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Whispers of the Vulnerable: De-glorification of Muslim Identities in Hindi and Bengali Films

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Abstract-

This paper aims to analyse the graual de-glorification of Muslim identities in Hindi and Bengali cinema, highlighting a historical shift from cultural reverence to marginalization and silencing. Early Indian films celebrated Muslims as symbols of refinement, syncretism and artistic excellence, reflecting the plural ethos of pre- and post – independence India. Drawing on film and cultural theory, the study argues that these portrayals were closely aligned with Nehruvian secularism. The trauma of partition, th rise of communal politics and global Islamophobia significantly changed the representations of Muslim characters in cinema. This paper in and through the lense of films like 'Garm Hava', 'Bombay', 'My Name is Khan', 'Mghe Dhaka Tara', and 'Mritunjoy' demonstrates how Muslim characters increasingly figure as the other or suspects or victims or erased figures rather than being social counterparts. While Hindi films reinforces this shift through demands of nationalist validation, Bengali cinema marginalizes Muslim voice through narrative silence and peripheral roles.

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Main Discussion

1. Introduction

Cinema in South Asia has long served as a powerful platform for the construction of social and religious identities. Among these, Muslim representation has remained both fascinating and fraught with tension. From the grand Mughal courts of historical films to the contemporary narratives of terrorism and marginalization, Muslim identities in Hindi and Bengali cinema have undergone a gradual process of *de-glorification* — a stripping away of cultural grandeur, dignity, and complexity that once defined cinematic portrayals. As India's political and cultural climate evolved, so too did the portrayal of Muslims — from proud nawabs and poets to alienated minorities struggling for recognition of being equal counterparts. This essay explores how the shifting political and cultural frameworks in India and Bengal as well have led to the transformation and often *dehumanization* of Muslim identities on screen. Through an analysis of representative films such as *Garm Hava* (1973), *Bombay* (1995), *My Name is Khan* (2010), *Mission Kashmir* (2000), *Meghe Dhaka Tara* (1960), and *Mritunjoy* (2000), the study examines how cinema both mirrors and moulds public perception. The phrase "whispers of the vulnerable" symbolizes the muted presence of Muslims in the mainstream cinematic imagination — voices subdued by dominant narratives of nationalism, communal tension, and cultural homogenization. Film, as Stuart Hall reminds us, is a site where "meanings are produced and exchanged" *("Hall 64")*. Thus, the image of the Muslim in cinema is not merely aesthetic but ideological, deeply tied to questions of identity, belonging, and power. The *de-glorification* of the Muslim subject represents the erosion of a once-syncretic Indian imagination — one that celebrated cultural plurality and poetic beauty — replaced by suspicion, marginality, and victimhood.

2. Historical Background: Muslim Representation in Indian Cinema:

The roots of Muslim representation in Indian films trace back to the early decades of Indian cinema, when films like *Pukar* (1939), *Mughal-e-Azam* (1960), and *Chaudhvin Ka Chand* (1960) glorified Islamic history and culture. These films celebrated Urdu aesthetics, architecture, and the refined courtesan culture of Lucknow or Delhi. Muslims were depicted as noble kings, tragic lovers, or romantic poets — embodying *tehzeeb* (culture), *shairi* (poetry), and grace. In this early cinematic imagination, the Muslim was central to India's composite identity. Scholars such as Ira Bhaskar and Richard Allen argue that this phase was marked by "a nostalgia for a lost Indo-Islamic culture that symbolized India's syncretic past" *("Bhaskar and Allen 112")*. Films like *Mughal-e-Azam* portrayed Emperor Akbar's secular vision and his love for a Hindu woman, reflecting Nehruvian ideals of unity in diversity.

However, after the traumatic Partition of 1947, Muslim identities became increasingly politicized. The creation of Pakistan and the ensuing communal violence altered cinematic representation. The Muslim character now bear the burden of guilt, suspicion, and divided

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loyalty. In post-Partition narratives, Muslims often appeared as either tragic victims of history (*Garm Hava*) or as outsiders whose belonging to the Indian nation was questioned. Film historian Rachel Dwyer observes that "the romanticization of Islamic culture gave way to narratives of displacement and alienation" *("Dwyer 98")*. The shift from glorification to de-glorification mirrored the national mood — the disillusionment with secular ideals and the growing communal anxieties in Indian society.

