive uncorrupted Afghanistan away from the modernized, corrupt India. The title of the film *Dharmatma* meaning "righteous man" is to be understood as an ironic reference to the character Seth Dharamdas, the Dharmatma in name, as well as a reference to Ranveer as the Dharmatma in substance. In the self-other dichotomy, Ranveer is fixated or identified with the righteous Indian self and Dharamdas with the corrupt Indian other.

In the film we find the civilized Indian hero, Ranveer contrasted to his rival in romance and Afghan counterpart Jangura. While Ranveer is dressed in a grey suit and is portrayed as an idealistic and self-righteous character evident from the altercation with his father, Jangura is portrayed as a hot-headed, excitable, cruel, and lustful character in the garb of a tribal man. Jangura is introduced to the screen as the man pursuing Reshma (the heroine) through the woods. Although Reshma is being pursued, she playfully tells him that he can only have her only if she allows it. Jangura, however, does not heed her words and wrestles her into submission. It is at this juncture that Ranveer calls out on Jangura from his horse and saves Reshma. Ranveer, having already been identified in the positive attributes of self against the negative ones of his father, is thus presented as the Indian self in relation to his rival in love, Jangura, the Afghan other identified as a lustful person pursuing his object of desire, the heroine Reshma, a metonymic fetish here.

Jangura's competence in savagery contrasted with the gentleness of Ranveer's soul is again made evident in the scene where Ranveer bets his money against Jangura's goat in the goat fight and loses. The Afghan, although not favoured by Reshma, displays a great deal of possessiveness and assumes he has rights over her. While riding his horse with a spear in hand, apparently practising his *buzkashi* skills, he approaches Reshma to tell her that he will get rid of anyone who gets in his way and confronts her for dancing without a care in front of Ranveer on the previous night. In the scene that follows, when Jangura finds Ranveer courting Reshma, he attacks him on horseback with his spear without warning. A one-sided fight ensues where Jangura is found chasing Ranveer on horseback as he attempts to jab him with his spear (see Figure 1).



Figure 1: Jangura on horseback attacking Ranveer with a spear, *Dharmatma*, 1975

The fight eventually ends with the two of them wrestling until the Afghan tribesmen arrive on horseback and stop the fight between the two. When asked about the cause of the fight, Jangura answers that Ranveer has been eyeing Reshma with evil intentions. Reshma however disagrees with Jangura and defends Ranveer. We again find Jangura confronting Reshma on why she has gone to meet Ranveer. To Reshma's response that she could do whatever she wished, Jangura threatens her saying that if she goes to meet Ranveer, he will cut her down and only he has claims over her. Reshma who is visibly angered answers that nobody has any such claims over her. Contrary to Jangura, Reshma is instantly attracted to Ranveer from the very beginning and hints at her interest in him, just as Ranveer appears interested in her. When Ranveer calls out to her from the mountain range, she comes there to meet him and accepts Ranveer's proposal for her hand. The viewers may frequently relate with Ranveer as the self as the main character is identified in positive attributes of idealism and righteousness. The meaning of his name Ranveer would suggest "a brave warrior" as a stark contrast to Jangura, who as the film progresses, steadily accrues more negative adjectives as attributes, such as lustful, excitable, and barbaric. The fact that Reshma is the "love interest" of both the characters serves doubly in the othering process as Jangura's treatment of Reshma and her lack of interest in him becomes a point of comparison to Ranveer in furthering the othering process.

In the film, *buzkashi* has been used as a plot device to bring climax to the narrative and serves to present Jangura as the consummate Afghan other or to inscribe him in the stereotype of the noble savage or, in other words, within the play of the metonymic aggressive. The centrality of *buzkashi* to the Afghan culture is evident in the tribal chief's announcement at the beginning of the tourney—that the brave man who stakes his life to bring the *buz* (goat skin), to him will be given any reward he demands. This scene brings to focus Jangura's struggle to emerge victorious and

demand Reshma's hand in marriage from the chief. His trophy demand to marry Reshma, however, is problematized at this juncture by the arrival of Ranveer and Roshanlal (Ranveer's acting guardian) who demands that he has the right over Reshma, reasoning that Reshma herself has given him the right. The response is not taken well either by Jangura or the chief and Jangura starts lashing Ranveer in fury until he is stopped by the chief. The chief likewise dismisses Ranveer's case by telling Roshanlal that if he cares about the youth's life (Ranveer), he should take him away from the place.

