

Constructing South Asia: A Qualitative Study of Post-Cold War Hollywood

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Abstract

The study employs narrative, contextual, and semiotic analysis techniques of qualitative research method to examine the construction of South Asia in Post-Cold War Hollywood cinema. Relying on the theories of Orientalism and media constructionism, the research explores how Hollywood produces and circulates dominant representations of South Asian identities, cultures, and geopolitical realities. Through a purposive non-probability sampling technique, three such films were selected that depict South Asia or South Asian characters as central to the storyline. The findings reveal that South Asia is consistently portrayed through exoticism, political instability, religious extremism, and cultural backwardness. These representations support colonial binaries and legitimize Western ideological and geopolitical control. The study concludes that while present-day cinema embraces greater diversity and outreach than ever, it continues to replicate Orientalist tropes and geopolitical hierarchies.

Keywords: Construction, South Asia, Hollywood, Post-Cold War Era, 9/11

Introduction

Hollywood is often described as the entertainment capital of the world. It is located in the Los Angeles district of California. California is rated among the leading states of America. It has the biggest electorate, keeping in line with its enormous population. However, being home to Hollywood serves as the prime global reference to this state. Though Hollywood is entirely American in its essence, its massive influence has made it synonymous with the global film industry. Historically, it emerged as a major centre of filmmaking in the early 20th century. Favourable weather conditions, diverse landscapes, and the presence of brilliant filmmakers and actors were the primary reasons it advanced into a major industry (Balio, 2023).

The influence of Hollywood is not restricted to the cultural domain. It has addressed political issues while advocating for social change. Topics such as civil rights, environmentalism, war, and globalization remained central to Hollywood cinema. Hollywood celebrities have also turned themselves into raising awareness about different political issues. The American electoral process is a leading example of this phenomenon, in which Hollywood celebrities, especially Singers and actors, play a significant role in shaping public opinion (Mustafa et al., 2020).

Hollywood also plays an important role in the exercise of American soft power. Nye (2024) defines soft power as the ability to shape global preferences through the manufacture of consent rather

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than compulsion. It is evident that Hollywood films frequently disseminate American ideals of freedom, individualism, and prosperity. It builds a favourable image of the USA worldwide while reinforcing American values of heroism, consumerism, and moral authority.

It is generally assumed that the evolution of Hollywood cinema can't be understood without understanding the fluctuating geopolitical landscapes that have melded international power relations over the past century. Hollywood is acknowledged as one of the world's most influential cultural industries. It has consistently been shaped by different political and ideological factors. As many critics note, the political climate of any era expressively prescribes the types of narratives Hollywood produces, particularly when representing foreign cultures, conflicts, or strategic regions (Kellner, 2020).

Post-Cold War Hollywood: A Geopolitical Overview

The post-Cold War era may be further divided into the early post-Cold War phase, ranging from 1990 to 2001; the post-9/11 War on Terror phase, extending from 2001 to 2010; and the ongoing emergence of a multipolar world. Importantly, all of these three phases exhibit distinct patterns of depiction. Let's begin with the early post-Cold War phase to comprehend its geopolitical significance.

The fall of the Soviet Union marked the beginning of a post-Cold War era. A bipolar world was replaced by a unipolar world accordingly. American supremacy and the rise of neoliberal globalization were its prominent features. Hollywood came up as the leading beneficiary of this strategic development. It successfully expanded its global cultural reach and diversified its settings during this period (Miller et al., 2005).

Hollywood didn't take much time to line up with the narratives of unipolar dominance. The revival of Military heroism and national pride emerged as the fundamental characteristics of the early post-Cold War era. Movies like "Independence Day" (1996), "Black Hawk Down" (2001), and "Pearl Harbor" (2001) clearly demonstrated this phenomenon. These films highlighted the USA's role as a global protector while explicitly sidelining non-Western perspectives. Even apolitical genres like sci-fi and fantasy served as tools for ideological arrangements. The careful examination of movies like "Armageddon", "Deep Impact", and "Godzilla" reveals that Western superiority was delicately entrenched in the stories of global disaster and rescue (Boggs & Pollard, 2007).

The 9/11 attacks brought a turning point in American politics, foreign policy, and cultural production. Hollywood was not an exception. The proof lies in the fact that, over time, prevailing cinematic narratives shifted towards themes of national security, terrorism, and cultural conflict. Movies like *Zero Dark Thirty* (2012) and *American Sniper* (2014) overtly endorsed U.S. security-state narratives (Frost, 2023).