3. Stereotyping and the 'Othering' of Muslim Identity in Hindi Films:

From the 1970s onward, Hindi cinema began to create a more monolithic and often distorted image of Muslims. The nuanced portrayals of earlier decades gave way to stereotypes — the *mullah*, the *don*, or the *terrorist*. The aesthetic of Urdu poetry and culture was replaced by visual symbols of violence, fanaticism, and backwardness. In *Deewar* (1975) and *Amar Akbar Anthony* (1977), while Muslims were part of the secular trinity of India's brotherhood, they were nonetheless characterized by certain performative signs — skull caps, Urdu idioms, and exaggerated religiosity. As Rauf Ahmed notes, "Muslimness became a costume rather than a culture" *("Ahmed 45")*.The 1990s marked a further decline. Films such as *Roja* (1992), *Bombay* (1995), and *Mission Kashmir* (2000) presented Muslim characters as either fundamentalists or victims of fundamentalism. The backdrop of the Kashmir conflict intensified this binary. In *Mission Kashmir*, the Muslim protagonist Altaaf (played by Hrithik Roshan) becomes a tragic terrorist — torn between love and revenge. The narrative humanizes him only through his renunciation of violence, reinforcing the notion that Muslim redemption lies in conformity to the state.

The politics of representation here is crucial. As Rini Bhattacharya Mehta observes, "The Muslim subject is almost always defined by his relation to the Indian nation — either as a loyal citizen or as a potential threat" *("Mehta 120")*. The cinematic gaze thus disciplines the Muslim body — demanding proof of nationalism and innocence. Post-9/11 global anxieties further reinforced this imagery. In *My Name is Khan* (2010), Rizwan Khan's journey from discrimination to self-assertion underscores the global Muslim's struggle for dignity. His statement, "My name is Khan, and I am not a terrorist," became symbolic of the Muslim's need to constantly *prove* humanity in the face of prejudice. Yet, as noted by Shohini Chaudhuri, "even in its empathy, the film reinforces a politics of exceptionalism — the good Muslim versus the bad Muslim" *("Chaudhuri 89")*. Films like *Shahid* (2013) and *Mulk* (2018) attempt to counter this by reclaiming the Muslim as a citizen rather than a suspect. *Shahid*, based on the real-life story of lawyer Shahid Azmi, presents a narrative of faith and justice against institutional bias. *Mulk* directly confronts Islamophobia, with the protagonist declaring that his loyalty to the nation does not require constant validation. These films mark moments of resistance but remain exceptions in a dominant industry still governed by market and political forces.

The "othering" of Muslims, as scholars point out, is not only ideological but also visual. Cinematic codes — dark lighting, mosques framed against police sirens, Arabic

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calligraphy as shorthand for danger — all contribute to what Anustup Basu calls "a visual semiotics of suspicion" *("Basu 77")*. The Muslim in Hindi cinema thus oscillates between the *romantic relics of the past* and the *suspect of the present*, rarely existing as an ordinary, multidimensional human being.

4. Bengali Cinema and the Marginal Muslim Narrative:

While Hindi cinema dominates the national imagination, Bengali cinema offers a different but equally revealing trajectory in representing Muslim identities. Bengal, with its unique history of Partition, refugee movements, and linguistic nationalism, provides a complex backdrop where Muslim representation often intersects with issues of class and regional identity. In early Bengali films like *Meghe Dhaka Tara* (1960) or *Pather Panchali* (1955), Muslim characters are largely absent or peripheral, reflecting the Hindu bhadralok perspective of postcolonial Bengal. According to Moinak Biswas, "The Muslim presence in Bengali cinema is marked more by silence than by stereotyping" *("Biswas 53")*. This silence itself becomes a form of de-glorification — erasing the cultural and historical contributions of Bengali Muslims from cinematic memory.

The Partition of Bengal in 1947 created sea deep social fractures. Muslim narratives became associated with rural backwardness, poverty, and illiteracy — images that occasionally surfaced in films such as *Titash Ekti Nadir Naam* (1973) and *Matir Moina* (2002). These works, however, were exceptions that foregrounded Muslim life with empathy and realism. In Rituparno Ghosh's *Abar Aranye* (2003), the postcolonial elite's encounter with the "other" reveals a lingering discomfort with the Muslim presence. The Muslim character is often depicted as a servant, labourer, or marginalized villager — embodying what Partha Chatterjee calls "the subaltern within the nation" *("Chatterjee 106")*. Bangladeshi filmmaker Tareque Masud's *Matir Moina* offered one of the most nuanced portraits of Muslim identity in the Bengali cultural sphere. Set against the backdrop of the 1960s Pakistan, it portrays a young boy torn between liberal education and orthodox madrasa teachings. The film exposes the politicization of religion while maintaining empathy for faith itself. As Dina Siddiqi observes, "Masud's cinema challenges both Western Islamophobia and Bengali secular elitism by giving dignity to rural Muslim lives" *("Siddiqi 91")*. Contemporary Bengali cinema in India, however, continues to marginalize Muslim voices. Films like *Mritunjoy* (2000) and *Herbert* (2005) briefly touch upon communal coexistence but largely avoid addressing Muslim subjectivity head-on. The urban intellectual narrative — dominated by middle-class Hindu sensibilities — renders the Muslim as either an invisible labourer or an exoticized relic. As Sharmistha Gooptu notes, "The Muslim in Bengali cinema is the absent center — always present in the margins of songs, bazaars, and festivals, but rarely as the speaking subject" *("Gooptu 132")*. The *de-glorification*, therefore, here operates not through vilification but through *silencing*.

