

Interventions



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United by Partition: A Study of the Portrayal of the Boota Singh-Zainab Story in Films

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Abstract

This article offers a discussion on the impact of the story of Boota Singh and Zainab upon films. By referring to three films, namely *Shaheed e Mohabbat Boota Singh* (1997) directed by Manoj Punj, *Gadar Ek Prem Katha* (2001) directed by Anil Sharma and *Partition* (2007) directed by Vic Sarin, this paper will attempt to depict the variation of this story in these films. Beginning with this comparative study, this essay will also attempt to analyse how the Boota-Zainab story appears to have initiated a tradition of making films. It explores the bonding between an Indian and a Pakistani which is significantly different from the tradition of jingoistic anti-Pakistan films. This essay attempts to reveal how this incident helped in the creation of tropes that are recurrently used for depicting the self-less love of an Indian for a Pakistani.

Keywords: partition, films, Bollywood

India's Partition of 1947, was undoubtedly a great test for the people who encountered it. If there are innumerable incidents that portray the vengeful aggression of the people of the two countries against each other, then there are also incidents where people from both sides helped each other, not considering the person in need as an Indian or a Pakistani but as a human being. Unfortunately, Bollywood at large chose to ignore the incidents of the latter kind while making films on the Indo-Pak relation and came up with films that depicted Pakistan as an out and out villainous and terrorist nation, always engaged in hatching plots against India. Films like *Agent Vinod*, *Diljale* are examples of this kind. As the relation between the two nations started getting colder, a mushrooming of anti-Pakistani films took place, particularly in the years that are immediately preceded and succeeded by the Kargil War of 1999. Maligning Pakistan became a major trend of Bollywood during this period.

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While talking about this major trend of popular Indian Cinema, Vijay Devdas comments: “there is also a tendency in popular Indian cinema to continually conjure up the spectre of Partition and Pakistan to codify its own nationalist discourse.” (224). This observation seems applicable especially for films that were released after the Indo-Pak War of 1999. It seems relevant to quote from Devdas’s article for discussing the political strategy that worked in making of these films. Devdas writes:

The spectre of Partition and the ‘othering’ of Pakistan as an ever present threat intensified after the 1990s with the ascendancy of the Hindu Right and the discourse of Hindutva. Simultaneously, Indian popular cinema responded with ‘a series of jingoistic films’ (Bhowmik 2009: 305) that includes *Roja*, *Border*, *Sarfarosh* (1999), *Hindustan Ki Kasam* (1971 and 1999), *Mission Kashmir* (2000), *Maa Tujhe Salaam*, *Gadar: Ek Prem Katha* (2001), *Indian* (2001), *LOC*, and *Bharat Bhagya Vidhata* (2002). At times reference to Pakistan is implicitly coded—in *Phir Bi Dil Hai Hindustani* (2000) the subtext ‘explores those antinational forces ...that work through terrorist networks for a “foreign” (a code for Pakistan) nation’ (Mishra 2002: 218). In other instances this is explicitly violent—in *Maa Tujhe Salaam* an Indian soldier declares ‘If I urinate on the border, the whole of Pakistan will be flooded’ (cited in Bhowmik 2009: 304). (225)

All these films are based on the capitalization of mistrust, the enmity that had started brewing between the two nations right from the birth of Pakistan and then kept on growing with every military confrontation between the two. Events that happened during Partition are referred to and shown to be major factors that determined the lives of important characters of most of these films.

After surveying a few other films that were released after the above mentioned ones, there was a move to counter these jingoistic films. These counter-films against the ones which demonize Pakistan, too involve the two nations and do not shy away from acknowledging the problematic

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relation between the two governments. But, along with that, these films also speak of love, friendship, sacrifice of the people of these two nations for each other. Interestingly the Boota-Zainab story depicting selfless love between two residents of these two nations at a time when the mobs of both India and Pakistan were busy avenging their dead, provided the plot for many of the films. This discussion will attempt to depict how this real life incident inspired a majority of these films that are characterized by the portrayal of unconditional love of the two individuals from both sides of the Radcliffe Line. The analysis will also involve the film- *Gadar*, listed above, along with other jingoistic films. *Gadar* seems important for this discussion due to its use of the same incident that inspired the films about the bonding between an Indian and a Pakistani. Since *Gadar* turned this incident into a typical tale of an Indian teaching Pakistan a lesson, it seems important to place it together with these other films for depicting the contrast between the two approaches. This paper will, therefore attempt to discuss the filmic representations of this event that are so different in their politics of representation.