When Roshanlal pitches that Ranveer and Reshma love each other, after having received a private audience with the chief, the chief responds that love is a feeling that can alter the next day. Reshma however, interrupts to tell him that only she has the right to alter her feelings. In the discussion that follows between Reshma and the chief, the nature of the Afghan society and Reshma's dislike for it becomes apparent. The film presents the inferiority of Afghan society as one where women are subordinated to men in decision-making, are only allowed to speak when permitted, and that their own preferences in marriage are given secondary importance. Even though the chief tries to persuade Reshma to choose Ranveer explaining "their lifestyle, culture, tradition and everything else is different from ours, You'll be suffocated to death in such an atmosphere" (*Dharmatma* 1:07:01-1:07:09), Reshma stubbornly retorts, "but I'll be good as dead here too...your orphan daughter is pleading before you today. If you don't accept my plea I'll kill myself" (*Dharmatma*, 1975, 1:07:10-1:07:24) and in a dramatic turn takes the chief's dagger from his waist, only to be stopped by him. The chief, although reluctant, finally gives in to her preferences, and the marriage between Reshma and Ranveer takes place.

Even though Jangura behaves barbarically throughout most of the film, his decent nature becomes apparent during Reshma's wedding to Ranveer. In spite of being rejected by the tribal chief and Reshma in favour of Ranveer, he accepts the decision graciously. Even though he is deeply hurt that he cannot marry Reshma, he celebrates her wedding by playing the flute with tears in his eyes and participates in the traditional dance performed during the wedding with Reshma and Ranveer, wishing them well. The rejection of Jangura in favour of Ranveer as a match for Reshma both by the chief and by Reshma herself serves to undermine *buzkashi*, a sport considered central to the Afghan identity and by extension the Afghan culture through the rejection of Jangura's justified reward of marriage to Reshma as per the promise of the chief which he has earned by greatly risking his life. The Afghan other is constructed through an identification of the Afghan with the sport *buzkashi*, central to the Afghan culture to constitute the disavowed other in the trope of the "noble savage" or alternately within the play of the metonymic aggressive. Such a representation contrasts sharply with the Indian persona Ranveer as the *Dharmatma* or "righteous man" as the self, fixated as the self, about the corrupt Indian other Seth Dharamdas. Placing the Afghan heroine, Reshma, as the object of desire or the metonymic fetish, the Afghan man is othered through rejection by the heroine in favour of the Indian man. Reshma's own preference for Ranveer and dislike for Jangura is hence symbolic of the cultural supremacy of the westernized Indian over the Afghan man suggesting that Afghan women need to be saved by Indian men from Afghan men.

Not long after Reshma and Ranveer get married, Reshma loses her life to an explosion from a car bomb intended for Ranveer planted by Natwar and Rishi, the sons of Dharmatma's business rival Anokhelal. In Afghanistan, Ranveer receives news of his father being injured and returns to India

to find him dead. Seeking to find the conspirators involved in his father's murder, he seeks out Vikram Singh, the alleged murderer of his father. However, when Ranveer finds his corpse, he discovers the man to be innocent. Anokhelal, who brings Ranveer to a burial ground, confesses his crime of having Dharmatma murdered and, with his goons gathered, begins to shoot him when the police arrive and kill Anokhelal in the ensuing shootout between them. Not long afterward, Ranveer's sister Mona immediately informs him over a phone call that her husband Kundan is involved in the conspiracy to kill him when she overhears his discussion with Natwar and Rishi. Kundan, however, finds out about it and strangles her during the call causing Ranveer to run over to his house where he finds Mona dead. He then teams up with Shakti Singh, a henchman of his father, and seeks out the culprits. With Anokhelal's sons already killed by Kundan, he finds him and finally kills him by forcing him to jump down a hill. Thus, putting an end to the corrupt family business. The film ends in much the same way as it began: After having avenged Reshma and his family, Ranveer leaves corrupt India with his mother and newly married wife Anu to settle down in uncorrupted primitive Afghanistan (see Figure 2).



