

Politics of Tolerance and Cinematic Representation: An analysis of Vinod Chopra's *Mission Kashmir* and Shojit Sircar's *Yahaan*

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Abstract

This paper argues about 'Tolerance' as an ideological apparatus expressed through cinematic representation of Kashmir. Tolerance as a category is exhaustively contested in Kashmir-based movies and to this purpose Kashmiri Sufi discourse is largely utilized. Kashmiri Sufi-syncretic idea of religion is presented as a higher case of tolerance. The paper primarily draws insights from Slavoj Zizek and Herbert Marcuse who contest and debate narrative of tolerance as an ideological category. The primary data will be taken from film *Yahaan* (2005). The paper also contests the narrative of syncretism which is foregrounded as a possible solution to intolerance in another film *Mission Kashmir* (2000). For this purpose films dedication will be critically explored.

Introduction

Mission Kashmir is a 2000 film directed by Vinod Chopra. The film features Hrithik Roshan (Altaaf Khan), Preity Zinta (Sufiya) and Sanjay Dutt (I.G Inayat). The film follows the story of young boy named Altaaf Khan whose family is killed by police officers. He also learns that his family was killed by Inayat Khan, who adopted him during his childhood. Unable to make sense of the tragedy, Altaaf joins Hilal Khan who is working on *Mission Kashmir*, a plan to kill Indian Prime Minister. Hilal Khan uses Altaaf's hatred and rage to achieve his own motives. Sufiya and Inayat Khan at the end are successful to transform Altaaf and he starts to live peaceful life with them. The movie ends when Inayat Khan and Altaaf abort *Mission Kashmir*. They killed Hilal Kohistani and other militants. In the end, Sufiya, Altaaf and Inayat are shown playing cricket together. The film contests and constructs ideas like Fundamentalism, Patriotism and Syncretism and later in the paper, these idea will be critically analysed.

Yahaan is a 2005 film directed by Shoojit Sircar. The film features Jimmy Sheirgill (Aman), Minissha Lamba (Ada) as lead characters. *Yahaan* is a blend of romance, war and family drama. Ada, who is a Kashmiri girl, falls in love with Aman, an Indian army Jawan. Shakeel, brother of Ada has chosen the path of militancy. Ada and her family don't support Shakeel but are sympathetic towards Aman who wants to eliminate terrorists. When Shakeel kept people hostages in a mosque and Aman comes to rescue them. Meanwhile Ada through television exposes the mediocrity of Kashmiri's like Shakeel and laments that her love with Aman is considered as the greatest sin in Kashmir. The film ends when army invades and forces militants to surrender. Ada arrives and leaves the scene with Aman.

Culturalization of Politics

Zizek in his paper *Tolerance as an Ideological Narrative* starts with an important question that "Why so many problems are today perceived as problems of intolerance, not as problems of

inequality, exploitation, injustice?” (Zizek 02). It is an important question when it comes to the cinematic representation of Kashmir. The problem of intolerance is presented as a fundamental problem in Kashmir conflict. This is a process of extreme reductionism. All political, social and religious problems are homogenised as problems of intolerance. Zizek argues that such reductionary process leads to ‘Culturalization of Politics’. What does he mean by it? Zizek answers that “Differences conditioned by political inequality, economic exploitation...are naturalized and neutralized into cultural differences...that cannot be overcome but must be merely tolerated”(Zizek 02).

Now take the case of film *Yahaan*, directed by Shojit Sircar. *Yahaan* is fundamentally a movie of integration and exclusion. It tries to integrate those who are tolerant towards national ideology and excludes those who dare to question dominant national ideology. Aman, an army commander stationed in Kashmir represents national body. He works to bring Aman (peace) to the valley both by love and violence. He falls in love with a Kashmiri girl whose brother Shakeel has chosen the path of militancy. The love story of Ada and Aman accentuates the narrative of tolerance and pluralism starkly in a binaristic method. Ada, who is obsessed with Aman accepts both body and soul of India. She is not concerned about political and social crisis in her locality; instead she transcends all such diversions through her love with Aman. The characterization of Ada is such that she comes up as a promising subject who has a potential to internalize every character of modern India. In the beginning, we see her unnecessarily happy about wearing jeans. The song she sings captures her utopian dream world. “*Jeans Bhole chamak ke jab Chinar bolein, Khawab dekha hai, Ankh ka Khumar bolein*”. (The glimmer of the jeans and the Chinar speaks; I have a dream, as do speak the radiant eyes.) Khwab (dream) is the defining character of Ada throughout the movie and in contrast to her, Shakeel is presented as enemy of her dreams. The question is what is the dreamworld of Ada? Through television interview, Ada expresses her dreamworld with its own unique narrative: “*Hamein Fakhr hai hum captain se pyaar krte hai, Pyaar krne walon ko ajke Kashmir mein duniya ka sabse bade gunah ka darja diya ja chukka hai*” (I am proud of my love for Captain. In today’s Kashmir love is deemed as one of the major sins of the world). It is the love which is in danger of extinction in Kashmir. All political, social and ethical problems are basically rooted in Kashmiri heretic behaviour towards love. Ananya Jahanara Kabir in her critique writes: “Kashmiris who have “forgotten how to love” – while her romance with the Aman, the noble representative of the Rashtriya Rifles, is the transcendent act that will redeem Kashmir”(11). Intolerance towards their transcendental relationship is both mocked and pitied in the movie. It has become a nauseating hindrance towards prosperous Kashmir. When people will transcend their petty political and cultural problems a change will occur. As Ada says, “*Jahan Shikare phirse chal padegein, Jahan geet bhol uthe*” (Where the Shikaras will again row and the songs fill the air). Land will be atoned of its own sins by admixture of Shikaras and songs, both clichéd signifiers of pornotropic Kashmiri landscape. Kabir also notes that in *Yahaan* “more frequently romance implodes into the valley, with the tensions moving the narrative forward being generated by competing worldviews of individual Kashmiris” (05).

