

Kashmir

A Venture of the Dream Merchants

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The thought behind this paper was actually a result of a casual reading of one article in Economic and Political Weekly regarding Kashmir. It referred to an incident where the home ministry directed the censor board to delete some scenes from a documentary film in the December 1993 issue of a video magazine called *Eyewitness* sighting objections against some issues raised in the film that was according to them not conducive to our national integration¹. The film consisted of a story on Kashmir from a historical perspective. It had Farooq Abdullah talking of broken promises, journalist Ajit Bhattacharjee talking of rigged elections and New Delhi made chief ministers. Also recited in this film were Nehru's broken pledges to the Kashmiris. The censor board's response in this issue is all the more intriguing. Though it being an independent statutory body created by the Cinematograph act 1952 it abdicated its function and preferred to play safe by referring the case to the Home Ministry of India. According to *The Hindustan Times* (December 5), " the Censor Board had informed the producers, HTV, that the Kashmir story had to be cleared by the home ministry since it touched upon issues related to the sovereignty and integrity of the country". The impression that emerges out of this incident is clearly that of reluctance on the part of the Government to allow a circulation of a socio-political discourse regarding Kashmir through media. And as result of such a standpoint those who belong to mainstream Indian society Kashmir remains merely as a vivid visual construct. The reality of Kashmir both past and present has remained absent in the way it has been represented in the popular culture. This becomes all the more evident if we look into how Bollywood portrays and deals with this geo-political space.

Through a trick of visual cannibalism neatly executed by the mainstream Hindi cinema, Kashmir is devoured and subsequently disgorged as a scenic background, a beautiful landscape arrested in time, bereft of a past and a future. A dehistoricised version is however amply compensated by a powerful visual metaphor that presents Kashmir as an earthly paradise, an order of reality that is so perfect that it has achieved a triumph over time, a place marked by a complete stasis out of time. Such a construct loomed large on people's psyche till the 1990s, after which the place attracted regular headlines due to terrorist attacks and border problems. However, with the change in circumstances, the visual construct of Kashmir remained hardly altered. The representation was a mere shift from the image of an untainted Eden to a heaven endangered: a dream that has suddenly turned into a nightmare.

A cursory glance at the history of bollywood films based on Kashmir shows we can effectively discern a concerted effort on creating a visual order of ideality at the expense of a definite material and historic exclusion. Though the initial two films C.M.Trivedi's *Kashmir Hamara Hai* and Indra Jolly's *Kashmir*, made three years after independence, presented a crude

justification of India's aggressive nationalist project, but soon bollywood realized that they were treading on volatile grounds. Finally, it came to a solution of a kind, by inventing a new order of aesthetics based on landscaping an otherwise historic-politic entity. This was perfectly suited to the newly emergent India in its nation-building process for it whitewashed its interventionist role in Kashmir.

The visual and narrative codes deployed in the Kashmir-centric films often give an interesting reading. In a paradoxical way, they both present and not present Kashmir in the viewer's gaze. This trick is performed by the two dominant images, working at two different points, in conjunction with the political convenience of the nation state. The first image refers to Kashmir as terrain of desire, a libidinal space to which Indian male takes a trip to shed of his repressed sexuality. Such a representation automatically led the space to be stripped of its geopolitical identity. The first four decades after India's independence saw Bollywood dominated by the image till it came to be supplanted in the 1990s by yet another image, equally overpowering and hegemonic in its scope. In this Kashmir is represented as a landscape that has been brought under serious threat by the powers of terrorism, a victim of the global terror that presents Indian soldiers with an opportunity to showcase their maleness and patriotism. The new image also dabbled with issues of lost innocence and lost aesthetic. The elegiac note in these films were related to the loss of a fabled world of pleasure and romance rather than two thousand years of history and culture fashioned by its people.

In the early Bollywood films the place was showcased as a dreamland surrounded by natural lakes and snow-peaked mountains, offering an extended space to several characters from the mainstream Indian society for erotic performance and discharge of their repressed libidinal energy. Chief among such films were *Kashmir Ki Kali* and *Junglee*, both made in the mid 1960s. In both the films, Kashmir is presented as a refuge for the characters from the oppressive gaze of the traditional Indian society. In *Kashmir Ki Kali*, the hero, in a flight from his parents and their continuous pressure for matrimonial alliance, comes to Kashmir and he meets in a kashmiri-flower girl his coveted ideal of the ideal womanhood. She seems to take her virtue from the land she belongs to --- the virtues that makes her vulnerable to sexual and emotional exploitation. She is constructed of pre-modern attributes that stands in contrast to Bollywood version of modernity and epitomizes one that needs to be protected. Her life is symbolic of Kashmir's political history. By the end of the film we come to know that she was smuggled into Kashmir when she was a child, and the hero finally restores her to her actual home located somewhere in the Indian mainland. Her story is therefore a symbolic reenactment of Kashmir's recent past --- its loss and subsequent recovery narrated from the nation state's interventionist perspective. The image of the hero also goes in well with the supremacist and masculinist image of the state. In fact he is presented as the archetype of masculine virtues that Indian men should strive to aspire.

