

## Chapter 8

# *Tawaifs* and Islamicate Culture: Reading Bollywood's Muslim Women

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### **ABSTRACT**

*This chapter focuses primarily on the relationship between Islamicate culture and Muslim women in Indian Hindi cinema. This chapter goes beyond the simple deconstruction of gender stereotyping in Hindi cinema. Here, the researcher argues that the Muslim courtesan films convey the concept of seduction as a form of art through visual aesthetic. Focusing on the Muslim courtesan genre, this study locates a multi-layered status of Muslim women and traces how that creates an imaginary notion of Muslim women. Looking at the representational pattern, the study also will explore three specific arguments. Firstly, Muslim courtesan films are an art of seduction. Secondly, to make the representation seductive, they are positioned in a particular mise-en-scene. Lastly, the chapter points out how the makers of these films tried to fit the courtesan characters into the normative majoritarian gender discourse in which women are represented as subservient by ignoring the liberated identity of tawaifs.*

### **INTRODUCTION**

Although women form one half of society, the values of their existence and status have often been questioned in India as well as the world. This outlook also reflected in the way women portrayed in Bollywood films. There are mainly three theoretical approaches to locate the representation of women protagonists in such films. Firstly, women are always an 'object of the male gaze' composed through multiple cinematic devices, such as a rape scene or visuals of lecherous male glances at some innocent village girl. Secondly, women are the deified in specific social roles such as the loyal and virgin wife, obedient daughter and sister, or sacrificing mother. Thirdly, women are portrayed as the Westernized heroine or vamp drunkenly staggering in a bar with a wine glass in hand, or as the sensuous courtesan. Thus, these stereotypical representations of women in Bollywood films oscillate between 'victim', 'deity', and 'prostitute'. The most contested identity is that of the courtesan/prostitute as represented in both print and electronic media. Within that representation, the primary objective of the article is to

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inquire into the depiction of Muslim women in Bollywood cinema through an enquiry into the genre of 'Muslim courtesan films'.

While courtesans are visible in numerous literary and cultural texts, perhaps nowhere is the portrayal of courtesans as prevalent as in films. Courtesans are the central characters. Films in this genre gained much popularity among audiences and have proved to be the favourite plot device of noted filmmakers until recent times. Such films include *Mamta* (Affection, 1966), *Mandi* (Marketplace, 1983), *Chetna* (Consciousness, 1970), *Dastak* (Warning, 1970), *Khilona* (Toy, 1970), *AmarPrem* (Eternal Love, 1971), *Pakeezah* (The Pure One, 1971), *Bhumika* (The Role, 1977), *Utsav* (Festival, 1985), and *Ram Teri Ganga Maili* (Ram, Your Ganges Is Polluted, 1987).

The Indian courtesan films can be characterised into two broad classifications: firstly, Courtesan films based on religion such as Hindu courtesan films and Muslim courtesan films; secondly, modern-day and historical Courtesan film. In this chapter, the researcher will be focusing on Muslim courtesan films. It is worthwhile to note here that although such films stand out independently as a genre. In this paper, I will be discussing courtesan films under the sub-genre of Muslim Social or Muslim Historical Courtesan genre because *tawaif* characters are frequently evident in Muslim Historical and Muslim Social films (Khatun, 2016). Such films situate courtesans outside respectable society. Historically, courtesans evoked the attraction of their audience, generally heterosexual men, by facilitating the production of a variety of pleasures. In the case of courtesan films, it is the film viewer who occupies the position of the audience, i.e., the heterosexual men. Thus, courtesan characters portrayed as the objects of 'male gaze'. This paper seeks to examine the representation of courtesans in Muslim courtesan films individually. Here, the current study argues that Muslim courtesan films communicate the notion of seduction as a form of art by their use of exotic Islamicate culture, which represented through costumes, extravagant.

Muslim courtesan films locate *tawaifs* in a dizzyingly rich past where they represented as exotic beings dolled up in their glittery jewellery and dazzling clothing, practising their art of seduction and alluring dance steps. Therefore, the portrayals of courtesans are so eccentric that they are antiquated and old-fashioned in contemporary time. In this representational pattern, the paper will also explore how, a dominant form of public culture, courtesan films represented Muslims as exotic and the 'Other'.

The study will be documenting and analysing films such as *Mere Mehboob* (courtesan as the sister of the hero, 1963), *Mehboob Ki Mehendi* (courtesan as the mother of the heroine, 1971), *Devdas* (1955, 2002), *Pyasa* (1957), *Kala Pani* (1958), *Pakeezh* (1972), *Umrao Jaan* (1981, 2006), *Tawaif* (1985) and *Rajjo* (2013). In these films, courtesans are shown either as a central character or the 'Other Woman' who acts as a foil to the heroine. It can be in some of the films mentioned earlier. In discussing these films, this chapter deploys Laura Mulvey's theory of the male gaze, which depicts women as sexual objects from a masculine, heterosexual perspective. Moreover, this chapter also engages with Edward Said's notion of Orientalism to deconstruct Muslim exoticism as 'Other' in the cinematic text. I have used textual analysis and also mentioned views and personal in-depth interviews with filmmakers and film critics. The intricacies of Muslim courtesan films include factors such as images of courtesans, the socio-cultural background, the status of courtesans in the society, and the relation between seduction and sexuality from multiple points of view. Moreover, the textual analysis method has helped in understanding the underlying meaning and characterisation, as well as the social and political aspects of the films.

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