Figure 2: Ranveer and his family moving to Afghanistan, *Dharmatma*, 1975

Savagery and Nobleness in *Khuda Gawah*

Not unlike *Dharmatma*, *Khuda Gawah* is another Bollywood representation that has subjected Afghans to an Orientalist gaze. Not surprisingly, it borrows the same ploy of using *buzkashi* as a means to present Afghan barbarism in order to construct the trope of the noble savage. *Khuda Gawah* has been described as a curry Western where the inadequacies of the Afghan hero's traditionalist logic is pitched against Indian masculine tension apparent through dichotomies such as passion as opposed to duty, and freedom as opposed to domesticity ("Khuda Gawah Reviews"). Stephen Holden describes the film as the Indian response to *Ben-Hur* (1959), *Duel in the Sun*

(1946), *The Desert Song* (1943), *Giant* (1956), and *The Seven Samurai* (1954) put together as well as having enough plot to cover many seasons of the TV series *Dallas* (Holden, 1993). What is obvious in the list of films compared to *Khuda Gawah* is the Western genre, which offered the myth of conquest – an encounter with the native American transmuted into a mythology of triumphalist nationhood (Prats 2002).

The narrative of the film differs from *Dharmatma* in that the main character or hero is not Indian but Afghan. The film begins with the narrator describing *buzkashi* as not just a game but an issue of life and death and brings us to the struggle between two contestants or *chapandaz* who have each grabbed a side of the *buz* and are heading for the goal until the identity of one of the contestants come undone as a woman, the heroine, Benazir, causing the hero, Badshah Khan to relinquish the *buz* to her. Badshah Khan becomes enamoured by Benazir and makes her a marriage proposal, but she agrees to marry him on the condition that he avenges her father's murderer. Thus, the premise is presented to us as Badshah Khan sets off to find and avenge the murderer of Benazir's father, Habibullah. Although he avenges the death of Benazir's father and marries her, his effort to avenge Benazir's father leads him to prison, and he incurs the enmity of Habibullah's brother, the crime lord Pasha who seeks revenge upon him. With the help of a corrupt policeman, Inspector Aziz Mirza, Pasha not only prevents him from rescuing Ranveer Singh's daughter whom he kidnaps but also delays his stay in prison. Badshah Khan finally freed after his lengthy stay in prison avenges the villain Pasha after he returns to Afghanistan.

In the film, the identification of the self and others begins with the premise of the film—the condition on which Benazir agrees to marry Badshah Khan. It is the acceptance of her demand to avenge her father's murderer that commences the self-other dichotomy through the viewers' identification with Badshah Khan, the self, as the just hero out to avenge the criminal other, the murderer Habibullah. The noble savage trope traditionally understood as a quality projected onto the other is instead seen projected onto the hero, the self, through the sport *buzkashi*. A romantic vision of horse-riding is constructed in which Afghans are valorized on account of being horsemen. It is through the use of *buzkashi* for the premise and the ending of the narrative that makes horse-riding central to Afghan identification. Throughout the film, Badshah Khan's mode of transport is always a horse. Like in the Hollywood film *The Horseman*, where we find the main character Uraz uniting with his horse Jahil near the ending, we find in the ending of *Khuda Gawah*, a similar relationship between Badshah Khan and his horse. When Badshah Khan comes to confront Pasha on horseback in Afghanistan after his lengthy imprisonment in India, he is shot by a rocket launcher after which he falls unconscious with his horse. However, following Khuda Baksh's spirited call to wake up Badshah Khan, his horse lying glassy-eyed next to his unconscious body suddenly gets up and walks over to nuzzle him, at which point the sound of the adhan (the Muslim call for prayer) "Allahu Akbar" is heard, and we find the hero regains his consciousness and gets up to fight the villains once more. The scene makes apparent the spiritual connection between the rider, his horse, and Islamic mysticism as an enlivening force so that Badshah Khan can free his allies and enact justice on Pasha. The film is brought to a close with Badshah Khan and Benazir riding side by side on horseback; both of them having gotten ahold of Pasha drag him behind before throwing him headlong against a rock (see Figure 3), just as the two characters hold two ends of the *buz* at the beginning of the film. Having finally exacted retribution for all the suffering Pasha has caused, the film consolidates the image of the Afghans as noble savages.