A trip to Kashmir as a means to recharge one's sexual batteries is recurrent motif in Hindi popular cinema. From this perspective, the journey taken to Kashmir is not merely restricted to space-time coordinates but is also a journey into the deep recesses of one's psyche. It is more like being conscious of one's deep unconscious sexual drives. The Shammi Kapoor-Saira Banu starred *Junglee* set in Kashmir captures the transformation of the hero from a

sexually inhibited awkward adult to an outright romancer. The storm-scene, forcing the clumsy lovers to be cooped up in one isolated hill-top cottage brings about this miraculous transformation. The epiphanic encounter with the self that was denied to the hero before finds a typical Bollywoodish treatment in the dance and song sequence that follow the storm-scene. The sheer externality of the situation hides the fact that at a deeper textual level, Kashmir is turned into the unconscious other, an internally uncharted space that needs to be made conscious of and reintegrated. This kind of psychological representation of space as the unknown other that needs to be studied and controlled, find its apt reflection in the state's hegemonic discourse regarding Kashmir and tallies well with the state's interventionist policies.

The early Bollywood film narratives based on Kashmir espouse a policy of depoliticizing the Kashmir issues by providing it with a mythical status. The canvas drawn is invariably that of an idyllic state replete with transparent lakes encircled by snow peaked ranges, beautiful shikaras sailing gently along often aided by the lilting rhythm of santoor, smiling girls with traditional costumes, a canopy of deep blue sky and liberal sprinkle of gardens here and there. A perfect pre-Lapsarian state, as it were. But what is really worrying is the total absence of a single Kashmiri man or woman located amidst his/her day-to-day problems. Nothing can be more incredible than a portrayal of a place severed from its historical and cultural roots. Bollywood has indeed served us a discourse regarding Kashmir that robs it of its past, history, culture and language. Its only reality is limited to a series of images to be devoured by the spectator whose gaze is circumscribed between a mimetic identification with a certain persona in the narrative and a mythic location. As Ranabir Lahiri points out rightly, "What comes to dominate the cinematic field is the image of Kashmir as a privileged site of visual autonomy producing its own semantic unconnected to reality in its historical and quotidian aspects." (Lahiri, 76)

In 1990s, however, a new Kashmir came into view that demanded a modification of the prevalent cinematic discourse associated with the place. The new reality after 1989 presented Kashmir as battlefield between Jihadists and the Indian Army. Bollywood found in it the opportunity to bring back the genre of war movie and repackage them with added doses of melodrama, emotion, and jingoistic nationalism. Consequently, any number of films between 25 to 30 got released, featuring Kashmir as a stage where the drama of aggressive nationalism was played with much pomp and show. New strategies were to be required for the changed scenario, and this was cleverly done by a slight alteration of the previous discourse. Kashmir remained to be a paradise, a dream land, but this time a fallen one, a place of worst nightmares set free by the evil forces of global terrorism. Mani Ratnam's 1992 film *Roja*, effectively portrays this shift of the Bollywood mindset regarding Kashmir. The film begins with the typical portrayal of Kashmir as a place where one finds an outlet of one's libidinal energies. In it, we find a newly married couple, placed in a kind of Edenic backdrop, savoring their marital bliss. However, the plot receives a twist as the hero gets abducted by the terrorists, a fulfilling dream that is suddenly turned into a nightmare for the heroine. It is true that some enthusiasts of *Roja* have praised it for its representation of the 'enemy': 'There are no black and whites in the film, but varying shades of grey. Mani Ratnam does not paint the militants as totally evil,

but merely as deviants in a society gone wrong." However, one wonders, are these 'objective' reviewers capable of forgetting that these 'deviants' are also presented in a rather monstrous light? The hawk-like, sinister persona of Wasim Khan is never once humanised. In a sense, he continues to be the stereotyped 'villain' that Bollywood knows, even though his frenzy and somewhat demented demeanour are contained within the framework of naturalism. Again, Liaquat is more 'civilised', but let us not forget the knife that he points at Rishi Kumar's neck, drawing a trickle of blood (very discreet, but sadistic nonetheless); the slaps that he inflicts on his sister (whose compassion is problematically silent); and the blows with which he hammers the hero in the *Jai Hind* sequence. The very rhythm and movement of the camera are positively menacing when we first encounter the 'terrorists' in their own terrain, when at abrupt intervals, they appear suddenly like predatory guards, masked and pointing their guns directly at 'us' in the audience. How can all these details be regarded as 'grey' in representing the 'terrorists'? In fact what follows is a drama infused with high nationalist sentiments that on one hand tries hard to re-invent the transcendental myths of national unity and belongingness, while, on the other turns a blind eye to the socio-political reasons that lay behind the emergence of terrorism in Kashmir.