The post-9/11 War on Terror prompted an abrupt transition from multicultural depiction to Islamophobia and militarized narratives. A profound shift in Western geopolitical consciousness was witnessed in its aftermath. For the first time in history, the Middle East and South Asia became essential to American foreign policy. It led to the widespread dissemination of militarized narratives about these regions. The Middle East and South Asia were depicted as the centre of uncertainty, violence, and religious extremism. Alsultany (2012) suggests that post-9/11 media revolved around the stereotypical depiction of dangerous landscapes, veiled women, and fanatic groups. The primary intention behind this portrayal was to rationalize U.S. intervention and justify its security policies.

The latter phase of the post-Cold War era is attributed to the rise of a multipolar world. This phase roughly began around 2010 and has persisted to date. It was shaped by the rise of China, India's

growing strategic presence, ever-changing global coalitions, and strong doubts toward U.S. unilateral dominance. Keeping in line with these new geopolitical dynamics and their impact on Hollywood cinema, contemporary films frequently reflect concerns about nuclear proliferation, migration, and global power shifts. Meanwhile, digital globalization is continuously forcing Hollywood cinema to appease international audiences. It has resulted in a simultaneous expansion and complication of representational patterns. Lobato (2019) suggests that modern-day Hollywood operates within a global marketplace where political narratives, commercial interests, and cultural diplomacy intersect.

The increasing influence of Diaspora and Independent filmmakers has significantly shaped later post-Cold War-era depictions of Hollywood. The need for authentic and diverse representation has not only been identified across Hollywood but also pursued in recent years. Meanwhile, initiatives like the Pillars Artist Fellowship aim to challenge existing stereotypes by supporting diverse storytelling and inclusive media practices. Notably, this initiative is the brainchild of the eminent South Asian-American actor Riz Ahmed. It is evident that such initiatives aim to foster a more inclusive and diverse global cultural landscape by confronting reductive and derogatory portrayals (USC Annenberg Inclusion Initiative, 2021).

Streaming platforms like Netflix, Amazon Prime, and Hulu turned out to be the real game-changers. They have not only expanded media access but also opened up new opportunities for marginalized voices. Independent filmmakers and content creators from the Global South are frequently using these platforms to tell their own stories. Series like *Never Have I Ever* (2020) are offering multi-layered and authentic representations of South Asian identity. However, some critics suggest that even this representation is not free from commodification. Nwonka and Keddo (2023) argue that the recent culture of inclusion often serves corporate agendas. They have labelled it as “performative multiculturalism”, where inclusion is meant for branding instead of any structural change.

South Asia

“South Asia” is an important region in southern Asia. It includes eight countries: India, Pakistan, Bangladesh, Nepal, Sri Lanka, Bhutan, Afghanistan, and the Maldives. It is pertinent to note that South Asia is a conspicuous region due to its geographical location, economic potential, and cultural heritage. It has served as a junction linking Central Asia, the Middle East, East Asia, and Africa. Moreover, the region is home to nuclear powers such as India and Pakistan, underscoring its significance for global security (Varshney, 2018).

South Asia accounts for nearly one-fourth of the world's population. It is home to around 1.8 billion people, turning the entire region into a huge consumer market and an enormously rich pool of skilled labor. The demographic strength of South Asia has profound implications for its economic growth. It attracts investments from various regions of the globe besides influencing international financial trends (World Bank, 2020).

The strategic importance of South Asia is underlined by geopolitical conflicts, territorial disagreements, and colliding regional ambitions. Especially, the Ideological clashes between India and Pakistan have been shaping regional strategic dynamics for a long time. In the meantime, China's rising influence has sparked debates across the region over security, sovereignty, and economic development (Basrur, 2018).

Media Constructionism

“Media Constructionism” is an essential concept in mass communication and sociology. Len Masterman, Marshall McLuhan, Stuart Hall, and David Buckingham were among the key figures

who provided the basis for this idea. It tends to explore how meanings are created through images, language, and narratives in media, and to understand how these meanings influence our perception of reality. Media constructionism is deeply rooted in the idea that media is not an unbiased or neutral transmitter of reality; rather, all representations are deliberate constructions influenced by broader cultural agendas, institutional norms, and political climates.

The concept of “Construction” refers to an elaborate process that leads to the creation and dissemination of meanings within different forms of media content. It is a mere illusion that the media represents objective reality. Rather, media representations are fashioned by numerous social, cultural, political, and economic influences (Hall, 2019).

The idea of construction can’t be understood without understanding representation, which refers to the depiction of individuals, communities, events, and concepts in media. It is noteworthy that these are not independent, unbiased, or objective reflections. Rather, the predispositions and interests of media producers shape such images. We all know that communication involves encoding and decoding messages. The same applies here. The message encoded by creators is decoded by audiences to construct the reality. However, it is not as simple as it feels. Rather, it is a complex process of negotiation and interpretation that is heavily dependent on factors such as individual experiences, cultural settings, and social backgrounds. In other words, it is the field of experience and frame of reference of the audience that matter most during the construction process (Hall, 2013).

