

The Idea of Modern Muslim Women in Indian Cinema: New Image or Old Trends

Ramsha Aveen¹ 

¹Doctoral Researcher in Sociology at Jamia Millia Islamia, New Delhi

Abstract

India is a diverse land where people of every religion, culture, caste, creed, and ethnicity coexist. Constitutionally, every individual, irrespective of ascribed affiliations, is entitled to equality, freedom, and justice. However, this is a significant gap between constitutional provisions and social practice. Sociologically speaking, Muslims are the minority in the country, not merely numerically but in access to equality, opportunities, and privileges. In everyday life, right from the working places to educational institutions to access to public resources, welfare benefits, the Muslim community encounters social discrimination and exclusion. This has become a lived reality, especially in the current rise of hyper-nationalist ideologies. Cinema is not merely a tool of entertainment, but also functions as a powerful propaganda and ideological tool that shapes public perceptions. The representation of Muslims in Indian cinema was historically and culturally problematic, marked by stereotypical depictions and fundamentalist ideologies. Muslim Men are mostly depicted with orthodox mindsets, marked by specific attire, rigid body language, either proving their loyalty to the nation, or, worst, as terrorists. Although films like *My Name Is Khan* have challenged such stereotypes, such cases are very rare in mainstream Hindi cinema. When it comes to cinematic representations of Muslim women, it is even worse. The portrayals of their lived realities lack social agency, marked by socio-cultural stereotypes. It is not denying the fact that Indian cinema has Islamophobic tendencies. However, with the emergence of OTT, there is a paradigm shift in the portrayal of Muslim women. Therefore, this paper will analyse three Indian films selected through the Purposive Random Sampling Method that have depicted modern Muslim women. It examines the cinematic narratives of their lived experiences to see whether these films/construct or distort the idea of modern Muslim women and the Muslim community at large.

Keywords: Muslim women, Muslims, Indian cinema, modern.

Received: 16/04/2026 | **Accepted:** 30/06/2026 | **Published:** 20/07/2026

Corresponding Author: Ramsha Aveen (ORCID: 0000-0002-9389-5856) | **Email:** ramshaaveen@gmail.com

© 2026 The Author(s). Published by Allahabad Academic Press. This is an Open Access article distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International (CC BY 4.0) License.

Introduction

India is a country that is rooted in traditions, culture, beliefs, and rituals. Indians are very sensitive when it comes to their native and ethnic identities. The Indian masses derive their sense of belonging from their culture and from their religious identities. In other words, for most Indians, religion is not only about rituals, festivals, and traditions, but it is a way of life, which gives them the purpose to live their life in a certain way, and at the same time provides them with the means to achieve the goal: salvation or benefits in the afterlife. India is a multicultural country of diverse religions, for example, Hinduism, Islam, Sikhism, Christianity, Buddhism, Jainism, etc., and every religion has its own share of culture, rituals, traditions, scriptures, and teachings. Sometimes, the religious sayings of one religion align with other religion, sometimes they are antithesis to each other. Whatever the case may be, every religion adheres to the universal goal of humanity and kindness. Sometimes, the idea of modernity is seen in opposition to the idea of tradition, that modernization means letting go of one's roots, culture, and beliefs and adopting the western values and culture. This is a very simplistic view. In the contemporary world, the west is also adopting a lot from the Indian culture, indigenous knowledge is one such example. Further, following one's own traditions and culture does not make one a conventional or normative person. Tradition and being modern can go side by side. Similarly, being a modern individual does not mean that one has left their traditional beliefs and ideologies. Sociologically speaking, modernity can be defined as a process of towards rational thinking and instrumental rationality. It refers to the socio- economic changes, scientific innovations that took place in Europe from the late 18th century (Baudrillard, 1987). The project of modernity has put a lot of emphasis on the idea of Individualism and freedom. On the other hand, a country like India, which is so much rooted in culture, individualism, and collectivism are treated as the two opposite ideas in society. Religion is one aspect of the collectivism of society.

