Rupture of trust: the question of Muslim othering with a special emphasis on the Hindi movie Garm Hava

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Muslims in India have been subject to neglect over the years Successive governments have failed to bring about appreciable change in their standard of living, while many a times they also face hostility by a majoritarian community. Partition especially becomes a marker from where we can see these issues compounding exponentially. This othering has led to some serious problems for the community in general. Much literature is available on this topic, while other mediums of communication, most particularly Cinema has not got its due share. This paper is an attempt to understand how Hindi Cinema has dealt with it; using the movie Garm Hava (1974) as a case study.

Index Terms: Partition, Hindi Cinema, Parallel Cinema, Mourning, Garm Hava.

Introduction

The division of the erstwhile undivided India into two different nations in 1947 was much more than just a redrawing of boundaries, it was a division of hearts. The bloody Partition which accompanied it was and still does remain one of the bloodiest and most problematic episodes of the subcontinent's history. Millions of people were displaced, lost their lives in the ensuing violence. The issue of Partition has from then on remained a festering wound, which refuses to heal completely. One of the most problematic legacies of Partition has been the gulf it created between different religious groups of the Indian society; most particularly, Muslims have been at the center of this storm. Despite having been present in India for more than thousand years and having rulers at the center, they have remained a minority in the country, accounting for 14.2 percent of the total population[1]. With Partition of the erstwhile undivided country, while many of the Muslims left to settle down in Pakistan, many still decided to remain in India. This paper is concerned with this latter section of the population. An attempt has been made to understand that how the remaining Muslim population found themselves at the receiving end of a hostile society and how Hindi Cinema, particularly the movie Garm Hava 1974, dealt with the Muslim question. However before beginning with an elaborate discussion on the issue, let's first try understand about 'othering' and condition of Indian Muslims in this regard.

Othering

According to Cambridge online dictionary, 'othering' refers to the act of treating someone as though they are not part of a group and are different in some way[2]. Scholars like Reicher believe that when people associate themselves with a particular group, then they tend to act in terms of the shared social identity associated with such a membership. These identities are constructed on the basis of certain similarities found among the members of the group. Naturally, claims and contestations of one set of definitions and understanding come into conflict with similar rival definitions. This gives birth to a power struggle, which according to him are chiefly responsible for the birth of cleavages in the society[3]. It is not only enough to construct identities for your group, but to also ensure that they are pitted against similar identities constructed by another group. Most of the times, the more powerful

among the competing groups is able to dictate the terms of constructing such social identities for their own groups in contradiction to other groups, 'othering' supports this process[4]. It should also be noticed that cultures generally have multiple others, but the one other which gets foregrounded depends upon the socio-political and economic situations in which the culture finds itself. As, R.C. Tripathi and Purnima Singh aptly put it[5]:

If the other is not stigmatized or rundown, securing positive identity for oneself or one's own group may be a little less possible. The other is often the construction of and by the powerful. It is not that weak does not have an other. But othering by the weak rarely, if ever, converts into generalized stigma and its denigration of the other accepted widely

Another thing to be noticed here is that the process of differentiation is not the same as that of othering because the latter involves denial of certain rights and entitlements to the othered community with a belief that whatever is the mandate and the interest of the dominant and majoritarian community; that alone is right and hence that should prevail. It similarly overlooks similarities[6].

Othering of Muslims in India

In the case of India, the very birth of the Nation took place along communal lines, hence religious identities have remained an important arena of contestation[7]. The subcontinent being home to multiple religions, differences between all of them existed (and still do), but Hindus and Muslims being two of the largest religious dispensations, differences between them have been the most glaring. It is not as if such differences emerged all of a sudden around the time of Partition alone. We get to hear about riots between the two communities throughout the long period of Muslim rule in India, although, such occurrences did heighten in the modern times, with certain traceable records from the eighteenth and the nineteenth centuries onwards[8]. The complicity and involvement of the colonial British government in fanning such issues cannot be disregarded. From the very beginning of their rule in India, there was conscious policy on their part to appropriate Indians into artificially constructed knowledge systems of their own. Communal divide as we presently know it was very much one of such artificial constructs. As Professor Mushirul Hasan puts it[9] :

In a sense the British created a sense of communitarian identity: by asking you what your religion was, what your past was…These were new constructions. The idea of being a Muslim, or being a Brahmin, existed in pre-British times…But the homogenization of these categories was a British invention.

It was felt that if stern control over the colony had to be maintained then such kind of divisions (which though already present) were to be upended and limited into watertight compartments, so as to prevent any inter-mingling and dialogue. Even the word 'communalism', which for a long time was used to refer to any activity of the commune, came to be used for denoting religious community, especially in case of India[10]. It is under their patronage power that these differences became so stern, leading to contestations between communities.