Orientalism and the Representation of “The Other”

Orientalism provides the historical and ideological backbone of the framework. Said’s scholarship illuminates how Western academic, literary, and political discourses have produced the East as a contrasting entity defined by inferiority, mysteriousness, or menace. His work outlines how these constructions, initially rooted in colonial encounters, persist through contemporary cultural institutions, including the media. Said (2013) is of the view that Orientalism is a system of ideas built upon an ontological and epistemological dissimilarity between the Orient & the Occident. Said suggests that if the Occident is taken as a thesis and the Orient as its antithesis, the identity of the former depends on the latter. He thinks this binary is convenient for many resolutions. It not only gives the Occident a narrative of superior identity but also establishes and affirms its position as master, controlling and subjugating “the other”. Said argues that this style of thinking deprives the East of its history, culture, and language, thereby preventing it from representing itself or producing knowledge about itself. Given this, the Occident celebrates a unitary history that can accommodate only Occidental notables.

Kumar (2010) detects how political and media discourse of post-9/11 America offered reductive frames, which depicted Islam as a problematic religion inherently built to support extremism and misogyny. The evidence of this phenomenon lies in prevalent frames, like “Islam is oppressive by nature” or “the Muslim world is frozen in time”. It is pertinent to mention that such frames vehemently endorse classical Orientalism, but with a contemporary trend of Islamophobia added to it.

In line with the theoretical foundations provided by Edward Said and Stuart Hall’s critique, numerous scholars have scrutinized Orientalism’s persistence and evolution in contemporary media. It is important to mention that “neo-Orientalism” has been the prime focus of post-9/11 media research, which not only updated Orientalist tropes in modern contexts but also broadened pre-existing databases (Banaji, 2017).

Objective of the Study

The objective of this study is provided as follows:

To identify and examine dominant stereotypes, narrative tropes, and ideological themes through which South Asian identities are constructed in post-Cold War Hollywood cinema.

Research Questions

Keeping in line with the objective of this study, the research question is formulated as follows:

What dominant stereotypes, character tropes, and ideological patterns are employed in post-Cold War Hollywood cinema to construct South Asian identities?

Methodology

Qualitative research methodology is applied in this study. It is generally assumed that qualitative research is best suited for studies that analyse meanings, discourses, representations, and underlying ideologies rather than numerically measuring variables (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Since film texts embody cultural narratives, symbolic structures, and ideological assumptions, a qualitative design provides the depth and flexibility required to interrogate their aesthetic and political dimensions.

Research Design

The research design of this study comprises narrative, semiotic, and contextual analyses of selected movies to develop a multidimensional understanding of how cinematic meaning is produced and circulated.

Narrative Analysis

Fleming and Noyse (2021) define narrative analysis as an effective qualitative research technique that is used to examine texts or visual data in a storied form. They suggest that narrative analysis and content analysis apparently perform the same function, yet they are quite different when viewed on a broader scale. The difference lies both in the approach and its application. Content Analysis is primarily concerned with categorizing themes and ideas, whereas narrative analysis examines themes and ideas and scrutinizes the stories people tell about themselves or others.

Semiotic Analysis

Semiotic Analysis examines the visual, auditory, and symbolic elements of films to understand how meaning is constructed through signs. As Chandler (2017) explains, semiotics is the study of signs and signification, offering tools to decode images, gestures, lighting, framing, colors, symbols, and even silences. Since film is a multisensory medium, semiotics helps uncover ideological messages that are not conveyed solely through dialogue.

Contextual Analysis

Athique (2020) argues that Contextual analysis positions films within the political, historical, industrial, and cultural environments that shape their production and reception. Recent studies stress the fact that cinematic texts can't be meaningfully interpreted without understanding the socio-political contexts, such as foreign policy shifts, global conflicts, market pressures, and cultural discourses.

Rationale for selecting Triangulation

Triangulation refers to the use of multiple methods, data sources, theories, or investigators within a single study to strengthen the credibility, depth, and validity of research findings. It also enhances

methodological transparency and analytic precision, especially in studies that address complex cultural or ideological ideas, such as the media construction of South Asia. Tracy (2020) suggests that triangulation assists researchers in achieving crystallization of findings by allowing phenomena to be examined through multiple methodological prisms. This study employs triangulation by combining three qualitative research techniques. The combination of narrative, contextual, and semiotic analysis provides a holistic analysis of South Asian representation in Hollywood cinema. The researcher believes that no single method can address the complexity of cinematic portrayal.