On the other hand, cinema is not merely a tool of entertainment in society; it is one of the most powerful mediums of mass communication, it is consumed on a wider scale in large numbers. In contemporary times, where the act of reading has diminished, people are more into seeing and watching. The visuals, the sound effects, and the latest VFX make cinema a more tempting and 'thrilling' activity. But this is not always the case; being a part of the superstructure of the society, it has both constructive and deconstructive tendencies. Cinema as an apparatus does not exist in a vacuum, being a tool of creativity, cinema or to say the stories come from the people. Every piece of art, whether it is literature, poetry, or theatre, derives inspiration or references from real-life experiences. The stories and the narratives come from the people. Building upon this point, the social location of a filmmaker is paramount when it comes to the act of filmmaking. In this way, one can say that cinema is not only

a reflection of society, but it has the power to shape and form the ‘realities’ of society. If one goes by the sociological definition, there is no objective reality; reality is subjective, it is constantly constructed and deconstructed by the social agents of the society (Berger & Luckmann, 1967). In this way, cinema has the power to create discourse in the society, it can initiate a conversation, an atmosphere of thoughts in the society. But the question comes what kind of discourse, whose thoughts, and what kind of stories and films are being portrayed. Cinema is also a propaganda tool to further the interests of certain sections of society, targeting the minorities of the country. Religion has always been the subject or the theme of cinematic narratives. Whether in terms of communal riots, with films like *Bombay* (1995) and *Mr. and Mrs. Iyer* (2002), and nationalist ideologies, or a self-awakening film like *Oh My God* (2012), which exposed the money-making business done in the name of religious rituals and beliefs. *PK* (2014) is again a film that satires religious dogmas and beliefs. Films like *Baahubali* (2015) draw inferences from the Ramayana and Mahabharata epics. Religion has remained a recurrent theme in the process of storytelling and filmmaking.

Representation of Muslims in Indian Cinema

Representation is one of the major aspects in the act of filmmaking. As discussed earlier, films inherently have constructive and deconstructive tendencies. Through the representation process, films can either construct discourse in the society or it can deconstruct the older meanings and create new meanings in society. When it comes to the representation of Muslims in Indian cinema, it is not denying the fact that Indian films have Islamophobic tendencies. Although films like *My Name Is Khan* (2010) and *Mulk* (2018) have tried to bring forth the raw, honest stories and struggles of the Muslim community in India but such cases are very rare. For Biswas (2024) after the Babri Masjid incident, the cinematic narratives of Muslims have changed a lot, with films like *Roja* (1992), which portrayed Muslims in a negative light and demonic nature. The Muslims were denoted as “anti-national, supporters of Pakistan or as terrorists. *“They are often portrayed as wearing Pathani suits, wife beaters and hypersexual males with an infinite appetite for meat”* (Biswas, 2024, para. 10). Following on the same line, there are films like *Sarfarosh* (1999), *Veer – Zaara* (2004), *Fanaa* (2006), *Kurbaan* (2009), and *New York* (2009), etc., which have stereotyped the Muslim community in one way or another and projected them as terrorists, especially after the 9/11 attacks. *My Name Is Khan* (2010) came in response to this. Then we have some historical films like *Padmaavat* (2018), which have depicted Muslim rulers as barbaric and grotesque in nature. Further, to talk about the current scenario, films like *The Kerala Story* (2023), *The Kashmir Files* (2022) are other such propaganda movies which have depicted the Muslim community in a negative light, dehumanizing the Muslims, and promoted anti Muslim sentiments in the country. The latest is the film *Animal* (2023), which centres around

a family feud. It not only objectified Muslim women but the main villain of the film was a Muslim ‘Abrar’ played by Bobby Deol, who is again violent and barbaric in his nature and personality. As a result, the cinematic narratives of Muslims in Bollywood have contributed to the ‘othering’ of the Muslim community in general (Riaz, 2023). Thus, reinforcing the dominant ideologies that equate Indianness with Hinduness.