5. Post-Partition and Contemporary Shifts in Muslim Representation:

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The legacy of Partition continues to shape the cinematic imagination of Muslim identity in both Hindi and Bengali films. In the immediate decades after 1947, the trauma of displacement, loss, and nostalgia became recurring motifs. Films such as *Garm Hava* (1973), directed by M.S. Sathyu, stand as perhaps the most humane portrayal of Indian Muslims grappling with belonging. The film's protagonist, Salim Mirza, a Muslim businessman in Agra, faces economic and emotional marginalization in independent India. Sathyu's narrative refuses to demonize or romanticize; instead, it exposes the quiet suffering of a loyal citizen forced to justify his Indianness repeatedly. As Ravi Vasudevan remarks, "*Garm Hava*'s power lies in its ordinariness — it presents Muslim life not as spectacle but as survival" *("Vasudevan 115")*.

This realism, however, gradually gave way to politicized imagery. By the 1980s and 1990s, India's socio-political climate — marked by the Babri Masjid demolition (1992), Bombay riots (1993), and the rise of Hindutva politics — deeply influenced cinematic portrayals. Mani Ratnam's *Bombay* (1995) exemplifies this trend. While the film advocates communal harmony through the inter-religious marriage of Shekhar and Shaila, it ultimately centers the Hindu male as savior, reducing the Muslim woman's agency. As Ananya Jahanara Kabir notes, "Even well-intentioned narratives like *Bombay* reinscribe Muslim vulnerability through the gaze of the liberal Hindu filmmaker" *("Kabir 122")*. In contemporary Hindi cinema, especially post-2010, there has been a subtle rearticulation of Muslim identity, shaped by globalization and diaspora consciousness. *My Name is Khan* (2010) and *Raazi* (2018) present Muslims who are patriotic, self-sacrificing, and cosmopolitan. Yet this "positive" representation often demands extraordinary virtue — the Muslim must be *better than good* to be accepted. *Raazi*, in particular, presents Sehmat, a Muslim woman spy loyal to India, whose faith is erased in favor of nationalism. As Faisal Devji observes, "The secularization of Muslim identity in such films functions as a condition of belonging" *("Devji 67")*. Thus, post-Partition representations have oscillated between *inclusion through exceptionalism* and *exclusion through suspicion*. Both Hindi and Bengali cinemas continue to negotiate these anxieties, reflecting the fragility of secularism in the subcontinent's visual culture.

6. Deglorification: A Cultural and Political Reading:

The concept of *deglorification* in cinema refers to the systematic erosion of dignity, grandeur, and complexity from Muslim representation. Where once the Muslim was the aesthetic heart of cinematic India — the poet, king, or lover — he is now often portrayed as the marginalized subject, stripped of refinement and reduced to a political category.This shift is inseparable from the ideological changes in Indian society. The rise of majoritarian politics, market-driven nationalism, and the decline of Urdu's cultural capital have all contributed to what Arvind Rajagopal calls "the visual disinheritance of the Muslim" *("Rajagopal 139")*. The cultural hybridity of pre-Partition India, celebrated through syncretic imagery, has been replaced by binaries of purity and pollution. In Hindi films, the *nawab* figure — once central to cinematic grandeur — has been reimagined as decadent or

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irrelevant. Films such as *Umrao Jaan* (1981, 2006 remake) mourn the lost world of Islamic refinement but frame it as an elegy rather than a living culture. Similarly, *Dedh Ishqiya* (2014) revisits this milieu with irony, portraying nawabi culture as both charming and obsolete. The audience is invited to view this world nostalgically, not empathetically.

The deglorification process also manifests in language. Urdu, once the lingua franca of Hindi cinema, has been increasingly marginalized. Film lyrics that once carried the cadence of *ghazal* now favor colloquial Hindi-English hybrids. As Rakhshanda Jalil writes, "The vanishing of Urdu from the soundscape of cinema marks not just linguistic loss but the silencing of an entire sensibility" *("Jalil 84")*. In Bengali cinema, deglorification takes subtler forms. The erasure of Muslim voices from urban narratives and historical films reflects cultural denial. Even in films addressing Partition, such as *Chitrahar* (1988) or *Ekti Nodir Naam* (2002), Muslim suffering is represented tangentially — as background noise rather than central experience. This invisibility normalizes exclusion under the guise of realism. The cinematic Muslim is thus doubly vulnerable — visible enough to be stereotyped but invisible enough to be forgotten. This paradox mirrors what Gayatri Spivak famously described as "the subaltern's inability to speak" *("Spivak 102")*. In filmic terms, the Muslim rarely speaks for himself; his story is mediated through nationalist or secular lenses that demand conformity to dominant ideologies.