Sampling Strategy & Selection Criteria

The purposive non-probability sampling technique is used in this study. To select movies, three fundamental criteria were considered. Firstly, the selected movies must belong to the post-Cold War period of Hollywood cinema, particularly the post-9/11 geopolitical climate and its discursive continuities, given their geopolitical significance in the contemporary world. Secondly, South Asia or South Asian identity must occupy a central narrative or symbolic position in the selected films. Thirdly, the films should be commercially successful, critically acclaimed, and widely distributed. This includes Hollywood studio productions, mainstream independent films, and films released through American streaming platforms.

Film Selection

In line with the above criteria, three Hollywood movies were purposively selected for investigation. It is pertinent to mention that selected movies belong to different genres, yet they are ideologically connected in their construction of South Asian identity.

- *Slumdog Millionaire* (2008) – dir. Danny Boyle
- *The Reluctant Fundamentalist* (2012) – dir. Mira Nair
- *Whiskey Tango Foxtrot* (2016) – dir. Glenn Ficarra & John Requa

Unit of Analysis

The entire film served as the primary unit of analysis for this study. Within each film, sub-units such as narrative structure, plot development, character arcs, visual motifs, and symbolic elements were scrutinized in light of the objectives and scope of this study. The researcher holds that treating films as the core unit of analysis aims to provide a systematic, deeply interpretive examination of Hollywood's construction of South Asia.

Analysis of Selected Movies

The researcher viewed each movie four times, with a one-month interval, to reduce bias. The narrative, contextual, and semiotic analysis of all three films selected from the Post-Cold War Era is detailed below:

Slumdog Millionaire (2008)

Danny Boyle and Loveleen Tandan's "*Slumdog Millionaire*" was released in 2008. The movie revolves around the life and struggles of Jamal Malik. Jamal is a young man from the slums of Mumbai who unexpectedly becomes a contestant on "Who Wants to Be a Millionaire?", a major reality show. Told through flashbacks, the film's narrative reveals how each question on the show connects to a destructive or constructive moment in Jamal's life. It ranges from the death of his mother during communal violence to occasional encounters with criminal gangs and his persistent

love for Latika. The story concludes with Jamal winning the final prize and reuniting with Latika. The ending symbolically resolves the film's central tension between fate and suffering.

Narratively speaking, the film revolves around a slum in Mumbai. The slum is central to this story, shaping the trajectories of Jamal's life and the other characters' lives in the movie. The narrative constructs poverty as both the obstacle and catalyst for Jamal's ultimate success. This narrative duality allows the film to appear both critical and celebratory at once. On the one hand, it criticizes the brutality and ruthlessness of poverty. On the other hand, it celebrates the extraordinary resilience that arises from such conditions.

Contextually speaking, "Slumdog Millionaire" emerged as Western audiences and global film industries gradually turned to South Asia for visual and narrative inspiration. The process started in the mid-90s. During the 2000s, globalization increased Western access to Indian culture, Bollywood aesthetics, and diasporic identities. Interestingly, this cultural openness coincides with the idea of Banaji (2018) in terms of poverty porn consumption. According to him, it is a global craving for stories that depict the misery of the Global South for emotional and commercial purposes. Scholars such as Merskin (2011) suggest that the film's international acclaim, especially its sweeping of major Western awards, reveals the Western preference for films that affirm the pre-existing image of South Asia as a messy, corrupt, and impoverished place. Given this, we may deduce that the film's contextual framing is inseparable from the global film economy, which rewarded such depictions of India, well in line with Western humanitarian and exotic sensibilities. The semiotic construction of Mumbai plays a crucial role in producing these imaginaries. The slum is filmed through rapid camera movements, saturated colors, and handheld cinematography that imply energy, danger, and disorder. It has been observed that Boyle employs a chaotic visual style to depict Mumbai as a city in a state of continuous crisis, where impulsiveness and volatility become defining cultural attributes. Meanwhile, affluence, represented by the television studio, high-rise buildings, and luxury cars, is framed as morally dubious. This visual contrast reinforces class hierarchies. It frames the slum as both lively and tragic, whereas elite spaces signify a modernity that lacks authenticity. Meanwhile, the characters themselves function as semiotic carriers. For instance, Jamal signifies innocence and moral purity, Latika reflects suffering, and Salim personifies aggression.

It is also important to note that Women are outlined within victimhood and romantic redemption. It reinforces gendered narratives of sacrifice and liberation. Meanwhile, the antagonists of the film, mostly comprising police officers, criminal gangs, and exploitative adults, mutually establish a semiotic field where the state and society inherently appear as predatory and vulturine. The real South Asia is once again a site of an uninterrupted and endless moral crisis.

Another semiotic layer materializes through the film's use of language, sound, and music. The fusion of Hindi dialogue and English-language framing through the game show format is very meaningful. It metaphorically positions Western cultural structures as the ultimate negotiator and representative of the value. It is clearly evident that by placing Jamal in a globally recognizable Western-style quiz show, the film emphasizes a narrative that situates India within a Western epistemological horizon of knowledge, success, and destiny.