On the other hand, the art house cinema, commonly known as parallel or alternative cinema, is way ahead of its time in its depiction of the Muslim community. The logic of commercial cinema and alternative cinema is different from each other. The former is based on profit-making, while arthouse cinema is more rooted in the social realities, problems, and issues of society. The famous trilogy of filmmaker Shyam Benegal, *Mammo* (1994), *Sardari Begum* (1996), along with *Zubeidaa* (2001), has portrayed strong-headed independent women protagonists, which form his Muslim women trilogy. On the other hand, films of Saeed Akhtar Mirza, *Naseem* (1995) deals with the communal disharmony and the growing fear of survival in the days ahead to Babri Masjid demolition. *Salim Langde Pe Mat Rao* (1989) has depicted the lived experiences of lower-class, uneducated Muslim youth and the oppression and discrimination faced by Muslims in Indian society. Nandita Das’s *Firaaq* (2008) deals with the 2002 Gujarat riots.

When it comes to the portrayal of Muslim women in Indian cinema, specifically in mainstream Hindi cinema, the case is worst; very rarely is a Muslim woman seen as a protagonist. They are either underrepresented or depicted as a weak, submissive, conservative woman without having agency of her own or as a courtesan who stands in opposition to the ‘good’ ‘morally correct female protagonist. However, in the contemporary scenario, there are some mainstream Bollywood films that have portrayed strong independent ‘modern’ Muslim women who have a voice of their own, who aspires freedom and challenge the norms of society, thereby establishing a new identity of a Muslim woman.

Methodology

The researcher has used qualitative methodology in this paper and has used an exploratory research design. Purposive Non- Random Sampling Method was used to select three Indian films. Content Analysis was used to analyse the films. Apart from this, the researcher has also made use of secondary resources like books, articles, blogs, and film reviews, etc. to collect data. The study will examine the cinematic narratives of the lived experiences of Muslim women to see whether the films de/construct or distort the idea of modern Muslim women and of the Muslim community in general.

The first film, which is selected here, is *Lipstick Under My Burkha* (2016) by Alankrita Srivastava.

The film revolves around the lives of four women, 'Usha' (Buaji) a 55-year-old widow, the resident owner of 'Hawai Mahal' 'Rehana' a young college girl, 'Leela' a beautician and 'Shireen' a sales-woman, all of them struggles to break free from the patriarchal society in pursuit of their desires, fantasies, and happiness. All women are tenants in Buaji's residential home. *Lipstick Under My Burkha* deals with female sexuality and female desire. It has talked about how pleasure is an integral part of every woman's life, regardless of age, as it is depicted in the case of 'Buaji,' who has sexual fantasies. 'Leela,' on the other hand, is unapologetic in terms of her sexual needs, for her sex, like any other need, is a basic need; she is vocal about it, she exercises her autonomy over her body, and is not ashamed of it. The last two protagonists, Shireen and Rehana, are Muslim women; an analysis of these two characters and their narratives is crucial for the purpose of this research.