As mentioned above, *Shaheed e Mohabbat Boota Singh* (1997) directed by Manoj Punj, *Gadar Ek Prem Katha* (2001) directed by Anil Sharma and *Partition* (2007) directed by Vic Sarin. are connected by a real incident. The incident concerns a Sikh man and a Muslim girl in the wake of Partition and it acquires a mythical dimension: “Heer-Ranjha, Romeo-Juliet, Sassi-Panno are all stories/myths, shrouded in mystery, oblivious to the criterion of chronology, however this story of Boota and Zainab is real.” (Khalid). Partition in India has always initiated a carnage accompanied by sexual violence that targeted the women in particular and this incident, concerning the girl Zainab, might just have ended with her getting brutally tortured, but it did not. The involvement of an Indian helped her survive. The girl, while running for her life, came across Boota Singh who for uncertain reasons, saved her life from her abductors and as the

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accounts of the incident add, he even paid money to those men. Eventually they got married and had a child.

So far the account seems to argue that the man was significantly different from many of his contemporary Sikh-males and the fact that within a short time he decided to marry the girl adds to the impression that the two people from different religions were actually feeling comfortable together. Unfortunately his nephews, infuriated at the possibility of losing the property that they had hoped will be inherited by them if Boota remained unmarried, reported of Zainab's Pakistani origin to the authorities who were relocating Pakistanis in India. This resulted in Zainab's deportation to Pakistan. Boota left no stone unturned to get his wife back but the bureaucratic rules that had separated the two nations and united these two individuals, now made sure that his wife was to remain in Pakistan only.

However, Boota did not give up. He wanted to bring her back at any cost which is why he changed his religion and went to Pakistan with his little child begging his wife to come back. Unfortunately the girl, who was re-married ultimately refused to come back to him. This devastated Boota and ultimately he committed suicide while coming back to India. The crowd was moved by his last letter soaked in blood expressing his desire to be buried in Zainab's village. Though his last wish could not be fulfilled in its entirety, the young people of Pakistan ultimately managed to bury him in Lahore, and got his grave covered by flowers. Zainab's family attempted to desecrate the grave but their attempt made his supporters further united and they protected the grave with great care. Not only did this become a popular story among the Indians but it drew the attention of foreign writers as well. For instance, this incident is mentioned in the book *Freedom at Midnight* (1975) as the account of "One unfortunate man, Boota Singh, the Sikh farmer who had purchased a Moslem girl fleeing her abductor, came to symbolize for millions of Punjabis the tragic aftermath of their conflict as well as the hope that

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ultimately man's enduring aptitude for happiness might overcome the hatreds separating them.” (Lapierre 528). This incident was made into the three films mentioned above.

Chronologically the first amongst the three is the Punjabi film *Shaheed e Mohabbat Boota Singh*. It won the best film award in the 46th National Film Awards. It was also shown at various International Film Festivals, including the one in Vancouver. This film tries to offer a faithful account of the incident. The film, as suggested by its title, has Boota Singh as its focus. Neither Zainab, nor the world around manages to get enough scope to express itself. The lead actor Gurdas Mann, who happens to be a superstar of Punjabi films plays the role of the hero. The film even begins and ends with the paean of praise for Boota Singh. What is given little importance in this film, is the way the other lives might have been affected during this time.

Next came the blockbuster one, *Gadar: Ek Prem Katha*. This film tried to detach itself formally from this incident from the beginning by changing the names of the characters into Tara Singh and Sakeena and offering a disclaimer. Tara is a truck driver, the profession, Bollywood frequently assigns to Sikhs, which is played with a lot of gusto by Sunny Deol. Sakeena is played by Amisha Patel, at that time known for her role of a typical damsel in distress in her debut film *Kaho Naa Pyar Hai*. The choice of casts for this film indicates its reliance on stereotypes. Actors who made a career out of playing similar roles were brought together by the makers of this film for producing another generic tale. Amisha was chosen for her image of the sweet cute heroine that Bollywood loves to portray as a damsel in distress. Sunny Deol was chosen chiefly due to his involvement in the highly successful anti-Pak movie *Border* and Amrish Puri, the villain *par excellence* of the Bollywood films was chosen to play the role of Sakeena's father for ensuring an out and out murky portrayal of a Pakistani villain. Apart from punching typical boy meets girl romance materials and nonsensical comic moments into the real incident, this film seemed to offer a Pakistan that was too tawdry. The characterization of Sakeena and her family was done

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also in a very interesting manner. She and her parents seemed to be in love with the Western culture. A vintage pocket-watch is used by her father, her mother seems to be associated with Western art and she herself is “Madam” for the poor Sikh. Anil Sharma seems to be seeking revenge against Pakistanis and Anglicized people by portraying Amrish Puri as a Pakistani villain who repeatedly uses English slangs while abusing his unwanted son-in-law!