As far as the music and background score are concerned, A.R. Rahman's soundtrack blends Indian rhythms with Western electronic influences, which signifies hybridity; however, Kraidy (2005) argues that hybridity mostly conceals asymmetrical power relations in global cinema, where local culture is remixed for Western tastes.

The film's political subtext is equally important. Despite "Slumdog Millionaire" appearing to criticize police brutality, child exploitation, and religious violence, its political critique is very

superficial and shallow at the end of the day. The structural causes of poverty and violence in India, such as caste discrimination, economic policy, state neglect, and global capitalism, remain unexplored till end.

The Reluctant Fundamentalist

Mira Nair's "The Reluctant Fundamentalist" was released in 2012. It is a cinematic adaptation of Mohsin Hamid's 2007 novel of the same name. It presents the ideological journey of Changez Khan. Changez is a Pakistani financial analyst residing in the USA, whose faith in the American dream ruptures in the aftermath of 9/11. The narrative employs a dual timeframe. We may witness the present-day conversation between Changez and journalist Bobby Lincoln. Meanwhile, flashbacks unfold as Changez's professional success at an American financial company and his romantic relationship with Erica unfold. This particular structure facilitates the movie to oscillate between confession and interrogation. Changez's progressively increasing alienation reveals the broader post-9/11 impacts on the South Asian diaspora.

Hollywood's portrayal of diaspora strictly follows the "model minority" stereotype. South Asian characters are frequently depicted as academically gifted, especially in STEM fields, but socially awkward or romantically unacceptable individuals. Lee & Zhou (2015) are of the view that such representations give rise to a racialized hierarchy in which South Asians are acknowledged for their labor and intellect, but denied social or political agency. By introducing Changez as a Princeton-educated consultant, the story reveals the same model minority stereotype; however, Changez is shown as socially confident and romantically desirable. This aspect of his character saves him from being reduced to a mere stereotype.

Narratively, the plot effectively reveals the clash between the neoliberal promise and geopolitical reality. The protagonist, Changez, undergoes frequent psychological shifts, keeping the story dynamic and well-paced. By shifting the novel's confusing first-person narrative into a more explicit political confrontation, the film repositions Changez as a resilient figure enjoying autonomy in a world that is designed by fear, racialization, and geopolitical misunderstanding.

It is equally important to understand the context of this movie. The film landed in a cultural moment when debates about Islamophobia, racial profiling, and the War on Terror were increasingly prominent in global discourse. It visibly struggles against the securitized frameworks, which are otherwise dominant in Hollywood's representations of Muslim characters. Dabashi (2009) identifies it as "post-orientalist resistance cinema" in which filmmakers from the Global South re-appropriate representational power.

Frost (2023) suggests that 9/11 brought a turning point in American politics, foreign policy, and cultural production. The prevailing cinematic narrative was shifted towards the themes of national security, terrorism, and cultural conflict. Hollywood Movies of the post-9/11 phase overtly endorsed the U.S. security state narratives. "The Reluctant Fundamentalist" is an elaborate and profound answer to such depictions.

The film was released when controversies surrounding drone warfare, CIA operations in Pakistan, and the U.S. strategy of securitizing Muslim bodies were in full swing. Scholars argue that the early 2010s witnessed a shift in which terrorism was reframed as a civilizational problem. "The Reluctant Fundamentalist" counters this idea by pronouncing structural violence as an outcome of economic dispossession, imperial intervention, and the emotional toll of long-lasting suspicion.

As far as Semiotics are concerned, the film employs visual contrasts to emphasize the ideological tensions surrounding Changez's transnational life. The New York sequences are encoded in cold, restrained colour schemes that signify corporate shrewdness and emotional detachment. On the

contrary, Lahore and Istanbul are presented through warmer colors and dynamic street life, which highlight cultural rootedness. The most important aspect of this film is that it doesn't exoticize Pakistan. The camera remains in academic spaces, cafes, family gatherings, and urban intellectual circles. It effectively counters dominant Western cinematic tropes that frequently minimize Pakistan to violence, chaos, and poverty. It is pertinent to note that, through this semiotic inversion, the film reframes South Asia as a culturally rich and politically vibrant space.

Sound is also deployed in a remarkable manner. It further highlights the ideological meaning hidden inside the movie. For instance, the hum of corporate offices conveys bureaucratic confinement, while Lahore's textured soundscape of street vendors, qawals, and traffic signifies its polyphonic social life. Silence is strategically used during interrogation scenes to intensify the weight of suspicion. It is important to note that the absence of ambient human sound indicates the elimination of subjective interiority. On the contrary, Changez's public lecture scenes are marked by an honourable, deep vocal delivery. It provides him with an intellectual agency against the West's attempts to define him. Eventually, these semiotic structures work together to destabilize the hierarchical binaries implanted in post-9/11 cinematic discourse.