The Savarna idea of Freedom

'Rehana' is a young college-going fresher in an 'elite' college. She belongs to a typical conservative Muslim family, which does not allow her to live her life on her own terms. She sews Burqas for her family store, but she wears jeans under her Burkha, listens to Miley Cyrus songs, and smokes in order to fit in, in the 'cool' squad of the college. She takes part in protests the ban on wearing jeans, shoplifts clothes and shoes from the mall, with the help of burkha, which she takes off in her college. On a surface level, 'Rehana' seems to represent the young modern Muslim girl, who, despite all the challenges crave her space to live life on her own way. She does not submit to the demands of the normative society but creates her own small little world, where she can find happiness and experience freedom, which is the dream of many young women. 'Rehana' lives a dual life; it is very much evident in the film that she is 'forced' to wear a Burkha by her family. This is problematic; the characterization of 'Rehana' in the film has stereotyped Muslim women and Muslim families in general. It gives the idea of forced and compulsory enforcement of the burkha and how Muslim families do not give freedom to their children to choose what they want to do in their lives; they keep their children in boxes, which is, however, not the case in every Muslim household. Secondly, her father runs a Burkha store, which again reinforced the preconceived notions that Muslim communities are in certain occupations and professions that have cultural and religious significance for them. For Muslims, the burkha carries a very significant meaning in Islamic cultures; it is a symbol of modesty, a will to submit to God. According to Siddiqui (2022), if one goes by the history, every culture has evidence of the veil, which is the symbol of respectability and social standing. But in the film, for 'Rehana' Burkha becomes the symbol of oppression and worst a 'tool' through which she can fulfil her desires and commit theft in order to impress her elite higher caste/ class friends. The film is about female desire and sexual liberation, for 'Rehana' sexuality equates to freedom. Thereby, the characterization of 'Rehana' is

problematic in the sense that it has sexualized the burkha.

The Savarna idea of the oppression of marginalized communities

On the other hand, the film has stereotyped the Muslim men and portrayed them as the oppressor and sexually hyperactive men. In the case of 'Shireen' she works secretly as the saleswoman without the knowledge of her Saudi return husband. Equating Muslims to Saudi gives a very generic view that Indian Muslims go to Middle east countries for their social and economic upliftment. Although, it happens, but it is not the universal reality of every Muslim in India. Even his identity as a Saudi returned Muslim man makes him more 'ruthless.' Further, her husband rapes her every night, refused to use contraceptive measures, has extra marital affairs thereby, lacks any kind of affection and love for his wife. 'Shireen' is depicted as the ultimate oppressed, submissive Muslim woman who is a just a sex object for her husband. In the film, she suffered from uterus infections, and had multiple pregnancies and abortions. Further, all her children are boys, this hinted towards the notion that Muslim community has an aversion to girl child however, female foeticide is not just exclusive to certain communities and religions. When 'Shireen' husband gets to know about her job, he raped her brutally and 'ordered' her to be a 'good wife.' Although, the film deserves an appreciation of depicting marital rape not only as a sexual assault, but as a power-driven mechanism to control women, but it reinforced the stereotype of Muslim men as hypersexual beings.

Similarly, in the case of 'Leela' who has her own beauty parlour (lower caste/ class) she has a Muslim boyfriend, 'Arshad' who runs a small photo studio. (again, a lower class) is portrayed as a carefree casual lover, who shames her of demanding sex and does not care much when her mother arranges a mate of her. 'Leela' fiancé on the other hand, is portrayed as a 'good mannered' soft speaking, man who does not want to consummate their relationship before marriage. In this case also, through the characterization of 'Arshad' it gives a pre conceived notion that young Muslim boys 'trapped' young Hindu girls in order to get sexual favours from them. This depiction also fuels the conspiracy theory of Love Jihad which targets young Muslim men.

Further, the title of the film is itself problematic, that equates Burkha with suppression and oppression while Lipstick denotes freedom. Thus, *Lipstick Under My Burkha* produces brahminical definitions and stereotypes about the Muslim communities (EP, 2017). The movie clearly depicted the Muslim man as the symbol of oppression and suppression and limiting Muslim women struggles exclusively to religion is a very oversimplified and a savarna idea of Muslims as a community in the society. Lipstick cannot be the symbol of freedom to everyone; it is state of mind. In any piece of creative art, the social location of the maker/ writer matters a lot, in this case, the idea of freedom, sexuality,

desires and oppression comes from a savarna background, without paying heed to the marginalized communities lived experiences who actually belongs to that caste, class or religion.

The second film, which is selected here, is ***Dhak Dhak*** (2023) by Tarun Dudeja.