The 1940s was particularly rife with communal tensions between both the communities, muddled with a number of violent instances. The Pakistan movement was particularly responsible for it and the creation of a new state-Pakistan on the basis of religion made things even worse. The rampant violence and polarization that it caused, vitiated the environment completely. So much so that by the time of Partition, tempers were at breakneck point. Looting, arson, displacement became a commonplace phenomenon. Women were wronged, their bodies became battlefields, regulated by patriarchal notions of purity and trophies to be won. About a million people lost their lives in the Partition violence and about twenty million got displaced, forced to leave their homes behind in search of new places, with a bleak future staring them[11]. Apart from the material loss which accompanied it, the psychological damage which happened is something which even still remains a festering wound for the survivors in particular and the whole subcontinent in general. It destroyed the common composite culture that had existed for so long.

The Post-Partition era has largely remained troublesome for the Muslim population. Riddled with multiple challenges of their own such as low literacy rate, economic and political backwardness, they have been also forced to face neglection by the hands of successive governments over the years, often times just serving as vote banks during elections alone. The period has also seen increasing separateness between the Hindu and Muslim communities in general, many a times even leading to violent clashes. Thus, the othering has only increased with

time. A search for factors invariably leads one to Partition. It refuses to die down; and has become some kind of a living legacy for us. As, Professor Ranbir Samaddar argues, we still live in 'partitioned times'[12]. It is at once a sign of past and also a sign of the present times.

Garm Hava and the Muslim other

Cinema has been one of the most popular mediums of representation in India. Right from the time of its introduction, it has gripped the imagination of the masses like no other. Hindi Cinema being the most popular among the many film industries that India has, it becomes all the more important. Producing more than thousand films annually, it is closest to the idea of a national Cinema that we have. It is hence quite natural that one would expect that Partition being such an important issue in the life of our independent republic, Hindi filmmakers would have made many films over it. However contrary to such expectations, we find a very muted response in the initial decades post-Partition. It has generally been explained in terms of the 'shock value' from such a devastating episode as the Partition was. No one wanted to remember all the gruesome things which happened so close to the process itself[13]. Only some notable films like Lahore (1948), Apna Desh (1949), Nastik (1954), Dharmaputra (1961) and Chalia (1961) stand out, but even amongst them, most of the flicks didn't did enough to tackle the issue head-on. The human experience of the survivors, their families never found any serious mention. The Indian state at that time was in a vulnerable position. We had just recently won our freedom after a long colonial rule, in such a condition, Nation building was of the utmost priority. Everything was to be galvanized towards this endeavor. Cinema, being such a popular medium amongst masses was expected to follow suit. A system of censure was put into place to ensure that it doesn't deviates from such an expectation. At the same time, even the filmmakers willfully agreed to focus upon the priorities at hand, so we find the popularity of such tropes as those of nationalism, socialism and patriotism being more popular in the films in comparison to unravelling the lived experience of the people.

The 1970s was a period of turbulence in the Indian History, the initial optimism associated with the birth of a new Nation had slowly fissured out, replaced by a general frustration with the way the things were going on. On the external front, India had fought wars with China and Pakistan and helped in the creation of a new nation-Bangladesh, causing a large-scale evasion of resources. Internally, the country had faced serious challenges in the form of separatist voices on the questions of language, territory and even the mode and method of governance. The country had underperformed at the economic front. The general misery caused the rise of resentment and self-reflection among the people. Scholars and intellectuals also responded by bringing about changes in their perception. It is in these unique circumstances that we find a renewed interest of scholars, especially Historians in Partition studies. They argued that how there was ample literature on political histories surrounding it, but an absence of social studies on it[14]. Cinema in India also underwent certain changes. Although the previous melodramatic films continued to be made, there was also the rise of a 'parallel cinema' movement, which involved filmmakers and producers making low budget movies, focusing more upon bringing to the fore the humanist element, highlighting the real societal issues instead of just getting trapped in the myriads of escapism[15].

Garm Hava (1974) is a part of this movement. Directed by M.S. Sathyu, starring Balraj Sahani- one of the stalwart personalities of Hindi Cinema- among others, it is based on a story by Ismat Chugtai. It was financed by the Film finance corporation. Many members of the film, ranging from the main protagonist- Balraj Sahni, Ismat Chugtai and Kaifi Azmi who cowrote the script were all Marxist intellectuals and associated with the Progressive Writers Association and IPTA. They wanted a society free from sectarian divisions and focused upon realizing the ideals of social, economic and political justice[16]. So, it is only natural that their imprint is clearly visible upon the final product. The film opens with a montage of black and white photographs providing the viewers glimpses of Indian freedom movement, the division of the erstwhile united country, refugee problem, finally culminating to the assassination of Mahatma Gandhi. We are introduced to the protagonist of the movie- Salim Mirza (enacted by Balraj Sahni) who is elder of two brothers, the other being Halim Mirza. The Mirzas are shown to be among the most respectable families of Agra. The film opens on the eve of Partition. Halim (who was also a Muslim League politician) and his family have already left for Pakistan, even the last of their relations- an elderly aunt is shown leaving India for Pakistan, while Salim Mirza decides to stay back. Following this is a scene of conversation between Salim and a tonga driver, who asks 'who have you seen of this time?', it sets of the central theme of the film going forward, transformation of home and one's place within it[17]. This feeling of othering is not something