Whiskey Tango Foxtrot

Glenn Ficarra's "Whiskey Tango Foxtrot" was released in 2016. It is an adaptation from Kim Barker's memoir "The Taliban Shuffle: Strange Days in Afghanistan and Pakistan". The film occupies a prominent position in Hollywood's post-Cold War cinematic depiction of South Asia through its comedic-war correspondent framing. Its use of genre makes it unique.

Though marketed as a satire, the movie ultimately highlights Kim Barker's personal growth as an American journalist in Kabul. Her self-discovery serves as the narrative fulcrum around which Afghan life, politics, and culture rotate. This specific narrative reflects what Shohat and Stam (2014) term "the ethnographic gaze reversed," where the foreign journalist becomes the point through which an entire region is depicted. Given this, the movie tends to position South Asia merely as a locale for Western character development.

It is pertinent to note that Kim Barker experiences a transformation from an unfulfilled news copywriter to a fearless reporter, but this arc also emphasizes the trope of the American outsider discovering purpose in a conflict zone. Asava (2017) identifies this pattern as the white redemption plot in war journalism movies. Afghan characters in this movie exist primarily to facilitate the protagonist's growth. Mostly depicted as drivers, militia members, and politicians, such characters are completely devoid of narrative autonomy or psychological depth. Even when the film introduces prominent Afghan characters like Fahim, their discernments and perceptions are framed through Baker's reactions. The critics argue that the West has maintained its interpretive dominance through such manoeuvres.

The narrative further simplifies geopolitical complexity by offering Afghanistan as a chaotic frontier whose political volatility exists primarily to enable comedic or instructional moments for the protagonist. Interestingly, Barker's memoir criticizes the superficiality and shallowness of Western media, yet the film reinscribes the very tendencies it claims to criticize. As Möller (2013) argues, Hollywood war comedies often neutralize geopolitical critique through humour. Such movies also tend to provide a representational mode in which violence and ferocity become aestheticized spectacles, while their political consequences get masked.

Sticking to the above fact, Afghanistan is narratively positioned as a perpetual place of crisis and chaos. It is pertinent to mention that the region's temporal progression is suspended to uphold or advance the Western protagonist's adventure arc. The film does little to challenge the dominant

stereotypes that circulate in Western representations of South Asia, like volatility, corruption, and socio-cultural opacity. It eventually reinforces Hollywood's post-Cold War discursive outline, which tends to align the region with disorder, dysfunction, and moral disdain.

Contextually, "Whiskey Tango Foxtrot" was released during a period when American audiences had been gradually disengaged from the Afghanistan War, despite its status as the longest-running American military campaign. Given this fact, the film functions as late-war entertainment as Stahl (2020) describes it. It comprises cultural texts that frame ongoing conflicts as distant, absurd, or humorous to mitigate political fatigue. This positions Afghanistan as a consumable spectacle for Western audiences. This tendency was further reflected by the casting of American and British actors in Afghan roles. It was a production decision that perpetuates representational displacement in Hollywood portrayals of the region.

It has been observed that the film's gender politics intersect strongly with its cultural politics. Baker's map reading of a patriarchal war-reporting zone highlights feminist struggles within Western professional domains, but it does so by juxtaposing her independence with representations of Afghan women as uniformly restricted, veiled, or silent. This binary reproduces what Abu-Lughod (2013) describes as the "saving Muslim women" narrative, where Western female empowerment is contrasted with homogenized depictions of Eastern female suffering. Throughout the movie, Afghan women appear at checkpoints, markets, or compounds, but their presence is merely symbolic. The intellectual agency is completely missing in their portrayals.

Semiotically speaking, the film relies heavily on colour and framing to construct Afghanistan as a landscape marked by dust, disorder, and unpredictability. The palette is dominated by ochres, greys, and sandy browns, producing a crisis aesthetics in which the region's visual coding indicates a continuous state of emergency. Handheld camerawork and tight framing in outdoor scenes create a sense of instability, while wide shots of Kabul traffic, markets, and compounds emphasize disorientation. These stylistic choices yield a semiotic geography in which Afghan spaces appear chaotic and ungovernable. Even the soundtrack enhances this binary. Afghan voices are often untranslated, which strengthens the sense of opacity and difference. In contrast, the well-furnished newsrooms in New York or the structured interiors of Western compounds exhibit material affluence and rational authority.