The story revolves around the lives of four women who set out a road trip from Delhi to the highest motorable pass in the world, to Leh, and then to the Khardungla pass on their bikes. The film deals with the theme of self-discovery and the independence of women. All the women belong to the different strata of society. The cultural and socioeconomic backgrounds of each woman is different from each other. The eldest and oldest in the group is 'Mahi,' a grandmother and a homemaker, who dreams of going to Khardungla pass. 'Manjari' is a timid, young religious woman who is brought up in a very overprotective environment. She lacks confidence and is indecisive in nature. 'Uzma' is a reserved, soft-spoken middle-aged Muslim woman, a homemaker who belongs to a lower-middle-class Muslim family. Lastly, there is a young influencer, 'Sky,' who is a bike enthusiast and a travel blogger. She runs her own channel of travelogs where she makes adventure videos. Appears to be a strong-headed girl; she, too, has her own share of anxiety and insecurities. For 'Sky,' the trip was the ultimate opportunity to kick-start her career as a travel blogger influencer. The journey that these women take is a metaphor of their internal journey, a path to find their true selves, yearning for freedom, independence, and a sense of belonging to themselves. It is very rare in mainstream Hindi cinema to have an all-woman-centric travelogue film that builds on female friendships and sisterhood. It is not new to find films that metaphorically use travelling as a path of self-discovery and empowerment. *Dil Chahta hai* (2001) and *Zindagi Na Milegi Dobara* (2011) were some films to name a few, but these films are centred around male protagonists and male friendships. However, *Queen* (2013) is one such film that uses solo travelling as a symbol of women's empowerment and independence, in which a woman meets her own self somewhere in the lanes of Paris.

In a country like India, where women's mobility is restricted and spaces are gendered, films like *Dhak Dhak* are commendable for their fresh and innovative storyline. A woman bike rider is a cultural shock to the patriarchal mindset of society. The patriarchy associated bikes with strength and power, which are hallmarks of the socially created ideas of masculinity. Showing the protagonist, who is a biker enthusiast or an old lady going on a trip all the way on a bike was a revolutionary and bold idea, how realistic or possible it is in the society is the other question. Further, the characterization of 'Uzma' as the Burkha-clad biker is crucial for the purpose of this study.

Negotiation of Muslim women's identity- 'Uzma' the *Jugaadu* Mechanic

One of the protagonists of the film was 'Uzma' a middle-aged Muslim woman played by Dia Mirza.

Her story opens in a birthday celebration of her husband's colleague with their teenage daughter and other members. It seems that her life revolves around the domestic space, where her husband takes her for granted, bringing guests unannounced for a full-fledged dinner. Her husband runs a motorcycle repair shop, Hindustan Motorcycles, which was started by her grandfather. 'Uzma' 's legacy was passed to her husband after her marriage; thus, her name was erased and lost in the heritage of Hindustan Motorcycles. It is in the bike repair shop, where the rest of the group members 'Mahi' and 'Sky' meet her as they needed a road mechanic. Her husband refused to help but here comes 'Uzma' who secretly helps them as she is an expert mechanic. It is for the first time in Indian cinema that a Muslim Burkha-clad woman (although in the film she often switched between Burkha and simple Salwar Kameez with her head always covered) is shown as a bike mechanic. She is smart, logical and '*jugaadu*' the word she often denotes to her personality. On the day 4 of the trip, the 'Uzma' not only leads her group but also helped the fellow traveller to cross a mountain road which was completely covered in fog. She offered Namaz, she is religious but her religious identity does not stop her in achieving her goals. 'Uzma' does not try to fit in, she owns her identity, and she is not devoid of her agency. *Dhak Dhak* does not create a divide between US vs Them (the rest were all Hindus) instead it moves beyond it, to form a 'heterogenous commonality' (Collins, 2000). Although Uzma' character has limited dialogues, the film represents a very nuanced representation of a Muslim woman and does not reduce her to a particular archetype of a religious identity. Roshni Misbah, is a Hijabi biker she also runs her own motorcycle business which sells accessories and second-hand bikes, she is also been the brand ambassador for Indian Motorcycles and has went for cross country trips in the past, having a bachelor degree in Arab and Islamic cultures, from Jamia Millia Islamia she does not find any conflict between her religious identity and her love and passion for the bikes, for her, the idea of progress and modern is not anthesis to the teachings of Islam (Ghosh, 2020). There are other women, like Roshni, in the real life, whose idea of being modern and having freedom is not derived from the Western world, they negotiate their identity, moving beyond the stereotypes that highlight their agency as a Muslim woman.