So, what is the worldview of those who would oppose Ada and Aman’s sacred bond? *Yahaan* doesn’t provide this narrative from those Kashmiris who would oppose this; rather it comes from Ada herself when she explains to Aman. “*Suno ye Srinagar hai, yahan koi agr ladki Fauj se baat karein, tou jante ho kya hota hai?...ya tou us ladki ka rape hota hai, ya uske ghr mein bomb fat*

jata hai” (Listen, this is Srinagar. Here, if a girl talks with the army, you know what happens? Either she gets raped or a bomb explodes in her house). They come up as rapacious, fanatics and terrorists. Zizek is right that all political and economic problems are neutralized as cultural problems. In *Yahaan* it is the failed understanding of will to love. Shakeel who opposes Ada is determined by the distorted and fundamental Islamic culture – the culture represented by Jihadi Al Sami who killed innocent people in Kashmir. Justin Ponder in his book *Art cinema and theology* says that “Film favour certain arguments through characterization” (24). Following this, *Yahaan* also disapproves certain ideologies through characterization. Al Sami and the people associated with him are framed as representatives of Kashmiri-Islamic culture. Killing of people, women and children and also exploding of bombs is a direct offshoot of their Islamic consciousness. Al Sami in the beginning asks to Shakeel “*Sari World mai ek movement batade shakeel jahan hathyar istimaal na kiya gaya ho?*” (Shakeel, tell me of a single movement/rebellion in the whole world where weapon was not used?) This is the world of those who later oppose Ada’s will to love and integrate with national body signified by Aman. Ada is characterized as logical, possessing both will and intellect. She is tolerant towards Aman because her will is not corrupted. She possesses the truth of Kashmir. Herbert Marcuse says “The telos of tolerance is truth” (96). It is evident in *Yahan* where authentic spokespersons of tolerance are Ada and Aman because both of them have captured truth through their power of love. While as people, who are not able to transcend their religious and cultural elements, are bereft of any truth, hence becoming intolerant.

This simple binary between truth and falsehood hide some obvious ideological underpinnings. Why is Ada’s consciousness atrophied from her political consciousness? Why is Ada characterised as romantic, secular, tolerant and a girl of dreams? Through this characterization she is presented as transcending her exclusive cultural and political aspirations. Zizek was right when he says “The inevitable conclusion is that the only way to overcome intolerance and violence is to extricate the core of subject’s being, its universal essence from culture” (04). Through this, it is argued that exclusive cultural and religious lifeworld as embodied by people like Shakeel is a source of barbarism and intolerance. Shakeel represents every other alternative voice which tries to question the dominant national ideology. They become ipso facto barbarians.

Shakeel as Prototype of Intolerance

The character of Shakeel comes up as violent and intolerant. His path of militancy is aggressive. He kills people mercilessly. He explodes grenades and kills innocent people. It could be argued that his actions deserve large scale military action and his intolerance is rooted in his secessionist ideology. Such kind of characterization can be problematised in two ways: can people’s narrative be reduced to what Shakeel believes? And what are the limits of tolerance in a conflicted state like Kashmir? These two questions are crucial while dealing with narrative of tolerance in Kashmir cinematic representation. When any narrative poses as a meta-narrative by proving absolute version of reality (in our case film *Yahaan* provides monologic account of Kashmir), it becomes a means of oppression. Herbert Marcuse succinctly punctures such narrative: “The toleration of the systematic moronization of children and adults alike...the recruitment for and training of special forces, the impotent and benevolent tolerance towards outright deception...are not distortions and aberrations, they are the essence of a system which fosters tolerance as a means for perpetuating the struggle for existence and suppressing the alternatives”(89). *Yahaan*

through stark binaries echoes the elements of cinepatriotism where it works for the re-invention of nation. It tries to, in the words of Aparna Sharma, present “Monocultural, logocentric, ethnocentric and absolutist ideologies of nationalism”(17). This leads to the negation of polymorphous and heterogeneous narratives and in Kashmir context, they are camouflaged as intolerant.