Figure 2: Ranveer and his family moving to Afghanistan, *Dharmatma*, 1975

The film does not solely identify with the Afghan, Badshah Khan, as the self; the Indian character Ranveer Singh is contrasted to the Afghan as the civilized noble self as opposed to the noble savage self of Badshah Khan. This can be seen in the constant conflict of principles between the two characters. In his initial encounter with Ranveer Singh, Badshah Khan breaks into a prison facility on horseback breaching blockades of policemen before he is stopped by the jailer Ranveer Singh. Though Badshah Khan demands that Habibullah be handed over to him as he is an Afghan criminal, Ranveer Singh replies that as Habibullah is in the custody of the Indian legal system, he cannot be handed over to Badshah Khan, and it is his duty as the jailer to maintain the due process of law. After kidnapping Habibullah from the custody of the police and fighting off Pasha's men, Badshah Khan encounters Ranveer Singh in a confrontation where he has to turn himself over to the Indian law for his criminal activity. Finding himself in this predicament, he promises to return to India after a month to receive his punishment in exchange for being allowed to take Habibullah's corpse with him to Kabul and, according to his promise, returns to India from Kabul to turn himself over to the law. While these conflicts of principles serve to demonstrate the respect that Badshah Khan and Ranveer Singh have for each other on account of their noble identity respectively as Pathan and Rajput, they also present a contrast between the trope of the noble savage and that of the civilized noble, one that is made possible by a process of objectification in which Indian films present the ethnic synecdoche in which Afghans are equated with Pathans (Saxena, 2022). The fact that Habibullah, an Afghan criminal, is captured by the Indian legal system and that Badshah Khan has to contend with a Rajput on equal terms betrays an Indian self-consciousness where the need to present a noble identity to match the Afghan one is made apparent through the effectiveness of the Indian legal system and the Rajput code of honour. The appearances of the two characters are also reflected in the ways their identities are constructed. Being an Afghan, Badshah Khan sports a turban, rides a horse for transport as suited to his identity

as a *chapandaz*, is dressed in an exotic garb that looks like a robe, has a sword sheathed in his waist and a gun slung over his shoulder. His attire similarly complements his impatient and excitable disposition. Ranveer Singh, on the other hand, is calm and collected in nature; being a jailer in a police uniform, he exudes regality as a representative of the Indian legal system. What the repeated contrast between the two identities of the noble savage and the civilized noble serves then is to make conspicuous the savage nature of the Afghan (see Figure 4).



Figure 4. Ranveer Singh offering handcuffs to arrest Badshah Khan, *Khuda Gawah*, 1991

In the self-other dichotomy, we find the heroine as the object of metonymic fetish through which identification as the self and other emerge through the premise of avenging Benazir's father. The Afghan hero Badshah Khan and the Indian jailer Ranveer Singh are both identified as the self yet recognized as the noble savage and the civilized noble respectively. On the other hand, the other is identified with the Afghans Pasha and Habibullah and the Indian Aziz Mirza. The existence of both the Afghan and Indian identities in the constitution of the self and other demonstrates the existence of the other within the self, precipitated by the hero's object of desire, the heroine. If *Khuda Gawah* then celebrates the savage other as the self, *Dharmatma*, in contrast, presents the Indian character, the civilized noble as the self and the Afghan character, the noble savage as the other.