The trope from Victimhood to Emancipation

Although, *Dhak Dhak* portrayed the nuanced representation of a Muslim woman trying to break the stereotypes but, in the process, it reinforces the very same stereotypes that it tries to break in the first place. For example, 'Uzma' 's husband 'Shabbir' becomes the symbol of oppression and repression. He is not the wife-beater, but he takes her for granted, every night, he forces himself on her, without her consent (Marital Rape, which was also depicted in *Lipstick Under My Burkha*). He does not care about her daughter's education and wishes to have a son. When he gets to know that 'Uzma' went

on a road trip without his permission, he purposely gets her arrested by the police by saying “*sabak seekhna tha, agar mein pyar karta hoon toh galti karne par saza bhi deta hoon*” (“to teach you a lesson, if I love you, then I will punish you if you do a mistake”). Although in the climax of the film, ‘Uzma’ rises above her oppression by finally taking a stand for herself in front of her husband. But the film gives the idea that Muslim families and Muslim men are inherently conservative, uneducated, and exploit their wives, and the women of their community in general. *Dhak Dhak* represents a dual perspective of the lived experiences of the Muslim community. To show the empowerment of Muslim women or of women in general, it is not always necessary to put a background story of suppression and oppression (although I am not denying or invalidating the experiences of women’s oppression). But it is high time that Indian cinema should move beyond the simplistic narratives of Muslim men oppressing Muslim women and the latter exercising her agency to rise above her injustices. It is high time to show new stories, struggles, and new lived experiences of what it means to be a Muslim woman in the Indian society. For example, in this case, what are the struggles and challenges a Hijabi Biker faces in a male-dominated society.

The third film, which is selected here, is *Darlings* (2022) by Jasmeet K Reen.

The film has used dark comedy as its subversive strategy to show how women are subjected to emotional and physical abuse within the institution of marriage. The film revolves around a Muslim couple (who were previously beaus), Badru and ‘Hamza, belonging to a lower-class Muslim family. It has been three years of their marriage, and ‘Hamza’ turned out to be an alcoholic abusive husband who beats ‘Badru’ every night on trivial matters. Anything can trigger, for example, finding stones in his food, ‘Badru’ attending a public meeting in the neighbourhood. But ‘Hamza’ is manipulative; he used to gaslight ‘Badru,’ justifying his abuse as his love and care. Gaslighting is basically the emotional and psychological manipulation in which the perpetrator makes the victim doubt their thoughts, actions, behaviour, and feelings, basically their perception of reality (Stern, 2007). Gaslighting is a kind of emotional and psychological violence that is being inflicted on women in society. When ‘Hamza’ doubts ‘Badru’ that she is pregnant with the neighbourhood guy ‘Zulfi,’ he, in a fit of anger, pushed her down the stairs, and consequently she suffered a miscarriage. Losing her unborn child was a breaking point, which gave her a reality check, and she decided to take revenge on her abusive husband.

Badru- The new image of Muslim Women

The portrayal of ‘Badru’ played by Alia Bhatt was a fresh take on the representation of Muslim women in Indian cinema. The characterization of ‘Badru,’ whether in terms of her attire, body language, or