Another disturbing element of the film is its representation of Islam and a concerted effort of aligning it with terrorism that ruins the peace of this heavenly abode. One wonders whether there is any 'balance' in the disorienting angle of the shot depicting Muslims praying—a shot that is deliberately inserted in a sequence of images representing 'Kashmir' when it reappears in the middle of the film? The other shots (almost like quotations) accompanying this image are the army drill and an explosion. Prayer is interspersed between maintenance of order and its disruption and consequently goes on to equate 'Islam' with disturbance. Mani Ratnam shows his skills in advertising in the central sequence of the film where Liaquat's intense faith on the principle of Jihad that seems to transcend reason, humanity and history is countered by a delirious state of self-sacrifice driven by the hero's uninflected courage and surrender to the highest ideals in fighting for the nation. What Ratnam does successfully here is to sell the hottest brand of nationalism making it not just palatable but intensely desirable through a clever trick of juxtaposition. The film thus frustrates any attempt to know the history of Kashmir and fails to go beyond associating it crudely with 'Islamic terrorism'. However, the box office collection of this film and official recognition of the film as one promoting patriarchal values exhibits a creation of what Sumit Sarkar talks of as 'communal consensus' in which 'a whole series of assumptions and myths have turned into commonsense' through the appropriation of old prejudices and combinations of new ones, which are being propagated by the media with increasing intensity.

Another film that deserves special mention is Vidhu Vinod Chopra's *Mission Kashmir*. The film is about the making of a terrorist that takes place within the spiral of violence and personal vendetta without any reference to the socio-political factors that have turned Kashmir into a breeding ground of terrorism. The spirit of the Hindu-Muslim camaraderie is shown in the film through the eyes of a Kashmiri non-Muslim whose section (seven percent of the entire population of the Kashmir valley) was a part of the ruling Hindu elite that played a less than glorious part in the 150 year history of Kashmir. Such a politically privileged position

makes the Kashmiri terrorism an outcome of external conspiracy, a foreign import from outside the borders, rather than an offshoot of years of neglect and political shortsightedness. Such an attitude is symbolically reflected in the image of the grotesquely deformed Afghan fugitive in the film. The film's satirist version is however subverted by the terrific photography that foregrounds for the first time, the carefully guarded under belly of the Kashmiri landscape---- its dirty back lanes, dilapidated wooden structures inhabited by faceless majority without voice, without dignity. This points to a different source of terrorism that has been festering for more than sixty years at the backyard of a neatly drawn paradise called Kashmir.

Thus, the image of Kashmir as a garden suddenly turned into ashes with shouldering fires beneath received much circulation in the global media. From a place visually evoked as one where the human psyche can experience its share of erotic abandon, Kashmir has been turned into an active geo-political centre of global terrorist activity. The repeated collage of violent images---burnt and mutilated bodies, smoked vehicles lying prostrate on the city roads, commercial hubs turned into ashes---bear testimony to the orgies of violence the place has experienced and connect it with places like Kabul, Sarajevo, Grozny and Baghdad which has equally been portrayed as the worst victims of the Islamic Jihad. Thus as a site of global terrorism, Kashmir has again been castrated of its individual historical and cultural identity.

The question that remains to be answered is whether Kashmir will continue to survive as a visual text propagated by popular cinema and mass media? The fact is that the real Kashmir has been tricked into oblivion first by mythico-psychic discourse graphing the space and then by the simulacrum of a global landscape of terror. Indeed, a truly disappearing act performed with commendable success in the magical world of Bollywood.

Notes and References

¹ Noorani A.G.(1993). 'Censoring Kashmir', Economic and Political Weekly, December 18:2765:Film censor board, by referring an item on Kashmir in the December 1993 issue of Eyewitness, the video news-magazine, to the home ministry for clearance seemed to pronounce its own unfitness for performing the task assigned to it. Moreover, Article 19(2) of the Constitution clearly posits that fundamental right to freedom of speech and expression guaranteed by Article 19(1)(a) can be restricted only by "law" and on grounds mentioned in Clause (2).

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