It is pertinent to note that encounters between the USA and Afghanistan are suffused with humour, which softens the harsh realities of conflict. The comedic timing of explosions, miscommunications, and bureaucratic absurdities transforms violence into entertainment. For instance, scenes involving military escorts or insurgent attacks are structured around jokes that divert attention from structural insufficiencies to individual quirks. It detaches viewers from the material consequences of war.

Findings

It is noteworthy that Hollywood's post-Cold War portrayals of South Asian identities present a consistent design of stereotypes, character tropes, and ideological patterns. It is an open secret that they reflect as well as reinforce broader geopolitical apprehensions, racialized imaginaries, and global power hierarchies. While the aesthetics of portrayal have evolved over time, the fundamental narrative logic remains the same. The primary reason is that it has been shaped by Western-centric frameworks that tend to position South Asians in volatile, marginal, or symbolic roles. The spread of depictions after the 9/11 attacks further deepened such patterns. Resultantly, South Asian identities were embedded and entrenched within the discursive matrix of terrorism, security, poverty, and exotic spirituality. The details of this phenomenon are as follows:

The Spiritual / Mystical South Asian

Hollywood films have consistently shaped spiritualized images of South Asia. Every South Asian is either a mystic monk or a spiritual saint in the real life of Hollywood. “Slumdog Millionaire” exemplifies this trope through its depiction of Indian identity, which keeps revolving around Hindu philosophy, mythmaking, and spiritual transcendence. Despite the film underlining resilience and creativity, its narrative arc is built on a metaphysical framework that converts racialized identity into symbolic constructs. Such construction is definitely less hostile than security-driven stereotypes, yet it reduces South Asian identity to primitiveness. The ultimate outcome is the sidelining of socio-political complexity and cultural depth of South Asia.

The Corrupt or Inept South Asian Official

The stereotype of the corrupt, incompetent, or morally compromised South Asian authority has been frequently repeated across post-Cold War Hollywood cinema. There are multiple instances to support this statement. For example, “Slumdog Millionaire” depicts local police as highly vicious and brutal. The same is true of “Whiskey Tango Foxtrot,” where Afghan officials are depicted as either two-faced or highly incompetent. It is important to note that all such portrayals are in clear line with Chatterjee’s (2004) critique of Western development discourse. According to him, the global South is positioned as incapable of autonomy and self-governance in American cinema. It eventually legitimizes and validates the West’s external intervention, which is a modern-day replication of colonial fantasy. It is also noteworthy that such depictions serve ideological purposes by reaffirming Western institutional dominance. On the contrary, American intelligence, military, or journalistic organizations appear to be cogent, competent, and morally burdened in spite of the fact that they engage in violence. It is an open secret that Hollywood has been establishing such binaries to accomplish its discursive, cultural, and political interests. The West is always placed at the top, and South Asia comes at the bottom in this hierarchical structure.

The Grateful / Loyal Native Informant

Like many other tropes, the Hollywood film industry recurrently employs the “native informant” stereotype. It is a South Asian character who supports the Western protagonist by providing cultural knowledge, logistical support, and emotional grounding. In most cases, this “native informant” may be a translator-cum-guide. This trope is clearly manifested in “Whiskey Tango Foxtrot”, where Afghan fixers facilitate Rick’s navigation of Kabul. These characters are “mimic man” as Bhabha (2004) describes them. They are positioned between cultures yet devoid of true agency. While they enable Western access to unfamiliar places, they remain secondary and subordinate within the narrative hierarchy.

Semiotically speaking, such characters are enclosed within tight shots. Importantly, this kind of depiction highlights dependence and reliance. Likewise, at times, they are visually aligned with crowded and chaotic spaces to signify their entrenchment in local contexts. It is pertinent to note that their narrative role is instrumental. They never act as independent or autonomous entities. The outcome is obvious. The Western perspective remains the movie’s primary interpretive lens. The South Asian perspective is either missing or vague.

The Hyper-Urban Chaos Trope

Many ideological patterns have been employed and replicated by Hollywood over time; however, it is noteworthy that one of the most prevalent is the semiotic coding of South Asian cities as messy, dense, unhygienic, and overwhelming spaces. For example, “Mumbai” in “The Slumdog

Millionaire” and “Kabul” in “Whiskey Tango Foxtrot” are framed through narrow alleyways, dusty colors, and crowded markets. The intended outcome of such framing is an atmosphere of persistent threat.

It is pertinent to note that such visual strategies eventually shape an ideological narrative in which South Asia becomes synonymous with chaos, confusion, and disarray. Constructed in this manner, the environment itself becomes a character, volatile, hostile, and morally ambiguous. Critically speaking, this is a replication and reinforcement of a continuing theme that advocates that Western protagonists should explore and endure the region's chaos. No wonder this theme is built around the premise of Western resilience.