7. Voices of Resistance and Humanization in Modern Cinema:

Despite the overwhelming trend of de-glorification, certain filmmakers have attempted to restore dignity and complexity to Muslim representation. Their works resist stereotyping, foreground lived experiences, and critique structures of power. Anurag Kashyap's *Black Friday* (2004) broke new ground by humanizing Muslim characters implicated in the 1993 Bombay blasts. Based on Hussain Zaidi's investigative book, the film portrays the socio-political circumstances leading to violence without demonizing its participants. The narrative blurs the boundary between victim and perpetrator, exposing systemic injustice. As Ashish Rajadhyaksha comments, "*Black Friday* does not absolve; it contextualizes — a radical act in Indian cinema" *("Rajadhyaksha 91")*. Similarly, Hansal Mehta's *Shahid* (2013) and *Aligarh* (2016) offer nuanced portraits of marginalized Muslim individuals who navigate law, morality, and prejudice. These films reclaim subjectivity for Muslims — they are thinkers, professionals, and citizens, not caricatures.

In the Bengali context, resistance emerges more subtly through regional filmmakers. Buddhadeb Dasgupta's *Mondo Meyer Upakhyan* (2002) portrays the spiritual dignity of marginalized women, including Muslims, through poetic realism. Most notably, Tareque Masud's *Matir Moina* (Bangladesh, 2002) and *Runway* (2010) examine the roots of extremism and poverty without moral panic. Masud's lens is empathetic yet unsentimental, treating faith as a living, evolving force. Rituparno Ghosh, though not primarily a political filmmaker, often interrogated identity, class, and marginalization. His portrayal of inter-community coexistence in *Chitrangada* (2012) symbolically parallels

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religious otherness — suggesting that identity, whether sexual or religious, is constantly negotiated through social constraint. In the 2020s, newer filmmakers have begun reclaiming Muslim narratives through independent cinema and OTT platforms. Films like *Gully Boy* (2019) and *Faraaz* (2023) depict Muslim youth as creative, conflicted, and modern — negotiating poverty, politics, and art. Zoya Akhtar's *Gully Boy* turns the Muslim slum into a site of aspiration rather than victimhood, redefining masculinity through music. As Sadaf Jaffer notes, "By reclaiming cultural space through art, the Muslim subject begins to reassert humanity" *("Jaffer 63")*. These films, though few, represent *whispers of the vulnerable* transformed into voices of agency. They challenge dominant ideologies not through confrontation but through empathy, everyday realism, and aesthetic intelligence.

8. Conclusion:

The cinematic journey of Muslim representation in Hindi and Bengali films reveals not merely a shift in aesthetic preference but a deeper reconfiguration of cultural power and national imagination. De-glorification, as traced in this study, is not the simple disappearance of grandeur; it is a political process through which Muslim identity is narrowed, regulated and rendered legible only within dominant narratives of nationalism, suspicion or nostalgic loss. What once functioned as a living cultural presence- embodied in language, music, articture, and ethical sensibility- has increasingly been reframed as either anachronistic memory or contemporary problem. Hindi cinema, shaped by mass appeal and state aligned nationalism, often subjects the Muslim character to tests of loyalty and moral exceptionalism, while Bengali cinema frequently silences Muslim subjectivity through omission and marginality. Both modes, though different in form, participate in the same structural exclusion: one through hyper-visibilty and stereotyping, the other through invisibility and narrative erasure. De-glorification thus emerges as a shared cinematic grammar across regions, revealing how cultural dominance operates not only through what is shown, but also through what is withheld. The process of *de-glorification* reflects how cultural power shapes visibility: once glorified as symbols of beauty and sophistication, Muslims are now often depicted through absence, suspicion, or marginality. Yet, within this silence, there remain *whispers* — filmmakers, characters, and audiences who continue to seek humane representation. Whether through the moral integrity of *Shahid*, the faith of *Garm Hava*, or the creativity of *Gully Boy*, these narratives remind us that cinema's true potential lies in empathy. As long as the screen remains a mirror of society, the de-glorification of Muslim identities will stand as both an aesthetic and ethical challenge. Restoring dignity to these portrayals is not merely a cinematic task but a moral imperative — one that reclaims the plural soul of the subcontinent itself.

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