her sense of belongingness was not a stereotypical perception of what it means to be a Muslim woman. She wears western clothes, tries to lure her husband but this is not derived from any kind of insecurity related to her religious identity. Losing her unborn child was a breaking point for her, and she finally decided to take a stand for herself. Abuse is something that she will never negotiate with her self-respect. The second half of the film deals with 'Badru' exercising her agency with the help of her mother 'Shamshu,' along with 'Zulfi.' *Darlings* is a tale of domestic abuse which is experienced by the women of the society. Putting a Muslim family context was a fresh and innovative take to break the stereotypes of Muslim women as being weak and submissive who choose to live in toxic and abusive marriages. 'Badru' chooses to break the cycle of abuse, rise above her oppressor, and find her independence and freedom. The film is commendable to put new struggles of the Muslim community without reducing it to religious connotations. 'Badru's mother, Shamshu,' was also the victim of domestic abuse, who killed her husband, and she does not approve of 'Badru's abusive marriage. From the start of the film, she is constantly seen urging 'Badru' to leave this relationship. She is not the typical archetype of Muslim mother who tells their daughters to 'adjust' and 'compromise' in their marriages. The film also indirectly hinted towards breaking the cycle of intergenerational trauma, where 'Badru' chooses not to kill her husband, although destiny has other plans, and 'Hamza' is hit by a train and dies. Being modern means different things to different people; it is not always in the kind of attire or lifestyle one wants to have, which is often influenced by the Western world. Modern also implies freedom, freedom to live life on one's terms, freedom to break the cycle of violence and abuse. *Darlings* contributes to a paradigm shift in the cinematic narratives of Muslim women by moving away from the traditional stereotypes that often depict them as the oppressed.

Hamza and Zulfi- Two Perspectives on Muslim Men

The film portrayed Hamza as the abusive alcoholic husband, he is not the typical Muslim man with kohled eyes, wearing a kurta pyjama and a skull cap. He is a common Muslim lower-class man who works as a TC in the railway department. For him, love also includes violence and abuse, as there is a dialogue in the film, "*pyaar nahi karta toh marta kyun, tum pyaar nahi karti toh sehn kyun karti?*" ("*I love you; that's why I beat you; if you have not loved me, why would you bear it?*"). Equating love with violence is a socially constructed idea of toxic masculinity created by the patriarchy. It is not inherent in certain religions or communities. Further, the film also provides the context and reasons for his abusive behaviour. Firstly, he is in conflict with the rest of his neighbourhood regarding the renovation, and secondly, his frustration comes from his working environment, even being in a government job and a TC, he is forced to clean toilets of the department. Although not denying the fact that he is an abusive man and his abusive behaviour is not justified, no matter what leads to it. But this

brings forth the fact that women are often treated as the punching bags of their work-stress-frustrated husbands.

On the other hand, 'Zulfi' is the neighbourhood guy who files a complaint on Badru's behalf and encourages her to file a case of domestic violence against her husband. His characterization is also not tied to the stereotypical image of young Muslim men. There is another Muslim character in the film, the silent butcher, who has helped 'Shamshu' in killing her abusive husband. With men like Zulfi and that silent butcher, the film also exemplified the signs of healthy masculinity and positive portrayal of Muslim men who can become feminist allies in the fight against violence and abuse. Darlings, it does not give one a linear picture of Muslim men if men like 'Hamza' exist, but there are 'Zulfis' also in the community. Therefore, Darlings provides a broader understanding of the diverse identities and the everyday lived experiences of the Muslim community in Indian society.

Conclusion

All three, which are analyzed in this study has tried to build the idea of modern Muslim women. Every film, in one way or another, has talked about shifting the dominant narratives to construct a new identity of a Muslim woman and of the community at the larger level. An individual's interaction with any phenomena of society, be it mobility in terms of social processes, domestic abuse as a kind of structural violence, or sexuality as the normative and political aspect of a person, is dependent on various factors, one of which is the social location or social standing of an individual in terms of their ascribed affiliations. All the films have tried to depict the everyday lived experiences of Muslim women in terms of abuse, sexuality, and mobility. Although dealing with different themes and storylines, the common goal that unites these films is the idea of Muslim women's empowerment, emancipation, and freedom. The films have highlighted the agency of Muslim women to break free from the societal norms and create a new identity for themselves. For a religious community like Muslims who are so much subjected to hate crimes and blatant islamophobia in the current political scenario, such cinematic narratives can help in building a new discourse on the identity of Muslims. However, after saying this, one cannot deny the fact that every film has its own good share of flaws and misrepresentations. In order to break the stereotypes, it again reinforces the same preconceived notions that already exist in society regarding Muslims. As a result, films like this will do more harm than good by reinforcing the traditional stereotypical ideas of Muslims. Cinema is not only the reflection of society, but it shapes and forms the perceptions of society; it has both constructive and deconstructive power, and it can either feed on the already held notions of the people, or it can deconstruct them and form new meanings. Any narrative, let alone the idea of modern Muslim women, requires a good amount of rigorous research, especially