Representational Strategies in the Muslim/Arab portrayals of Hollywood and Bollywood

Besides *The Horseman*, the noble savage stereotype has been a common theme in Hollywood films in reference to native Americans given its representations in literature (Ellingson, 2001). The oxymoronic term noble savage contains in itself two opposing ideas put together as a means to

present certain groups (particularly native Americans) as inferior. The strategy of using two opposing ideas to create stereotypes of Muslims is also found in post-9/11 American TV dramas such as *Threat Matrix*, *Sleeper Cell*, and *The Practice* among many others. These television shows present what Evelyn Alsultany terms in her work "Arabs and Muslims in the Media after 9/11: Representational Strategies for a "Postrace" Era" as simplified-complex representation. These portrayals appear to promote cultural diversity but, in effect, justify racist practices and policies. The strategies employed couples a positive representation with a negative one, usually a Muslim or Arab terrorist and an American Muslim willing to help the government fight them or a victim of post-9/11 hate crimes. The plots of these narratives end up concluding that in the face of the security crisis, the discrimination of innocent Muslims becomes inevitable. Another strategy employed by these portrayals to avoid the charge of stereotyping is the fictionalizing of the enemy country, making ambiguous the villain's country of origin while indicating their Middle Eastern lineage and "flipping" the enemy as in the case with *24* and *The West Wing*. In the context of these representations flipping involves making the viewers believe Muslim terrorists are plotting to take over their cultures only to reveal that they are backed by European or Euro-American terrorists.

The TV series *24* tells the story of Jack Bauer, an agent working for the Counter Terrorist Unit who uncovers terrorist plots to save innocent people. Though he manages to subvert a nuclear attack by tracking down Middle Eastern terrorists, he eventually learns that Euro-American and European businessmen are behind the attacks to profit from increased oil prices by leading the US to declare war against the Middle East. While the country of the terrorists is initially left unknown save to hint at their Middle Eastern origins, we discover the fictional countries Kamistan in *24* and Qumar in *The West Wing* as the architects of terrorist conspiracies.

Simplified-complex representations of Muslim women also appear in news reports through the use of disclaimers and native informants to present Muslims in a negative light chiefly about oppression against Muslim women in the Islamic world seen from a secular-liberal perspective. These disclaimers begin by saying that it is impossible to capture the Islamic world in all its diversity and complexity before presenting evidence against Islam as a brutal religion. The media also puts the spotlight on ex-Muslim women who support the Western feminist narrative about Islam and present the traditionalist form of Islam as backward and oppressive due to their treatment of women and their difference from Western liberal values. Nonie Darwish, Ayan Hirsi Ali, and Wafa Sultan are some examples of women who have disavowed Islam and established careers by testifying for the inherent backwardness of the religion. In their works, Darwish, an Egyptian, presents Islam as a retrograde religion, Sultan, a Syrian, claims Islam to be a promoter of violence, and Hirsi Ali, a Somali, presents the religion as incompatible with democracy all the while suggesting that women are continually oppressed in the Muslim world. These strategies, Alsultany points out have been used "to justify withholding sympathy for Muslim men" (167) and to strategically advance US imperial interests. (167).

In his work "US Media Darlings: Arab and Muslim Women Activists, Exceptionalism and the "Rescue Narrative", Ahlam Muhtaseb demonstrates how Muslim representations in mainstream US media adopt the same strategy in using women as metonymic fetish to delineate self-other relations through a few static and negative stereotypes namely tropes of silence and oppression, sexualization, and violent aid to terrorists. To highlight these tropes selective exposure is given to western educated feminist women as seen in cases like Nonie Darwish, Ayaan Hirsi Ali, and Wafa

Sultan while the exposure of traditionalist Muslim women like Malala Yousafzai is qualified within the purview of the rescue or protection narrative. The rescue narrative posits that the burden of having to save Arab/Muslim women from the barbarity of Muslim men falls on the shoulders of the liberal white populace. Thus, the media does not only attempt to create self-other relations by using women as a metonymic fetish but also invoke the white woman's burden to promote interventions in the Arab, and Islamic world (Muhtaseb 2020). The representational strategy of simplified complex representations and the use of women as a metonymic fetish to delineate the self and others are strategies apparent in both Bollywood films. In the case of *Dharmatma* in particular the Western feminist conception of Islamic or regional Afghan values as backward and oppressive is presented through Reshma as the native informant.