This film ends with the victory of typical Bollywood hero over Pakistan who refuses to say HINDUSTAN MURDABAD, standing in Pakistan and defends himself by beating two hundred men using a tube-well which he plucks out of the ground! Powerful acting, blood boiling dialogues, classy and popular music, the film had it all, except the actual pain of Partition in adequate measure. One cannot help feeling this film had actually made business by combining popularity of the already well known love story. *Border*, ironically released in the same year with *Shaheed*..., actually, pioneered a series of films that had one simple formula: kill Pakistanis. *Gadar*, though subtitled “EK PREM KATHA” seems more like a mere application of this formula.

What the third film *Partition* offers, seems to have its root in the first film made in 1997. Reasons for such a conclusion are a little too many. The film was made by Vic Sarin. He was born in 1945, in Kashmir and had actually witnessed Partition, though presently he is a Canada based film director, producer and screenwriter. Sarin himself wrote the script and his film has a sub-plot which neither of the previous two had. The sub-plot concerns the English people who were also a part of the Partition saga and who bled equally during these violent times. Sarin does not try to shake off his indebtedness to the real incident and yet he changes the names of the characters of the main plot. What he seems to have done with great care is to shed light upon the other tormented faces of the Partition. His film seems to suggest that humane emotions can emerge even amidst the flood of brutality. The director himself commented: “I didn’t want the

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audience to get so caught up in bloodshed that they couldn't see the beauty." (Ken). The real characters become Gian Singh and Naseem, neither played by an actor empowered by stardom.

The film's opening incident is not about this tragedy of love but it is the death of a British soldier named Andrew Stilwell. Gian and his friend Avtar had accompanied Andrew to Burma. His sister Margaret had been too happy since her brother was in- the charge of the troop. Andrew dies, Gian brings Margaret his remains and tells her the usual lie, that Andrew was a hero and his last words to Margaret were, go back to where you belong. Margaret's reaction to this reveals a very basic question which none of the other films asked: is it that easy to determine where one belongs? Actually the whole account of Zainab-Boota seems to pose this question: should law or imagined communities, realized by borders of cruel wires be allowed to determine where one belongs? In Sarin's film, Gian's rescue of Naseem is shown in a very matter of fact way. Gian does not fall in love instantly with the girl, nor does the surrounding environment, which was bound to be busy with too many other things, suddenly seem too interested to interfere. Margaret keeps trying to catch the attention of the authorities that were relocating people. It seems highly ironical that when she gets the permit, Naseem has already re-located herself. Sarin uses a very powerful scene to show how Naseem had ceased to be a Pakistani girl and had become Gian's wife, the mother of a child by the time she was given the permit. After giving the permit, Margaret asks "Where is the Muslim Girl?" and when Gian shows Naseem, Margaret becomes speechless for a moment and this silence beautifully attests her change.

This film, allows Gian and Naseem to speak out their own and perhaps a million other's hearts out. Gian, after being savagely beaten up by Naseem's family mutters through his blood soaked lips: "I found partition laid everywhere. I did not save her. It was Naseem who saved me." And yet her family refuses to let her go. Naseem breaks free and is about to move to India via train. Her brothers arrive at the station and in their struggle with Gian, he falls in front of a train.

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Naseem runs away with the child, helped by Margaret and moves finally to England. The closing scene has the grown up child sitting under a banyan tree. Naseem's voice from the background says: "The Banyan's root go deep into the ground, where there emerges new trees. Like banyan, Gian's love gave me the strength to start a new life, he lives in all that I am, in all that we are." And the film closes with the silhouette of a banyan tree looming over silhouettes of houses. The entire film justifies the names of the two lead characters. They embody Gian or wisdom and Naseem or fresh breeze, respectively.

To conclude the discussion I would like to argue that this story of sacrifice and love in the wake of Partition has definitely become a trope in Bollywood films. Films like *Refugee*, *Veer-Zaara* and even the very recent *Bajrangi Bhaijan* uses this myth in its plots. It seems a little more than a matter of sheer coincidence that *Refugee* shows the birth of a child born out of parents of a different country, *Veer-Zaara* uses a very significant grouping of characters in a dance sequence. The characters of Veer and Zaara are similar to Boota and Zainab for their love for each other. It seems that the incident of Boota Singh and Zainab has managed to initiate a tradition of films, based on the real-life story.

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