if one is dealing with the minorities of society.

Films like *The Kerala Story* (2023) and *Kashmir Files* (2022) explicitly have the agenda to promote Islamophobia in the country, but films like *Lipstick Under My Burkha* and *Dhak Dhak* have some indirect touch of ‘soft Islamophobic’ tendencies in the characterization of Muslim men and Muslim families. However, *Darlings* was an exception in this regard. Therefore, in the last one can say that mainstream Hindi cinema has a long way to go, they need to move beyond the western constructs of freedom and modernity, and provide a more nuanced and authentic representation of Indian Muslim women. For this, it is necessary to have a Muslim woman’s standpoint, which starts from the actual lived experiences of the oppressed groups, to understand the social phenomena, by giving them a public voice, the standpoint theorists treat the oppressed sections of the society as “collective ‘subjects’ of research, not as objects of others observation” (Harding, 2004, p.19). Therefore, it is necessary to move beyond the representation politics, get people from the community to play the roles, let Muslim women direct films on Muslim women’s emancipation and struggles, which will eventually provide a unique outlook on their everyday lived experiences from a Muslim woman’s gaze.

References

1. Baudrillard, Jean. (1987). Modernity. *Canadian Journal of Political and Social Theory*, 11 (3), 63-72.
2. Biswas, Nilosree. (2024, n.d.). Bollywood’s depictions of Muslims over time have gone from good to ugly. *TRTWorld*. <https://www.trtworld.com/opinion/bollywoods-depictions-of-muslims-over-time-have-gone-from-good-to-ugly-16662169>
3. Siddiqui, Raamish. (2022, October 15). What does the Quran say about the hijab? Prophet said law of land foremost. *ThePrint*. <https://theprint.in/opinion/burqa-and-hijab-are-not-quranic-terminologies-they-are-a-part-of-the-muslim-culture/1167853/>
4. EP, Rahmath. (2017, August 12). Lipstick under my Burkha, why Not Janeu under my Kurta? *Muslim Mirror*. <https://muslimmirror.com/lipstick-under-my-burkha-why-not-janeu-under-my-kurta/>
5. Ghosh, Anindita. (2020, September 14). Delhi’s ‘Hijabi Biker’ Breaks India’s Stereotypes Riding ‘Ninja’ Motorbike. *Newsweek*. <https://www.newsweek.com/delhis-hijabi-biker-1478534>

[er-breaks-indias-stereotypes-riding-ninja-motorbike-1531052](#)

6. Stern, Dr. Robin. (2007). *The Gaslight Effect*. Morgan Road Books.
7. Harding, Sandra. (Ed.). (2004). *The Feminist Standpoint Theory Reader*. Routledge.
8. Berger, L. P & Luckmann, T. (1967). *The Social Construction of Reality: A Treatise in the Sociology of Knowledge*. Anchor Books.
9. Collins, Patricia Hill. (2000). *Black Feminist Thought: Knowledge, Consciousness, and the Politics of Empowerment*. (2nd ed.). Routledge.
10. Riaz, S. (2023). Un/Familiar Other: The Indian Muslim and Bollywood Filmscapes. *European Journal of Behavioral Sciences*, 5(4), 31–49. <https://doi.org/10.33422/ejbs.v5i4.928>