Conclusion

Afghanistan presented as a foil to India is visible in the romantic conception of the "return to nature" theme as seen in the hero's return to the primitive, uncorrupted Afghanistan and the contrast between the Afghan noble savage and the Indian civilized noble. Through the sport *buzkashi*, the Afghans have been characterized as noble savages; the sport has also been central to the theme in presenting Afghanistan in a romantic vision and to the plot for being tied to the love interest of the Afghan and Indian characters where the Afghan character as the noble savage is used as a foil to the civilized and noble Indian character. The films differ in that while *Khuda Gawah* celebrates the spectacle of savagery through the Afghan hero, in *Dharmatma*, the narrative leads the Indian hero to champion his Afghan counterpart and undermine the Afghan culture in favour of the Indian one.

The Horseman, the Hollywood film from which the two Bollywood films being discussed take their cue, was released during the era of the Vietnam War. This film features the sport *buzkashi* as symbolic of the Nietzschean "master morality" that became America's imperialist attitude to acquire victory at all costs (Graham, 2010, pp. 16-20). What do we make of the films then? Are the representations in these Bollywood films mere aesthetic choices influenced by Western films or do they, like the American imperialist attitude, reflect Indian imperialist ideation? In his work, Ahmed divides popular Indian cinema between pre-1971 and post-1971, pointing out that while the pre-1971 films reflected an ethos of love and tolerance in response to the communal unrest, the post-1971 films depicted action, violence, corruption, and eroticism reflecting India's self-perception as a dominant power in South Asia after its military victory over Muslim Pakistan in 1971, followed by the rise of materialism with its moral and social crises, and the spread of communalism and religious intolerance (Ahmed, 1992). Graham speaks exaltingly of the conflation of Afghanistan with Islam: "Afghanistan, never dominated, despite three misbegotten attempts by the British and one by the Russians, fuses here with Islam, itself the single most powerful opponent of Western intellectual, scientific, and spiritual hegemony" (p.4). Afghanistan as a site for Islam as a revolutionary force is presumably perceived as a matter of concern to the Hindu majority India whose difficult relationship with its minority Muslim populace is marked by its lengthy history of Mughal rule, partition into India and Pakistan along the line of religious orientation, and ongoing Hindu-Muslim antagonism within and outside the national border.

The strained Hindu-Muslim relationship is evident in the works of Sanjeev Kumar HM such as "Metonymies of Fear: Islamophobia and the Making of Muslim Identity in Hindi Cinema" (2016) and "Constructing the Nation's Enemy: 'Hindutva', popular culture and the Muslim 'other' in Bollywood cinema" (2013). In both articles, he demonstrates that Muslims in Bollywood films are not only stereotyped through images of traditional clothing, beards, and Arab scarves and shown to be carrying AK-47s, but also present Hindu majoritarian platitudes such as "all Muslims are terrorists but all terrorists are not Muslims" ("Metonymies" 5-6) and the idea that the identity of Muslims are determined entirely by their religion, which is the source of their violence. In light of right-wing populism that has given rise to aggressive Hindu nationalism, Muslims are consequently turned into metonymies of fear making them a threat against which vigilance is required. In his work "Imagining Indian Muslims" (2007) Maidul Islam comments further that Muslims are presented in Bollywood films as feudal characters and terrorists, who are alien from the Indian culture, are loyal to foreign territories, and disseminate mistrust and suspicion towards them. However, the reality of Indian Muslims is that they are disadvantaged in every metric be it social, economic, or otherwise.

It is little wonder that a Westernized India with an ongoing history of Hindu-Muslim conflict appears in these films to be offering an Orientalist gaze. Beginning with *Dharmatma* where Afghanistan is presented as a tourist spot filled with exotic natural beauty, later films on Afghanistan such as *Escape from Taliban* (2003), *Kabul Express* (2006), *Torbaaz* (2020) depicts the post 9/11 Afghanistan as a war-torn country. Films in the last decade has moved on from depicting contemporary events to those of history in which Afghan Muslims are presented as barbaric invaders of the subcontinent as seen in films such as *Padmavat* (2018), *Kesari* (2019), and *Panipat* (2020). In light of the resurgence of aggressive Hindu nationalism, the films discussed in the paper reflect the Hindu majoritarian sentiments where Muslims and/or Afghans are seen as antagonists to the Indian polity.

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Declaration of Conflicts of Interests

Not applicable.

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