Yahaan fails to provide us the narrative as to why subjects like Shakeel have chosen the path of armed struggle. It doesn't historicize his evolution of consciousness. It also fails to account or accommodate other voices from Kashmir who do not see Kashmir as is seen by people like Al-Sami. Their struggle is not primarily doctrinal or dogmatic with others like Pandits. *Yahaan* also accentuates and sentimentalizes the Muslim-Pandit relationship in Kashmir. Here again it tries to give monologic account of their relationship. Except Shakeel, Ada's family has adopted a Pandit girl showcasing signs of good Muslims in contrast to Shakeel who comes up as evil personified. *Yahaan* characterizes Pandit girl as a victim of militant Islam. She doesn't talk in the movie. Her silence is ideological in a sense that narrative is thrust upon her from the outside. Through her story, *Yahan* wants to mummify or monumentalize the narrative as in the words of Kabir “Kashmir is typically shown in the grip of militant Islam, whole of the state structures of administration, security and policing tend to be shown in benevolent Islam”(13). The benevolent structure is personified by Aman who arranges for Ada's treatment and promises to her family any possible support.

Syncretism and Narrative of Tolerance

The problem of Intolerance as showcased in film *Yahaan* is one of the characteristic features of cinematic representation of Kashmir. Movies like *Mission Kashmir* (2000) try to foreground sufi-syncretic tradition as the possible solution for Kashmiri intolerance. Tony-K-Stewart writes about politics of syncretism that “Syncretism is predicated on the assumption that pre-existing and doctrinal or ritual systems are mysteriously combined to form some unnatural admixture” (04). Following the same politics *Mission Kashmir* starts with a dedication “Dedicated to Kashmiriyat, the centuries-old tradition of religious tolerance and harmony”. What kind of “religious tolerance” the film wants to foreground? *Mission Kashmir* characterizes a binary of IG Khan, Sufiya on the one hand and Altaf and Hilal Kohistani on the other. Sufiya, who is a childhood friend/beloved of Altaf represents a version of Islam which is more syncretic and accommodating than Altaf's. Her name Sufiya possesses semiotic polyvalency, both as a name and signifier of her religious identity. Her name is both metaphoric and value laden. Within the interpretive field of syncretism, she embodies a hybrid personality. On the one hand she doesn't share Altaf's worldview of militancy and violence and on the other she wants to exhume his fanaticism through her love and romance. Like Ada in *Yaahan* she has a will to love and momentarily tries to cure Altaf while singing around Dal Lake. Altaf and Hilal Kohistani who are working on their mission to wound the soul of India share exclusive Jihadi understanding of Islam. They are not able to clearly negotiate given their inability to transcend rigid monolithic Islamic identities. They fail to actualize religious tolerance as espoused by Sufiya. *Mission Kashmir* tries to see Kashmiri conflict through the failure of religious tolerance leaving out other political causes. *Mission Kashmir*'s emphasis on syncretic tolerance leaves out the process by which disjunctive and so called intolerant narratives come into being. It focuses on the end product rather on the history. Why people dissent towards national policies? Why are people like

Altaaf drawn towards militancy? There is a total absence of such historical processes. Secondly, there is an unhealthy relationship drawn between religion and politics. Stony K Stewart critiques such cinematic theories of religion and politics when he writes: “Because of the nature of this commonly held presupposition about the exclusive nature of religions and religious experience, the contemporary interpreter is generally blind to the fact that this attitude is itself the result of historical processes that have conflated religious orientation with political identities” (06). However, *Mission Kashmir* frames Kashmir conflict purely as a problem of failed religious orientation where political concerns are subsidiary and determined by exclusive Islamic consciousness. Altaf at the end leaves his oedipal father Hilal Kohistani and embraces IG Khan. He is able to embrace syncretism of Sufi and IG Khan where love and patriotism gives promise of enlightened life. Thus, equivalence is achieved when at the end, they are shown playing cricket, implicitly mocking those whose worldview is darker because of their failure to transcend exclusive political and religious aspirations.

Conclusion

Khalid Abou Fadl points to an important fact when he writes: “Conceptually one should distinguish between juristic discourses, Islamic law, and Muslim law” (14). In the context of Kashmir such conceptual distinction is very important. It is very important to see what *is* Islamic and what is presented as Islamic. It is very problematic to bracket Kashmiri perspective within certain discourses. Ada and her vision of love and tolerance is not defining feature of Islam, while as Al Sami and Shakeel are not authoritative spokespersons of Islamic law. Their discourses operate within a broader interpretive field and it becomes difficult to frame certain discourses as tolerant or intolerant. The paper tried to show how discourses of tolerance and syncretism often hide ideological constructs and are used for some pre-defined purposes. Second the paper also tried to explicate the problematic of exposing Kashmiri conflict within cultural and religious structures because it tends to obfuscate political and economic problems as tertiary or unimportant.

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