The Exceptional Diasporic Subject: A Counter-trope

A rare counter-trope may be glanced at in “The Reluctant Fundamentalist”. The movie's narrative clearly aligns with Hall's (1996) notion of the “new ethnicities”. This novel idea emphasizes hybridity and diasporic agency. “The Reluctant Fundamentalist” is an interesting movie, a Hollywood production written and directed by members of the South Asian diaspora. The film's story revolves around a Pakistani protagonist, Changez Khan, caught up in transnational identity negotiations. It is pertinent to note that Changez's story confronts the dominant patterns of Hollywood by introducing an eloquent, educated, and emotionally complex South Asian subject. The identity of Changez is shaped by global capitalism, racial profiling, and cultural belonging, making him an interesting and unique character capable of understanding his system and surroundings. He is one of the few South Asian characters in American reel life who are authentic and autonomous. The point to ponder is that diasporic South Asians gain complexity when they are positioned within Western modernity. Otherwise, South Asians within South Asia are more often stereotyped, flattened, or instrumentalized in their depictions.

Hollywood's portrayal of diaspora strictly follows the “model minority” stereotype. South Asian characters are frequently depicted as academically gifted, especially in STEM fields, but socially awkward or romantically unacceptable individuals. Lee & Zhou (2015) are of the view that such representations give rise to a racialized hierarchy in which South Asians are acknowledged for their labor and intellect, but denied social or political agency. By introducing Changez as a Princeton-educated consultant, the story reveals the same model minority stereotype; however, Changez is shown as socially confident and romantically desirable. This aspect of his character saves him from being reduced to a mere stereotype.

Conclusion

The attacks of 9/11 and their aftermath gave rise to a prominent visual pattern in the depiction of South Asia. Neo-Orientalism developed into the leading representational mode. Neo-Orientalism updated classical Orientalism by incorporating contemporary geopolitical concerns such as terrorism, religious extremism, and cultural incompatibility. Neo Orientalism establishes Muslim identity as innately unstable or unsafe. Moreover, it constructs South Asia as a permanent zone of conflict. Scholars such as Kumar (2012) and Alsultany (2022) suggest that neo-Orientalism is deeply embedded into post- 9/11 culture; whereas, the most prominent feature of this culture is to uphold and sustain such media narratives that hold suspicion and contempt for Muslim identity. Securitized Orientalism further deepened this trend. The primary aspect of Securitized Orientalism was to depict South Asian landscapes as militarized spaces. Notably, this depiction was less focused on culture and more focused on threat perception.

Similarly, Post-Orientalism is evident in this era. The salient feature of Post Orientalism is that it facilitates the presence of multicultural narratives in Hollywood cinema. It also highlights the persistence of deeper asymmetries. The films exhibiting this phenomenon usually feature South Asian characters who speak English fluently, work in global industries, and navigate cosmopolitan spaces. However, these characters are mostly devoid of narrative authority. Instead of being described from their own standpoints and positions, they are described solely through the lens of Western discernment and acuity. Scholars such as Dabashi (2009) and Moorti (2016) are concerned that post-Orientalism signifies diversity and variety without offering any real structural changes. The moral of the story is that it provides the illusion of presence while conserving core Orientalist values.

After the end of the Cold War and the disintegration of the USSR, the United States of America emerged as the sole global power. This political change sparked new cultural concerns about identity and security. Meanwhile, immigration, religious extremism, and global mobility emerged as the leading concerns reshaping public consciousness. Given the scenario, Hollywood cinema served as an essential medium through which such concerns were interpreted and addressed. Critics such as Boyd-Barrett (2019) and Fuchs (2018) argue that contemporary media systems endorse national security narratives because they align with prevailing institutional interests.

The dominant trend of depiction has been identified and explained in detail; however, a parallel approach was also adopted by a relatively smaller number of movies. Such movies employed a more dialogical method. “The Reluctant Fundamentalist” is one of these movies. It is a diasporic movie as its writer and director were not born in America. Scholars such as Alsultany (2012) and Naficy (2019) argue that diasporic cinema often offers richer, more inclusive portrayals, as it arises from lived experience rather than preconceived, prejudiced notions.

The study's findings indicate that Hollywood has been constructing South Asia for a long time. The continuity of orientalist tropes in modern-day Hollywood cinema is a real concern. It is also evident that most of such tropes have been updated or revised. At the same time, the emergence of more authentic and inclusive narratives suggests that representational practices are evolving by the day. Globalization and the increase of the South Asian diaspora in the USA are other important factors in this regard. All of these aspects have created considerable space for a more authentic representation of South Asia.

The depiction of South Asia in Hollywood cinema is neither solely deterministic nor exclusively liberatory. It is a contested land where historical memories, political concerns, and cultural imagination collide simultaneously.

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