which can be quantified, but only felt. After deciding to stay in India, Salim gets subjected to a double whammy. On one hand the members of his own religion question his stubbornness in deciding to stay back, on the other hand he finds that the larger population of the city suddenly becomes hostile towards Muslims in general. His position becomes even more precarious because he had in the past publicly opposed the possibility of Muslims leaving for Pakistan, even going against his brother. Moreover, the house in which the mirzas lived was willed in the name of Halim Mirza by their father and after he left India, the property was soon confiscated by the Indian government, leaving Salim and his family not only bereft of a house but also of memories and their very identity. Its significance does not only remain limited to his social standing, but also penetrates his personal life. Salim who owns a shoe making factory finds that none of the moneylenders or banks are ready to give him any credit as they fear that he might also run away to Pakistan. His elder son, Baqar who helps Salim Mirza in running his factory, finds it difficult to continue doing business in Agra anymore. Forced by the circumstances, he also decides to leave for Pakistan. The most tragic is the case of the women of the household. The ancestral home has up until now been shown to have been largely remained unaffected by the turbulences of the outer world. The women in the early part of the story have been shown to have remained carefree and busy in a world of their own[18]. Dadda- Salim's mother encapsulates this essence in its totality. Rendered frail because of old age, she still commands the highest respect within the precincts of the wall. She not only has a say in all the matters but also guides and steers the happenings as a matriarch. But things changed post-Partition. The outside infiltrates and modifies the inside. When the family is dispossessed of their house, the bubble of security bursts. Dadda in particular is inconsolable, she refuses to leave the house at any cost. Having spent a larger part of her life inside that house, she is not able to reconcile with the reality. Even when they shift to another house, she continued to remain restless. It is only due to the good gesture shown by the new owner that she is able to return to her house for one final time to relive all her memories and finally pass away with satisfaction. Similarly, Salim's daughter- Amina's life has been shown to have been totally roiled by Partition. She is forced to face two broken engagements, first to Halim Mirza's son, Kazim, and then his sister's son, Shamshad. She finds herself totally powerless in front of forces over which she has no control. It is not as if his suitors betrayed him, but the circumstances. Kazim comes to India in order to fulfill his promise to Amina, even going against his father and family, but is arrested and deported back. Not finding any way out, she commits suicide. The feeling of othering is intimately weaved into the narrative of the film, the landlords, bank managers and the interviewers remain nameless and faceless[19]. The point being stressed is that it is not an individual but the whole system which is involved in this segregation. Similarly, it also points to the difficulty faced by those oppressed because the absence of any clear and distinct agency makes it difficult for them to understand whom to oppose[20]. The use of Muslim tropes and locations point to a cultural heritage of the adherents which they considered as their own and juxtaposing it with mournful imagery points to the glory getting lost in the humdrum. However, in midst of this dull, we find a glimmer of hope. Salim's younger son, Sikander who even after having completed his education finds it difficult to get a good employment, even so, he remains unperturbed. Unlike his elder brother, he decides to face the circumstances head on. He finds common cause with similar such unemployed people and protests against the status quo. Salim has also been shown to have largely accepted his fate of not being able to do much against the situation, until the very last of the scenes. While finally having decided to move to Pakistan. On the way to railway station, he witnesses a political procession of a left leaning organization, against prevalent economic injustice. It had participants coming from different religions and castes. Suddenly finding a new ray of hope, he along with his son joins the fray with the understanding that they as citizens of the country would have to do their own bid in order to ensure that situation becomes better with time; and that the nationalist, socialistic and secular values of the state were there to stay.

Conclusion

The problem of Muslim othering continues to remain relevant even till now; and it is one of the flagrant fault lines of our society. Subjected to discrimination in various forms by successive governments, the problem of Muslims exacerbates further because of facing hatred from majoritarian community as well. Garm Hava can be considered as a representative of the Hindi film dealing with the issue. It highlights that how a common middle class Muslim family finds itself in a soup which was not of its own making and over which it had no control. They try to deal with the events in the best way possible, but despite their best efforts, they miserably failed. It points to a very fundamental problem that we as a society have to deal with.

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